

Book Review

James, A. and Nerantzi, C. (eds.) (2019) *The Power of Play in Higher Education* Palgrave Macmillan

Kathryn McFarlane

Independent Consultant

Corresponding author: kathryn.mcfarlane4@btinternet.com

A few years ago, I came into work an hour early to set up my classroom for a group of staff on a postgraduate education course. I moved all the tables out of rows and into *cabaret* style with chairs around them, and set out shaped post-its, coloured pens, and various other objects. A passing colleague came in and said "It looks like a primary school classroom". Having read this book, I can now finally interpret that casual comment as a compliment.

If you value using creative and innovative methods to promote deep learning, this book will not only offer you new techniques, it will also provide a theoretical framework which will help you to explain and justify this approach to your colleagues, learners and managers:

"We need to play, not just to relieve our stresses, but because play makes us better at the complex, challenging, horizon-stretching work that a university needs to do."

(p.18)

It sets out to deal with a "system error" which suggests that as learners progress through education, it should become more serious with less play:

"For many children, education can all too easily be a journey of increasing seriousness from the exuberance of the playground to the silence of the examination hall. At university, it is all too easy for a

learner's spirit of enquiry, playful experimentation and curiosity to be stifled by a misplaced perception that 'student engagement' and 'student satisfaction' will only be achieved if courses are delivered in certain unplayful ways".

(p.vii)

Meanwhile, what do Play-Doh®, a wormery, a global tea party and an escape room have in common? They are all featured within this book, along with other surprises such as the culture shoe box, puzzles, computer games, a scavenger hunt, and more. The book starts with the editors' introduction to the overall context of play in higher education, and ends with concluding reflections and a model for play in learning and teaching. In between are 40 chapters, written by 64 different authors, which provide a fascinating range of creative and *playful* approaches to learning and teaching in a higher education environment. The authors' experience ranges from Art to Zoology, and from the UK to Canada, South Korea, Germany and the USA. While many are lecturers, they also include students, managers, professors, an artist and a stage manager, among others.

Marshalling the contributions of such a large and diverse set of *playful* writers must have been immensely challenging for the two editors. For a start, the authors did not agree on the definition of play; while for some authors it was "free, unfettered activity", for others it was "rule-bound and structured", and still others viewed it as "an immersive experience which frees us up to make mistakes, new discoveries, go beyond convention and learn through moments of discomfort", (pp.xli-xlii).

These different definitions were evident throughout the book, in the examples of practice and theoretical context elaborated by each author. Meanwhile, inevitably, there was variability in the approach taken to writing each chapter

and the quality of the academic writing. I found some chapters were valuable sources of practical ideas which could be adapted to different contexts, while others focused almost exclusively on theory, and lacked detail of the learning activities, which would hinder their transferability. On the positive side, perhaps this diversity means that the chapters would appeal to different learning styles.

Despite the varied approaches, there was some structure; the majority of chapters began with an introduction providing some context, before moving into a description of a *playful* approach and associated theory. Each chapter was either an "Exploration" — a more detailed and theorised evaluation — or a "Sketch" — a brief account. Most chapters, whether Explorations or Sketches, theory-focused or practice-focused, were very readable with clear diagrams and references to further reading in many cases.

The chapters were loosely organised into six parts, described as "thematic structures", and the reader was warned to "expect and forgive messiness", (p. xviii). While I would agree that these parts were broadly defined, they did provide some structure to the text, for example all the approaches focused on words and language were grouped together (Part IV — Wordsmiths and Communicators) and all the approaches which were based on games were grouped together (Part VI — Gamers and Puzzlers).

This book would be valuable for staff involved in learning and teaching in Higher Education in all disciplines and also in related areas, such as information literacy or careers. It would be equally relevant to those new to teaching and those with experience; in both cases it would be a helpful resource to evaluate alternative perspectives and approaches, and to refresh or initialise learning and teaching practice. In terms of reading styles, it could work well for the dipper; the introduction is a good place to start, but after

that, why not take a *playful* approach, look at the interesting chapter headings, and follow your nose through the plethora of practical ideas and theoretical underpinnings? Even if you do read the whole book, there is no need to read it in the order presented, as each chapter stands alone. Having taken a cover-to-cover approach, I would recommend you do not miss chapter 10, with its focus on the use of artefacts and the “environment as the third teacher” (p. 109); chapter 15, the egg-dropping challenge; chapter 22, which outlines innovative approaches to integrating foreign language students within the “cityscape” of Tours; and chapter 35, which introduces Wardopoly (Monopoly in a hospital), another idea which could be adapted to other disciplines.

This book elaborated an impressive array of innovative learning and teaching techniques, representing staff and students in diverse disciplines and environments. While this was an immense achievement for the authors involved, my slight disappointment was the focus on individual projects and activities, rather than a wholesale transformation of learning and teaching with *playful* approaches integrated throughout. Nevertheless, maybe this text is an important step in the right direction.

I suspect that the methods outlined will resonate with many readers who are already using similar approaches to promote student learning. It may feel like *playful* is simply a new piece of terminology for something we already knew and already do. However, this book does offer something new—a rationale for turning the traditional classroom upside down, some new strategies to use within this context, a change in the power relationship with students, and above all a recognition that learning should be FUN, not just for five year olds, but for learners of all ages.