



# Playful Learning dissemination report

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A report on research in playful approaches to  
teaching in social education and teacher training

2024

## **Authors**

Helle Marie Skovbjerg  
Julie Borup Jensen  
Line Togsverd  
Oline Pedersen  
Helle Hovgaard Jørgensen  
Vibeke Schrøder  
Mikkel Snorre Wilms Boysen  
Ole Lund  
Jeppe Bundsgaard  
Bent Sortkær  
Mona Have Nielsen

## **Editors**

Ditte Obenhagen Hoff  
Signe Lehmann  
Rebecca Sørensen

## **Design & layout**

Runa Rossau Bondesen, wayfab

## **Photos**

Emil Monty Freddie  
Vibeke Schrøder  
Inge Lynggaard

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# Preface

The Playful Learning research extension (2019-2024) is funded by the LEGO Foundation and the six university colleges in Denmark. The research project is led by Design School Kolding and with participation from University College Northern Denmark, VIA University College, University College South Denmark, UCL University College, University College Absalon and University College Copenhagen, as well as Aalborg University and the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University. In addition, the research project has collaborated with Monash University in Australia, Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands and Western Norway University of Applied Sciences in Bergen, Norway.

A big thank you goes to the researchers and lecturers involved for their contributions to the research project.

# **Table of contents**

<b>Background, purpose and research questions</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Basic assumptions of the research project</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Research context, methodology and design</b>	<b>9</b>
Design-based research	9
Design principles	10
The DBR model	11
5W Pool and five design principles	14
Empirical material	16
Quantitative impact assessment	16
<b>Results of the research project</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Play qualities – a perspective on playfulness</b>	<b>18</b>
Why is the concept of play qualities important?	18
Play qualities – supporting distinct conceptualisations and empirical sensitivity	19
We recommend	22
<b>Playful approaches from a cultural perspective</b>	<b>23</b>
Theme I: Time	23
Theme II: Participation	25
Theme III: Performance	26

Theme IV: Body	27
We recommend	29
<b>The importance of space and materiality for playful approaches</b>	<b>31</b>
What do we know about PlayLabs?	31
Changeable materials	32
Entangled learning spaces	33
An example with ball tracks	34
We recommend	36
There's something out there calling to us	37
The immediate bodily interaction	37
Wooden houses and superheroes	39
Low floor, high ceiling	40
Patience and practice	42
We recommend	44
<b>Rounding up and our continued journey</b>	<b>45</b>
If you want to know more	46
<b>References</b>	<b>47</b>

# Background, purpose and research questions

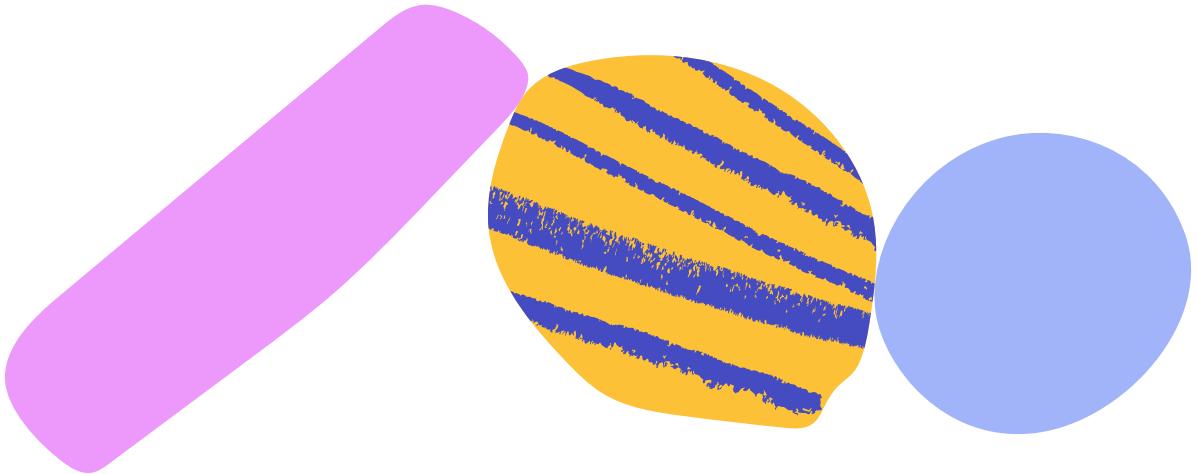
This report presents the results of the Playful Learning research extension (2019-2024). In collaboration with the Playful Learning development project (2018-2022), the research project has explored how playful approaches to teaching and learning in social education and teacher training can help develop the didactics of these programmes. This is to prepare future social educators and teachers for their future profession in schools and daycare institutions, making sure that they can realise the potential of playfulness in the future. At the same time, the purpose has been to present new suggestions for didactic designs with play qualities that can be used by others, and which can constitute new ways of realising playfulness in education. Last but not least, the purpose has been to investigate how practitioners and researchers can explore this field together through a design-based approach, to ensure that the research was not only descriptive, but that the changes, developments and explorations could be driven by a shared curiosity and creative power.

Danish daycare institutions and schools are facing a number of challenges that are having a bearing on children's well-being, their creativity and their desire to learn. When starting school, 15% of children are lagging behind their peers when it comes to social and emotional skills, language skills and mathematical skills. At the same time, we know that most children starting school are extremely eager to learn and look forward to going to school. During their schooling, they lose their desire to learn, and one in six young people leave school without continuing into upper secondary/youth education (VIVE, 2019; EVA, 2021). There is therefore a need to come up with ideas

for how schools can inspire children and young people pedagogically and make sure that they continue to want to learn. There is a need to stimulate and enhance children's creative, experimental and playful approaches to the world and their lifelong desire to learn.

In a Nordic context, play and playfulness have traditionally been regarded as key values in our pedagogical practice. We know from psychology, cognitive science, phenomenology, philosophy, sociology and anthropology that children's play skills are of huge importance to their lives, development and learning. Playful approaches to teaching and learning are a meaningful way for children to engage in learning activities, with knowledgeable professionals by their side. These research findings are also supported by the UN Global Initiatives and by the European Commission's comprehensive skills agenda (OECD, 2017).

A large number of research projects take play seriously, with a particular focus on young children of nursery and kindergarten age. ECEC studies are interested in play as a pedagogical tool, i.e. in how ECEC professionals can initiate play activities that help strengthen the children's social and personal skills. Some studies are particularly interested in children's play culture, i.e. play activities engaged in by communities of children, and where ECEC staff are not necessarily involved, but where the most important task for staff is to create a framework for what is traditionally called "free" or unstructured play. In these studies, reference is often made to Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, where the importance of play is also



highlighted as a right. In schools, the situation is different, as play has so far not been regarded as being key to the role of schools. Play is often relegated to the breaks or to the after-school club, and it is often seen as distinct from the academic content, while certain elements of play are not accommodated in schools at all. At the same time, we also know from multiple research projects that since the era of reform pedagogy, professionals have applied qualities from play, especially in relation to younger children, to realise activities in schools. But we also know that play and playfulness play a diminishing role the older pupils get, and virtually no research projects concern themselves with play and playfulness at lower secondary school level.

These themes are key to understanding why play and play are central to social education and teacher training. On social education programmes, play has traditionally played an important role; play has been seen as a central phenomenon for the children that future social educators would be working with and for. Knowledge about play and play skills play a role in several modules, and so there seems to be a direct link between the play-related intentions of social education and the pedagogical practice for which students are destined. When it comes to teacher training, the situation was quite different; in fact, students would sometimes complete their teacher training without acquiring knowledge about play and playfulness, despite the fact that as future teachers, for example in primary school, they would encounter play as a way for children to be together.

In this light, the research questions to be addressed by the qualitative part of the research project were worded as follows:



*How can playful approaches to teaching and learning be used as a catalyst for cultural change and capacity building in both social education and teacher training?*



*How can PlayLabs be used as a physical, material, social, cultural and affective space for playful approaches in both social education and teacher training?*



*How can playful approaches be used to create a didactic approach to both social education and teacher training?*

# Basic assumptions of the research project

The research project's understanding of education and learning is inspired by the American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey (1986). According to Dewey, learning is rooted in experiencing and interacting with the world, and despite the fact that others have had similar experiences, it is important for the individual to undergo a course of experience in order to be able to say that they have achieved experience. This means that learning occurs through hands-on activities and actively engaging with the subject matter. In simple terms, we can say that learning is not about transferring knowledge from lecturer to student; instead, the students' engagement with knowledge production must be active, i.e. they must be invited to engage actively, and by doing so, they have the chance to achieve experience.

In our shaping of such spaces of experience, where you can achieve experience through use of the imagination, the living, carnal body is central and thus also an important dimension. The British philosopher, Kathleen Lennon (2015) emphasises the close relationship between body, experience and imagination in her book *Imagination and the Imaginary*, where she demonstrates this important point, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2009). Lennon points out that it is by using our senses and processing sensory impressions that we can trigger our imagination, and in this process the imaginary emerges. Through the bodily staging of action knowledge, experiences are made possible.

The space of experience in which the carnal and concrete bodies can act is constituted by

and constitutive of social practices. This means that educational activities that stage a space of experience in which the carnal, living body can exist and be, must always be a social space, borne by social practices. Social practices refer to the actions, negotiations and social processes continuously taking place in any practice (Wenger, 2004; Schmidt, 1999). Social practices are both about stability and repetitions, but also about disruption and differences (Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022). It is in the interplay between repeatable, social practices and the changes associated with shifts and disruptions that we come to understand that playfulness plays a role (Skovbjerg, 2021).

Play, playfulness, to play, playing. The concepts of playfulness fly and flow. In the research project, we have worked systematically with the concepts associated with playfulness. Our starting point has been, among other things, work on the mood perspective (Skovbjerg, 2021).



We have chosen to work with the concept of play qualities as a way of talking about playfulness and playful approaches. We have done this to emphasise the following:



that we do not play in education, we use the qualities of play to create meaningful situations for students.



that by talking about play qualities, we link playfulness to actions that are tied to concrete situations, and which always constitute play qualities for those involved.



that by linking play qualities to actions, we make it possible to ask the question from a design perspective.



that by linking it to a design perspective, we operationalise playfulness so that it can be used didactically.

We have chosen this solution because we want to shine a light on the difficulties associated with a static and narrowly defined concept, but also on the importance of knowing what we are talking about when we talk about playful approaches and of the context-dependent development of the concepts with a view to strengthening the conceptualisations in the project. In this connection, we have insisted that we need more than a single concept of playful approaches; we need a landscape of concepts to collectively uncover, in a context-sensitive way, close to the empirical realisation of playful approaches, what it is we are talking about and developing together. The point is that there is not just one quality of play, but a number of play qualities that must be defined in close interaction with the empirical context in which they are developed. It's like holding a jellycake – due to its wobbliness, you have to hold it gingerly and with the greatest care. On the other hand, you need to contain it; otherwise it will go everywhere. And so ultimately your pedagogical intentions may end up flowing in all different directions rather than focusing on playfulness.

You can read more about the work with – and the development of – notions of play qualities in the section on play qualities.

# Research context, methodology and design

The research group consists of a head of research, 10 senior researchers and 12 PhD researchers. The senior researchers are organised into four main groups: The culture group works with the research question concerning cultural change; the space and materiality group works with PlayLabs and materials used when working with playful approaches; the didactics group works with the didactic questions; and the effect group works with measuring the effects for lecturers and students of working with playful approaches. Six PhD projects are about playful approaches in teacher training, and six PhD projects are about playful approaches in social education.

The researchers involved in the project have collaborated closely with 36 lecturers on the social education and teacher training programmes. Their collaboration has constituted the empirical context in which the researchers have created the empirical material. The lecturers have been appointed as local ambassadors for the Playful Learning development project, which since 2018 has been exploring and developing playful approaches to teaching on social education and teacher training programmes in Denmark. At the six university colleges, the development project has been organised through six ambassador teams, consisting of the above-mentioned 36 lecturers, half from the teacher training programme and half from the social education programme. As participants in the development project, the lecturers have been involved in workshops, experiments, gatherings and explorations in communities, all with the aim of developing a didactic basis for playful approaches.

Methodologically, the research project is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. We describe these methods in greater detail below.

## Design-based research

The qualitative part of the project is based on a combination of design-based research (DBR) (van den Akker et al., 1999; van den Akker et al., 2006; Barab & Squire, 2004) and research through design (RtD) (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Binder et al., 2015). These are research approaches that involve close collaboration between researchers and a field of practice, in this case the educational context of the university colleges, with a view to developing concrete designs in the field, which are then tested a number of times over a period of time. In terms of philosophy of science, this means that the project is rooted in pragmatism and the idea that knowledge is created with a view to assessing its usefulness and scope for creating change in real life. Knowledge is thus not something that is uncovered; rather, it is created and negotiated with those who are involved. Also, knowledge and development are not advanced in isolation from those concerned, instead insights must originate from close collaboration.

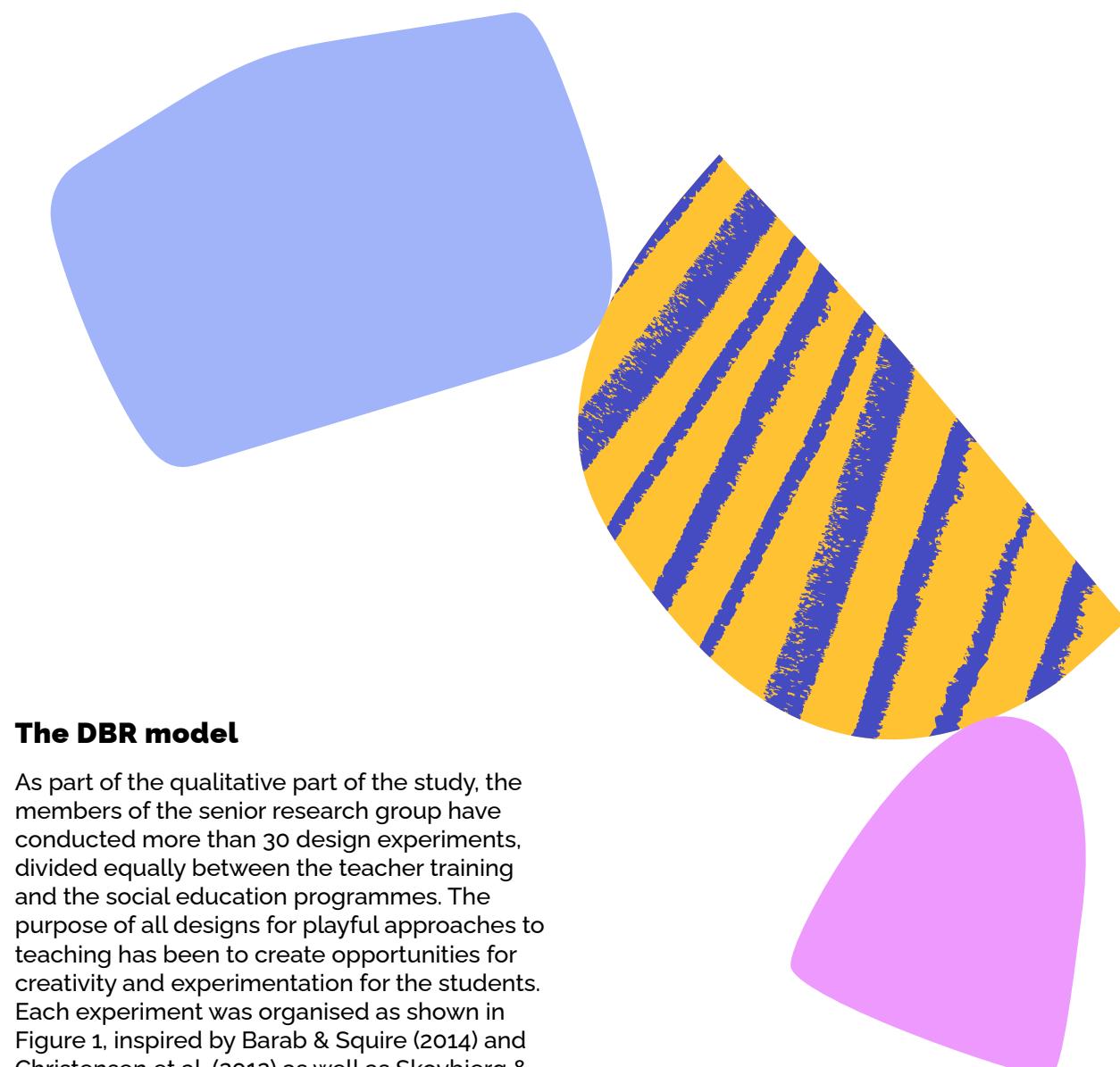
In the collaboration with the educational context, design experiments have played a central role (Binder et al., 2015). An experiment is an organised educational activity designed to test key play qualities to find out what the activity has to offer. The experiments are often organised



as a series of iterations, where adjustments can be made on an ongoing basis, in order to find out if the intentions behind the designs can indeed be realised.

### **Design principles**

Taking a design-based research approach, we have worked with design principles (van den Akker et al, 1999; Hanghøj et al., 2022; Jensen et al., 2022) as a way of clarifying intention, planning, testing and reflection. Working with design principles is a key methodological strategy in design-based research, and the principles can guide designs in a particular direction in relation to form, function, aesthetics and practice (van den Akker et al., 1999; Baumgartner & Belle, 2002, Bakker, 2019, Jensen et al. 2022; Hanghøj et al. 2022). In design-based research, the work with design principles is not only part of the method, but also part of the analysis and the results, as we start early on to test, develop and reformulate the design principles. The design principles are both a way of operationalising the knowledge on which we want to base our decisions, and at the same time, the design principles can be a way of gathering knowledge along the way. In the continuous alternation between developing ideas, inspired by theoretical insights, testing them and reflecting on what we have learned, the design principles are the extracted knowledge contribution. See the specific description in the section on the 5W Pool and the five design principles.



## The DBR model

As part of the qualitative part of the study, the members of the senior research group have conducted more than 30 design experiments, divided equally between the teacher training and the social education programmes. The purpose of all designs for playful approaches to teaching has been to create opportunities for creativity and experimentation for the students. Each experiment was organised as shown in Figure 1, inspired by Barab & Squire (2014) and Christensen et al. (2012) as well as Skovbjerg & Jørgensen (2020).

### Context

In the context domain, we started by exploring – in collaboration with the lecturers – the challenge that we wanted to investigate together. As an example, the lecturers might explore their local PlayLab to find out what was already there, and we then interviewed them to find out about their PlayLab discoveries.

### Lab

In the lab domain, we developed, in collaboration with the lecturers, design principles based on context and literature of specific relevance to this issue. As part of our planning, we looked at how specific play qualities could be incorporated in the experiments that we wanted to explore further.

### Experiments

In the experimental domain, we tested, together with the lecturers, the activities that we had designed based on our knowledge in context and the planning we had done based on the design principles. We tested the experiments several times and also involved the students in corrections and reflections along the way.

### Reflection

In the reflection domain, we met with the lecturers and shared our reflections on the experiments that we were involved in with them. The aim was to qualify our intentions and design principles as well as the knowledge that we had by then created in connection with the experiment.

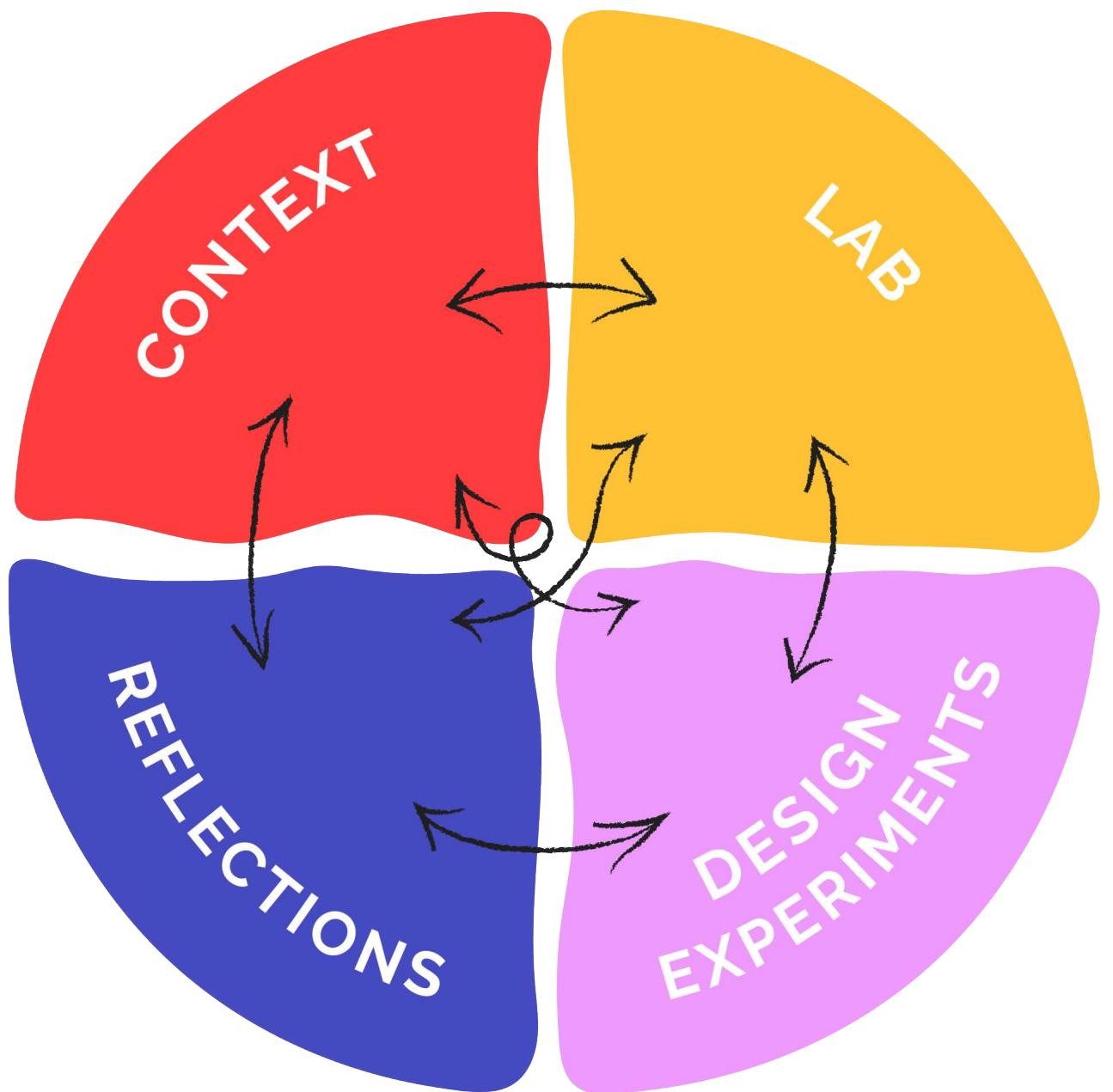


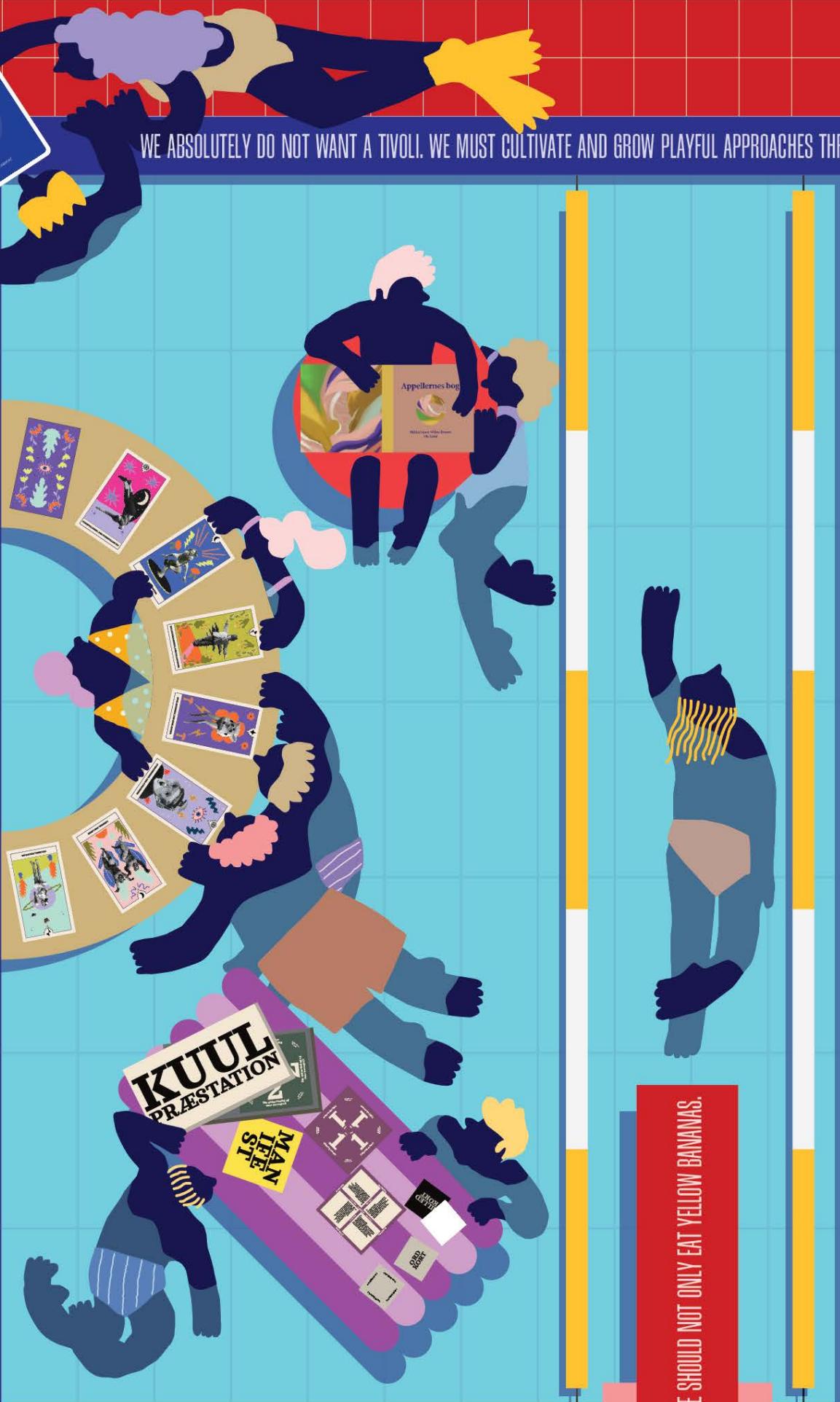
Figure 1: The design-based research model

WE MUST USE ACTIONS WITH A WIDE SPECTRUM OF PLAY QUALITIES, WITH REPETITION AND DISRUPTION BEING IMPORTANT ELEMENTS.

WE MUST BE SOCIAL

WE ABSOLUTELY DO NOT WANT A TIVOLI. WE MUST CULTIVATE AND GROW PLAYFUL APPROACHES THROUGH

A PROFESSIONAL APPROACH TO EXPERIMENTATION. WE MUST ENSURE DIVERSITY IN MATERIALITIES THAT ARE UNDERSTOOD IN INTERACTION WITH THE CONTEXT OF LEARNING SPACES.



BODIES THAT MOVE AND ARE MOVED, CREATING RIPPLES IN THE WATER.

# THE 5W POOL

Figure 2: The 5W Pool

## 5W Pool and five design principles

As mentioned above, in our research work, we have used design principles as a way of working systematically with the interplay between theoretical concepts and empirical insights. In order for the design principles to guide the design process, they must strike a pragmatic compromise between abstract principles with great explanatory value and context-sensitive principles. We have experimented with formulating our principles concisely and in the imperative form in order to strengthen their directive power, while reducing them to five general principles. In this section, we present our five design principles as well as a graphic model labelled the 5W pool.

5W stands for a total of five "We wants" and "We musts", which together make up a pool. There are five design principles – four make up the perimeter of the pool, while the fifth rests on the diving board. These are principles that we must commit to when working with playful approaches.

The pool is a metaphor for the possibilities associated with playful approaches. There is a clear framework, within which many different actions are possible. You can do lengths, practise repetitions again and again and refine your technique. You can also splash around, try out a variety of other tools for doing things and using your body together with others.

The five design principles are as follows:

### We absolutely do not want a tivoli. We must cultivate and grow playful approaches through a professional approach to experimentation.

This principle points to the importance of playful approaches not being used as a gimmick to add some fun. Playful approaches require both practice and patience and are deeply related to learning. First and foremost, it is an invitation to try out playful approaches and then see what happens with the curricular subject matter.

### We must use actions with a wide spectrum of play qualities, with both repetition and disruption being important elements.

This principle emphasises the importance of using many of the elements of play to ensure a diversity of opportunities for participation. If you

are used to using the qualities of construction games in your teaching, then you might want to try elements from role play, pretend play or hide-and-seek.

### We must be social bodies that both move and are moved, creating ripples in the water.

This principle emphasises the importance of the social aspect. Playful approaches will often use the social community to create sensory and attentive experiences where the body moves, and is also moved by what you are involved in. The principle also highlights the fact that over time, more and more experiences will be created, and therefore you must both think long-term and be patient.

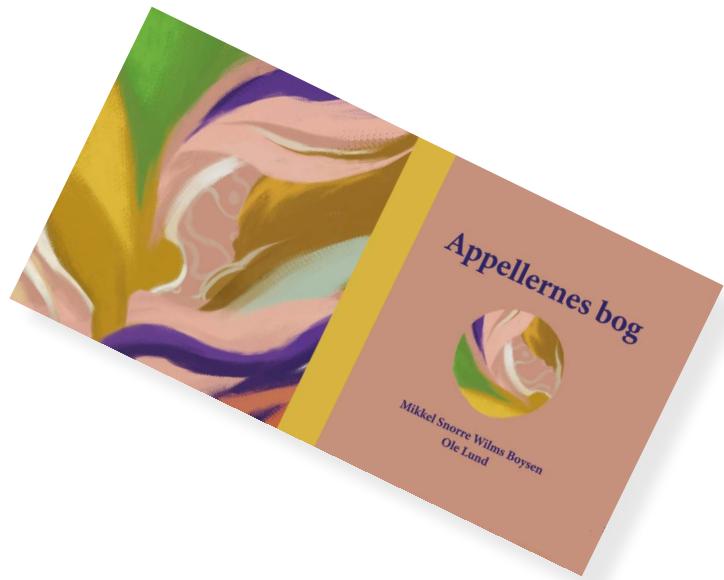
### We must ensure diversity in materials and materialities that are understood in interaction with and in the context of learning spaces.

This principle is about the materials used in connection with the activities we organise. It is important to think about using different materials – large and small, soft and hard, materials normally used inside can be taken outside and vice versa. Furthermore, with this principle we emphasise the fact that the materials are always interwoven with both the people who interact with them, with combinations of materials, with the actions taking place in the room, and with the concrete spaces where activities take place.

### We should not only eat yellow bananas.

This principle is the mocking principle. In a way, it does not make sense, because when do we incorporate the eating of bananas in our activities? Probably not very often, but perhaps we could? The principle points to the importance of not always doing what we usually do, of tasting lots of things and of also tasting new things. In other words, the principle encourages us to dare to go down paths that we have not walked before and geek out – sometimes.

In the pool, you will find four tools: Stedmoskopet, Appellernes Bog, the Play Tarot and KUUL – all of which can support your work with playful approaches and which support the five design principles.



## About Stedmoskopet

Stedmoskopet is a tool that you can use to come up with ideas on how to combine academic subjects, places and materials.

## About Appellernes Bog

In Appellernes Bog, you can find inspiration on how to create appeals in your teaching, making students curious about playful approaches, inviting them to partake in playful approaches and become attracted to playful approaches.

## About the Play Tarot

The Play Tarot can help you use specific play qualities when planning your lessons. What are the actions you employ? What other actions could you also employ? You can also use the tool to evaluate activities and reflect on whether the play qualities you hoped for were realised.

## About KUUL

KUUL is a tool you and your colleagues can use to reflect on and explore how you work with performing in your cultural education practice. The tool invites you and your colleagues to test in your own practice and reflect on what you experience.



## **Empirical material**

In the data production, we used short-term ethnographic methods such as documentation (Pink & Morgan, 2013), observation, participant observation, go-along interviews, semi-structured interviews, and the experiences were documented with the help of photos, videos and field notes. All data was produced in accordance with applicable GDPR rules, and the participants consented in writing to participating in the project and following the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014).

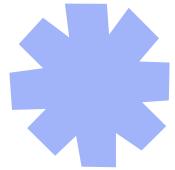
## **Quantitative impact assessment**

In addition to the qualitative part of the study, we have also examined the 'impact' of the Playful Learning development project. Impact is written in inverted commas because the term can give the impression that it is possible to point to specific things and say: This is an impact. It can also give the impression that you can identify a small number of things that constitute an impact. This is rarely possible when it comes to projects that aim to change the practices associated with complex activities such as teaching. And certainly not when it comes to a development project intended to change many aspects of the practices at six institutions, two degree programmes and four year groups of students over a relatively long period of time. The Playful Learning development project is certain to produce an infinite number of impacts. Some lecturers realise something about their own teaching practices and change

them; others meet colleagues they would not otherwise have met and are inspired to meet their students in new ways; collaborative practices are transformed; perceptions of what constitutes good teaching evolve; ideas about what is possible in teaching change, and so on and so forth. All these impacts can neither be identified nor measured at once. In our quantitative impact research, we have therefore focused on a few key aspects of the many impacts. We found that a number of key impacts related to changes in the perception of what constitutes good teaching and about the experience of teaching practices. And we found it would be interesting to look at the impacts from the perspectives of both lecturers and students. For this purpose we conducted two questionnaire-based surveys among lecturers on the teacher training and social education programmes and students starting their studies in winter 2023. We asked the respondents to complete the questionnaires three times over the course of about a year. This provided us with insights into how the Playful Learning development project has contributed to developing the practices of lecturers a few years after the launch of the project, and of students from when they start their studies without any experience of playful approaches to teaching until they may have gained some experience with the phenomenon and an understanding of what playful teaching practices are and are capable of. This work will be completed in mid-September 2024. The results of the quantitative impact assessment are therefore not communicated in this report, but will be published later.

# **Results of the research project**

*In the following sections, the project's findings and results will be presented. The results are grouped under the overall research questions and concern playful approaches themed on culture, didactics, and space and materiality. The results have been continuously discussed with and communicated to the lecturers with whom we have collaborated.*



By Helle Marie Skovbjerg

# Play qualities – a perspective on playfulness

As mentioned at the beginning, conceptualising play and playfulness is not easy, neither as a general concept nor in an educational context. In the introduction to *The Ambiguity of Play* (Sutton-Smith, 1997), the American researcher Brian Sutton-Smith points out that we all know what playing feels like, but when it comes to making theoretical statements about play, we fall into silliness. It goes without saying that we do not wish to sound silly, and at the same time, we have known from the outset about the challenge associated with the conceptualisation of play, a challenge that we wanted to address wisely. We therefore developed the concept of play qualities, as a perspective on playfulness in education, to aid the distinct conceptualisations of playfulness, while taking account of the empirical details.

## Why is the concept of play qualities important?

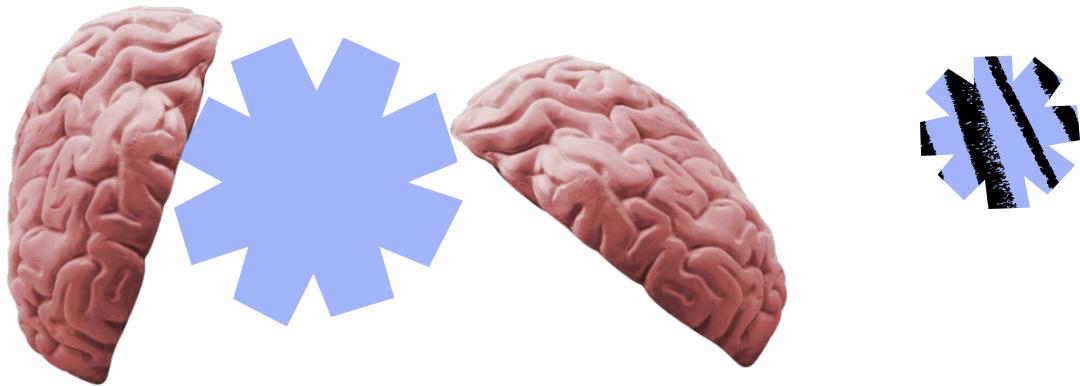
The development of notions and perspectives on play in the form of these distinct conceptualisations has been a central part of the research. This is because we know that the lecturers' perceptions of play and playfulness, both theoretically and empirically, have an impact on possible pedagogical and didactic behaviours. This means that the decisions made by lecturers in the planning, execution and evaluation of their teaching are influenced by their ideas about how they can talk about playfulness and their perceptions of playfulness in concrete terms.

For example, some lecturers may feel strongly that free play is the only right way of practising play, and if free play often means teacher-

free, then they end up undermining their own pedagogical power of action, you could say. When working with playful approaches to teaching, it is therefore crucial that the lecturers work with their preconceptions of what playfulness is and what it looks like for them, that they verbalise their ideas about playfulness, which they can then share with each other. This is to ensure the skilled use of playfulness in teaching situations.

The distinct conceptualisations of playfulness as play qualities are also related to what we call empirical sensitivity about playfulness. The question is whether lecturers – when what they have planned for is realised – are able to see, feel, sense that playfulness has come alive in front of their eyes and ears? Do lecturers have a sense of how playfulness comes to life? Do lecturers have a sense of what it looks like for students when playfulness comes to life? Most have experienced what play looks like and how it comes to life when young children are involved, while playfulness in the teaching of mathematics, Danish or pedagogy is still a relatively unexplored phenomenon, and by talking about empirical sensitivity, the research results point to the importance of lecturers paying attention to how playfulness is realised in their own particular teaching practices, in relation to their academic mission.

Also, we know for a fact that the combination of distinct conceptualisations of playfulness and empirical sensitivity will pave the way for constructive meetings between playfulness and the academic mission. If there is no interplay



between playfulness and the academic content, it may mean that the lecturer relegates playfulness to the spaces between the serious academic involvements – the so-called brain breaks. This means that the lecturer keeps certain dimensions of playfulness separate from the academic content. If there is no focus on the interplay between playfulness and the academic mission, it may also mean that the lecturer does not use the whole spectrum of dimensions of play, but only what they know about already and have developed a liking for. Last but not least, we also know that if no attention is given to the distinct conceptualisations and empirical sensitivity, lecturers may end up drawing mainly on their own preferences, and being less concerned with how playfulness is experienced by the students they involve in the teaching activities. For playfulness to have an impact on the teaching and make a real difference to the students' learning and the outcome of their studies, distinct conceptualisations and empirical sensitivity are absolutely crucial.

### **Play qualities – supporting distinct conceptualisations and empirical sensitivity**

The concept of play qualities is a take on the development of a distinct language that can help us approach playfulness as an empirical phenomenon in education with sensitivity and curiosity. The play quality concept is also intended to help us conceptualise playfulness in the planning, execution and evaluation of teaching activities, while at the same time making it easier for us to approach playfulness as an empirical phenomenon.

The concept of play quality is based on the play mood perspective (Skovbjerg, 2021). This is because the mood perspective insists on

the importance of empirical proximity, i.e. that definitions must be developed close to where play unfolds – as an empirical phenomenon – and on the theoretical in the form of a web of concepts capturing the phenomenon in a sensitive way. At the same time, the play mood perspective is rooted in a common perception of play, rather than play being about development and learning, insisting that play says something fundamental about who we are as humans, and we must remember this also when working with playfulness in teaching and education. As Skovbjerg puts it: "Play tells us something basic about what it is to be human" (2021). Play mood is a state of being together with others, open and ready to engage with the world and explore life in different ways. A point that the play mood perspective shares with a number of other theoretical perspectives on play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Henricks, 2008).

The play quality concept is about the properties (Beschaffenheit) of play, i.e. the characteristics, elements or affordances of play. For example, the game of hide-and-seek will be associated with certain properties that you can use when planning your teaching, and which say something about of play qualities of the game. The properties of hide-and-seek are about hiding, about someone seeking and others hiding, about using the space in order to realise the game, about your body being in motion, moving around, switching between being completely still and being in motion as you look for a place to hide. The properties of construction games such as building with LEGO are quite different. The properties of construction play revolve around putting things together, shaping the material according to an idea you have, using different materials, often sitting down, side by side with others, and letting your hands do the work and decide what to build. And when it comes to



role play, this is associated with quite different properties. Role play is about being able to tell a story, play a role as a mother, teddy bear, troll or bus driver, depending on what the role play is about (Jørgensen & Skovbjerg, 2023).

In the planning, execution and evaluation of teaching activities using play qualities, i.e. the properties of the activities, the actions you plan, execute and evaluate as a lecturer are at the core. This means that you must take an interest in the actions that you are designing for. If, on the other hand, you want to explore whether what you have planned for, i.e. the play qualities you hope to realise, are in fact realised, then you must explore the properties of the actions in specific situations. This means you cannot sit in your office and devise playful approaches to teaching and be sure they end up having play qualities. You can only find out by looking into and being curious about how they are realised in specific situations. Last but not least, play qualities are always play qualities for someone, i.e. it is up to the students

who are part of the activities to determine whether the play qualities are realised or not. This means that you must find ways of getting a sense of how the students experience the teaching you are designing for.

We have created an overview of the archetypal play qualities identified in our research.

Table 1: Overview of archetypal properties and play qualities and examples of how they are expressed.

<b>Properties that are turned into play qualities through action</b>	<b>Building Fiddling Collecting Balancing</b>	<b>Jumping Dancing Swinging Running</b>	<b>Imitating Pretending Performing Spectating</b>	<b>Mocking Smashing Destroying Yelling</b>
<b>Examples of how the properties are expressed</b>	Calm bodies.  Often with hands in front.  Establish what's going to happen.  Rhythm, continuity and beat.	Alternating between repeating something, with breaks every now and then.  Focused on the body.  Often speed, altitude and direction involved.  Exploring through the body.	Social aspect is important, and it is about contributing to social community.  Audience plays a big role.  About looking for role models, and being role models for someone.	About violating cultural codes for how you ought to behave.  Often involving wacky, naughty and crazy elements.  You develop your capacity and lay yourself open to criticism or attack.



## We recommend

**1**

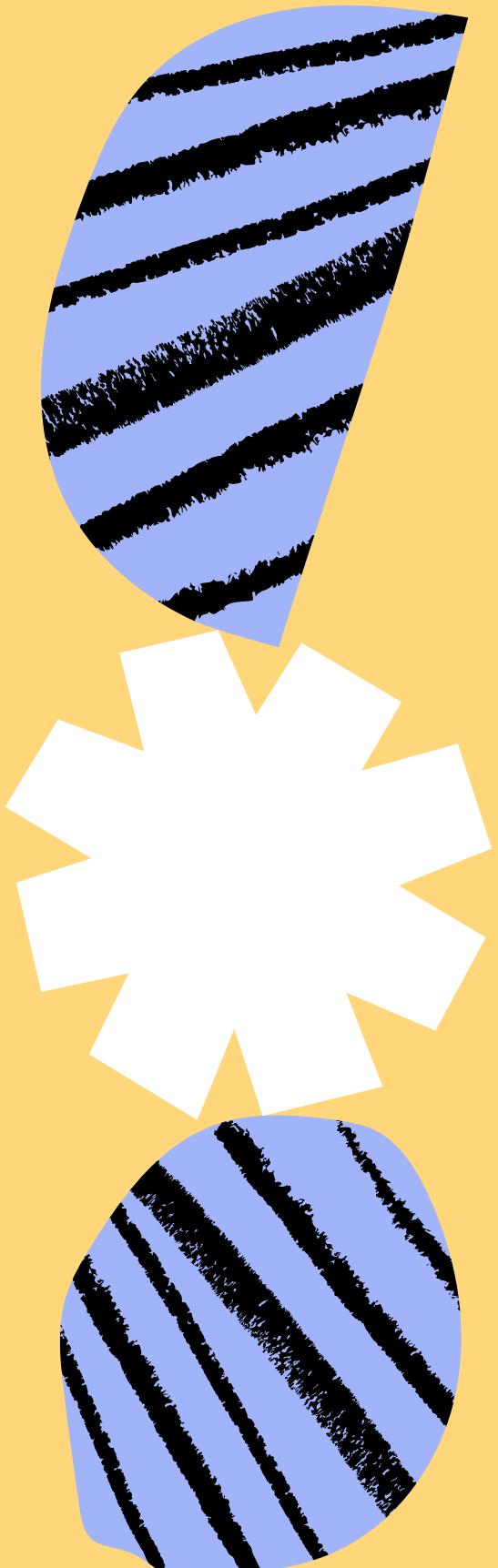
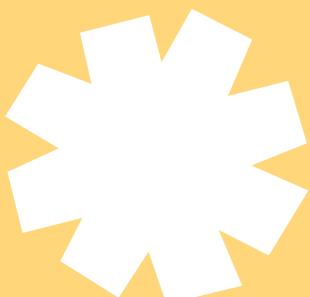
We recommend that, as a lecturer, you work continuously with distinct conceptualisations – in collaboration with colleagues, students and researchers.

**2**

We recommend that, as a lecturer, you work continuously with empirical sensitivity in your own specific teaching context, and that you share your experiences and listen to the experiences of others, so as to continuously develop the ideas of what play qualities look and feel like, how play qualities are experienced and felt, and how they sound.

**3**

We recommend using the Play Tarot to support your efforts.





By Line Togsverd, Oline Pedersen & Julie B. Jensen

# Playful approaches from a cultural perspective

As described in previous sections on design-based approaches, we have worked with locally appointed lecturers on the social education and teacher training programmes with a view to testing and investigating playful approaches to teaching. The purpose of our research has been to gain knowledge about how existing cultural conditions and circumstances in education affect the teaching and vice versa when lecturers focus explicitly on making their teaching playful. Our research is based on the theoretical understanding of education as a cultural practice (Bruner, 1996; Biesta, 2015). By this we mean that lecturers, coordinators, managers and students at educational institutions draw on, produce and reproduce both major societal and more local organisational cultural values and underlying assumptions about what education is for and about; about what learning is and how learning takes place; as well as about what students are, what they need and what can be expected of them (Schein, 1985). Such cultural understandings and underlying assumptions are not always articulated, explicit or conscious, but they often become evident in connection with the launch of major changes, for example in connection with development projects such as the Playful Learning project. You can suddenly become conscious of any underlying assumptions when you experience tensions or bumps along the way or liberating opportunities when experimenting with alternative teaching practices. It is therefore important to explore and take account of any underlying assumptions and cultural practices

when investigating what playful teaching practices are and can be.

As we shed light on playful approaches to teaching from a cultural perspective, four basic assumptions emerge as particularly significant themes that either hamper or support opportunities for playful approaches to learning: time, participation, performance and body. In the following, the four themes are illuminated as distinct analytical dimensions, but in practice they are interrelated aspects of the cultural opportunities and challenges that arise when an educational institution wants to develop playful teaching practices.

## Theme I: Time

Our studies indicate that cultural assumptions about time are important when experimenting with enabling playful approaches to learning (Jensen et al., 2022). Teaching is structured and organised in time and into time intervals, and time is generally something that both lecturers and students talk and think about. Our analyses show that perceptions of time and of time as an organising principle in education become clearer when experimenting with playful teaching practices.

Lecturers generally find that the students' cultural assumptions about time become clear in teaching contexts based on playful approaches. They talk about students who are culturally



socialised to be oriented towards decoding and delivering what is expected, towards being as time-efficient as possible and towards 'getting the job done'. Students are thus oriented towards time in ways specific to educational culture. A lecturer explains: *"In my experience, sometimes they actually finish in five minutes. Well, I've in fact set aside 45 minutes for this assignment. How can you be finished already"*

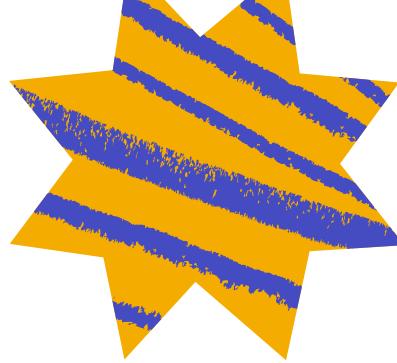
Based on the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, you could see the lecturers' experiences as being a result, or symptom of, the quickening of modern cultural and social life – a demand for ever greater speed and efficiency (Rosa, 2019). The lecturers find that as a consequence of this, it can be difficult for students to immerse themselves and to take out the time needed to develop their own perspectives, understandings and solutions, as sometimes suggested by playful approaches to learning. A lecturer puts it like this: *"I would like the culture to be like: 'Okay, we're actually happy with this, but shouldn't we investigate some more? Could we ask some explorative questions? [...] Could we come up with something new ourselves?' I mean, it's what the culture is like: 'I've done what you said we should do.'*"

In our experiments, both students and lecturers talk about their feeling that playful approaches to teaching provide an opportunity to immerse yourself in educational activities and to experience time quite differently. The objective number of hours or minutes allocated for a specific task can subjectively be experienced differently when playful approaches are taken. A lecturer explains how time passes faster when the students work with playful approaches: *"Students made comments like: 'Oh wow, those four hours just flew by! I mean, they couldn't understand how time had whizzed by like that."*

Similarly, another lecturer describes how time is not only experienced differently, but how students end up in different and qualitatively better places when teaching practices are playful: *"We do exercises like [...] perhaps they are asked to do a Facebook profile for a theorist or [...] if a particular theorist had a museum, what would it look like. They make [...] leaflets, and they build the museum, and things like that. And it's [...] as if time passes in a different way compared to if they were just sitting on a chair. They ask different questions. It is not so much: 'How many pages should it be? How long do we need to spend on it?' It's more like: 'Oh, what else could you do?'"*

Our analyses also provide insight into how playful approaches to learning result in new pedagogical and didactic ways of thinking about time at different levels. A lecturer talks about the need to strike a delicate balance between the students' prerequisites, her pedagogical and didactic ambitions and the time allocated: *"And then there is the question of how much time to allocate [...] It actually takes time for them to get into an activity, it takes time for them to start it up and to familiarise themselves with a particular train of thought, and then the activity also takes time, and then they actually have to [...] wind down the activity, [...] it involves cognitive processing."*

In other words, playful approaches have made lecturers aware of time as a culturally malleable phenomenon. They have thus experimented with new ways of balancing objective (clock) time with the students' subjective perception of the passage of time, thus paving the way for new perceptions of and cultural assumptions about time. The examples illustrate how cultural assumptions about objective and subjective time are mutually reinforced by the dynamics of cultural continuity and change. Continuity in the form of predetermined and externally defined learning outcomes to be achieved on both social



education and teacher training programmes, and sluggish cultural assumptions about time in the educational practices that both teachers and students take for granted. They do not go away just because the teaching becomes more playful, but are reproduced in practice and affect the realisation of the potentials of playful approaches to teaching. But we are also seeing that our experiments with playful approaches to teaching give lecturers an opportunity to work more intentionally with time in educational practice.

## Theme II: Participation

Another assumption specific to educational culture that emerges in a cultural analysis of playful approaches to learning concerns students' opportunities for participation. It becomes clear that playful approaches are associated with the hope that they are inherently inclusive and create more opportunities for participation in the existing educational culture. Our analyses shed new light on this aspect and point to the fact that playful approaches can be simultaneously inviting and quite demanding (Togsverd & Pedersen, 2024).

Students are invited to use their own experiences and come up with their own ideas and opinions, to experiment and try out new things in relation to the subjects and topics around which the teaching revolves. What emerges is an intention to create a more student-centric culture when it comes to the students' own learning processes. Several students explain that, as a result, they have gained some experiences with participation that inspire them in relation to their own practices. A student teacher says: "*What I find with many of my own pupils is that they can be a little tired of [...] always being judged on whether something is right or wrong. But here they are kind of made masters of the outcome.*"

Our analyses show that being 'made the masters' of the various elements of the teaching is often

experienced as inviting and inspiring. However, playful practices also result in an educational culture in which students are positioned in ways that can be perceived as new types of demands. The students are expected to participate in new ways if the playful approaches to teaching are to succeed. Thus, success is contingent on the students' *independence, commitment and open-mindedness* – open-mindedness in the sense of a *willingness to be open about themselves and to experiment*. Some of these demands are expressed by a lecturer who explains how she encourages the students to find new presentation forms. "*And I've said to them that I absolutely don't want them to present anything in writing [...] and that goes for PowerPoints as well. 'Well, what are we supposed to do then?' 'That's entirely up to you. You could do a movie trailer or something else that you can present. Or you can dance it, or whatever you like.'*"

Playful approaches to learning can thus shift the educational culture in a direction where students are offered opportunities to improvise and experiment. But students need to be willing to do just that. Many students are, but there are some who do not exactly leap at such new opportunities. Some of the words used by the students to explain why they or their fellow students are hesitant or even reluctant to engage in playful learning practices are: 'overwhelming', 'embarrassing', 'difficult' and 'transgressive'.

For many students, the perception of playful approaches as being difficult and transgressive has to do with the students being unsure whether they can meet the new performance requirements entailed by the changed teaching practices. Performance and the role of performance in relation to playful approaches to learning are discussed in the next section.



### Theme III: Performance

All educational cultures contain and produce performance criteria, which can be more or less explicit. Our analyses show that fundamental cultural assumptions about performance play a role when experimenting with playful approaches to teaching (Jensen et al., 2022). On the one hand, playful approaches to teaching and learning can contribute to challenging culturally determined notions of desired student performance, while on the other hand, students are required to perform in new ways.

Both lecturers and students talk about experimenting with easing performance requirements, for example by stressing that 'we're just playing' or sharing experiences of being involved in processes with unknown outcomes. A student says: "*Time passed very quickly, and it wasn't stressful at all because I was able to walk around and talk freely.*" This is, in fact, a student talking about her experience of an oral exam, which is not necessarily obvious. She accepted her lecturer's invitation to experiment with her presentation at the exam and designed a two-metre-long interactive poster that she used for her presentation.

However, our analyses show that playful teaching practices can still leave students feeling under a pressure to perform. A student says: "*I have to admit that when I see boxes of crayons and large pieces of paper being brought into the classroom, I panic slightly at the thought that 'Oh no, now we're going to draw! Ehm. But once we get going, everything changes, partly because we're always working in groups, so even though I'm not particularly good at drawing, creative help is at hand from my partner. Still, panic remains my overriding feeling, and every time I just think 'no no!'.*

The statement is interesting in a number of ways – the student is overwhelmed by panic and feelings of discomfort in connection with playful teaching practices; she knows from experience that her feelings of discomfort can be overcome; and finally that a helpful culture is key to overcoming her feelings of discomfort. Our studies generally indicate that for playful teaching practices to succeed, educational cultures need a strong social environment and a strong sense of community.

With playful approaches to teaching, new norms and ideals are added to the teaching context – for example, norms and ideals that it is better to experiment and possibly fail than it is to take the safe and well-trodden path. Some students become unsure of themselves if they cannot decode what constitutes a good and a bad performance, respectively. Two teachers recount: "*They were certain that I wanted them to do it in a specific way [...] And they were like: 'If you could please show us an example of how to do it because then we can do it.'*" "*They become, they're a little unsure to begin with, because they actually don't quite know whether they've done the exercise in the expected way. Because they haven't been given a recipe as such. They tend to be very keen to have a recipe.*"

These quotes are about specific students who may have difficulties navigating the more diffuse performance requirements entailed by playful teaching practices and where the process is more important than the end-result. But the quotes also highlight the cultural and structural fact that the executive orders and curricula of the social education and teacher training programmes do not explicitly value playful approaches. This means that even though experimentation and exploration are key to playful teaching practices, the intended learning outcomes to be demonstrated at exams remain the same. A

teacher expresses this dilemma as follows: *"It's a difficult balance to strike because after all we don't assess their ability to engage in divergent thinking at [...] the exam."*

#### **Theme IV: Body**

The role of the body in playful approaches to teaching and learning is closely linked to our cultural body norms in the educational system, cf. tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1958). You can talk about culturally well-known student bodies and culturally well-known lecturer bodies: many will recognise the student body that enters the classroom, looks around for a chair, sits down at a desk, turns their face towards the lecturer, the student body moves little, it listens and takes notes, and sometimes it raises its hand to ask (or answer) a question. In synchrony, the culturally well-known teacher body takes up a position at the centre of the classroom, turns towards the students, often remains standing, handles communication media such as PowerPoints and writes on blackboards and flip-overs, it sometimes seeks eye contact with as many students as possible, it might gesture a little and walk around the room.

Playful approaches to teaching can challenge the well-known cultural patterns embedded in our bodies, involving the bodies of students and lecturers in new ways of teaching and learning. A lecturer describes it as follows: *"It has become ingrained in your body – all the times you've entered a classroom and been told you had to be quite passive, because that's what was expected. And every time you've behaved badly, you've been told to sit down and pay attention. It is deeply embedded in us all. But then in the world of playfulness, you get the feeling that all of a sudden something unexpected is expected of you, and it produces this bodily reaction."*

When students and lecturers engage with spaces and materials in new and playful ways, when they use their bodies to stand, walk, run or jump, or when they use the floor, corridors or outdoor areas in their efforts to relate to particular subjects or academic content, it disrupts our enculturated habits and behaviours of bodies, and it challenges our expectations of the role and behaviours of the body in educational contexts (Skovbjerg & Jensen, 2023).

Our studies indicate that there are bodily implications to play qualities entering the classroom: Sometimes students and lecturers feel good about it, while at other times, it causes their bodies to seize up. We like to say that playful learning can be liberating of the body, but can also be inhibiting. Play qualities can make your body feel light and at ease, they can make time fly as you become totally immersed in what you are doing and the present moment. Conversely, the body can seize up and be consumed by feelings of insecurity and discomfort at the thought of having to engage in something unknown, spurring a strong sense of self-consciousness of your body and what it may look like in the eyes of others. All these sensations

and bodily responses are perceived subjectively by individual lecturers and students, but the cultural and social norms have a bearing on them, shaping them and challenging them through multiple interpretations and reinterpretations of what is at stake in the bodily sensations and movements. It is precisely these shared interpretations and reinterpretations that help to build new habits, cultural knowledge and norms for what teaching is and can be, and what roles our bodies can play.

A lecturer talks about the liberating potentials associated with students using their bodies more actively when working with the academic content in playful ways: *“... The students come with pre-existing knowledge, with some experience from their own understanding of the world. So when they meet in a context where the starting point is their own bodies and their own understanding of life, of course it is better remembered and understood more thoroughly than if they have to relate to a cognitive text or some literature or a presentation or something like that first.”*

From the perspective of cultural analysis, our point is that creating a playful educational culture takes time, i.e. a culture where it feels normal and physically comfortable for learning to also involve the body being active and in motion.



## We recommend

In our investigations of playful approaches to teaching and learning on social education and teacher training programmes, time, participation, performance and body have, as mentioned before, emerged as themes associated with special and relevant tensions. Sometimes time can be at odds with playful practices, and existing norms can seem to inhibit play qualities, and conversely, play qualities can sometimes dissolve these norms and cause time to fly by. As regards opportunities for participation, we saw that play qualities can be both inviting and demanding and hold potentials for inclusion as well as a risk of exclusion. When it comes to performance, we have seen how play qualities succeed in disrupting and having a liberating effect in relation to the existing performance culture, while at the same time becoming a new arena for performance. Finally, we find that the body plays a key role in playful contexts. This is a role that can be both positive and negative as reflected in, e.g., bodily well-being and lightness or uncomfortable stiffness. The association of play qualities with such tensions leads us to conclude that play qualities can unfold in many ways, and that what matters is what sort of culture students, lecturers, teams, managements and organisations create around play qualities in educational settings, and how it is kept fluid, alive and inviting.

### On this basis, our recommendations for lecturers are as follows:

#### Time

## 1

We recommend that you reflect together on the impact of time on playful approaches to teaching, including: when do you feel that you do not have enough time, and when do play qualities challenge time? In your view, when is time a law of nature, and when can you influence its use?

## 2

We recommend that you experiment with time, on a small or large scale, in relation to playful teaching practices, for example by increasing or decreasing your management of the time allocated to specific tasks or courses. It is a good idea to involve students in the experiments and the reflections on the experiences gained.

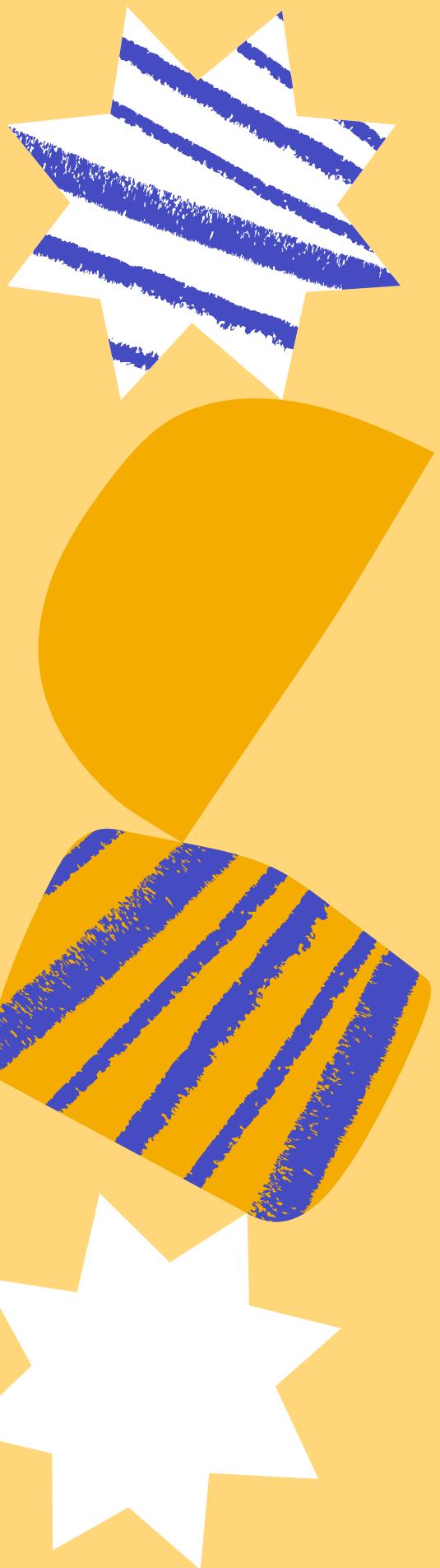
#### Participation

## 3

We recommend that you are aware of and together take heed of the fact that playful approaches to learning can be both inviting and demanding, and that you do not lose sight of the importance of creating a culture and a framework where it feels safe for students to engage in playful practices.

## 4

We recommend that you are curious about any hesitation and resistance to playfulness on the part of students, and that you take an interest in what you can learn from such hesitation and resistance when it comes to opportunities for participation in playful activities.



**Performance:**

**5** We recommend that you explore the interplay between play qualities and performance in your teaching and at your institution: Are there times when play qualities create a break from the existing performance culture? And are there also other times when playfulness itself becomes an arena for new performance requirements?

**6** We recommend experimenting with the performance requirements based on playful approaches, e.g. so as to make the performance requirements more transparent or more productive.

**Body:**

**7** We recommend that you develop your sensitivity to what bodies tell us about playful processes in teaching contexts – are the bodies liberated or do they seize up? How do bodies interact with each other, both the bodies of lecturers and students? Do some students claim or gain physical space and grow, while others withdraw and become smaller?

**8** We recommend that you experiment with how the bodies of leaders and especially lecturers show the way in playful settings – do you feel comfortable, does your body signal confidence in the playful process, and do you give the students space to use their bodies in the playful learning processes?



By Helle Hovgaard Jørgensen & Vibeke Schrøder

# The importance of space and materiality for playful approaches

In connection with the Playful Learning development project, PlayLabs have been established on the campuses of all six university colleges in Denmark. A PlayLab is a playful learning space developed and designed by lecturers from the local ambassador corps. The various PlayLabs are therefore all different and have been designed based on different design principles. The purpose of establishing PlayLabs was to support playful teaching and learning on the social education and teacher training programmes by experimenting with the layout of the classroom and the materials made available, and to point out the importance of spaces and materialities for playful practices. As an alternative to traditional classrooms, a PlayLab can share characteristics with other learning labs. Materially, they differ from the university colleges' specialist facilities designed for, e.g., the teaching of music, physics/chemistry and physical education, as well as general classrooms, characterised by traditional table and chair arrangements, in that the PlayLabs are characterised by 'open-ended' and multifunctional interiors and materials. PlayLabs are not designed for teaching particular subjects. It is thus left to the users to turn the PlayLab into a subject-specific learning space. At the same time, it is worth noting that a PlayLab can also serve as inspiration for new teaching practices in non-PlayLab settings. In the following, we will

present key findings from our research into the importance of space and materiality to playful learning.

## What do we know about PlayLabs?

### A different and open space

The university colleges' PlayLabs are essentially spaces of a different kind. They look different to the other classrooms on the social education and teacher training programmes. They are neither 'white' traditional classrooms nor rooms designed for teaching a specific subject. The 'white' classroom is traditionally used for lectures conveying thoughts on an academic topic. There is a blackboard, which is where the lecturer usually stands, and tables and chairs are arranged for the students to sit at. The room is 'white' to indicate undisturbed and 'pure' thinking. The subject-specific classrooms, on the other hand, are equipped with the specific materials needed to learn the practices associated with the teaching of subjects like music, cookery or chemistry. Since the materials have been developed for a specific subject, it is very clear what the various materials in the classroom are to be used for, e.g. guitars, pots and pans, laboratory flasks etc.

The university colleges' PlayLabs are neither 'white' nor filled with specific materials for specific uses. For example, in the development and design of their PlayLab, University College Lillebælt (UCL) was deeply inspired by the principles of choice, wonder and delight from Project Zero (Mardell et al., 2016). The principles describe how the experience of play qualities is expressed among children in school, and they are thus used in this context as well. The other university colleges probably relied on other sources of inspiration, but the outcomes turned out to be the same – the PlayLabs became spaces of a different kind, inviting students to interact in other ways with the academic content.

A PlayLab can also be described as an open space. While it is obvious how teachers and students are supposed to use subject-specific classrooms and traditional 'white' classrooms, PlayLabs are designed to be open and enigmatic places that encourage new behaviours through opportunities for choice, wonder and delight. In PlayLabs, you encounter unconventional and unexpected furniture and furnishings, such as second-hand furniture, which resist the institutional look, and new and unique designs intended to encourage you to act and sense in new ways, such as a climbing frame, a slide, sand, a sand table. The colour scheme is also different to the usual colour schemes on campus. Much of the interior is designed to be multifunctional and open to multiple and endless uses. For example, tables and chests of drawers are fitted with castors to allow them to be easily moved around, or they may consist of different elements that can be put together in a multitude of ways. On account of the multifunctional and open nature of the materials and interiors, everything can be used in many different ways. In the words of Madeleine Akrich, the PlayLab furnishings are 'weakly scripted', i.e. there is no one obvious way

of using the furnishings; you have to work with the furnishings to shape them according to your intentions. The furnishings must be 'redesigned' or, in Akrich's words, 'de-scripted', and that is the task that teachers must take upon themselves in order to be able to use the space for a specific academic purpose (Akrich, 1992).

It is therefore not immediately clear how the subjects should unfold in a PlayLab, as it is neither a traditional classroom nor a traditional subject-specific classroom, and as the room is arranged in an open and multifunctional way. It requires didactic design work, the space must be 'de-scripted' (Schrøder et al., 2022).

## Changeable materials

PlayLabs are also characterised by the materials being changeable. Like the interior, the materials are multifunctional and open. Materials may range from sand to iPads, feathers, LEGO bricks or large cubes, and the teacher must create a relationship between the materials and the academic purpose. We have worked with a socio-material perspective, which means that the social perspective and the material perspective are connected, and we cannot understand one without the other. We have focused on how the social perspective contributes to shaping the material perspective in the culture of teaching and vice versa. Inspired by Sørensen (2009), we have made a distinction between materials and materiality. Materials are understood as clearly defined objects of a non-human nature, like a chair, a ball or a wooden brick. Materiality, on the other hand, we understand as a combination of users with the many parts of the teaching, i.e. a ball as a materiality can only be understood as an entanglement of the ball, room, mathematics as a subject, the students and their teacher. When

open materials are used in different academic contexts, they become concrete subject-specific materialities. The dice are used in different ways, depending on whether they are used to teach Danish or mathematics, and depending on whether many or just a few students are involved. Similarly, a piece of cardboard will be used differently in the teaching of Danish to the way it may be used in the context of teaching mathematics. If the materials are weakly scripted and suitable for a variety of different uses, it may, on the one hand, be easy to incorporate them in a teaching context. On the other hand, the meaningful use of the weakly scripted materials in ways that seem relevant to the academic content requires a lot of input on the part of teachers.

The materials in a PlayLab can also be said to be visible or invisible. In the UCL PlayLab, the design of which was guided by the design principles of choice, wonder and delight, this has meant that some interiors and some materials are remarkable and visible, while other materials remain invisible through being habitual and inconspicuous. These are the materials that we are used to encountering in classrooms, so we tend to not notice them at all. Moreover, the materials are shaped by the teaching contexts they are part of; also, when we use materials in educational settings that are not normally there, they can add an element of surprise and astonishment. The floor is an example of such invisibility, of something that we are so used to is there. And then we have learned that using the floor in a PlayLab can be a bit of an eye-opener. We make it visible in new ways. Other ordinarily invisible materials such as pencils, hats and phones can be made visible by being used in playful teaching practices in new ways. Materials thus play an important role when it comes to creating spaces for playful teaching and

learning, and in our design of teaching activities we can create space for playful approaches, and in our design of teaching, we can activate their visibility, invisibility and changeability (Schrøder et al., 2023). The changeability of materials and their potential for transformation resonate with the imaginative power associated with the phenomenon of play. It can support playful approaches to teaching and help create a dynamic space. This dynamic space can be characterised based on the cultural geographer Doreen Massey's concept of throwtogetherness. She describes how spaces are ever-changing as a result of people, materials, intentions and affects being thrown together (Massey, 2005). In a PlayLab, the throwtogetherness is of lecturers and students, changeable materials, multifunctional interiors, academic and educational intentions as described in the curriculum and purpose, interpreted in teaching designs, the emotional engagement that tunes the room through play qualities and through the willingness or unwillingness to engage in creative and investigative learning processes. Adding play quality and giving direction to such a dynamic space requires pedagogical and didactic design work on the part of lecturers (Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021; Jørgensen & Skovbjerg, 2023).

## Entangled learning spaces

Living and open learning spaces can be created in PlayLabs as throwtogether spaces in which lecturers develop designs that become part of the dynamics of the room, helping to develop and shape the room. In our research, we have also worked with Tim Fawns' concept of entangled pedagogy. From a pedagogical perspective, it should be understood as an entanglement of the five elements of teaching, which are: purpose, method, values, context and materials (Fawns,

2022). Working with learning spaces that are both entangled and dynamic makes a difference for the subjects and the learning because the subjects are approached and experienced in new ways and seen in unexpected contexts. The subject-specific content must be thrown into a PlayLab and into a playful learning space, and such throwtogetherness and entanglement also contribute to developing the subject-specific content, allowing new paths to be taken.

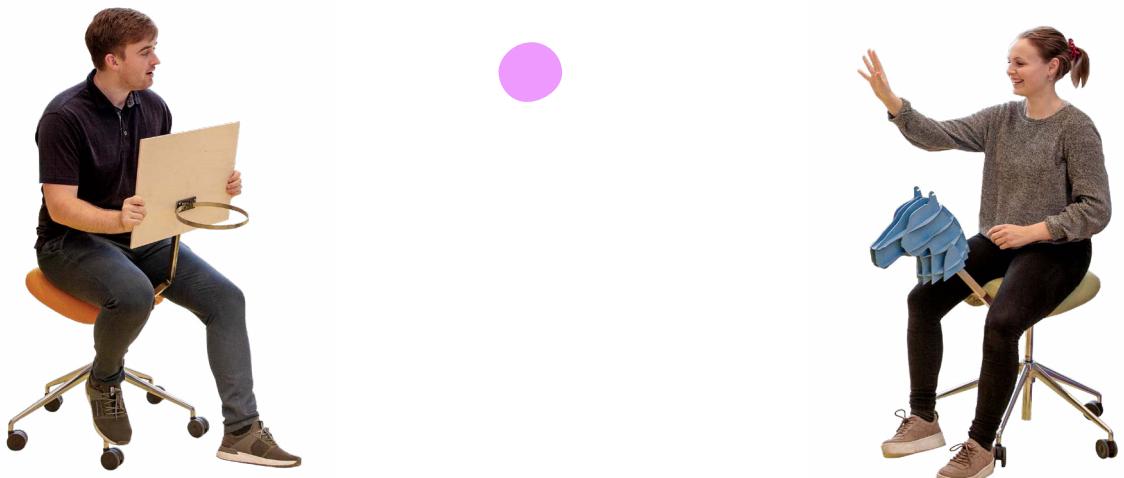
The openness of the PlayLab, which is characterised by high degrees of complexity and throwtogetherness, is both a strength and a weakness. Complexity can turn into confusion and disorientation, and for the academic mission to succeed, it is important to know what we understand by playful approaches, the material perspective and the subject matter in order to be able to handle the swirling space based on carefully conceived didactic design work.

To sum up, we can say that materials and materialities in PlayLabs come to play a role through social practices that are constituted by what we usually do with spaces and subject matter. They are thrown together and entangled, and they continue to have meaning through what we do – together.

### An example with ball tracks

In the following, we will describe an exercise we have carried out in connection with the research project with a group of students on the social education programme. The purpose of the exercise was for the students to learn about the importance of space and materials for the educational activities that are initiated in, for example, an after-school club and to reflect on the science-specific content that could be brought into play. The exercise shows the importance of space and materials for the unfolding of playful approaches to teaching.

The students were tasked with making ball tracks out of different-sized materials that were either weakly or strongly scripted. One group was tasked with using small-sized materials scripted as a ball track. In other words, they were given a prefabricated ball track. They sat down on chairs at a table and built the ball track in different ways, varying inclination, speed etc. Despite their tenacity and engagement, they finished the task very quickly, and in their subsequent reflections they expressed a desire for more diverse materials to be made available. Another group was given weakly scripted materials such as cardboard and plastic tubes in many different sizes. They based themselves in the corridor, incorporated some seating steps and imagined how they could continue down the corridor, out



the door and down the stairs at the end of the corridor. However, time ran out before they got that far. They expressed great satisfaction with their way of solving the task and explained, in their subsequent reflections, that synergies arose, energising the group. They could have spent more time, but "had lost track of time" because they were, in their own words, being both investigative and experimental.

Our empirical data shows that small-sized materials invite sedentary activities, where the play qualities will often be associated with an affectionate play atmosphere and activities involving assembling, building and fiddling, as we saw at the table (Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021). Large-sized materials tend to involve the body more, expanding the scope of possibilities and thus also the play qualities that can be brought into play. There also appears to be a difference between using strongly and weakly scripted materials when it comes to the openness of the learning processes. In other words, it is worth keeping the qualities as well as the scale of the materials in mind didactically because this allows you to create different possibilities for involving the body and being investigative and experimental.





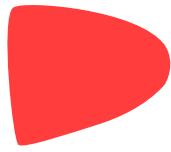
## We recommend

### 1

We recommend that you take an interest in how materials, materialities and the social perspective are entangled. We know that this is important in the planning, realisation and evaluation of teaching, and therefore we recommend that lecturers ensure strong combinations of the five individual elements – purpose, method, values, context and materials – forming part of a teaching situation. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that no one element is more important than the others; the important thing is how the five elements are thrown together, entangled and therefore add meaning in different ways in relation to each other.

### 2

In the realisation of teaching activities, we therefore recommend that you keep the empirical sensitivity in mind – that you look, in detail, for how these entanglements materialise and how materials and materialities continuously give and gain meaning.



By Mikkel S. W. Boysen & Ole Lund

# Didactics and playful approaches

## There's something out there calling to us

*There's something out there that's bigger than us. We're not alone. Somebody is calling to us And there is something that is appealing to us. Are they aliens? No. It's a world right here and now. With a past and a future. With children and adults who want to live, experience, create, play, learn, explore and belong. And it is a world with a culture rich in materials, techniques, workshops, stories, art, knowledge and traditions. There is something out there we can play with. And something we can learn from. And something we can throw around and build on. There are balls, books, plants, guitars, brushes and microscopes. And there are children who dream of exploring and children who have forgotten how to. And there is somebody, there is something that is appealing to us. Calling to us.* Excerpt (translated from Danish) from Appellernes bog (Boysen et al., 2023b).

When teaching becomes playful, it is usually because it becomes relevant and alluring. Students lose track of time and become immersed in the teaching activity. Their participation and behaviours are characterised by engagement and spontaneity, which means that they do not think about and evaluate their behaviours or the justification of the activity. On the contrary, they identify with it. They involve themselves in it and what is at stake in the teaching situation, and they react instinctively to the progress of the activity. Playful teaching is thus characterised by achieving a form of momentum, self-determination and self-dynamics (Gadamer, 2007). It does something

to the students while at the same time giving them something desirable in return, namely the pleasure and enthralledness of being in class in a playful way. In other words, you can say that playful teaching is characterised by attracting and appealing to the students.

When something is appealing, it is because it addresses us in "someone else's name". It serves someone other than, for example, the person who articulates the appeal (Frandsen, 2020). This can be understood as not having your attention directed at the source of the appeal. When this happens in class, students may feel that it is not the lecturer who wants something from them, rather the material/teaching activity is drawing them in and doing something to them. Despite the fact that the teaching activity has been organised by the lecturer.

In collaboration with lecturers from the Playful Learning development project, we have examined playful approaches from a didactic perspective, and in the following we look in depth at a number of aspects that seem to be crucial for creating an appealing and playful teaching situation:

## The immediate bodily interaction

Our studies point to the importance of remembering that teaching involves a meeting between bodies that talk to each other in direct and immediate ways. This has a significant bearing on how the teaching is perceived and whether it develops in a playful way, for example.

The importance of bodily interaction is not diminished by the fact that the teaching experiments in a development project such as Playful Learning are often more practice-oriented and are about making the students more physically active than they are in ordinary sedentary teaching situations.

However, our studies show several examples of how the more practical and 'bodily' forms of teaching can shift the focus to the body to such an extent as to prevent the teaching from developing playfully.

This is evident from this statement by a student who had been participating in a physically active teaching activity: *"In this situation [the teaching activity], I'm very conscious of my body, how it moves and of the fact that others are looking."* (Lund et al., 2023)

This student as well as several other students thus expressed the view that the focus of the teaching on practical and physical expression meant that they became self-conscious and conscious of their own movements and behaviours. As was the case in the specific situation, the student's excessive self-awareness got in the way of her chances of being drawn/appealed to by something other than herself, including the teaching activity/situation. Therefore, the teaching activity/situation was not perceived as showing play qualities (Skovbjerg and Jørgensen, 2021).

In contrast, we saw how the teaching became more playful when students had a chance to turn their attention outwards, towards the world, for example as can happen during a fierce football match, where the players become focused on chasing the ball. In these cases, we saw that the students were gripped by the teaching activity

and their interaction with each other. It was no longer just the lecturer wanting something with the students, but also the teaching activity itself. The teaching activity gained a kind of momentum and self-dynamism, and began to draw in (or more precisely: attract/appeal to) the students (Pedersen & Lund, 2024) and give them something in return. To be gripped and taken out of yourself in this way presupposes, among other things, having the practical skills needed for your actions to take place predominantly through a spontaneous urge to act (Øksnes, 2012), i.e. you act predominantly pre-reflexively and instinctively to the way the activity is developing.

In the example above, however, the situation is different. The student does not feel that she is able to move spontaneously and let her movements be determined and drawn by the movement activity. She is not able to participate and (experience) the teaching activity in a silent physicality, i.e. to move without considering how. Rather than allowing herself to become immersed in what is happening between her, the others and the situation, the unfamiliarity of the situation leads to her feeling compelled to be overly concerned and controlling of her own movements in an excessively self-conscious way. Paradoxically, experiencing this kind of self-awareness can undermine the individual's sense of self-determination, as they feel controlled to a large extent by what they expect others to see and think about you, and as a result end up holding back (Lund et al., 2023).

Didactics that succeed in awakening play qualities is therefore not just about what is said or words written above the entrance door to the classroom. It is also to a large extent about how bodies are situated and about what is continuously communicated between the bodies in the teaching situation. And it is about

creating a space where the bodily presence and communication allow the students to turn their attention to and focus on something other than themselves.

## Wooden houses and superheroes

On the social education and teacher training programmes, playful approaches to teaching usually take place in classrooms with relatively large groups of students. We have therefore wanted to investigate ways of framing co-creative and creative processes in rooms with many participants.

We know from research that co-creative processes can, on the one hand, be mutually inspiring, lead to an exchange of ideas and the establishment of communities and a collective identity. On the other hand, we also know that co-creative processes can lead to an abdication of responsibility, exclusion and demotivation, especially when many people participate in the process (Boysen et al. 2022). This may be due to the fact that as humans we develop what is known as 'psychological ownership' of what we create. For example, when we make a drawing or develop an idea, we are not necessarily happy that others start making changes to it. Our drawing or idea becomes a kind of extension of ourselves that we identify with. In the words of a student who was part of a co-creative process: *"When the others started working on my idea, developing it further, I felt terrible. It was like surrendering my own child!"*

There are well-known ways of supporting co-creation to inspire collective, rather than individual, psychological ownership. If people know each other really well, a sense of mutual trust can be developed, making people happy to share their ideas with each other. However,

this is not necessarily the case in an educational culture characterised by mixed classes and short courses. In addition, students should be able to collaborate with many different players both while studying and in their professional practice, which calls for the development of different collaboration models.

In the Playful Learning development project, we were inspired by two pedagogical courses that seem to provide new ideas for a model for co-creation. One course was developed by Mathilde Knage and concerned cave construction. The second course was about superheroes and superhero camps and was developed by Karen Stine Egelund (Boysen et al., 2022).

On both courses, a basic didactic approach was applied, whereby the students made gifts for each other. Divided into groups, the students first developed their own cave or superhero camp. The groups were then asked to give each other 'gifts' in the form of specific products and add-ons, which the gift-giving groups each created and which were intended to supplement, support and expand the recipient group's process/product.

In both cases, the process led to the successful exchange of ideas as well as engagement and motivation among the students. An important explanation is probably that this type of co-creation does not compromise the recipient group's product, as the gift does not directly change the product and because the recipient group can choose how to incorporate the 'gift' into their product. The group's sense of ownership is thus maintained, while inspiration is obtained from the other groups. In addition, in the process the students are presumably being asked to create something based on the perspective of the recipient group. We know from creativity

research that perspective-taking in creative processes can promote the exchange of ideas. Thus, our research indicates that co-creative processes can be qualified through design principles that include the exchange of gifts and perspectives.

### **Low floor, high ceiling**

In connection with the Playful Learning development project, we see many examples of aesthetic forms of expression, such as film, music, drama, dance, modelling/design, poetry, drawing etc., being used as a focal point for teaching, and that these are didactically thought of as catalysts for play and learning.

In general, however, our studies point to a problem worded in this way by a lecturer on the teacher training programme: *"Drawing is actually really difficult. It's like asking someone to speak Russian, even if they've only learned five words. So saying 'just have a go' is not that productive."*

The quote demonstrates how improvisation and play within an aesthetic domain of knowledge require expertise and skills. Improvising a guitar solo is fun if you can play the guitar. If you cannot play the guitar, it is often less fun. Playful teaching is therefore not always child's play. And play qualities cannot always be kicked off immediately. Not even when using forms of expression that we normally associate with play, such as chalk, modelling clay, role-playing, LEGO or the like.

The above challenge is accentuated by the fact playful approaches to teaching are oriented towards creating opportunities for participation for all. Therefore, the techniques are often expected to be mastered by all students and lecturers to some extent. When drama is used





for role-play about classroom management in Danish lessons, everyone is expected to be able to perform a role. And when visual arts are used to express ambivalent feelings about a difficult issue to do with interprofessional collaboration, all students are expected to be able to join in.

The playful method of teaching ideal is often the ambitious and inspiring didactic principle of "low floor, high ceiling" (Resnick & Silverman, 2005). This principle indicates that everyone should be able to join in regardless of their abilities (low floor) and that the potential for activity and learning should be high (high ceiling). A high level can be understood in several ways. But a possible point of departure could be more recent interpretations of Bloom's taxonomy. Thus, a high level comprises

elements such as creativity, synthesis and analysis. This is also in line with the concept of deep learning, which, in contrast to superficial memorisation, involves practical skills and the ability to explore and apply one's knowledge and skills in unfamiliar contexts. Playful teaching methods are thus based on the hope that high learning outcomes can be achieved, while at the same time making it easy and straightforward. In our study, we examined various teaching activities involving aesthetic processes as a starting point for playful approaches (Boysen et al., 2023a). These studies indicate that the students' practical experiences with a given form of expression or teaching activity are crucial for whether the process is playful. For example, observations of tabletop role-playing games show that it is easier for students who are experienced players to participate in playful, immersive, improvising and collaborative processes.

As an alternative to well-defined aesthetic forms of expression, in playful teaching less domain-specific tools are also used (Boysen et al., 2024). This has the obvious advantage that anyone can participate because no specific prior skills are required. On the other hand, less domain-specific tools do not represent an elaborate idiom, which can limit the possibilities of expression.

### **Patience and practice**

As already mentioned, our studies indicate that in many cases, play qualities cannot be expected to arise instantaneously and as soon as individual teaching activities are kicked off. Playful teaching should therefore not be seen as something lecturers can pick off the shelf and make happen at will. Nor does it arise just because students decide to be ever so positive about it.

This can be due to a number of factors. An important observation in connection with our studies is that playful experiments in the classroom were often met with initial reluctance on the part of the students (Lund et al., 2023). We often noticed students just sitting around initially talking about the teaching activities rather than throwing themselves into improvisations with each other. We also noticed that students often only engaged briefly in the activities and showed signs of being eager to finish or be done with the activity as soon as possible.

This indicates that teaching methods intended to inspire playfulness must be coupled with the development and training of practical skills and expertise in order to ensure that students are given a genuine opportunity to engage in playful teaching activities of which they have little prior knowledge and (practical) experience. Education and teaching will often involve presenting students with new teaching content that the students themselves have not asked for, that they are not aware that they will need or which they are, as yet, not able to consider either valuable and meaningful. It is therefore relevant to consider how the best possible conditions can be created for students to want to engage in and practise certain unfamiliar and unknown teaching activities and their content over a longer period of time.

Our studies point to patience as an important aspect. An analogy about falling asleep can serve to illustrate how patience relates to play qualities. Falling asleep is comparable to play qualities in the sense that neither action happens at will or by deciding that it should happen. When you want to sleep, you go to bed and lie down, often in your preferred way. You close your eyes, perhaps start breathing slowly, putting the events of the day out of your mind. I can call up the visitation

of sleep by imitating it, but I cannot force the moment when sleep 'comes', settling on this imitation of itself which I have been offering to it, and I succeed in becoming what I was trying to be (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Many people have probably experienced that it is often more difficult to fall asleep if you want it too much. Sleep is something you have to be engulfed by. It takes patience. However, this does not mean that you are completely powerless and cannot steer yourself in the direction of sleep. You can imitate and repeat certain expressions and actions that over time make it possible and more likely to fall asleep. This emphasises the importance of actively letting one's actual waking state lean towards sleep without wanting to force it.

Something similar also seems to apply to the efforts of lecturers to bring play qualities to life in their teaching. Therefore, in many cases, it will be necessary to create a teaching space where the students patiently repeat, for example, new, unknown and as yet meaningless teaching activities in order to make it possible for play qualities to gradually emerge, although it cannot be guaranteed. In this view, awakening play qualities in the classroom is not perceived as something that can be created in a jiffy; on the contrary, extensive and uninterrupted time (Aitwood & Ford, 2021) is needed as well as space for the students to experiment/tinker with the specific teaching activity, for them to immerse themselves and develop their practical skills so that the activity can begin to speak to them and become meaningful in ways other than what they experienced at first glance. Since there is a built-in urgency in the education system, which often extends to the individual lesson (Rosa, 2019), many students and lecturers will find it unnatural to have to dwell on something for a long time (as also testified to by the above field note). Therefore, awakening play qualities in the

classroom is also about practising and refining patient forms of interaction, starting with the way you meet and connect with each other in the classroom, so that this is characterised by curiosity, openness and responsiveness rather than eagerness to reach goals or understand each other based on established role patterns.

Making space for patience in the classroom does not only seem to be a question of didactics and the planning and execution of individual lessons, but calls for patience to be valued on a more general, organisational and structural level.





## We recommend

We can point to four recommendations that can support playful approaches to teaching.

**1**

We recommend creating time and space for the students to practise and experiment. Firstly, experiences are important starting points for play and improvisation. Secondly, achieving a playful mood can take time. This applies especially in situations where students at first glance find the teaching activities or content too unfamiliar or perhaps even meaningless.

**2**

We recommend that you make space for personal ownership in joint co-creative processes. This is because co-creative processes, on the one hand, hold many valuable potentials, but on the other hand, can be demotivating because students lack a sense of ownership, control and influence. A combination of personal and collective ownership can be promoted through didactic approaches, whereby students are forced to see things from each other's perspectives or where they develop gifts for each other. Through such processes, inspiration can be shared while respecting the students' sense of personal ownership.

**3**

We recommend that you draw inspiration from traditions, practices and materials known from familiar cultural domains, e.g. games, film, music, drama, dance, poetry, drawing etc. Within these domains, a veritable treasure chest of tools and symbols have been developed which can be used by students to play, improvise, reflect and communicate with. The value of such domains can be strengthened by incorporating domain-specific knowledge, for example by using certain materials, tools and methods or by taking the students' experiences as a starting point.

**4**

We recommend you appeal to the students by drawing their attention to something outside themselves. It could be a higher purpose, such as the importance of the work of social educators and teachers with children and young people. Or it could be cultures and materials that are so inspiring that the students cannot help but dive into them. If students embrace such appeals, they will be motivated less by a desire to please their lecturer or prepare for exams, and more by a higher purpose. Thus, you can consider how, as a lecturer, you can help ensure that the students' attention is attracted to appeals that are not perceived by the students as coming (directly) from their lecturer. But rather from "SOMETHING OUT THERE".

# Rounding up and our continued journey

The purpose of this report has been to inspire lecturers and students on the social education and teacher training programmes to use playful approaches to teaching and learning in their professional practice. In addition, we wanted to stress how a carefully considered and reflected didactic approach to playfulness is key – both for us to succeed, but also to ensure that we can share knowledge about playfulness and playful practices with each other in the future and develop a vibrant and lively field of research.

We have highlighted that it *is not* unimportant how we talk about play and playfulness. The way we talk and think about playfulness will be constitutive of the pedagogical decisions we make.

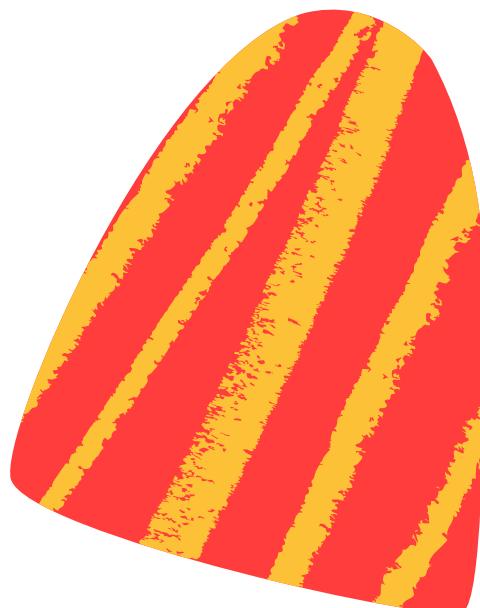
It is therefore absolutely crucial that we insist on distinct conceptualisations and on empirical sensitivity. The play quality perspective supports this point.

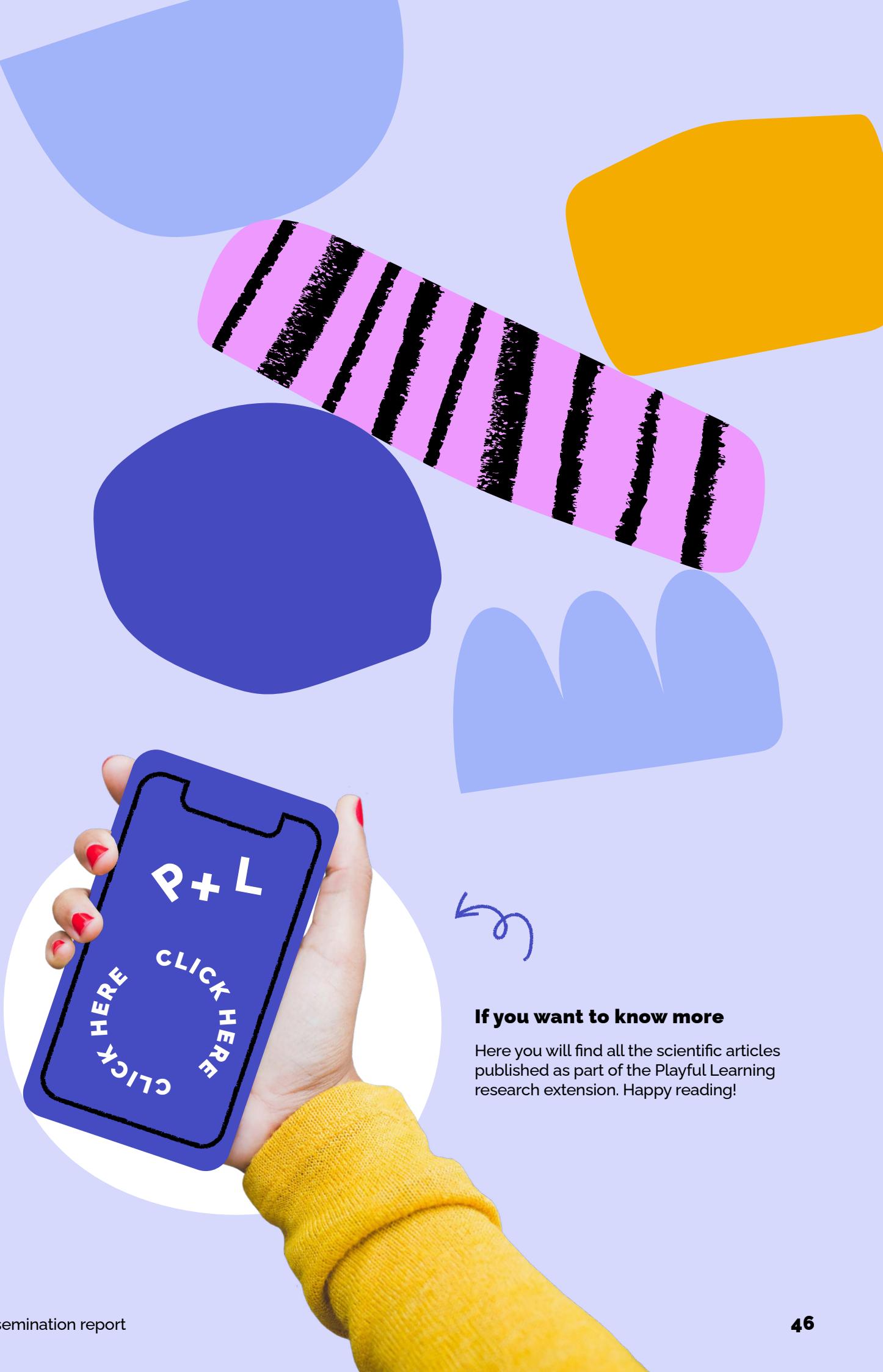
We have shed light on the opportunities and challenges associated with playful approaches to teaching and learning from a cultural, spatial, material and didactic perspective. We have condensed the results from the three perspectives that are relevant to playful approaches and provided recommendations that can support work with playful approaches in teaching.

The points presented by the report were, of course, developed in the context of the training of teachers and social educators by the university colleges, but we do not stop there. We will

continue our work with the importance of play and play qualities for children and young people. For the next three years, we will do this in close collaboration with four daycare institutions. We will be working closely with professionals to develop pedagogical practices aimed at young children aged from 0-2 years based on play and play qualities. In addition, we are collaborating with two primary and lower secondary schools, teachers of mathematics and Danish as well as the young people in Year 8.

As we embark on our onward research journey, we remain convinced that in order for play and play qualities to live, you have to be generous, you have to say yes to a lot, and you have to hope that it all works out. That's it – this is where we start.





### If you want to know more

Here you will find all the scientific articles published as part of the Playful Learning research extension. Happy reading!

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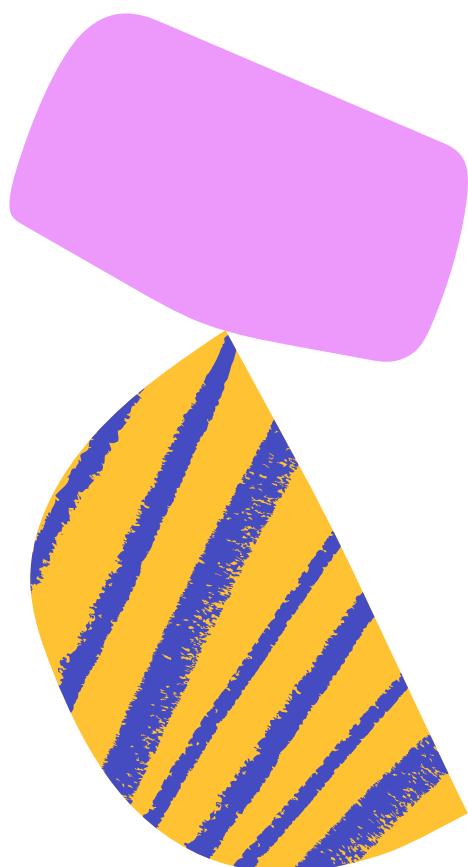
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