

## Chapter 66

# What Really Happens When Adults Play?

### A Call for Examining the Intersection of Psychosocial Spaces, Group Energy, and Purposeful Play

Jo A. Tyler

*Penn State University, Harrisburg PA, USA*

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Play is an increasingly popular process for working with groups of adults in a range of contexts. We are increasingly sophisticated in our ability to integrate creative forms of play into our facilitated work with groups, often with excellent outcomes. Experience and research have deepened our understanding of how to design and implement powerful and effective playful scenarios in connection to objectives for adult learning and performance. We are convinced, intuitively and experientially, about the value of play. However, our confidence in the efficacy of play seems not to be matched by clear insights into why and how play actually achieves results. This conceptual article builds a case for the importance of understanding the nature of the influence play has on psychosocial spaces and group energy in the interest of better informing our application of play as a learning intervention. It advocates for designing ways of systematically and qualitatively researching the influence of play as it unfolds in real time. A brief case study of a simple experiment undertaken by the author at a session of the 2016 Playful Learning Conference is described here as a thought-starter for ways we might explore the psychosocial and energetic dynamics fostered when we introduce play as a way of purposefully engaging adult learners.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

We are already quite smart about play. We have definitions for it. We know it when we see it, and sometimes even when we only hear it. We know for certain when we are engaged in play. We know quite a bit about its benefits, especially for children, but also for adults. There are ways in which we feel quite

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8598-6.ch066

## ***What Really Happens When Adults Play?***

certain that play can matter for adults in a range of contexts, and somewhat paradoxically we know that play works.

It is perhaps on the basis of this knowledge, evidence from both research and practice, that play is an increasingly popular process for working with groups of adults in organizational settings. We are increasingly sophisticated in our ability to integrate creative forms of play into our facilitated work with groups, often with excellent outcomes, designing and implementing powerful and effective playful scenarios in connection to objectives for adult learning and performance. We are convinced, intuitively and experientially, about the value of play. This is all excellent. However, our confidence in the efficacy of play seems not to be matched by deep and clear insights into why and how play actually achieves results.

In this conceptual article, my intention is to build a compelling case for the importance of better understanding the influence that play has on adult learners. Examining its effect on psychosocial spaces and group energy will better inform our design and application of purposeful play as a means of fostering learning with adults.

Here we will look briefly at three “strands”, weaving them together into a braid of knowledge acquisition and capacity building for adult learners. There is, to begin, the strand of play itself. We will take a tour of some ways in which we currently think about play, how we parse it in an attempt to name and understand it. Interwoven play is our second strand, the notion of psycho-social spaces in which play unfolds. The final strand is the energetic dynamic of the group.

Having briefly considered what we know, and do not know, about each of these strands, we turn our attention to the benefit of additional research on the influence of play in groups of adults, particularly as it unfolds in real time. To leverage play with adult learners we can benefit from unlocking the how and why of its potency. To this end, I raise some questions that might be addressed by future research, followed by a brief case study of a simple experiment I undertook at a session of the 2016 Playful Learning Conference. I hope this will serve as a thought-starter for ways we might explore the psychosocial and energetic dynamics fostered when we introduce play as a way of purposefully engaging adult learners.

## **Play**

Throughout recorded history there has always been play. “Hindu tradition formalizes play as the ultimate source of reality” (Brown, 2009, p. 45), and there is a word for it in Sanskrit, *lila* (Brown, 2009; Nachmanovitch, 1990) that translates as “divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 1). Philosophers as far back as Plato have explored notions of play (D’Angour, 2013), and Sicart (2014) evokes the colliding tensions in Greek culture. Play, he suggests, “is between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth, between the Appolonian and the Dionysiac” (p. 9).

In the literature, play has been parsed and re-parsed, often in dialectical ways. For example, some play is collaborative or cooperative “in which pretend, role-play, improvisation, playful activities and a playful mindset were key components” (Harris & Daley, 2008, 50), while other play is competitive. There is scored play in which there are winners and losers and play in which no one wins or loses, such as that grounded in “visual art, in music, in literature” (Upton, 2015, p. 112). Play may be emergent and ad hoc, as in expressive (Yorks & Kasl, 2012; Yorks & Kasl, 2006) or presentational play (Heron, 1999) such as “pretend, sociodramatic, artistic, creative...active, locomotor, rough and tumble, and highly physical play” (Burghardt, 2016, p. 212). Alternatively, it may be predictive and highly structured, in the manner of games with rules and constraints (Upton, 2016; Dillon, 2010).

10 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:  
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/what-really-happens-when-adults-play/279787](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/what-really-happens-when-adults-play/279787)

## Related Content

---

### Overview of Learning From Past to Present and Self-Directed Learning

Cihad entürkand Gülçin Zeybek (2019). *Self-Directed Learning Strategies in Adult Educational Contexts* (pp. 138-182).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/overview-of-learning-from-past-to-present-and-self-directed-learning/224470](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/overview-of-learning-from-past-to-present-and-self-directed-learning/224470)

### The Perception Educators Have of their Leader's Support and their Own Perceived Level of Burnout

Gregory C. Pettyand Cherie Barnett Gaines (2013). *Handbook of Research on Technologies for Improving the 21st Century Workforce: Tools for Lifelong Learning* (pp. 440-459).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/perception-educators-have-their-leader/70177](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/perception-educators-have-their-leader/70177)

### An Innovative Approach of Using Mobile Gaming to Bridge Well-Being, Anxiety, Depression, and Isolation

Robert Costelloand Lucy Smith (2022). *International Journal of Adult Education and Technology* (pp. 1-18).

[www.irma-international.org/article/an-innovative-approach-of-using-mobile-gaming-to-bridge-well-being-anxiety-depression-and-isolation/302013](http://www.irma-international.org/article/an-innovative-approach-of-using-mobile-gaming-to-bridge-well-being-anxiety-depression-and-isolation/302013)

### Adult Learners and Their Development in the Information Society

Lesley Farmer (2010). *Integrating Adult Learning and Technologies for Effective Education: Strategic Approaches* (pp. 82-100).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/adult-learners-their-development-information/41841](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/adult-learners-their-development-information/41841)

### How Adults Learn Through Information Technologies

Lesley S. J. Farmer (2011). *Encyclopedia of Information Communication Technologies and Adult Education Integration* (pp. 17-36).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/adults-learn-through-information-technologies/43415](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/adults-learn-through-information-technologies/43415)