Never Underestimate the Power of Play

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“We do not stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”
– George Bernard Shaw

Play is everywhere. We play with words, play video games, watch a play, play the stock market, analyze a sports play, and play around. The ubiquitous nature of play is evident in the multiple approaches taken in the study of play. Anthropologists study play and ritual found in customs and festivals of various people groups. Biologists study the play in animals. Mathematicians focus on games of chance and probability to play war games and devise defense strategies. Psychologists study play to understand its role in human development. Sociologists focus on the adaptive aspect of play and how it contributes to socialization. Educators explore the relationship of play and learning: however, this is only explored in the realm of children and more specifically in early childhood education. Very little is written about the role of play among adult learners.

The Nature of Play

The extensive nature of play and playfulness makes it difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of what these words mean. While most everyone plays occasionally and knows what playing feels like, it is difficult to make theoretical statements about play because of its elusive nature. “Defining play is difficult because it is a moving target. It’s a process, not a thing” (qtd. in Tartakovsky). For the most part, the focus is on the actual experience, not on accomplishing a goal. The difficulties in conceptualizing play are frustrated by the fact that various academic disciplines approach play so differently. “Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language – and they all use the word play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.6). For the purposes of this paper, play is defined as pleasurable, separate from the real world (through imagination or rules), intrinsically motivated, and often spontaneous.

Theories of Play in Adults

While most play theories focus on children, there are several scholars who have theorized about adult play. Huizinga (1955) raises the status of play to prominence among adult society, Caillois (2001) provides a framework for understanding adult games, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies and defines a state of optimal being for adults which mirrors playfulness, Kerr and Apter provide helpful terms to distinguish between playful and non-playful activities, and Lieberman (1977) identifies aspects of playfulness among adults.
The work of Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga is significant because he esteems play as a legitimate aspect of adult life. In his classic work, *Homo ludens: Man the player*, he writes that play is a key building block of all human civilization (Huizinga, 1955). He argues that play is evident in law, art, war, poetry and philosophy. Roger Caillois (2001) builds on Huizinga’s theory of play to create a typology which categorizes various forms of play. His classification system is helpful in thinking about games utilized in play with adults and children in any context, including education. Huizinga and Caillois describe the manifestations of play within society, but Csikszentmihalyi captures the experience of play among individuals.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) does not research play specifically, however, his extensive studies of ‘flow’ mirror many characteristics associated with play/playfulness. For this reason, his work is included in this review. Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Our daily activities, whether work or play, can bring about satisfaction and happiness if we are able to enter into a flow state or playful state of mind.

This idea of play or playfulness as a state of mind is shared by Kerr and Apter (1991) as well as Lieberman (1977). Psychologists John Kerr and Michel Apter (1991) edited a book entitled *Adult play: A reversal theory approach*. They define play as “a way of seeing or being, a special mental ‘set’ toward the world and one’s action in it” (Kerr & Apter, 1991, p. 13). Their discussion of play is couched in reversal theory which is a psychological approach that deals with changes (or reversals) in motivation, emotion, personality, and psychopathology (Apter, 1991).

Playfulness as an attitude or state of mind has also been studied by Nina Lieberman (1977). She studied young children, adolescents, and adults exploring the relationship between playfulness and creativity. She postulates that there is a “developmental continuity of playfulness as behavior” and that “playfulness survives play [childhood play] and becomes a personality trait of the individual” (Lieberman, 1977, p. 5). Playfulness then is an attribute or personality trait of adults that is characterized by spontaneity, sense of humor, and manifest joy (Lieberman, 1977).

These theories of adult play provide some insight to play and playfulness among adults, but do not specifically address adults in a learning context. Despite their limitations, they help provide a broader understanding for play and playfulness in the life of adults. They indicate that play is embedded in human culture (Huizinga, 1950; Caillois, 2001) and that a playful approach to adult activities brings about joy and pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kerr and Apter, 1991; Lieberman, 1977).

**Studies of Play in Adults**

Overall, there is very little empirical research that explores play among adult learners in a classroom context. Elaine Melamed’s (1985) and David Tanis’s (2012) dissertations addresses the relationship between play/playfulness and learning by adults. Tanis looks specifically at the higher education classroom.
Melamed identified five themes concerning play/playfulness and learning; relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, and empowering. Playful learners value relational qualities like cooperation and connectedness. Being judged or competing against others, negatively affected learning. Experiential learning was a key approach because it provided a structure in which the learner could be playful. Playful learners are likely to engage in metaphoric thinking such as imagination, intuition, emotion, etc. The integrative theme describes the playful learner’s ability to pull together seemingly opposite viewpoints or paradoxical terms. They tend to view things as both/and rather than either/or. Finally, Melamed describes the playful learner as empowered to function within society and to cast dreams about what might be. In addition to these five themes associated with playful learners, play was found to open individuals up to learning, keep them involved in learning, and allow for deeper connections and understanding of self (Melamed, 1985).

Melamed begins to identify the connections between play/playfulness and learning, but there are some limitations to her study. First of all, she studied only women. She conducted her study at a time when differences between men and women in learning were just beginning to be explored. Her findings may be about women’s ways of knowing as much as they are about play and playfulness. Melamed draws attention to the significance of play to adult learners, but does not explore the role of play in learning in the context of an adult classroom.

Tanis used a comparative case study approach to explore the role of play in adult education classrooms. His findings revealed that educators associated the following elements with play and playfulness: fun, spontaneity, relationship and connection, silliness or goofiness, creativity and imagination. Furthermore, play and playfulness were most frequently manifested in the classroom through risk taking, storytelling, and physical activities. Students identified cognitive gains in terms of engagement, retention, and understanding. More significantly, students indicated that play and playfulness created a learning environment that felt safe and encouraged curiosity (Tanis, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Our society tends to dismiss play for adults. Play is perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood, it’s time to get serious. And between personal and professional responsibilities, there’s no time to play. “The only kind [of play] we honor is competitive play” (qtd. in Tartakovsky), according to Bowen F. White, MD, a medical doctor and author of *Why Normal Isn’t Healthy*. Froebel, Montessori, Paley, all the giants in the field of childhood learning and development, have said that play is children’s work, but it also adult work. Play is just as pivotal for adults as it is for kids.

Play brings joy. It is vital for problem solving, creativity and relationships, true 21st century skills (Pink, 2005). Therefore fun and learning cannot be opposites. Play promotes true intellectual curiosity. It has been shown to increase lifetime performance. Within an institution dedicated to “educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character … and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation” (USMA Mission Statement, 2015), we need to find ways to engage our students the same way that their out of school activities engage them.
References


Annotated Readings


Brown concludes that play is no less important than oxygen, and that it’s a powerful force in nature that helps determine the likelihood of the very survival of the human race. Brown reveals that play is an essential way humans learn to socialize. Beginning with the very first play interactions between mother and child, and working up to adult relationships between couples and co-workers, Brown describes how play helps brain development and promotes fairness, justice and empathy. Work and play are mutually supportive, he argues noting that play increases efficiency and productivity.


Aristotle observed 2300 years ago that more than anything men and women seek happiness. Csikszentmihalyi has for 25 years made similar observations regarding "flow," a field of behavioral science examining connections between satisfaction and daily activities. A flow state ensues when one is engaged in self-controlled, goal-related, meaningful actions. Data regarding flow were collected on thousands of individuals, from mountain climbers to chess players. This thoroughly researched study is an intriguing look at the age-old problem of the pursuit of happiness and how, through conscious effort, we may more easily attain it.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press. Huizinga discusses the importance of the play element of culture and society. He suggests that play is primary to and a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of the generation of culture. Huizinga defines play against a rich theoretical background, using cross-cultural examples from the humanities, business, and politics.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of extant theory and research on the subject of play in children and adults in a variety of cultural contexts with relevant comparisons to play in nonhuman species. The primary issue addressed is the ambiguous nature of play. Although we have a sense of what constitutes play, when asked to define it, explain its function, or even identify players, its paradoxical nature becomes apparent – it is and is not what it appears to be, does and does not have a function, is and is not the purview of children.