

# PLAY AND 'ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE' : A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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## ABSTRACT

*Play is a very important activity – it is creative and exploratory; it is also an activity in which progress can be achieved. These ideas are supported by the theories of Huizinga(1959) and Bateson(1973). In play we enter the 'play frame' which is a psychological frame in which we treat the activities that are occurring as non-serious and therefore we are more at ease in our approach; we tend therefore to be more open minded. If we can organise our teaching such that our students enter the play frame then they will be more likely to consider new ideas and knowledge. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi(1975) shows that enjoyable experience is achieved by matching skills with challenges and that we remember enjoyable experiences. Hence, if we provide students with the necessary knowledge (skills) and the problem solving exercises (challenges) they will have an enjoyable and memorable experience, and if it occurs within the play frame' then they will progress in their learning and understanding and look forward to the next such experience of education.*

*UNITERMS: play; play frame; enjoyment; creativity; education.*

Play is a remarkably significant and rich experience. When it is combined with enjoyable experience (or 'flow') (Csikszentmihalyi,1975), this paper argues a most effective pedagogical environment is created.

Georg Simmel(1964), the sociologist, developed the idea of sociability - that pure, and arguably quintessential, moment when conversation is being conducted for its own sake without any extrinsic motive by either party who are, for that moment, equals. In teaching this idea in a tutorial class following a lecture on Simmel's theory, the students are asked to prepare a skit(a brief play) of a dinner party. They are given a set of characters and then told to behave in a sociable way followed by a non-sociable way using the ideas of Simmel that they acquired during the lecture and from the readings they were assigned. This exercise involves play and enjoyable experience in the sense of skills/knowledge meeting challenges/skit. The outcome is a memorable experience in which the understanding by the student of Simmel's ideas and theory is developed. Just as importantly, it leads to the desire to return to learning because humans like to return to enjoyable experience.

The two important elements here are 'play' and 'enjoyable experience' and these will now be examined. These will be followed by further examples of the use of play and enjoyable experience to illustrate how they can be used for effective learning, understanding and analysis in the educational context and to foster the desire for life-long learning.

## PLAY

Bettleheim states succinctly "generally speaking, play refers to the young child's activities characterised by freedom from all but personally imposed rules (which are changed at will), by free-wheeling fantasy involvement, and by the absence of any goals outside the activity itself" (1987:37).

While this suggests play is only for children, the approach taken here is that play can be utilised with learners of all ages. The quote does however raise a number of key ideas in play that will be argued to be of critical importance: freedom from rules; fantasy; absence of goals. In short, play is very open territory, which in a pedagogical context means that there is a non-threatening environment that allows exploration. It was Huizinga(1959) in his seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, that drew together the ideas that constitute play, and significantly these ideas still remain at the forefront of any attempt to define play.

Huizinga(1959) states that:

1."First and foremost, play is a voluntary activity, Play to order is no longer play" (p7). Play is superfluous, the need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never a task. It is done during free time(p8).

2. Play is not ordinary or real life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. It is only pretending, only for fun. Nevertheless the consciousness of play being 'only pretend' does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that "only " feeling(p8).

3. Play is secluded, limited. It is played out within certain limits of time and place. Play begins and then at a certain moment it is over. Once played it endures as a new found creation of the mind a treasure to be retained by the memory.

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course(pp8-9).

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4. Inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. That is, play creates order, *is* order. Into the imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play casts a spell over us... it is captivating(pp9-10).
5. There is tension in play...uncertainty, chanciness, a striving to decide the issue and so to end it. In play we end a tension with the solution of the uncertainty(pp10-11).
6. All play has its rules. They determine what holds in the temporary world circumscribed by play. As soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses(p11).
7. A play community tends to become permanent even after the game is over. The feeling of being "apart together " in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game(p12).

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside of ordinary life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means(Huizinga,1959:13).

These ideas on play, it will be shown, can be utilised in the educational context, such as the one above, to develop the students' knowledge, understanding and analytical/critical skills. But before doing this, Gregory Bateson's(1973) 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' will be outlined to provide corroboration and enrichment to Huizinga's(1959) theory of play.

Bateson developed his ideas on play when he observed monkeys at the Fleishacker Zoo in San Francisco(1973:152). There he saw one monkey appear to bite another monkey. The bitten monkey chased the biter but instead of engaging in fierce or angered combat, the two monkeys engaged in mock, or playful, combat. Bateson deduced from this, that the process of communication here was that two, contradictory messages passed between the monkeys: the first level or 'concrete' message stated "This is a bite"; the second level or 'meta-message' that passed between the monkeys stated that "the bite was not a bite but rather it was play". That is, in play there is a paradox: our actions do not denote in play what they would ordinarily denote in non-play and during in play we are aware of the truth and falsity of our actions and communications.

Bateson argues that when we enter play activity we adopt a different psychological perspective - he says we enter a 'play frame'(1973:157-158). While in this play frame (such as when we go to a movie, play sport or hear a joke) we treat the activities as serious but at the same time we know that they are

not 'real'. To put it another way, the play experience is both true and not true at the same time. Bateson described this as 'the paradox of play' and demonstrated that all play frames contain this paradox(1973:162). So when the monkeys were observed they had entered the play frame and the bite was a bite and it was not a bite at the same time; in the joke context, while the joke is being told it is being treated as true and not true at the same time. These ideas are more fully explored in Lynch(1994). The important points here are that the play frame is paradoxical and that play is both serious and non-serious.

It is in these two points that we are able to see the commonality of thought between Huizinga(1959) and Bateson(1973).

Huizinga, it will be recalled, also says: Play...is a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. It is only pretending, only for fun. Nevertheless...(this) does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion...(1959:8).

This is life inside the play frame.

The element that is critical for play which is in Huizinga(1959) and Bateson(1973) is that of tension. As was noted above: "There is tension in play...uncertainty, chanciness, a striving to decide the issue and so to end it. In play we end a tension with the solution of the uncertainty"(Huizinga,1959:10-11).

Bateson describes his frame as labile, i.e. easily broken. When the rules or order or 'spell' within the play frame is broken or when the tension is released - by the final whistle of the sporting context, the ending of the movie; the delivery of the joke's punchline - there is a release and, most importantly a realisation or resolution of the uncertainty (how the game movie, or joke will end) which existed up until that point of time (see Huizinga above at '4'). He says 'Most importantly' this realisation, this resolution, this outcome, is the moment of understanding, of new insight, of progress.

As we emerge from the paradoxical play frame, we have solved a problem, discovered something new because, in essence, while in the play frame we are exploring, experimenting, taking chances with uncertain outcomes. And herein lies the beauty of play. It is non-threatening because it is fun, it is non-serious but full of possibility - hence our psychological and emotional readiness to explore, experiment, discover. When the play experience ends (or as Bateson would describe it 'the play frame is broken') the uncertainties become certain; the possibilities are now resolved; the experiment is concluded and there is a realisation. It is in this context that Huizinga writes "genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation"(1950:5); while Bateson states "the paradoxes of play are an evolutionary step"(1973:164).

What both are alluding to is that due to its very nature, we grow, progress and develop in play. Hence in the educational context, if we can place our students into the play frame the outcome will inevitably be learning something, progressing an understanding. Then reflection can be used to

develop analytical and critical skills. What was inside the frame can now be seen in a new, in another, different light.

This is most exciting both in terms of its simplicity from a practical point of view and in terms of its outcome from a pedagogical perspective. Students can easily be placed into the play frame, such as the conducting of tutorial exercises like the Dinner Party described above; and they learn and understand the ideas: "Once played it endures as a new found creation of the mind a treasure to be retained by the memory"(1959:9).

## ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE

There is one further element which we can add to this process to give it greater effect and that is to make the play activity an 'enjoyable experience'.

Csikszentmihalyi's(1975) theory of enjoyable experience or 'flow' is essentially that if a participant in an activity perceives that his or her skills are in balance with or 'up to' the challenge then that participant will experience flow: "the peculiar dynamic state - the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975:41??). Flow or enjoyable experience should be contrasted to pleasure. Whereas, pleasure is regarded by Csikszentmihalyi as an emotion that was experienced for less complex and more basic needs requiring minimal cognitive activity, enjoyment is a complex phenomenon requiring thoughtfulness.

Significantly, Csikszentmihalyi says "play is the flow experience par excellence" (1975:36-7), similarly Huizinga states that enjoyment or what he calls the "fun-element" is the thing "that characterises the essence of play" (1950:3).

In the context of education the skills are represented by the knowledge of the students and the challenges are the problems that they must solve. If adequate knowledge is provided for the student through lecture and readings to solve the problem such as the tutorial exercise then the student will experience flow. That tutorial exercise must be framed as play, as fun.

The further significant point arising from this enjoyable play experience is that it is remembered and learned well.

As indicated above Huizinga clearly states that "Once played it endures...a treasure retained by the memory"; "Play casts a spell over us...it is captivating"(1959:9). Csikszentmihalyi notes that enjoyable experience is remembered and what is learned therein is learned rather well(1975).

This whole process then fosters in the student: learning; understanding; analytical and critical skills; as well as the desire to go on learning – to return to the enjoyable experience.

## SUMMARY and CONCLUSION

Play is seen as different to 'real life'. It is seen as enjoyable activity in which we can indulge quite fully and seriously, but the outcome is non-threatening(Huizinga,1959). When we play we actually enter a (psychological and emotional) play frame in which we suspend our disbelief and we treat what is being heard or seen or done as serious but nonetheless know it is only play(Bateson,1973). What is critical here for teaching is that students, while in the play frame, are able to suspend any resistance to ideas, relax and play with new ideas because they know they can exit the play frame at any time. From a teacher's perspective it is desirable to keep them in the play frame because they are open to ideas and absorbing new knowledge in an enjoyable context.

Further, there is a more significant element of play which is articulated by both Bateson and Huizinga - play is basic to progress because play is creative behaviour. To play is to experiment, to explore, to discover. That is, there is a tension in play which arises from the uncertainty of the outcome, when the punchline arrives there is a realisation of the new - the play frame is broken but the insight is achieved. And with this realisation there is, typically, memory.

Students are brought into the play frame by use of various strategies including humour and popular culture; then provided with skills (knowledge) and then issued with challenges(problems). This is followed by the opportunity to meet those challenges while in the enjoyable play frame and hopefully overcome them by using the skills with which they have been provided. This will lead to understanding. The outcome is described by Csikszentmihalyi as a "feeling of creative discovery, a challenge overcome, a difficulty resolved"(1975:181).

Education is a two way process between student and teacher that can and should be, *for both*, an enjoyable experience. In enjoyable experience one feels in control; one feels progress; one feels achievement. Further it is remembered and looked forward to because "people who see what they are doing in these terms tend to enjoy the activity more for its own sake"(Csikszentmihalyi,1975:181). That is, learning becomes learning for its own sake and this instils a life-long learning ethic.

A play environment in which students have skills to meet challenges and so have an enjoyable experience is the ideal pedagogical framework: the student will progress in their knowledge, understanding and critical faculties and look forward to doing it again.

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