MANIFESTO

by the Playful Learning Center

PLAYING WITH LEARNING

We want to provoke a change and if possible, galvanise a movement in attitudes towards the meaning and value of education. This is a big aim and we are ambitious but we're also realistic. We also know we are relatively powerless. We do not control national education systems: and we are not in the business or offering a magic solution as if education was a single problem that could be resolved. Indeed, part of what we want to provoke is an opposition to the idea that education is a problem to which there is a solution.

Our aim at the playful learning centre is to develop ways of playing with learning. This is not quite the same thing as learning to play (although it can be at times) and it is not the same thing as simply making the case for play in education (although it too can also be that at times). What we want to do is to unsettle conventional assumptions about what play is and what learning is and suggest that there is a repertoire of approaches that enables us to mock, satirise, parody, send-up, invert, imitate, mimic, deconstruct, mess around with and quite simply, "play" with learning in order to challenge and deepen what education is and could be.

Usually educational programs are serious. They are pretty important after all. We are serious too but we think that introducing an element of playfulness into theories of learning and consistently taking a sceptical, questioning and humorous approach to learning - of seeing it as a kind of game with rules, conventions, as well as perhaps, a sense that it is something you can win and you can lose; that it, as Gregory Bateson put it, has a "meta-communicative"[1] function in that all forms of education signal what they are in their doing; that all in all, understanding learning as a form of play and therefore something that needs to be played with, offers us routes to more effective, more meaningful and, above all, more sustainable visions of education.

So this is our aim but why do we want to do this; how will we do it – what does it mean in practice: and what do we hope to achieve?

What is play and playfulness and what does it mean to join either term together with learning?

Although seemingly common and incontrovertible term, play itself has both meant a variety of things in the past and indeed is taking on new definitions in contemporary society. One of the most comprehensive studies of play is entitled "The Ambiguity of Play" by Brian Sutton-Smith[2] in order to draw attention to the fact that although we all think we know what play is, in fact we use the term to cover a multitude of activities. In this landmark study, Sutton-Smith describes different theories of play as different kinds of rhetoric because he argues that it is impossible to state with any certainty what play is, only what different theorists have claimed it could be. Because play is such a nebulous and unclear concept different theories, explanations or definitions only really make sense in the context of broader value systems and underlying ideological values. He then identifies seven rhetorics of play: as progress, as fate, as power, as identity, as the imaginary, of the self, and finally as frivolous.

However, scholars have been keen to make the point that whatever definition of play they espouse, playfulness, (or as used adjectivally in our key phrase "playful learning"), is where aspects of play are transferred across into other domains. Miguel Sicart makes the point that playfulness is more of an attitude or a modality where we can take "the attitude of play without the activity…. [it] is a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context"[3]

PLAY

as progress as fate as power as identity as the imaginary of the self as frivolous

Furthermore, as a number of commentators over the years have noted, play is often defined in terms of what it is not. Indeed, part of its value seems to be how the term can sustain a dialectical role across a series of binary oppositions. So: play is not work; play is not serious; play is not imposed; play has no extrinsic validation; play has no external purpose; play is not a good use of time: and of course if its play, can it be learning? However, this does not always mean that the inverse of these values is always true: play is natural (but can be learnt and even taught); play is spontaneous (but can be stimulated under certain conditions); play has its own intrinsic rewards (but people play to win); play is fun (but note the prevalent use of the term, "serious games" or what Seymour Papert has called "hard fun"[4]).

is spontaneous

PLAY

has its own intrinsic rewards

is natural

is fun and inviting

is creative

Playing with these binaries and exploring the tensions (and continuities) between them has often proved a productive way to define and promulgate the values of play. Thus Maria Montessori's famous dictum that "play is the work of the child" resonates because of the historical distinction between the domains of children and adults and the increasing importance of leisure activities in the industrialised and urbanised workforces of the 20th century.

What happens then to this fluidity of interpretation when playfulness is yoked together with learning? After all it is much more difficult to imagine or conceptualise a state of not learning or even unlearning in the same way that we can imagine alternative valorisations of play and playfulness. Indeed, by yoking together playfulness and learning one key challenge must be whether the possible range of meanings that exist within both terms when considered distinctly, are immediately constrained when joined together. In other words, how much of what play is not is still plausible in terms of an attitude or a modality, in the formulation of playful learning?

Why a centre for playful learning?

Two key dimensions of play have permeated our culture and society over the last 30 years: performativity and the game. The idea of performance (and performativity) refers not just to performing a play in the traditional sense but the argument that all social interactions, gestures, the language we use, the way we dress and so forth is in some way a kind of performance or enactment. It is even suggested by the sociologist Erving Goffman that deeply held personal views of our self are in some way a kind of performance[5]. Indeed, theories of performativity have spread from the human into many dimensions of social life and so carry a version of play and playfulness into other domains. It is the term most frequently used to describe our competence or performance at work; it describes how institutions and governments perform; it is used to validate epistemological questions[6]; and, controversially, it is frequently the term used to describe schools and learning in the current climate.

Similarly, ideas about games, gamers and gaming have infiltrated many more aspects of social life than simply the domain of play. Not only does gaming theory underpin systems analysis[7] and even financial heuristics but given the incredible spread of commercialised leisure activities in the post second world war period and especially the extraordinary rise of digital games and gaming in an industry that now rivals Hollywood, so playing games has become an acceptable part of everyday life – especially for the young – on the phone, in the living room and in the bedroom. Of course we "play" games be they digital such as *Grand Theft Auto, Hay Day,* organised as part of the community like soccer, of the *50 shades* variety or simply with our family and friends. And in this play, it is argued we make sense of rules, conventions, genres, ways of behaving and indeed the values of what it is to win, lose and join in.

In recent years we have seen the growth of "edutainment" and "gamification" both of which show a blurring between the worlds of leisure, education and work. Indeed, within the private, commercially driven world of software (including games)

there has been intense interest in developing learning-driven activities and curriculum sometimes from the historical tradition going back two centuries to the educational "toys" developed by Froebel and sometimes finding ways of using new digital media to create games, puzzles, learning environments and challenges as new ways of teaching and learning.

The *Playful Learning Centre* was established both to develop a research agenda within this new ecology and to act as a "living lab" to develop products and ideas all of which would contribute to a vision of playful learning. We want to bring scholars, teachers, innovators and developers together with curriculum and policy in order to take advantage of this moment to refine the best of what we do and shakeup the mediocre and the everyday in order to continue to provide stimulating, interesting and different opportunities for children and young people.

From playful learning to playing with learning

What we don't know however, is how powerful playful learning could ever be. Whilst public education systems around the world buckle under the pressures of economic restructuring and forms of employment seem to transform themselves almost on a yearly basis, as mass refugee crises, the digitisation of everything, globalisation, and migration all challenge the nature of what it means to grow up in Western democracies today, so the purposes and value of learning are under scrutiny as never before.

From this perspective, playful learning can, will and should play an important part in addressing the challenges of motivation and engagement and crucially mediating the shifting boundaries between home and school, private and state-supported education and formal and informal learning. These are important aims but at the *Playful Learning Centre* we want to do more. We think that once the idea of play and playfulness has been introduced into learning, the genie cannot be put back into the bottle.

> **Play is all at the same time an attitude,
> an approach and a whole way of looking at the world.**

Here, we want to follow in the footsteps of Mikhail Bakhtin, the literary theorist from the early part of the 20th century who made the argument that all communication is "dialogic", that is, any statement and any idea only has meaning in relation to its context and the conversation in which it is made[8]. He elaborated this idea in a discussion of "Carnival"[9]. For Bakhtin, the cultural practices of carnival suggest a way of mimicking, subverting and even resisting the dominant social order. His work analysed various literary forms showing how humour, mimicry, satire and parody are used to "play" with the dominant structures of power in society.

We want the Playful Learning Centre to, as it were, "carnival-ise" learning. We want to establish a set of practices and a research agenda that will play with learning, that will deconstruct its rules and conventions, that will undermine its claims to power and incite teachers, fellow academics and even policymakers to question and challenge what learning is, who it is for and how it works. Playful learning isn't just a question of playing nice, of being pleasant, sociable and of making us laugh but is also a way of being dangerous just as carnival could be, because it raises questions about the fundamental structures of power, authority and resistance in our society.

A research agenda for playing with learning

So what would a research agenda committed to playing with learning look like? What questions do we want to ask: what activities can we offer: what would we do and how will we make a difference?

Our values challenge and question. They open up the fact that learning is always and only socially situated and bound up with the imposition of power.

HERE ARE OUR PRINCIPLES.

1. Question the authority of authority. Everything is up to grabs, teachers, knowledge values, epistemology – the works. What purpose does authority in learning serve? In whose interests? What's the point of the power relationships in education?

2. Always draw attention to the fact that learning is all in the game, that it's a bodily, context-bound set of practices. It takes place in an immediate, often emotionally charged, social world. Don't ignore this fact. Don't pretend that it is otherwise. Challenge the myth that learning is only something that happens inside people's heads!

3. Challenge the rules, the conventions of classroom interactions, the purposes of examinations and accreditation, the practices and processes of how learning is currently organised

4. Fight the boredom. Succeeding in education can often be a question of attrition: keep finding ways to engage and motivate.

5. Assert the agency of players. Too often children and young people are considered passive and empty. They are not. Learning is something people do not something that is done to them.

6. Consider the consequences or what's the point? Of education, of study of learning? Winning and losing count: they matter. This is part of the game

But play is fun, it always draws attention to itself, as Gregory Bateson noted, play is always saying "this is play". Although play can be serious it draws on that unique spirit of humour, laughter and fun that is one of the key features of what makes us human. Our research wants to develop ways of playing with learning that asserts these values through our "Educational Carnival".

Educational Carnival

This means we want to find out: about ways of teaching, about self-directed activities by and with young people, about innovative uses of digital technology, and about blurring the boundaries between home and school, private and public, individual, family and group. We want to explore: ways of talking, ways of performing, ways of organising those moments of humour, satire and ridicule all of which draw attention to fundamental epistemological questions because this is where learning, true learning as we see it, takes place.

Please come and join us at the Playful Learning Centre to make this happen.

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Helsinki, December 2015

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