

Play Tarot Cards

A method to explore play qualities in teaching using playful approaches

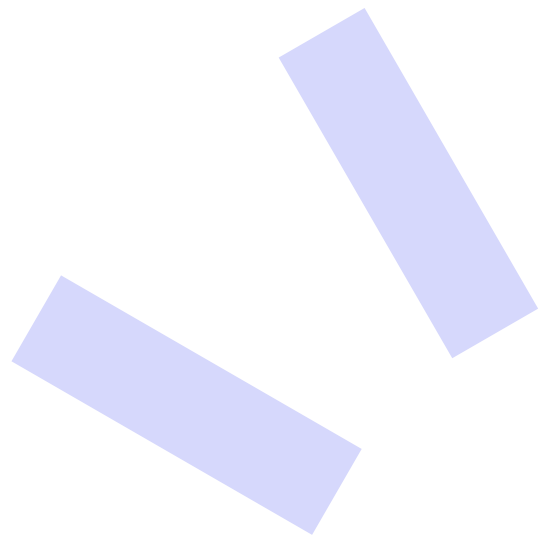
HELLE MARIE SKOVBJERG
HELLE HOVGAARD JØRGENSEN
LINDA AHRENKIEL

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– a method to explore play qualities in teaching using playful approaches

Helle Marie Skovbjerg
Helle Hovgaard Jørgensen
Linda Ahrenkiel



EDITOR

Ditte Obenhausen Hoff

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Introduction

Most people are aware of the challenges of combining play and learning in an educational context. That combination is controversial and contradictory, and from a theoretical and practical standpoint there is a risk of ending up in fruitless discussions about the nature of the relationship between play and learning. On the one hand, we have the study programmes with specific objectives for the students, and where all activities are aimed at improving their skills and meeting certain skill and competence goals. On the other hand, we have the diffuse and challenging phenomenon of play. Furthermore, play does not necessarily focus on the specific skill objectives of the educational programmes. In the research project Playful Learning Research which deals with playful approaches to learning in social education and teacher training, we often encounter the same practical and theoretical challenges. Our experience is that there is a need to find ways to talk about – and design with – *play* in teaching. At the same time, such efforts must facilitate play without in any way marginalising it.

This article is about the **Play Tarot Cards** and its use in social education and teacher training. Play Tarot Cards makes it possible for participants to explore and discuss play qualities in the classroom – i.e. question the specific characteristics of play relating to this particular form of

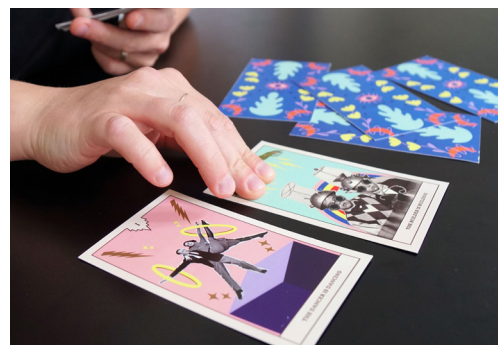
teaching. We identify play qualities by focusing on the specific actions we introduce in teaching – inspired by both the play research and learning understandings of Dewey (1986) and Lennon (2015). The contexts within which the specific actions take place will tell us something about whether the participants experience the actions as having play qualities. With the Play Tarot Cards, participants can not only explore past actions with play qualities in teaching, but also design future options for play qualities in teaching. What are the play qualities of the specific teaching? Which play qualities are dominant and which are absent? And which play qualities can I design going forward?



We begin the article by presenting the research context in more detail, followed by the theoretical framework for the development of both the Play Tarot Cards and the concept of play qualities. Next, we introduce the Play Tarot Cards where readers receive a guide for how to get started on testing the design in practice. If you want to read a more detailed description of the development of Play Tarot Cards and the associated research methods, we kindly refer to Skovbjerg & Jørgensen (2021), Skovbjerg (2021) and Skovbjerg, Jørgensen, Peréz and Bekker (2022).

Research context and method

Play Tarot Cards was developed under the auspices of Playful Learning Research (2019-2023), a research and development project that explores and examines playful approaches to teaching in social education and teacher training. The design-based approach to research means that we develop designs in close interaction with practice and subsequently through those designs create knowledge. In this case, Play Tarot Cards is a design that we use to create knowledge about how the combination of play and teaching can occur, and the design has been developed through experiments in collaboration with teachers and students in social education and teacher training.



Theoretical framework for the Play Tarot Cards

The theoretical framework for Play Tarot Cards is based on the *mood perspective* (Skovbjerg 2021; 2016). We are inspired by the tarot system which we use metaphorically to organise an interview about play qualities in teaching. The questioning technique is inspired by the episodic interview.

THE MOOD PERSPECTIVE

The mood perspective is a general human perspective on play consisting of a network of categories that together make it possible to identify experiences that can be said to have play qualities. The experiences that have play qualities are realised through the actions of play – referred to in the vocabulary of the mood perspective as *play practice*. That is, I *swing, jump or build*, and it is through these actions I want to (be able to) get into a playful mood and experience play qualities. Thus, there is a close connection between the actions of play and the participants' experience of play quality. Most people remember the experience of playing on a swing and also that it is quite different from building with LEGO bricks, for example. This means that the mood perspective is not limited to one type of action, i.e. play practice, nor one type of mood. We have created the following mood perspective archetypes consisting of four conceptual pairs.

PLAY PRACTICE	SLIDING	SHIFTING	DISPLAYING	EXCEEDING
PLAY MOOD	devotion	intensity	tension	euphoria

Overview of play practices and the connection to play mood.

The first play practice is called SLIDING and concerns all types of play actions characterised by continuity, tactfulness and repetition. When we are deeply focused on building or collecting something, our actions are typically characterised by these qualities. These actions then point to the *devotion* play mood which is characterised by lingering, patience and immersion.

SHIFTING practices, however, are linked to the *intensity* mood. Here, the body is often spurred into action, with shifts in degree and direction and alternation between the two to preserve the intense bodily experience. The third practice, on the other hand, is DISPLAYING, which points to the *tension* mood. This practice often concerns games where you have to show something to others, e.g. such as X Factor games, circus, theatre, poetry slams and the like. You also have to have a sense of the social

aspect and be able to come up with ideas about possible outcomes. The element of surprise is particularly central to the last play practice called EXCEEDING, which at the same time points to the *euphoria* mood. Here, it is about constantly breaking with the expectations and social codes that apply in this particular context, and the practice can quickly end with a joke, someone being startled – or in a bout of laughter.

THE TAROT SYSTEM

The exploration of play qualities both in past and future experiences is organised and designed through tarot, which is a card system. The history of tarot dates back to the 16th century. At that time, tarot was used to play games, while the occult symbolism of the cards first came into being in the 18th century when the tarot cards were used as a tool to predict the future. A tarot set usually consists of 22-56 cards divided into four houses. The cards are adorned with visual symbols taken from Christianity, the Jewish kabbalah and Greek and Egyptian mythology, with references to numerology, astrology and the Hebrew alphabet (Pollack, 2002). In our development of the Play Tarot Cards, we use the tarot system's organisation of houses and card visualisations that evoke associations. We also use the specific way of laying down the cards called spreads, including questions relating to each individual card (Semetsky, 2011).

THE QUESTIONING TECHNIQUE

The interview, which is introduced through the tarot system, is based on the episodic interview – an interview method developed in the field of qualitative research (Flick, 2001). The episodic interview is characterised by a specific situation which is thoroughly explored through a series of questions, so that the interviewer and the interviewee have a clear sense of the situation history. Based on the specific situation, various interpretations are examined so that the individual's experience of the specific situation is subject to further interpretation.

Play Tarot Cards – in brief

The cards are divided into four houses – one house for each play mood. Each house includes four cards, so a set of Play Tarot Cards numbers a total of 16 cards (Table 1). The middle top letter of the card indicates the house and mood the card belongs to. The text at the bottom of the card first says something about who is doing something – e.g. *the performer* – and then the nature of the activity – *is performing*.

In other words, it corresponds to the participants and the participants' play practices. The 16 play qualities are created through empirical field-work and are closely related to actual practices that often occur in play. They are therefore the best current interpretations of which actions typically relate to the different 'houses'. We begin with a known spread using three cards laid face down on the table. Using the first card, we ask about the past, then the present, and finally the future (Semetsky, 2011). This corresponds to the tarot system's focus on both interpreting the past and speculating about the future. The aesthetic expression of the cards is created using a bricolage technique – i.e. each card has a foreground, a background, a letter and a text. In the foreground, a black and white image of the central action appears as a recognisable shape. The contrasting background is colourful with painted symbols. The black and white images appear slightly exaggerated and grotesque against the colourful and naïve background.



Picture 1: Examples of the tarot cards, one from each house, that relate to a mood category. See also the table below.

BASIC ACTION/ MOOD	SLIDING/ DEVOTION	SHIFTING/ INTENSITY	DISPLAYING/ TENSION	EXCEEDING/ EUPHORIC
	Building	Dancing	Spectating	Destroying
	Fiddling	Jumping	Performing	Yelling
	Collecting	Running	Pretending	Smashing
	Balancing	Swinging	Imitating	Mocking

Table 1: Overview of the four mood houses and their associated actions and play qualities.

Guide to Play Tarot Cards

Our guide is based on the experiments we have conducted and those we plan to conduct (Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021). In best playful (and narrative) style, the guide is intended as a formula that is open to improvisation (Mouritsen, 1996). Thus, it is not an instruction, but rather an inspirational guide for how to work with both the interview format and the potential for play in teaching situations. When planning to use Play Tarot Cards, it is our experience that staging is key to implementation. Overall, the interview session takes an hour and begins with the setting up of a table and two chairs. The table can be covered with a dark velvet cloth, light and stones to create the tarot scenario. Together with the interviewer, a participant agrees to investigate a situation that has been experienced as playful. Interviewer and participant sit opposite each other. Around the table, the rest of the group take their seats, acting in the role of a reflective team.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

The interview using Play Tarot Cards is conducted after a lesson that is planned as playful. This makes it easy for the participant to remember a playful teaching situation. The interviewer sets the framework for the interview situation by explaining that we are going to jointly explore a specific situation and the play qualities that the situation may have. The interviewer reminds everyone that there are four houses (see Table 1) and four play qualities in each house. After this, it helps to give a brief reminder of the meaning of the play qualities. In other words, the interviewer explains that there are three important aspects to play qualities. Firstly, the aspects relate to a *specific situation* that the participant has experienced as playful, secondly, where the play qualities are *associated with certain actions*, and thirdly, where the participant experienced that *those actions had a meaningful impact*.

The interview has three stages: past, present and future, which make up our most commonly used spreads to examine a specific playful teaching situation. First, as it *has been* experienced, followed by reflections on the specific situation, and finally, on how the situation *could be* developed.

The interview begins with the participant choosing a specific situation with academic content that has been experienced as playful – and talks about it in (relative) detail. It is not about describing a long series of events or the entire teaching experience, but rather focusing on one specific situation. Along the way, the interviewer asks clarifying questions such as: *Where were you? Who were you with? What did you do?* The participant can also ask questions – the key point is to make the situation as clear as possible to both the participant and the interviewer.

Four prediction rounds then follow. Three rounds between the interviewer and participant and finally a round between the interviewer, the participant and the reflective team.

1ST PREDICTION ROUND

The first round is about the past and begins with three cards being laid out in a row (a spread). The cards are flipped one at a time by the participant. The following questions are asked of each card:



- Was this play quality present in the situation?
- How was it present?
- If you connect it to the situation, what does the card make you think of?

By extension, the interviewer asks the participant to choose one or two cards that are particularly appropriate for the situation. The participant selects the card(s) which are then placed next to the participant.

2ND PREDICTION ROUND

The second round is about reflecting on the situation and follows the same structure as the first. Three cards are placed face down and turned one by one based on the following three questions:



- What do you see on the card and do you feel it makes sense in relation to the situation?
- How are you able to connect it to the situation we just discussed?
- How could it be present in the situation?

As in the first round, one or two cards are selected, removed and placed next to the participant.

3RD PREDICTION ROUND

The third round is about the future and how, going forward, didactic designs can be developed with play qualities in mind. Play qualities are therefore now the primary focus of attention.

Three cards are added at once, now face up. The following questions are asked one at a time:



- Are there any of these play qualities that you have never thought of using?
- Are there any of them that you always use?
- Which card would you choose as an obstacle when developing your next didactic design, and why?

Here, too, the participant must point out one or two cards that they want to take with them.

Based on the selected card(s), the participant is asked to explain why this or these particular card(s) have been selected to describe the situation and a future vision. The interviewer can ask clarifying questions and make comments.

4TH PREDICTION ROUND

The final and fourth round involves the reflective team. Their reflections are taken into account by asking the team questions such as:



- Briefly, what did you experience in the course of this interview?
- What stands out?
- What are you taking with you from the interview?

Our experience using Play Tarot Cards in an interview

Based on a number of experiments, we can see that both the tarot system and the card design cause quite a stir. Just as in a regular card game where you flip the cards, Play Tarot Cards offers an element of surprise that is often experienced as playful. We have tried different ways of conducting the interview: with and without staging and with different spreads and questions.

UNDERSTANDING THE CARDS

One of the recurring questions is on how to understand the cards. For example, what is the difference between *the destroyer* who *destroys* and *the smasher* who *smashes*? How should *pretend* be interpreted and can the actions *perform*, *pretend*, and *imitate* coexist, for example, when I play a role and pretend to be someone else by imitating his actions? A similar question relates to the extent to which the cards should (also) be understood metaphorically, in the sense that the *balance maker* who *balances* for example, is not only a bodily act, but also a mental act in which the practitioner metaphorically tries to balance ideas.

Our preliminary experience suggests that there should not be any one answer to what the cards actually mean. Firstly, because it helps to justify the existence of a reflective team by creating space for an open and investigative approach when there are no unequivocal answers. This has led to many fruitful discussions and reflections on, among other things, the differences in the pleasure of smashing and destroying. Destruction is often associated with creating something new afterwards or with a process where something breaks down or decays – while smashing is more of a spontaneous impulse. Secondly, play and playfulness are also



Overview of every tarot card, design by Keila Pérez

known for their scope of expression – not as an exact science, but rather as something in flux. The design of the cards and the tarot metaphor thus act as a catalyst for an open conversation that often promotes imagination and creativity. The more the participant is involved in the ‘play’ aspect – i.e. can be driven by associations anchored in the specific teaching situation – the more meaningful the interview becomes and the more nuanced the play qualities are in the given learning situation that the interview explores.

WHAT DO THE ACTIONS OF THE CARDS ENTAIL?

The actions of the cards are also questioned. For example, when and why do you jump when teaching in the pedagogical and teacher programmes? The answer is that it is not certain that you do, and that even if you do, it is not necessarily a play quality. The point is that play qualities cater to actions that can be experienced as playful in the specific context and by the individual. Therefore, it is by looking at the action that we get a sense of the connection and thus whether it is about play quality. We have also experimented with various spreads (Pollack, 2002). In the version we have outlined, the participant is not presented with all the cards. This helps to promote the randomness of the cards, not leaving it up to the participant to choose from all the cards, but instead to choose from the cards that are flipped. In this way, we create a narrower focus, which on the one hand increases awareness and creates simplicity, but which on the other hand, of course, also means that something that could potentially be important is excluded. Our experience, however, is that the limitation facilitates associative and creative thinking.

WHAT CAN YOU USE PLAY TAROT CARDS FOR?

Play Tarot Cards can be used to identify what the participant experiences as a playful element in a given teaching situation. These are important building blocks in upcoming didactic designs with play qualities. Through repeated use of Play Tarot Cards we can support the reflections relating to the design of learning situations. In addition, we can focus on which play qualities were given higher priority than other qualities in the given teaching situation. By extension, Play Tarot Cards can be used as a didactic design planning tool with play qualities to help nuance the image of how to work didactically with playful approaches.

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