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Think play is for nurseries, not universities? Think again

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Play is what young children do, right? It's not what we want students at university to be wasting their time doing. Or is it?

Play isn't a waste of time. It delivers the same benefits for adults in higher education as it does for children: an opportunity to develop and practise skills, to reflect on things they have seen but not yet understood, and to deepen their learning, often constructing and developing mental models socially with their peers.

If lectures are where we try to transfer knowledge from the lecturer to the student, play is where students deepen shallow understanding into real knowledge.

In a workshop I do with education students, we cut up and rearrange parts of journal articles and book chapters, placing them in a framework that represents the different questions we should be asking of information sources. As they do this, I can see them starting to grasp the information literacy concept that information is constructed and contextual.

When we play, we step outside normal life, into a "magic circle". The circle has its own rules that allow players to immerse themselves in an alternative world, form social groups, improvise, and test out ideas (see Huizinga's classic book, *Homo Ludens*).

Risk is removed, so learners can practise the skills they need to develop, without worrying about failure. Play is "experience-based learning" at its best, with immediate feedback for students.

Go with the flow

Learners can practise skills and experiment with new knowledge, without worrying about failure

Designers of computer games spend a long time perfecting "flow", where an activity is in that perfect zone between being too challenging and too easy. So as our skills grow, so does the challenge.

When we hit the zone of optimal flow, we lose track of time and want to continue as long as possible. We no longer worry about whether something is too hard and get discouraged, or too easy and get bored. Play can help students find this flow and persist much longer at the task in hand.

Good educational games allow this to happen, partly by adding in some random elements, but more importantly by appropriate levelling up. So players who aren't challenged by an activity should have extra layers of stretch added in.

People often assume that using play in education is just a bit of light relief. They understand that learners might be more engaged in a lesson that offers opportunities for fun. But engagement is not the most important benefit of play. Much more important are its other attributes: the opportunity to practice, to be creative, to get immediate feedback and to encourage focus.

Simple card games are cheap and easy to use, such as Seek! The search skills game or a reference sequencing game.

More involved are the many simulation-type activities that are used in education, such as the virtual hospital wards in many medical schools. These allow medical students to act out scenarios with virtual patients without the fear of harming a real one. I'm experimenting with ideas from escape rooms, where students solve puzzles requiring subject knowledge to win the game.

I'm also exploring ideas for games that can teach information skills and help others develop learning activities (I've given some examples in this report and on this library site).

It can be hard to start playing as an adult, because of the connotations of childishness. But teaching staff are in a great position to give permission to play. Students are already in an environment at some distance from "the real world". Through setting learning games, and encouraging creative activities within this space, we can encourage playful interactions with the subject matter.

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