

The Process of Play in Learning in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Higher education faculty strive to adopt pedagogical approaches that generate student engagement, motivation, and quality learning experiences. The literature on play has much to offer higher education. However, playful pedagogy remains an uncommon approach in education and is often represented in the literature as a practice utilized for a singular purpose and not as an underlying teaching philosophy. This phenomenological study examines the meaning of students' experiences of play as a foundation to learning. The themes that emerge are: 1) play is underutilized and devalued in higher education, 2) play cultivates relational safety and a warm classroom environment, 3) play removes barriers to learning, 4) play awakens students' positive affect and motivation, and 5) play ignites an open and engaged learning stance to enhance learning.

Introduction

Higher education faculty have a strong dedication to providing quality learning experiences. Increasing students' motivation and engagement are vital to deep learning and enhanced student outcomes (Konopka et al., 2015). However, for centuries, the traditional and predominant mode of education has been lecture-based practice despite criticism that lecture is not the most effective mode (Brockliss, 1996; Hsu & Malkin, 2011). Active learning approaches have been shown to be more effective than traditional lecture (Freeman et al., 2014) yet such approaches are less likely to be adopted by educators (Konopka et al., 2015). Bloom (1956) suggested that utilizing a multitude of strategies can take students past a simplistic form of learning and into a more complex education that leads to deeper levels of understanding.

The literature on play has much to offer higher education in its efforts to provide engaging and deep learning experiences for students. However, some argue that tertiary education has separated play and learning and that education has evolved to become viewed as a serious endeavor (James & Nerantzi, 2019). At some point, maturing adults are made to feel

guilty about play and given the message that play is unproductive and unprofessional (Brown, 2009). In response to this exclusion of play from higher education, many scholars have provided arguments to support and legitimize play in adult lives (Brown, 2009; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Sicart, 2014; Swank, 2012). Some scholars have explicitly discussed the lack of inclusion of play in higher education (James & Nerantzi, 2019; Robinson, 2011). Robinson (2011) suggested that the exclusion of play in tertiary learning is one of the great tragedies in education. Several reasons suggest why play is uncommon in higher education (e.g., political climate of higher education pushing accountability and time efficiency; cultural narratives that devalue play in adulthood; personal fear to do something different, etc.). Perhaps one reason play is underutilized in higher education is due to a lack of insight about the power of play in the learning process—therefore, a more nuanced understanding is vital.

Literature Review

Most of the literature on play in learning exists within the early childhood setting. However, scholars who write about play at any level of education argue that play-based learning can serve as a vital tool (Barak, 1990; Barnett, 2007; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Sicart, 2014; Swank, 2012; Whitton & Moseley, 2014). Play can create an environment that is conducive to taking risks and experimentation that can lead to creativity and innovation (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Play can afford learners a hands-on opportunity that increases joy and motivation to sustain engagement in the learning process (James & Nerantzi, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2014). In addition, play is deeply inherent to humans therefore it can be a vehicle for greater learning (Sicart, 2014), connect theory and practice (Barnett, 2007), and support students' well-being (James & Nerantzi, 2019). The elements of play in learning reflect some of the principles of Social Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 2013; Vygotsky, 1980) which is concerned with learning being active and within social relationships where knowledge is socially constructed.

In general, the existing literature on play in higher education is scarce and the examples appear siloed into a specific section of content or aimed to develop a certain skill, rather than an all-encompassing play-based approach as a foundation to the entire learning process. For example, Kim and Lyons (2003) utilized play and games specifically related to multicultural competency. Barak (1990) utilized The Empathy Game to increase students' empathic abilities. Ivey and Ivey (2007) described how interactive role-plays can allow students to practice discipline-specific skills. Bell et al. (2014) applied play strategies as a self-reflection tool and a creative way to impart psychoeducation. Anderton and King (2016) utilized video games to increase students' self-awareness and increase empathy for various populations. Swank (2012) adapted previously established games (i.e., Jenga, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Jeopardy, etc.) to generate discussions and serve as assessment activities.

The overall lack of research and literature on play in higher education may be partly due to skepticism about play's place in education as James and Nerantzi (2019) describe or perhaps due to the perception that designing play into learning is time consuming (Swank, 2012). Not only is the literature on play in higher education limited, the academic publications tend to be conceptual rather than empirical and describe play as additive or used for a singular purpose within learning rather than as a foundation to the entire learning process. Many authors have called for additional research on play in learning (Anderton & King, 2016; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Swank, 2012). There is a need for further research on play in higher education to broaden the understanding regarding its efficacy and to legitimize a playful approach. Therefore, the

purpose of the current study was to understand students' experiences of the inclusion of play as an all-encompassing foundation to the learning process.

Methods

The research question that guided this study was: What is the meaning of the experiences of higher education students' learning within a playful approach? To infuse play as the foundation to the course, the instructor embodied a playful personality, included games and play at the start of class (not always directly tied to content), provided many opportunities for role-plays to practice counseling skills, and designed play and competitions within class discussions and activities to learn content. Play was a part of every class session. These elements of incorporating play into the course design supported a Social Constructivist learning approach (Piaget, 2013; Vygotsky, 1980) where constructivism provided the theoretical underpinnings and the playful approach guided *how* to create a socially constructed environment.

This study utilized a hermeneutic interpretive phenomenological methodology which positioned the researcher to understand the meaning of the experiences of higher education students learning through play (Creswell, 2013; Spielgelberg, 1976). This methodology was fitting for this study as it aimed to interpret the meaning of the students' experiences of play in the learning process (Moustakas, 1994; Lopez & Willis, 2004). The literature describing play within tertiary education is scarce and, to the researcher's knowledge, there are no studies that have examined the meaning of students' experiences of play as a foundation to the learning process within higher education. Therefore, an in-depth exploration to uncover the meaning of play in the learning was vital to better understand the process of play in education as a pedagogical tool.

Role of the researcher

In order to establish an explicit research process, it is important to understand the researcher's setting and her relationship to and assumptions about play in learning (Hunt, 2011). The researcher works at an urban public research university within a graduate program located in the Western region. The researcher has personally not experienced play throughout her prior educational endeavors outside of some humorous professors or isolated playful hands-on activities. The researcher values a Social Constructivist Learning approach (Piaget, 2013; Vygotsky, 1980) as a theoretical orientation to her teaching and believes that using play in learning is a means to achieve that theoretical stance. The researcher believes that through play, students would have an opportunity to experience joy and laughter which would cultivate stronger connections with their peers and professor. The researcher believes that with stronger connections and a sense of community, the students would be more willing to take risks which would ultimately lead to enhanced learning. Within interpretive phenomenology, the researcher's background knowledge serves as a valuable guide and inquiry lens when interpreting the data (Heidegger, 1962; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Through this lens, it is impossible to completely separate the researcher's experiences and background knowledge on the subject (Heidegger, 1962). However, the researcher attempted to be aware of these values and assumptions throughout the research process by arranging for a third-party person (hereafter referred to as "research assistant") from the Faculty Research Center at the researcher's university to collect and transcribe data, conduct the focus group conversations, and partake in the coding of data.

Participants

This study included 12 participants (see Table 1): eight self-identified as female and four self-identified as male with ages ranging from 23 to 43-years-old. All of the participants were enrolled in one of the researcher’s three courses during the Spring of 2020. The participants chose a pseudonym at the start of the study. It was important that the students’ identities remained anonymous to the researcher because the researcher will serve as the students’ professor in future courses. Therefore, limited demographic information was collected, as more detail than what is presented in Table 1 would have revealed the students’ identities.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity
“Steve”	39	Male	Caucasian
“Jean”	29	Female	Caucasian
“Mae”	26	Female	Caucasian/Latina
“Watson”	32	Female	Caucasian
“Sally”	43	Female	Caucasian
“Rose”	24	Female	Caucasian/Latina
“Jose”	26	Male	Latino
“Girl Scout”	23	Female	Caucasian
“Rando Partician”	27	Male	Caucasian
“Lily”	41	Female	Caucasian
“David”	27	Male	Black/Latino
“Helena”	38	Female	Mestizo/Hispanic

Data collection

After obtaining IRB approval, the research assistant attended the start of each of the researcher's three classes to describe the study to the students, answer questions, distribute and collect signed consent forms as well as the initial journal entries. During the consent process, the researcher left the room for confidentiality purposes and to reduce pressure or obligation to participate. At no point during or after the study did the researcher learn of the participants' identities. The only inclusion requirement was that the participant was a student in one of the researcher's Spring 2020 courses, which meant all were over the age of 18 and enrolled master's students within the program in which the researcher teaches.

Students who consented to participate in this study were asked to submit demographic information, two written journal entries (i.e., one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester), and engage in an end-of-the-semester focus group. The initial journal prompts inquired about students' thoughts regarding the role of play in learning, their prior experiences, concerns, or initial impressions regarding play being incorporated into class. The final journal prompt asked students how/if their thoughts about the use of play in learning changed since the beginning of the semester, what types of play-based activities they found useful and which they did not find useful, and how/if the use of play had influenced their learning.

Participants also engaged in an end-of-the-semester hour-long focus group (three separate focus groups were held) conducted by the research assistant. The focus group data were collected through a structured interview protocol which asked the students to reflect on their experiences of learning through playful pedagogy which they experienced within the course. They were asked to share specific examples of play in their learning, their experiences, and the benefits and limitations of play in learning. Focus groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom Video Conferencing.

Participants were informed about the risks as well as precautions taken to ensure confidentiality. All data and the students' identities were kept confidential through use of pseudonyms, limiting the demographic questions, and data being collected and de-identified by the research assistant. All data were transcribed for data analysis by the research assistant with student-chosen pseudonyms prior to being given to the researcher and were kept on password-protected computers. All data were uploaded to Dedoose, a password protected qualitative research software, to organize and analyze data.

Data analysis

A hermeneutic interpretive phenomenological approach was utilized to understand and make meaning about the students' experiences of the use of play in learning (Lopez & Willis, 2004; van Manen, 1990). A hermeneutic interpretive method attempts to capture and manifest the hidden meaning within the human experience that goes beyond mere description of core concepts (Spielgelberg, 1976). The meaning of experiences is not always readily apparent to the participants but can be extracted from the stories they share through the research process (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Therefore, the focus of inquiry is centered on the meaning of the participants' narratives regarding their experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Dedoose was utilized for coding and data analysis. The researcher initially read the transcripts without coding in order to gain a holistic understanding of the data (Moustakas, 1994). This initial pass through allowed the researcher to remain open to possible meanings that the data held. The second read of transcripts generated descriptive coding for the purpose of

assigning labels that capture, in a word or short phrase, the main meaning of the selected passage of the data (Saldaña, 2012). In an additional coding phase, pattern coding was used where a “meta-code” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 209) was assigned to similarly coded data. Using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher identified patterns in the data to generate themes. Each emerging theme was compared to previously identified themes. Smaller themes were then collapsed into broader themes. Textural definitions of each theme were developed to capture the meaning of the theme (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Multiple forms of trustworthiness were used in order to increase the study’s rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement was achieved by collecting data at various points throughout the semester, ranging over five months. Throughout the semester, the researcher attempted to maintain awareness of her values and assumptions throughout the research process by journaling reactions and possible biases as they arose (Moustakas, 1994). Triangulation was utilized by collecting multiple sources of data, which can improve the validity of the study as various types of data are used to substantiate a single fact (Yin, 2009). Data sources in this study included: 1) participants’ written reflections at the start and end of the semester, 2) three transcribed focus group conversations at the end of the semester, and 3) students’ qualitative comments within the Faculty Course Questionnaire (FCQ). The FCQs are the university administered end-of-the-semester surveys requesting students’ anonymous feedback regarding the course and faculty member. It was important to use FCQ data because a potential critique of this study could have suggested that students who would volunteer for a study about play in learning would potentially be naturally inclined to value play, suggesting the data would be largely in favor of this pedagogical technique. The FCQ data is anonymously completed by any student within the course, not just the study’s participants, therefore could capture any student’s experiences, even those that potentially did not value play in the learning process. The average percentage of students who completed the FCQs across all three of the researcher’s courses was 88%. Therefore, it is notable to report that there were no negative comments about play or outliers within the FCQ data regarding play in learning.

Lastly, once the researcher established themes and identified which codes made up each theme, she consulted with the research assistant to receive feedback and critiques regarding the themes. The researcher also engaged in numerous debriefing conversations with an external content expert on play, fun, and higher education. The content expert served as an external audit to provide feedback and agreement regarding codes and the development of the themes.

Results

This research utilized a hermeneutic interpretive phenomenological lens to understand the meaning of the students’ experiences of play in the learning process. Through data analysis, the following themes were uncovered: 1) play is underutilized and devalued in higher education, 2) play cultivates relational safety and a warm classroom environment, 3) play removes barriers to learning, 4) play awakened students’ positive affect and motivation, and 5) play ignited an open and engaged learning stance to enhance learning.

Play is underutilized and devalued in higher education

As participants described the experience of learning through play, they spoke about play in higher education as an atypical and underutilized approach. At the start of the course, students reported their initial confusion, skepticism, or surprise about incorporating play in higher education. Upon learning that this course would include play, Helena expressed her surprise by saying, “In this program, we can do that? We can play?” Lily expressed her confusion about play in higher education by saying, “I thought play in learning was for elementary level, it’s an exception to the rule in higher education. I’m possibly confused about play in higher education.” Watson expressed his skepticism about how it would even work with adult students, “I’d say when I first heard about this [play in learning] the first thing I was skeptical about was getting graduate students to get out of their chairs and move around.” Watson went on to describe how he was not initially excited about the expectation of being highly engaged by saying the “lazy student in me would rather sit and listen to a lecture” so he does not have to do anything but he also simultaneously admitted that he learns better when he is engaged and interacting. Although multiple participants were initially skeptical or confused by the idea of play in a higher education setting, by the end of the course, the uncertainty had been resolved and participants spoke favorably about play in learning.

During the end-of-the-semester focus groups, the students described play as an uncommon, non-traditional, and student-centered approach to teaching and learning that utilizes fun, play, joy, creativity, laughter, and flexibility. Students described this approach as being noticeably different than traditional learning which they described as a “rigid and stricter lecture-based ‘listen to me,’ approach that is focused on performative learning, content delivery, note-taking, memorization and high-pressure assignments.” Students described playful teaching and learning as abnormal but “refreshing.” Watson explained his experience of play in learning by saying, “I would describe it as an alternative to the traditional style learning where traditional is lecture-based and the non-traditional style learning is very engaging, experiential, and fun.” Students also spoke about the value this alternative approach holds for them. David said, “At this point we have well over a dozen years of just being lectured at and I never learned very well like that.” Play in learning clearly had an impact on Lily as she stated:

Everything about grad school feels non-fun-oriented: extensive program handbooks, performative quizzes, unnecessarily complex assignments, formidable grading and attendance policies, all of which seem designed to discipline rather than educate; loads and loads of reading which is never discussed or applied in class, and so it feels removed from usefulness. Play provided an uplifting break from the seriousness of all this. My experience has shown that the value of play in learning is not to be underestimated. The incorporation of a little levity and a laugh has been life-affirming in general, but has also felt useful in creating a spaciousness for learning that is palpable, and palpably absent in other classes where the focus is more on performative quizzes and lengthy PowerPoint presentations. I feel better primed to learn when it’s not quite so rigid a class environment. The spaciousness has been invaluable.

Several students communicated the belief that adults are not encouraged to play enough. It seemed as though the participants experienced play in learning as an alternative and refreshing approach to learning and seemed to prefer the approach rather than how they experience traditional education.

Play cultivates relational safety and a warm classroom environment

In this theme, students described play in learning as having the ability to build relationships leading to a sense of relational safety and a warm, inclusive classroom. This sentiment is reflected in the literature stating that play generates social bonding (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014). The participants indicated that this bonding process began with the professor embodying and modeling playfulness, vulnerability, humility, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard. Many students discussed the instructor's way of being and personifying a playful person, instead of just "spewing information" at them, which encouraged them to more deeply engage with the content. One student stated in FCQ feedback, "Her [the instructor's] quirky personality was an authentic showing of herself and allowed for an atmosphere where beginning counselors felt safe practicing skills and often failing along the way." It seems by modeling playfulness and making space for play, it provided a humanistic environment that encouraged students to subsequently let down their guards and become more human and vulnerable themselves.

Some participants described how play inspired vulnerability and authenticity in front of their peers which was typically difficult for them to do in class. Steve said, "Fun and play allows for genuine human connection that you don't get if you're serious all the time." Girl Scout described play as a way to rehearse vulnerability by saying, "I got to practice being vulnerable in front of a bunch of people and being authentic, and I got to be silly which made it a good bonding experience." As students were able to be authentic and vulnerable, it led to participants perceiving their classmates and instructor as personable and approachable. Having space to be authentic humans in the classroom seemed to foster student openness and cultivate relational safety with each other and the instructor. Sally reported, "It [play] is a way to build relationships and as you're building relationships, the learning goes even deeper." Sally's belief about social relationships leading to more profound learning experiences is reinforced by Social Constructivist Learning Theory which values the collaborative nature of learning within social relationships (Vygotsky, 1980).

Other participants indicated that a sense of community and belonging established a safe, warm, respectful, and egalitarian classroom environment where everyone is valued for who they are and what they have to contribute. Jose said because of the safe environment that had been created, he felt more open to "share ideas and perspectives as we had conversations." Within the FCQ data, a student commented, "I wish all professors made such clear and sincere efforts to care about us students as people, not customers in the business of education."

While play cultivated a safe environment for students to be their whole selves, students also reported that it did not equate to ease of expectations or a lesser learning experience. Many described how within the safe environment they were then expected to do challenging tasks. A student stated in the FCQ comments, "Even though we protested sometimes out of fear and didn't want to dive into role plays, I appreciated [the instructor] challenging us. I think she created a safe environment for us and expected us to rise to the occasion. The high support and high expectations made this feel like a safe environment in which I grew so much." Play established an environment built upon trust and safety which encouraged vulnerability leading to connections and belonging—this created a safe base in which to be challenged.

Play removes barriers to learning

This theme describes how play served as a form of self-care—relaxing students, reducing their stress and allowing them to balance the seriousness of the course. Students described play as melting away their stress that enabled them to relax in order to be ready to learn and better connect to the difficult content. The students’ narratives regarding this theme mirrored the literature indicating that play reduces stress and anxiety (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014). Rose said, “It [play] alleviated stressors because we were able to find moments of happiness and connection with others by engaging in play while learning.” Jean agreed, “I realized that play and goofiness has served to decrease stress and tension—even if just for a few moments.” Lily described play in the classroom as a form of self-care saying,

I think that is one of the very few places that I’ve seen somebody effectively provide a balance, like ‘yeah what you’re doing [counseling] is gonna be serious, it’s engaging, it’s meaningful, it’s thoughtful, it’s heavy, it’s hard, and that’s not all there is. There’s this whole other side too and it’s important to remember that you’re human, that you’re gonna laugh, that you’re gonna have fun.’ She even had it on the syllabus for spring break: ‘no work, must play.’ Everyone talks about self-care but in this class, we talked about self-care, it was modeled, and then we incorporated ways to practice it.

Rando Partician and Helena indicated that play helped them focus their attention on learning. Helena said that with play, “I am more alert and being more alert makes me better able to learn.” Sally described a similar importance of play by stating:

We frequently come into a class with a whole day...there’s stuff we’re worried about and so, just, going right into the content – I may not have fully transitioned. But by integrating play, you’re pulling the students, into your world, the professor’s world, and then once you have their attention through play, through the hook – which is what play is, it’s a hook – then you really can get them to be more attentive to the content that you want to teach, because you’ve engaged them in a really personal fun way.

Students described play as helping them balance out the seriousness and the stress associated with the profession and serious topics—also a benefit of play echoed in the play literature (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014). Play positioned the students to be more comfortable and confident in facing the stressful, vulnerable, and “dark” conversations in class. Claire said, “Warming up with jokes and activities set the tone for a warm environment before we had to talk about hard topics – it eased our nerves.” Students indicated that even small ice-breaker activities can have a positive impact with learning heavy content. Students noted that the entire class was not all fun and games – there were serious parts to the class but the time for play helped them face the gravity in a more balanced way without taking the seriousness of the profession away. Students described play as having the ability to make the seriousness more approachable.

Girl Scout acknowledged that play does not have to be separate from professionalism by saying, “Just because I’m in all this serious stuff doesn’t mean I have to be a serious person and it doesn’t mean I have to go down with the ship.” Rose added, “I can be a funny, silly, light-hearted person with an awareness of the professionalism that goes into therapy, so it helped me learn how to do that while also maintaining professionalism.” Girl Scout differentiated this balance nicely when she said, “Play allowed me to take my education seriously without having to take the stress of it seriously.” Rando Partician described his belief that humor can get lost in

education and communicated a preference that classes carry both fun and seriousness and that it is okay to balance them both.

In addition, participants repeatedly reported that play lifted the students' fear of vulnerability and fear of failure—often barriers to learning. Many students reported feeling more comfortable in the classroom setting as a result of play. Play relieved some of the pressure of the course freeing students to make mistakes and helping them to be better able to see errors as a part of the learning process—they were able to give themselves grace that there is a steep learning curve and failure is an expected component. Several play scholars have found a similar benefit of play in reducing self-consciousness that can lead to taking risks in learning (Brown, 2009; James & Nerantzi, 2019). David indicated that in going through a counseling program you experience a lot of “failure and shame” but play eases that tension and makes it easier to take risks that might lead to mistakes. Jose said, “It really took away my self-critique and opened me up for mistakes and the learning curve that I might have throughout the semester.” Removing barriers and reducing stress seemed to permit students to overcome their fear which primed them to be vulnerable and engage in appropriate risk-taking. A surprising finding was that this theme did not link play directly to learning, but students described play as a technique to reduce barriers to prime them to be more alert and willing to be vulnerable, which paved the way for effective learning to take place. It was almost as if playfulness (play that is removed from relevance of the course) served as a precursor to greater learning. Therefore, this theme highlighted a difference between play that teaches students content directly and content-irrelevant play that is done solely for the purpose of joy/levity that ignites the learning process.

Play awakened students' positive affect and motivation

Students indicated that once they felt a sense of trust, connection, and relaxation in a warm and playful environment, they were more excited and motivated in the learning context. An issue that educators often grapple with is increasing student motivation because it is clear that motivated students learn more effectively (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings from this study suggest play may be a valuable resource in increasing students' motivation. This is also supported by some play scholars who have argued that play in the learning space encourages intrinsic motivation (Gee, 2003; Whitton & Moseley, 2014). In the students' opinion, traditional education (e.g., strict, lecture-based) is less able to ignite positive affect and increase their motivation than a playful pedagogy. With play, students described being more motivated, alert, and energized – thus better able to concentrate and focus on learning by switching into student mode where material became more intriguing, pleasurable, joyful, and exciting because the content and the class were presented in a playful manner.

Play, relationships, a safe classroom, and the reduction of barriers, all seemed to aid in making the content more accessible and interesting to students. Jean said, “I thought about the discussions and learning topics in a way that is primed by play which in turn made the material more intriguing.” Students described a sense of joy and excitement when learning through play. One student's FCQ comment stated, “this class helped me engage with the material when I struggled with other classes. I looked forward to her class because she made the material exciting using play and games to learn.” Many students seemed to describe a shift in positive emotions which made class exciting and intriguing. Deci (1987) found that engaging in intrinsically motivated activities can result in positive affect, however, other research indicated that positive affect can be generated *prior to a task* to increase levels of motivation to complete the task (Isen & Reeve, 2005). It is clear that motivation and positive affect go hand in hand and are important

in the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Play seems to be vehicle to produce positive emotions in classrooms.

Multiple students agreed by stating that when class time is more enjoyable, they are better able to retain the information. Rose said, "Since it was done in a playful manner, I was excited about it and whenever I'm excited about learning, I can retain that knowledge a lot more." Students reported that this higher level of enjoyment in class helped them focus and look forward to class. Rando Partician said, "I am excited for class and not worried about being bored or not paying enough attention because she made the material exciting." It seems that one benefit of play was that students felt more intrigued and excited about the content and attending class which may have cultivated higher levels of motivation than if they had found class time joyless. This awakening of motivation seemed to fuel their excitement and increase the appeal of the course and their desire to engage in the content.

Play ignited an open and engaged learning stance to enhance learning

This theme seemed to build upon the prior themes. Once play established relational safety (theme 2), a reduction of fear, stress, and anxiety (theme 3), students became more motivated in the learning environment (theme 4). It seemed that those aspects paved the way for this final theme where students described an experience of high engagement, persistence, and openness to the learning activities. As the students were more excited and motivated to engage with the hands-on and interactive nature of play, participants described the learning as more realistic, meaningful, personal, and applied. This theme reflects the literature on play describing play's ability to produce high levels of engagement and participation (James & Nerantizi, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2014) which can lead to a more memorable learning experience (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014).

The students' narratives explained how interactive the classroom felt which made them better able to engage with the content and others. Sally indicated, "We learn the most when we are engaged and have to apply what we are learning. I think the purpose of play is about relationship-building and transitioning into the class and being able to better engage." Many students described their struggle with long lectures. Some participants indicated that throughout their education, it is typical for professors to lecture for 30 minutes or longer; when that happens, the students zone out quickly and disengage with the class and the content. When referring to play in teaching Lily said, "If I just wanted content delivery, I could go to the library and check out a book but the fact that we played in class, kind of engaged us more as whole beings." A student in the FCQ data described being engaged with the material as more meaningful by saying, "the use of fun in the classroom made learning the content engaging and I appreciated learning when it felt that there was meaning and purpose behind the material."

Students reported many positive learning outcomes of being highly engaged with the class and content. Lily described the playful activities as being beneficial because it cultivated thinking, she said, "There's learning content and then there's learning how to think. I think teachers who do better teach people *how* to think rather than *what* to think and I think that play really helped to ignite a different way of thinking." Lily described a playful approach as being effective for long-term learning, she said, "It helped my brain learn differently than just cramming content. I can cram content but then I immediately dump it at the end of the class to make room for the next class but content that I actually learn and incorporate, stays with me forever."

The participants described being more open to taking risks and making mistakes along the way as well as being receptive to and valuing feedback from not only their professor but also their peers. Students described the openness existing due to the trust and safety that had previously been established within the classroom (theme 2). The students described in detail the outcomes of learning in a safe environment where their fears and anxieties had been reduced. One student's FCQ comment stated, "It allowed for an atmosphere where beginning counselors felt safe practicing skills and often failing along the way." Steve described the play and games as vital to his learning because he was able to relax and make mistakes when the mistakes did not matter. Lily added,

We are not going to be perfect, so I think soft-fails are really important and play is a really good place for soft-fails where I'm not going to lose points, I'm not going to lose face, I'm not going to be kicked out of the program. And I don't think that there are many positive places to fail in a graduate program. You fail, you fail. The stakes are high and it's a problem. It's an expensive problem too. But the games are an opportunity to fail and it not be a big deal. I don't think there are a lot of places for that in higher education. There's plenty of places for that out in the world but I don't think it's incorporated into pedagogy very often and I really did appreciate that a lot.

Many students discussed the opportunities for growth they gained from learning in a highly interactive environment that was conducive to making mistakes. Lily said, "I learn from my mistakes and I never would have made them without the opportunities to make them." Students believed that the interactive and playful approach was more personable and permitted them to make more meaning from their learning.

Students also described that the interactive and hands-on nature of learning through play established a means for skill acquisition, and being able to retain the content more effectively. Lily indicated, "I just learn differently. A lot of content [in higher education] is delivered in such a way that it is isolated from application. In this class, the incorporation of play and so many role-plays made what we were learning immediately practical." Students described a disdain for having theory simply "thrown at them" and expected to complete "performative quizzes that someday will never matter." Lily continued by saying, "My future clients are not gonna be like 'how'd you do on the five-point quizzes at the beginning of class?' No one is going to care. But the things that we learned in this class, seemed immediately practical because we immediately used them. And I learned them in a way that made them matter" A student's FCQ comment stated, "The focus on play makes the class fun and engaging, and the hands-on practice and feedback with real counseling is incomparably powerful." Students believed that through play, which created an interactive and engaging environment, they were better able to retain the information and develop actual skills and that when they are in the field, they will have actual experiences to draw upon.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the meaning of the students' experiences of play as a foundation to the learning process. The participants described a complex process involving play that impacted their learning as a whole and not just solely for the purpose of learning content. The findings support much of the previous literature indicating that play increases social bonding (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014), leads to positive emotions and energy (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014),

is an instrument that allows us to balance out seriousness (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014), and reduces self-consciousness in order to make mistakes (Brown 2009) which can lead to meaning-making (Sicart, 2014). Play accesses the whole brain and ignites different ways to build knowledge and leads to enhanced and more memorable learning experiences (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014). Authors specifically writing about play in the learning context, indicated that play brings relaxation, joy, liberation, focus, and creates a safe and engaged learning environment (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Several authors have indicated that play in the learning space encourages intrinsic motivation (Gee, 2003; Whitton & Moseley, 2014) and positive affect, which has been reported to enhance learning experiences, increase interest, and enjoyment in activities (Isen & Reeve, 2005). Other authors reported play in learning can increase participation, curiosity, motivation (Whitton & Moseley, 2014), and enjoyment (Gee, 2003; Whitton & Moseley, 2014).

Play in learning borrows from two separate fields of study—play and education. The findings from this study seem to only partially fit existing theories (e.g., Sutton-Smith's Play Theory; Social Constructivist Theory; and Self-Determination Theory). Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) proposed a *Play Theory* with seven rhetorics or narratives of play that attempt to explain, and justify different forms of play: 1) play as progress (i.e., we develop through play); 2) play as fate (i.e., lives and play are controlled by destiny); 3) play as power (i.e., play represents controlling conflict); 4) play as identity (i.e., a means to confirm the identity of a community of players); 5) play as imaginary (i.e., promotes creativity and innovation); 6) play as self (i.e., idealized by attention to the experiences of fun and relaxation); and 7) play as frivolous (i.e., play experienced as frivolous and protests against established orders of the world). The findings from the current study reflect these rhetorics and therefore, can justify what the students experienced was in fact play. But this justification is removed from more mainstream educational theories that are focused on play's place in the learning process specifically.

The findings of this study mirror many elements of *Social Constructivist Theory* (SCT; Vygotsky, 1980), a type of constructivism, which posits that learning and knowledge are best constructed through an active process within a social context. Learning is contextual and involves creating systems of meaning. Motivation is essential in a social constructivist environment as students are active participants in their learning. The components of SCT reflected in this study's findings are that play created a social and active learning environment where students reported higher levels of motivation. One may conclude that play is a means to create a social constructivist classroom, however, this theory also does not fully capture the elements and process of play in learning as demonstrated in the students' narratives.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) examines various elements of motivation and indicates that the best learning outcomes derive from intrinsically motivated students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT differentiates motivation on a basic level – intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when one is internally moved to act for the fun or challenge of the task whereas extrinsic motivation is when an activity is completed in order to attain some separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Educators cannot simply remove external factors of motivation or reduce the responsibility and tasks of learning; therefore, they face the issue of motivating students to learn that is not solely directed from external and controlling sources. That is to say, learning is a complex process of connecting external or extrinsic motivators to internal or intrinsic motivations to achieve meaningful outcomes. This study's findings suggest play as a valuable tool to increase student motivation across this extrinsic/intrinsic continuum as the participants frequently described indicators of higher motivation (e.g., energized, higher focus, joyful, exciting, and intrigued). However, the

issue of motivation only partially captures the meaning of play in the learning process. It is as though the findings of this study illuminate a gap in our knowledge of learning theories. It may be vital for the field of play to suggest a Playful Learning Theory that captures the essence of play's place in the learning process. There exist play-based approaches but the field is lacking a more complete play learning theory. Such a theory can provide more understanding and structure for educators to have more ease and confidence in adopting a playful approach.

Previous literature on play has presented benefits of play in learning yet lacks a comprehensive model or systemic understanding of the relationship among those concepts. The themes presented in this paper capture the meaning of the students' experiences with play in learning. Figure 1 suggests a model that represents how the concepts within the themes have relationships with each other. A system that is more than a collection of parts says something about the structure of play in learning. The development of this model is based on the assumption that the themes and concepts are interrelated and build upon one another. This model assumes that play ignites a powerful learning process that begins with instructors assuming a playful, vulnerable, authentic stance and serving as a knowledgeable facilitator in students' learning process. Play and positive affect establish authentic human interaction which leads to relational safety. Play and positive affect also serve to center students and reduce their barriers to learning (i.e., stress/fear/anxiety). Relational safety and a reduction of barriers awakens motivation to learn. Students who experience positive affect and motivation are willing to adopt an active vulnerable engagement with the content and others. Students who learn through active engagement assume responsibility for their learning and relate to the content on a personal level leading to deep and meaningful learning outcomes. Although further research is needed regarding the relationships suggested here, perhaps this systemic understanding of the findings can provide structure for future attempts to integrate play in learning.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that there is a unique and energetic classroom experience when play is valued and utilized as a foundational component to the learning process. However, there tends to be criticism and misconceptions about play in tertiary learning potentially leading to the exclusion of play from pedagogical approaches (James & Nerantzi, 2019). James and Nerantzi (2019) suggested a reason why play is an uncommon pedagogy in higher education is that play can be seen as lacking rigor and educational quality. The results from this study provide additional legitimacy for play in learning as a substantial pedagogical approach in higher education. The results indicate that through play, students are better able to face the rigor of, and be more motivated to take risks and engage with, the material they are learning.

Swank (2012) described how some may be resistant to utilize play as they may believe play is merely for entertainment purposes. Educators may refrain from implementing play that is not connected to content because they believe play should be utilized only when it directly connects to course objectives and learning outcomes. This study demonstrates that play, even play for the purpose of joy, was a catalyst for enhanced learning. A playful activity can be an active way to learn the content, but also, play and playfulness indifferent to the course content serve as a precursor to establishing a safe, motivated, and engaged learning experience. These results suggest that, in part, faculty must trust the process of play in learning and include time for play even if the play does not initially seem directly related to content. This research demonstrates the value and importance of play for the sake of fun and joy because it generates

relational safety and ignites a valuable learning process that may awaken students’ interest in learning, and vulnerable engagement – all leading to memorable and meaningful learning.

Despite evidence that traditional lecture-based pedagogies are less effective than active learning strategies in achieving desired student learning outcomes, such alternative pedagogies are slow to be adopted (Konopka et al., 2015). A hierarchical, lecture-based approach may have become habit or the unquestioned norm passed down from generation to generation of academics. Some may wrongly believe if they incorporate play into their classrooms, they will lose credibility or waste valuable time needed to teach the content. Perhaps, tertiary educators often neglect a playful pedagogy because they misunderstand the role of play in learning. Faculty might not infuse play as a foundation to their course because it may, on the surface, appear to be irrelevant or trivial. However, play holds a hidden power in learning. These findings should encourage educators and researchers to explore the manner and methods in which play enriches learning.

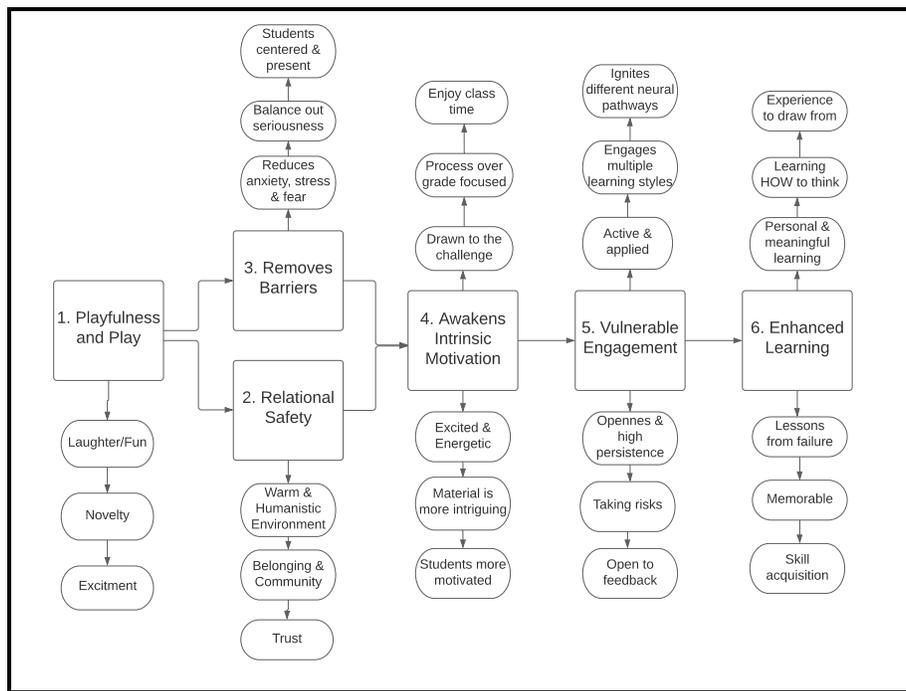


Figure 1: The Playful Learning Process Model

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