



Where's the fun in that? Building an authentic, inclusive, serious-yet-playful learning development framework

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Presentation abstract

At the University of the West of Scotland, one of the ways in which first year students engage in exploring academic, personal, and professional literacies is through an embedded and contextualised credit-bearing module that runs alongside subject specific study. The module offers students opportunities to explore aspects of identity, values, and motivations as part of long, thin, scaffolded engagement running over two terms, and provides a mutable space for student-led discussion on a breadth of aspects of longitudinal transition support, becoming, as well, a space to engage with learning development principles and practices. In so doing, learning experiences within the module are at once guided and exploratory, presenting a risky safe space (Boyd, Wilson and Smith, 2023) for students to use in their transition towards increased autonomy and confidence.

This session considered how the flexibility of the learning and teaching spaces created in the module (physical and virtual) allows for both reinforcement of formal structures/ requirements such as assessment processes (the serious part) as well as the freedom to negotiate personalised, aspirational, agentic, experimental learning experiences (more playfully intended). The session shared examples of classroom activities and presented learner feedback. Delegates were invited to share reflection on their own experiences of

designing and delivering similar experiences and contribute to a fuller understanding of the value of maintaining balance within the serious-play spectrum.

Keywords: professional literacies; authenticity in experiential learning; playful pedagogies; self-efficacy.

Community response

This initiative demonstrates the transformative potential of integrating playfulness into higher education. The session was rich with practical examples, demonstrating how playful learning strategies can foster engagement, inclusivity, and deeper understanding among students. One standout example was the use of the metaphor of a river for students to discuss their challenges. This approach encourages students to visualise and express their academic and personal obstacles creatively, using imagery to represent their experiences. This method is similar to that of [Smudge Skittle](#), which promotes imaginative expression to address challenges. Another notable activity was the spaghetti and marshmallows game, which helps students prepare for collaboration. By building structures with these materials, students develop teamwork and problem-solving skills in a fun, interactive way. These examples underscore how playful learning can create an engaging and supportive learning environment that enhances student success.

Another key element of this work is how we articulate and perceive the value of what we do as Learning Developers. The 'marshmallow and spaghetti' challenged focus on the assessment, and students needed to learn how to work effectively in groups in order to be successful. The fact that this activity gave students an opportunity to try out their roles in a group in a non-assessed environment and see what it might be like, as well as conveying that the learning comes from the whole experience, not solely how the output is assessed, spoke to me about how we might inspire students to be inquisitive about their learning process, rather than merely the end result. The second idea arose from a question asked of the presenters at the end about whether they needed to be very explicit with students about the skills they were gaining from this playful approach. I found the presenters' response very insightful - they responded that they will direct students to the learning outcomes for the unit, and ask students which ones they think they're trying to hit by taking

this approach. I can imagine that this method really gets students invested in the approach and, if necessary, gives it credibility – that there is a reason behind each activity and that they are carefully planned, which also gives students an insight into pedagogical approaches. It was pertinent to understand that each activity is introduced naturally to the students and it is the way the activity is presented coupled with the purpose of it that gains 'buy in' from students in terms of participation. A 'matter of fact' presentation of the activity helps the success of participation.

Next steps and additional questions

- Whilst encouraging students to engage in play affords exploration, experimentation, risk taking and developing solutions for curiosity, how might students be supported when they fail?
- How are students supported to articulate whether they have developed a growth mindset and a sense of self efficacy through this method?

Authors' reflection

From our perspective, the session went even better than expected. With this being our first time attending and presenting at the ALDinHE conference, we were a little apprehensive about sharing our examples in case these were common practice amongst such experienced practitioners. However, the level of engagement and enthusiasm within the session gave us an almost immediate sense of reassurance, and on further reflection, this reinforces the necessity of being willing to capture and share examples of professional practice in action.

Beyond sharing our own examples and case studies, the audience posited some of their own questions and reflections which developed into a really useful conversation. At this point it felt like the presenters were integrated with the audience which for us, is a sign of a genuinely collaborative experience and what we aspired to achieve. One comment that stood out in particular was around the use of competition/competitiveness within playful learning and the skill required to use it tactfully to create engagement and momentum, without the students feeling simply like winners and losers – especially in an HE

environment where a focus on comparing themselves to others in terms of grades and job outcomes has the potential to take away from them valuing their own individual experience.

We have since, as a team, reflected on our co-authorship of the session as well as points of discussion from our wider critical friends and community. Of particular interest (for us as practitioners) are: ideas around promoting credibility of our enhancement-focussed curriculum as a partner to, and not replacement for, in-discipline articulation of academic, personal and professional literacies; surfacing opportunities for students to practise and identify the *distance travelled* (as one of our colleagues asks – how do we support students to demonstrate self-efficacy); and how we provide scope to explore concepts of perceived 'failure' in our supportive pedagogies of play.

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