

Playful Pedagogy

A Novel Teaching Innovation in Counselor Education

Counselor educators have an important task in training competent counselors who can provide effective therapy to a diverse and complex caseload. However, traditional lecture-based teaching is often at odds with desired student learning outcomes. Therefore, it is important to explore and embrace alternative pedagogies because our efficacy as counselor educators has a direct impact on the quality of care our graduates will provide their future clients and students. In this teaching brief, I present a case for playful pedagogy as a powerful alternative mode to education that creates an environment that is conducive to connection, belonging, student engagement, and brain-based learning leading to deeper, more meaningful learning.

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Playful Pedagogy: A Novel Teaching Innovation in Counselor Education

Counselor educators have an important task in training and graduating competent counselors who can provide effective and nuanced therapy to a diverse and complex caseload. However, traditional teaching practices in higher education are arguably outdated and often at odds with desired student learning outcomes. It is generally well-known that increasing student motivation and active engagement are vital precursors to deep and meaningful learning (Konopka et al., 2015). However, despite this knowledge, many educators still struggle to divert their teaching practices away from the traditional sage-on-the-stage, lecture-based approach where students tend to be passive recipients of knowledge (Brockliss, 1996; Freeman et al., 2014; Hsu & Malkin, 2011). It behooves counselor educators to explore and embrace alternative pedagogies because educating future counselors has a more profound impact than simply preparing students to pass our courses and licensure exams. That is, becoming a more effective educator is not only essential to provide a better learning experience for students, but it also has ethical implications because our ability to train competent, deeply knowledgeable, and flexible counselors have a direct impact on the quality of care that our graduates will provide their future clients and students. Therefore, counselor educators should consider the limitations of the traditional modes of education and embrace alternative pedagogies that can more dynamic and effective in train competent counselors.

Neuroscience researchers have suggested that rigid and static learning environments, such as lecture-based teaching, do not appeal to the brain, tend to extinguish students' natural curiosity, and limit a student's ability to learn (Brown, 2009; Jansen & McConchie, 2020; Tang, 2017). A more valuable learning experience is generated when the environment creates optimal brain states for learning (Tang, 2017; Taylor & Marienau, 2016). Educators can support brain-based learning by eliciting certain neurotransmitters that are involved in learning (i.e., dopamine, norepinephrine, acetylcholine, and oxytocin) which strengthen neuroplasticity (Jansen & McConchie, 2020; Tang, 2017; Wang & Aamodt, 2012). The presence of these neurotransmitters increases students' motivation, attention, memory, concentration, urgency, and interpersonal trust - all vital aspects of learning (Jansen & McConchie, 2020; Tang, 2017; Wang & Aamodt, 2012). Environments that are most conducive to producing these positive neurotransmitters are those that allow for joy, pleasure, excitement, positive mood, surprise, novelty, and social interaction (Jansen & McConchie, 2020; Tang, 2017; Wang & Aamodt, 2012). However, when you compare this type of pro-learning environment with our traditional modes of education (e.g., lecture-based teaching), it becomes clear that formal teaching approaches may be counterproductive to learning (Tang, 2017). Given this contrast, in this teaching brief, I present a case for playful pedagogy as a powerful alternative mode to education that may hold considerable merit for counselor educators.

The counselor education literature has relatively few examples of play-based learning beyond the traditional role-play intervention. Although limited in examples, this literature may provide some direction and understanding of playful pedagogy in counselor training programs. Most of the play-based examples in the counselor education literature are singular interventions intended to teach a certain skill. For example, more than 30 years ago, Barak (1990) used The Empathy Game to teach and enhance students' empathy skills. Kim and Lyons (2003) utilized games to teach multicultural competency. Swank (2012) also adapted popular games (i.e., Jenga, Jeopardy, etc.) to foster discussions and create unique assessment activities. Bell et al. (2014) utilized play as a creative approach to impart psychoeducation and self-reflection. Anderton and King (2016) enhanced students' empathy for various populations through a video game. These examples demonstrate how play can be used to teach a specific concept, but they do not describe how those playful interventions fit within the professor's underlying pedagogical philosophy.

A more recent study took a more macro-level look at counseling students' experiences of learning when play was utilized as a foundation to the course (Forbes, 2021). In this study, Forbes (2021) provided a more holistic understanding and rationale for the application of playful pedagogy beyond singular interventions. While singular play-based interventions to teach a concept are meaningful, in this teaching brief, I suggest the use of a more holistic and comprehensive philosophical playful teaching approach.

Description of Playful Pedagogy

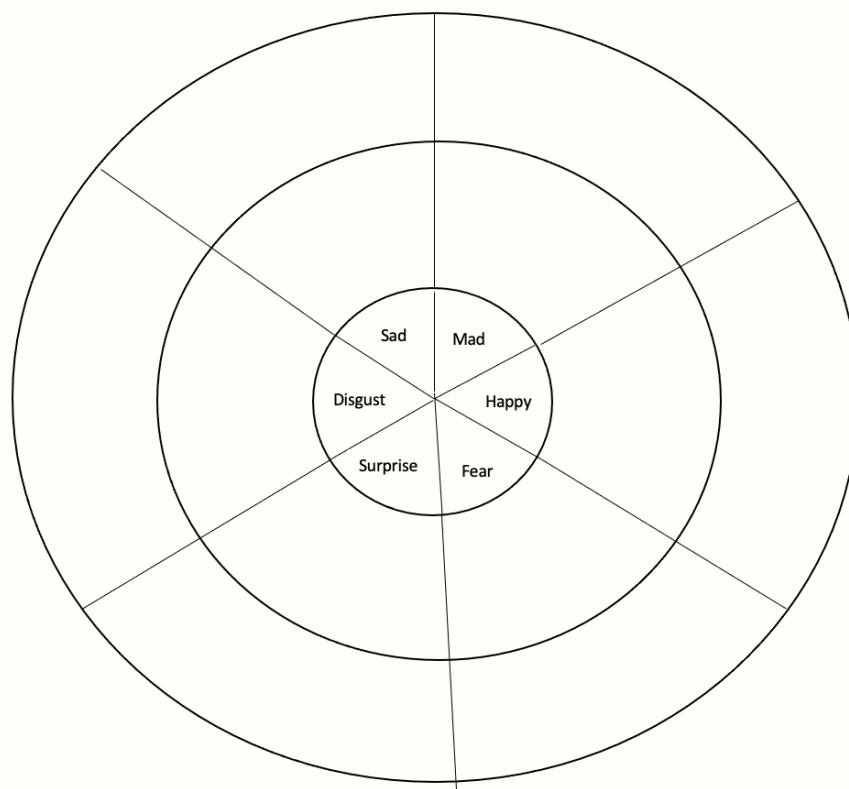
A holistic, playful pedagogy is an uncommon and non-traditional approach to adult education that transforms the learning environment to connect and engage students and change their association to learning (Forbes, 2021). Play is deeply inherent to humans and a basic human need (Brown, 2009) that generates a plethora of positive outcomes yet is often an untapped resource in adult learning (James & Nerantzi, 2019). However, when play is included in the learning environment, a powerful learning process ensues (Brown, 2009). Play reduces students' stress and fear promoting well-being, joy, and motivation to engage in learning which deepens and enhances the learning outcomes (Forbes, 2021; James & Nerantzi, 2019). Play generates feelings of joy, novelty, excitement, and surprise which produce important neurotransmitters involved in learning (Wang & Aamodt, 2012). Play awakens student engagement and establishes an environment built on trust and connection encouraging experimentation, risk-taking, and creativity (Brown, 2009; James & Nerantzi, 2019). Overall, playful pedagogy is not just a play activity but a philosophy to teaching that maintains a belief in the power of play to reduce students' barriers, create a connected learning community leading to motivated students who deeply engage and participate in their learning (Brown, 2009; Forbes, 2021).

ESTABLISHING AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE FOR DEEP LEARNING

Playful pedagogy extends beyond typical role-plays and singular activities and provides a deeper philosophy and approach to teaching. Moreover, playful pedagogy is not just what the instructor does but who the instructor is. That is, the instructor embodies play as a way of being, avoiding rigidity, reducing intimidating hierarchies, and simply not taking oneself too seriously (Forbes & Thomas, 2022). Embodying playfulness and flexibility are important aspects of the powerful learning process that ensues when play is utilized because play establishes a safe and inclusive learning environment - aspects that are vital as a foundation to learning (Forbes & Thomas, 2022; Marzano, 2017). Another often overlooked component of creating an environment for thorough learning is producing joy, excitement, and social connection. In Playful pedagogy, playful icebreakers are intentionally utilized to create a classroom environment built on trust, emotional ease, and connection between students and instructor (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Icebreakers in adult learning are often excluded or minimally used for various reasons, some being fear and a misconception that icebreakers reduce “rigor” or waste precious learning time needed to meet extensive learning outcomes (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Playful pedagogy is not only about teaching content, but also about establishing an environment that facilitates student success so that the learning can be deepened and accelerated. Similar to Carl Rogers’ person-centered belief that clients will self-actualize if given the “right” environment (Rogers, 1951), playful pedagogy also asserts that establishing an environment built on relational safety is an essential aspect of effective learning, which traditional pedagogies often struggle to cultivate. Therefore, by simply spending a little time on play, even when it is seemingly irrelevant to the content (i.e., such as icebreakers), educators can teach more deeply in less time because students will have an increased openness, motivation, and ability to learn (Brown, 2009). Once an environment is created where students are relaxed, connected, and motivated to engage, play can be harnessed as creative and hands-on approaches to teaching important content.

EXAMPLES OF PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY IN TEACHING CONTENT

Games for Active Learning. Play can be games or competitions, but play can also be “playing with” teaching norms to design learning that is more novel, flexible, and innovative (Forbes & Thomas, 2022). For example, instead of simply providing students with a completed feeling wheel, the instructor can turn the feeling wheel handout into a game where students are given a blank feelings wheel (see Figure 1) with only the primary feelings printed on the inner concentric circle. Then, student groups compete against each other (or race against the clock) to complete their own feeling wheels by brainstorming synonyms for each of the primary feelings. This allows students to engage with the feeling wheel and actively expand their feeling word vocabulary. Without active engagement, students tend to non-critically view the feeling wheel and tuck it away in a binder.

Figure 1*Blank Feelings Wheel*

A More Novel Case Study. Instead of a typical and obligatory case study, playful pedagogy encourages instructors to re-design the case study to be more novel and engaging. One example of a more playful approach to the case study intervention can be designing it based on a popular children’s book such as *Giraffes Can’t Dance*. This book tells a story of a giraffe who gets ridiculed because he is different from all the other animals. The client, then, is a giraffe and the client’s background information are based on real facts about giraffes turned into reasons why one might seek counseling services. After listening to a reading of the children’s book, in small groups, students are tasked to conceptualize this “client” through various theoretical lenses to make sense of the presenting problem and develop a treatment plan for this client’s care. Student groups share their conceptualization and treatment plan from their unique theoretical lens. The students are given an example of how a single case can be conceptualized and treated in different ways from different therapeutic lenses. Not only is this type of playful case study more fun and engaging, but students’ minds are also freed from the psychological confines of “getting it right” because no one has ever counseled a giraffe before. Play reduces the pressure and in-the-box thinking which often serves as a barrier to creativity and depth in learning. When we are allowed to get outside of reality, we are no longer limited by the box that often confines us. While this example of a case study is fun and playful, it also remains serious learning in that it adequately engages students in necessary skills of becoming a counselor.

Playful Framing of Discussions. Those who believe that heavy lecture-based teaching leads to passive students may implement small group discussions as an intervention to better engage students in learning. Oftentimes, educators design thought-provoking discussion questions only to find their students half-heartedly participate in the conversations. Playful pedagogy can take a typical and often viewed as obligatory small group discussion and create a novel framing, getting students genuinely excited and invested in the conversation. This playful framing can happen without changing the discussion question(s) or the desired outcome of the small group conversations yet can increase student participation. For example, the instructor can add a playful element and novelty by turning a group discussion into a Martian mission. The instructor can create an introduction video of a “Martian” (i.e., the instructor) calling the other Martians (i.e., the students) to engage in a mission to help Earthlings solve some of their deepest problems (i.e., the problem is the issue to be discussed). Students step into the role of helpful Martians who are sent to Earth to examine and research a specific Earthing problem then they must report back to Mars (i.e., the instructor) what they found and how to think about and or solve the problem. This example of playful overhaul is initially silly in presentation, but the conversation remains serious and in-line with the original purpose of the small group discussion. However, when turned into something more novel and playful, students find a sense of joy, excitement, and interest in the discussion that they may not have had otherwise. This type of play is another way for students to escape reality to take a different perspective on the issue and escape in-the-box thinking.

Playfully Redesigning Assignments. Counselor educators must demonstrate that students are reaching certain learning outcomes through various assessment measures. Some of the assessments that we assign students might be signature assignments of a course or program and unable to change, but many assignments are available for a playful re-design. For example, some accreditation and licensure bodies require students to know and understand various counseling agencies/bodies, the minimal training/supervision guidelines for licensure, and best practices promulgated by the counseling associations. This type of knowledge is dry and often experienced as busy work by students. Instead of a multiple choice exam or short paper assessing the students’ understanding of this knowledge, an instructor utilizing playful pedagogy might create a digital escape room where, as students explore the counseling association’s website, they must use the information within the website to solve clues in order to “unlock” a series of locks that eventually help them escape the room (i.e., answering all of the necessary questions and demonstrating they have explored the counseling association’s website). This type of activity is based in play, is more fun and novel, and yet achieves the same desired learning outcomes as a traditional and boring assignment. Examples of how to create a digital escape room can be found on the website, YouTube.com. The above examples are just a few of the possibilities designed through playful pedagogy. Below are resources that contain a plethora of other examples.

CLASSROOM DIVERSITY AND FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY

Although there is no found research on playful pedagogy and diversity and inclusion, the general play literature suggests that play is inviting, disarms people, and leads to deeper

connections, communication, and interpersonal trust (Brown, 2009). Considering that many marginalized students often feel excluded from the learning environment and struggle to find a sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021), play can include and connect all learners. Playful pedagogy enhances inclusiveness in the classroom by reducing power structures and hierarchies which help to marginalize certain students. Playful pedagogy, as a teaching philosophy, disrupts the norms and status quos of formal learning that often disadvantages certain students. Playful pedagogy challenges educational structures to consider alternative and more inclusive forms of learning and assessment (Forbes, 2021; James, 2022). For example, instead of traditional forms of assessment (i.e., high stakes testing, formal and extensive papers, etc.), playful pedagogy gives students more freedom to direct their own education and demonstrate their learning in a way that is meaningful to them rather than a predetermined box that is typically not designed for all students to be successful (Marzano, 2017). Indeed, additional exploration and research is needed in this area but the current literature on play and playful pedagogy suggest considerable promise for a more culturally responsive approach to education.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Although the field of playful pedagogy is in its infancy, those seeking information, guidance, and examples of play-based learning can look to various articles, books, and professional groups on the topic. Some articles on play-based learning include Playful learning (Langan & Smart, 2018); Playful learning in higher education: Developing a signature pedagogy (Nørgård et al., 2017); The process of playful learning in higher education: A phenomenological study (Forbes, 2021); Playful learning: Events and activities to engage adults (Whitton & Moseley, 2019).

Some helpful books on the topic of play are *Play* (Brown, 2009), *Play Matters* (Sicart, 2014), *The Play Ethic* (Kane, 2008); *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Bateson & Martin, 2013); and *Playful Rebellion* (Ware, 2022). Books more related to play in teaching are *The Playful Classroom* (Dearybury & Jones, 2020); *Play and Learning in Adulthood* (Whitton, 2022); *Fully Engaged* (Matera & Meehan, 2021); *The Professors at Play Playbook* (Forbes & Thomas, 2022); *The Power of Play in Higher Education* (James & Nerantzi, 2019); and *The Value of Play in Higher Education* (James, 2022).

Lastly, some professional groups and platforms providing support and guidance are: The Playful University Platform, The Professors at Play, InnoPlayUK at the University of Exeter, and The Playful Learning Association. Each of these groups focus on playful learning in higher education and provide webinars, dialogue, resources, blogs, books, and community for those interested in playful approaches to teaching. While there are articles, books, and groups explaining the premise and examples of playful pedagogy, an important understanding is that play is not formulaic. Playful pedagogy is not just one thing, and it will translate differently for each educator, therefore, adopting a playful pedagogy (beyond an understanding and belief in the power of play) is a personal exploration and practice in creativity.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Evaluating effectiveness in teaching is an elusive and arguably context-specific and value-laden concept (Skelton, 2005). Currently, there is no single agreed upon evaluation of teacher effectiveness (Goe et al., 2008). Evaluating effectiveness depends on what educators determine to be an important variable to measure. Although evaluating teacher effectiveness is broad and subjectively determined, several studies have examined and highlighted the effectiveness of play-based learning. For example, one study indicated that playful learning increased learner autonomy where students could create their own path to learning (Cruaud, 2018). Another study (Pavlou, 2020) found games in learning fostered students' autonomy, agency, and collaboration. In Forbes' (2021) study, because of play-based learning, students described being more interested in the content, more willing to be vulnerable and take risks and as a result, they reported the learning was more memorable, meaningful, and personal. Jensen and Rørbæk (2022) examined playful pedagogy and teacher preparation and defined effectiveness with five principles which identify quality teaching, 1) being experimental and taking an iterative approach to teaching, 2) actively engaging and facilitative rather than instructive, 3) creating learning opportunities that create meaningful connections between context and students' pre-existing understandings, 4) creating learning that is socially interactive and co-created, and 5) designing learning that is exciting and creates positive emotions. Jensen and Rørbæk (2022) found the use of playful pedagogy was positively associated with these principles of teaching effectiveness. Although further research is needed regarding evaluation of teacher effectiveness and playful pedagogy, the current literature suggests teacher effectiveness and a play-based approach are correlated.

Assessment of Student Learning

Playful pedagogy places a primary emphasis on designing teaching to elicit an environment that is conducive to developing positive mood states, connection and belonging, engagement, and supporting brain-based learning (Forbes & Thomas, 2022; Tang, 2017). Therefore, the established procedures that counselor educators already have for assessing students' learning need not change. Referring to the literature cited above, researchers found that because of play-based learning, students experienced positive outcomes and more meaningful learning experiences (Forbes, 2021; Goe et al., 2008; Jensen & Rørbæk, 2022; Pavlou, 2020; Skelton, 2005). More research can be conducted regarding designing unique assessment measures for student learning because of playful pedagogy. However, another aspect of adopting a playful pedagogy is that a playful philosophy encourages designing alternative and more innovative assessments for students to more freely, creatively, and personally demonstrate their learning. Especially in a field such as counselor education, one could argue the current

and common assessment measures (e.g., multiple choice exams, APA-style research papers) do not adequately prepare students to become effective counselors. Those who approach teaching from a playful mindset might suggest the field of counselor education reconsider our assessments of student learning to better evaluate their actual learning (i.e., rather than rote memorization) and design assessments that better reflect and develop the necessary skills needed of a practicing counselor. No found literature discusses such alternative assessments, therefore remains a topic to explore further.

Implications

The benefits and the power of play in learning are clearly documented (Brown, 2009; Forbes, 2021; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Sicart, 2014; Ware, 2021). Play has considerable promise as a foundational teaching philosophy for counselor educators that can more effectively excite, motivate, and engage students in a meaningful and purposeful learning community which aids in deepening learning. However, much remains unknown about playful pedagogy partly because this approach is relatively new within adult learning. Another potential reason that playful pedagogy is uncommon and underutilized in adult learning is due to misunderstanding, personal fear, and or incorrect societal narratives regarding play. Play, itself, is difficult to define because it is not just one concept, and it is highly subjective, leaving considerable room for misinterpretation (Brown, 2009; Sicart, 2014). In addition, there is a societal narrative that suggests play is childish, trivial, and a waste of time (Brown, 2009), therefore, adult educators tend to reject play in higher education and teaching (James & Nerantzi, 2019). When the societal narrative tells adults that play is childish or unprofessional, it makes an approach like playful pedagogy seem radical or reckless (Forbes & Thomas, 2022). However, play is not just for kids, and it has documented power in the adult learning process if educators become more open to play and learn the essence of playful pedagogy. With more understanding, practice, and research/publications, playful pedagogy will continue to gain legitimacy and a more robust evidence-base.

Though the current literature suggests efficacy of playful pedagogy, the field can work to develop better evaluation and assessment measures for playful teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Future research can develop assessment methods to quantitatively determine the efficacy of playful pedagogy not only for students' graduate school learning but also how that learning then impacts the quality of the therapeutic services provided to their future clients. Additional research is needed to develop a more robust understanding of play in adult learning and add additional examples specifically for counselor educators to adopt and create their own playful approach. Playful pedagogy has considerable promise for training future counselors, but it also can create joy in teaching for instructors and positively change students' association to learning - both reasons enough to become a playful educator.

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