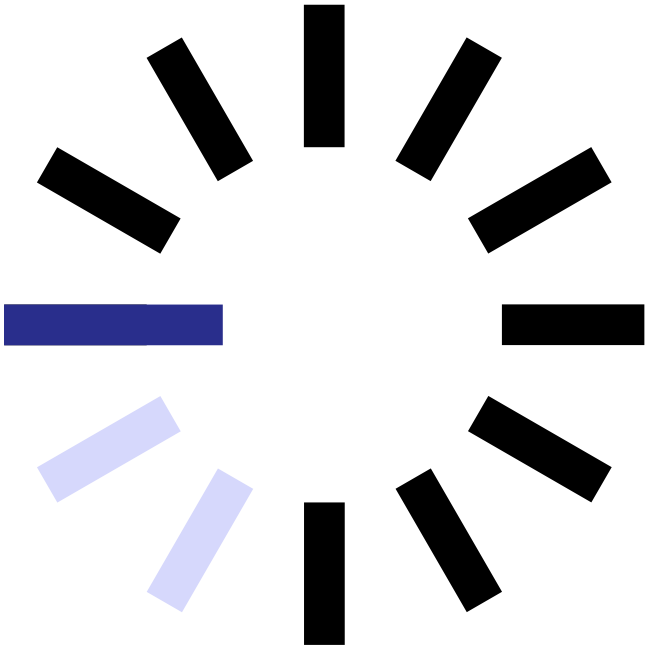

PlayLab seen through the eyes of educators

Experience-based stories and experiences with an established play and learning laboratory at University College Copenhagen

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P + Playful Learning RESEARCH

PlayLab seen through the eyes of educators

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Contents

Introduction

Imagine that you are an educator or a student in a higher education programme on your way to a classroom. What might you expect? A row of desks and chairs facing a blackboard? Try now to imagine which teaching method may be used. Could the educator be standing in front of the students at an interactive board or a whiteboard, with the students facing the board? Could this teaching method, which has been the most dominant method in the third cycle of higher education, be challenged? (Jiménez-Olmedo et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2022).

Then imagine that you open the door to a classroom which has been transformed into a play laboratory. This play laboratory has been designed with colours, lighting, materials and furniture that aim to invite to, inspire and insist on playful approaches to learning that change both the mood and atmosphere that have traditionally characterised a classroom. Then imagine that, having taken a competence cevelopment course, you also have to consider a teaching method in which playful approaches to learning has been put on the agenda. An agenda that, based on the principles of *playful learning*, challenges the notions of educators and students as to what teaching can be.

Photo of PlayLab at University College Copenhagen

We asked five educators from the social and teacher educational programmes respectively, about how space, moods and materialities have an impact on their experience of working with playful approaches to learning. They have different professional and academic profiles, but have all participated in a competence development process, in which a playful approach to learning has been put on the agenda (Playful Learning, 2021a).

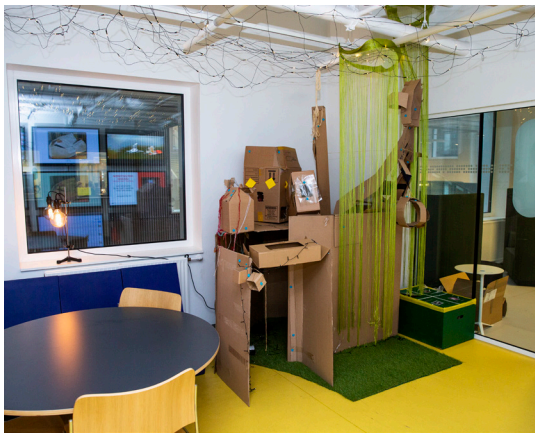

Photo of PlayLab at University College Copenhagen

PART OF A SPECIAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The national development project Playful Learning focuses on developing the competences of educators from the social education, teacher education and from the continuing and further education programmes. Competence development takes place in a learning community among colleagues, where educators from all three branches of the above education programmes are employed as ambassadors responsible for handling the competence development process. The purpose of the process is to develop and test different teaching designs that incorporate playful approaches to teaching and learning (Lyager et al., 2021). The University College Copenhagen (KP) inaugurated its PlayLab in 2019. PlayLab is a play and learning laboratory that provides a framework for - and supports the teaching and learning environment. The purpose of PlayLab is to create a space that does not resemble conventional classrooms, and in which the mood and atmosphere should invite to, inspire and insist on playful approaches to learning (Lyager et al., 2020).

Several studies show that educators need to establish a *safe space* for playful approaches to learning to become part of their repertoire. A safe space in a learning environment can be defined as the creation of a non-judgmental environment in which views, perspectives and personal, professional and academic experiences are encouraged, creating a safe space for experiments, failures and learning from mistakes. Those studies also indicate that there are situational limitations connected with the establishment of such a *safe space*, including the educator's previous experiences and teaching traditions (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Nørgård et al., 2017; Handel & Buhl, 2021). The previous experience of educators will be of importance to their use of playful approaches to learning.

OUR FIELD OF STUDY

The interviews we discuss in this article were conducted in autumn 2021 as part of an ongoing PhD project. The PhD project forms part of the Playful Learning Research Extension project, which includes 11 other PhD students and 9 senior researchers. The PhD project is methodologically rooted in design-based research and examines the importance of materials and the space (PlayLab) to student teachers' playfulness as well as their physical presence in teaching based on a playful approach to learning. The purpose of the interviews was to acquire a broader understanding of, and insight into, how educators from the social and teacher education programmes experienced PlayLab and the competence development process.

This article examines the experiences of five educators with PlayLab through three themes:

1. their previous experience with incorporating playful approaches to learning, in relation to tradition and educational thinking;
2. 'tone of teaching' based on van Manen's understanding of the pedagogy of teaching as a discipline, along with
3. the materials, mood and space as didactic fellow players in relation to the educators' experience of the mood and atmosphere in PlayLab.

Based on these three themes, play is discussed as a pedagogical-didactic component. This is done in relation to how a playful pedagogical approach to learning can give educators a more diverse basis for teaching methods. The article ends with some general recommendations on how to ensure that playful learning and PlayLab become sustainable parts of education programmes.

EXPERIENCE-BASED INTERVIEWS

The empirical data basis for the study consisted of experience-based photographic interviews. A photographic interview consists of the educators documenting scenes from PlayLab which symbolise their activities and experiences in their encounter with practice. Those images are then used as the subject of the interview. A photographic interview can help encourage narrative by the educators about the moods and experiences they had with PlayLab and the playful approach to teaching (Kampmann, 2017; Händel, 2010). The interviews were conducted in PlayLab, where the educators from the social and teacher education

programmes were invited to take 3-4 pictures of and in PlayLab. The pictures were to symbolise situations in which the educators were in different moods, for example provocative, positive or challenging (see Fig. 1, level 3). Through the pictures, the educators then gave an account of the mood and atmosphere they experienced in connection with PlayLab (van Manen, 2016a; Rasmussen, 2017; Händel, 2010). When working with photographic interviews, pictures only constitute a snapshot of the lives of the educators. Such snapshots thus do not show the situation in its entirety, but can be interpreted as a visual record of the educators' experiences with PlayLab.

Our study is based on a hermeneutic-phenomenological scientific theoretical perspective. Max van Manen (2014) talks about various *existentials,* such as lived body, lived space, lived time, moods and lived things (materiality). These *existentials* are linked to emotional and sensory dimensions and are useful in exploring meaningful aspects of the lives of the educators, and of the particular phenomenon being studied (Berg, 2018; van Manen, 2014).
Van Manen (2016b) also writes that a certain tone may be used in the classroom – what he calls *tone of teaching.* This consists of several elements, including the energy and curiosity that exist in the teaching space among educators and students, as well as the pedagogical importance of the discipline. This comprises how the teaching space is occupied, how the educators act academically and in their relations with students, as well as the prevailing mood of the teaching.

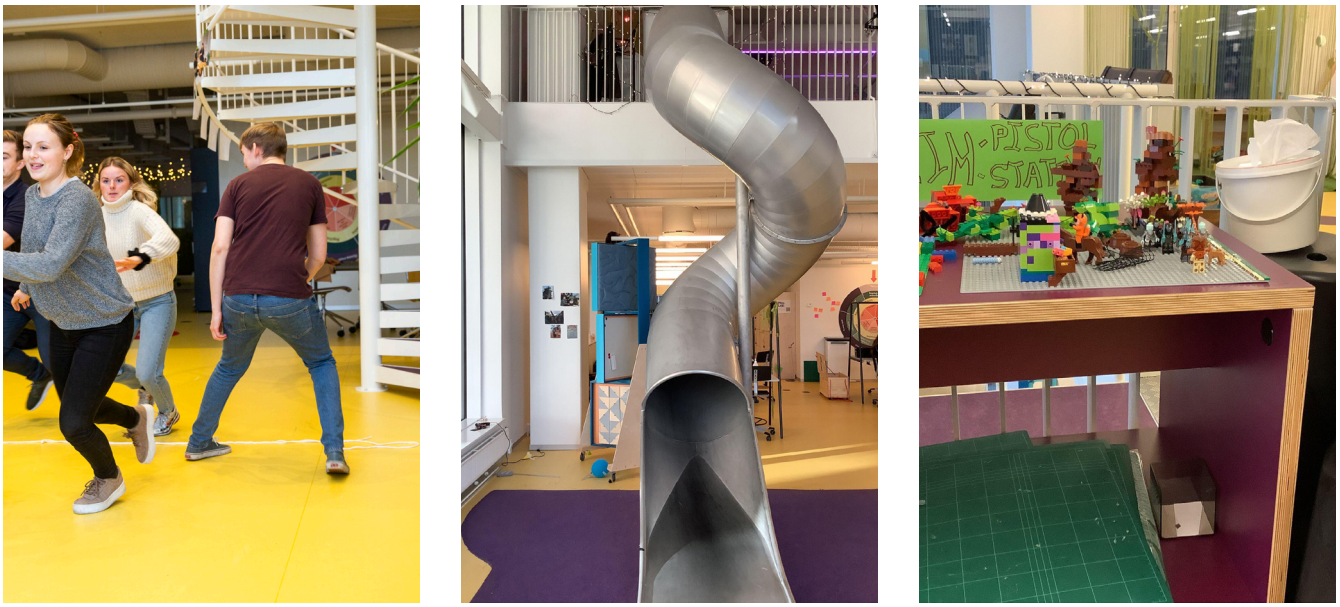

Photo of PlayLab at University College Copenhagen

A CONVERSATION WHEEL

Based on van Manen's (2014) *existentials,* we developed a framework for the photographic interviews (see Figure 1). The framework was constructed as a conversation wheel and is divided into three levels with a core. The core categories consist of: Mood, atmosphere and the lived body. The core categories are general for the other three levels of the wheel, and the core therefore functions as a synthesis category. The first level of the conversation wheel consists of: The educator's role in relation to rethinking, exploring and experimenting with playful approaches to learning. The second level of the wheel is inspired by van Manen's *existentials:* lived relations, lived space and materiality. The third level consists of six categories aimed at the many different experiences that the educators could have had: significant, positive, constructive, challenging, anxiety-inducing and provocative.

The purpose of the conversation wheel was to ensure that the key themes of the study were answered by the educators. The conversation wheel made it possible to control the interview, while also providing the educators with opportunities to answer the questions freely. The order of the conversation wheel categories could vary, and there was room to ask in-depth questions about the educators' experience. The conversation wheel was subsequently also used for analysis to ensure that the key themes emerged as significant.

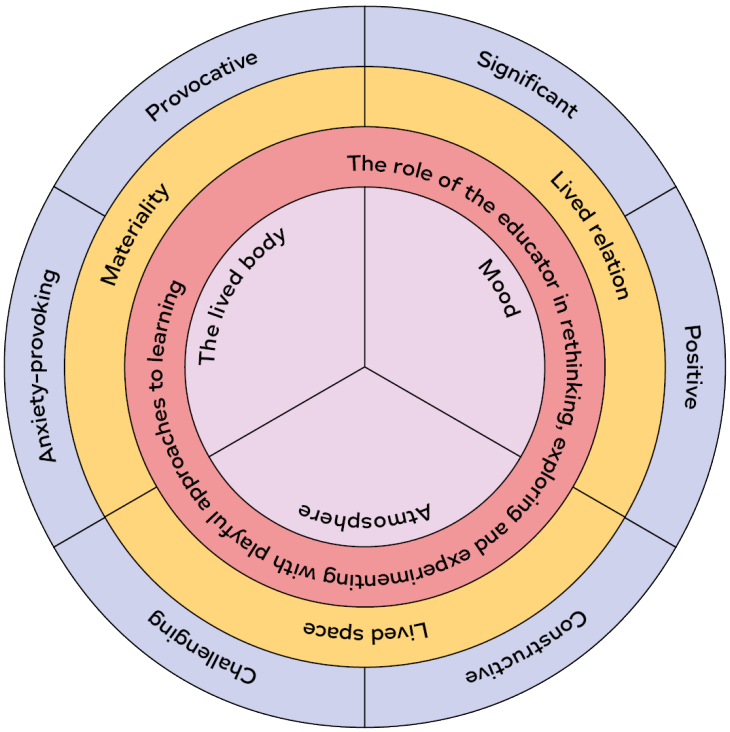

Fig. 1: Conversation and analysis wheel used in this study

PlayLab – a design process

Five design principles, three different functionalities and three concepts are used in PlayLab to support its development (Lyager et al., 2020). (For a further discussion of PlayLab and the design principles, see Playbooks 1 and 2)

5 DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR PLAYLAB AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION	
1	The PlayLab should offer and support a multitude of play types and moods
2	The PlayLab should be a transformative space
3	In the PlayLab, users are allowed to play with all PlayLab objects
4	The PlayLab has a magical entrance and a reflectory exit
5	The PlayLab has been and will continue to be developed by students and educators as co-creators.

3 FUNCTIONALITIES	
1	***Play in*** is the area in which the educators can book the room for ordinary teaching.
2	***Free play*** is the area where students can come and use the facilities in PlayLab when it suits them
3	***Play out*** are mobile PlayLabs that are an amalgamation of materials, games or technologies that can be used as a didactic fellow player.

THE 3 I'S – INSPIRE, INSIST AND INVITE	
	The 3 i's are concepts used on an ongoing basis when developing PlayLab and are defined as: Invite to, inspire and insist on quality in play and learning activities. The 3 i's are expressed by:
1	the balance between function and aesthetics, creating space to venture into unpredictable processes;
2	the space giving a magical and playful impression (a 'wow' effect) and
3	materials that can act as a didactic companion.

Room for play and situational limitations

When a space is established to create room for play, Gudiksen and Skovbjerg (2020) point out that a safe atmosphere and mood must be established, that the space must encourage curiosity, that there must be room to explore surprises and that there must be room for a change of perspective. They also point out that there are some situational limitations that have a restraining effect when it comes to establishing room for play. Such limitations are influenced by the existing relationships, roles, organisational rules, cultures, structures and time that exist in the context in which one wishes to establish room for play, for example in an educational context. The atmosphere and mood in a classroom and in a teaching situation can be affected by the way the room is arranged, decorated and designed. The furniture, light, colours and materials in the room also play a significant role.

In addition, the educators and students will also have acquired habits, traditions and preconceptions of what teaching is and can be in a higher education programme. This may, for example, be certain teaching methods, day-to-day routines or the experience that the academic content must be achieved in a certain way or within a certain time (Wolf, 2019). Such habits, traditions and preconceptions affect the possibility of creating change, for example with playful approaches to teaching, in an educational practice.

The voices and experiences of the educators

When educators are met with a new phenomenon such as PlayLab and Playful Learning's development project, their previous experiences with playful teaching are of importance to their approach to and use of playful approaches to learning in the framework of understanding that comes with this new phenomenon. They will have many years of didactic experience in organising, planning and executing teaching in relation to the area and academic field of expertise in which they teach. Such experiences give certain habits and traditions that are situationally rooted in time, space and cultures (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020). Therefore, a phenomenon like playful learning can either be in close relation to those experiences and habits, be in contrast to them or be somewhere in between.

TRADITIONS AND EDUCATIONAL THINKING

The relation between experiences and habits and playful approaches to learning are seen when an educator talks about their experience of a shift in educational thinking, with play and creativity becoming points

of focus in the education programmes. One educator says:

> *"I experience that play, with a few exceptions among management and colleagues..., play, experimentation and creativity are hyped in a cool way. That is, they are talked up. I perceive myself as not being just someone who provides comic relief... that play, creativity, experimentations have been given a place in the educational mindset again in such a way that it becomes... that I can feel that I'm an important piece of the learning mindset puzzle." (A1).*

This shift in educational thinking comes with the proviso that all educators must or can participate in a competence development process where the playful approach to learning is encouraged to be used as part of different academic dimensions. Participation in the competence development process was an option for the educators in the teacher education programme, whereas it was allocated among the educators in the social education programme. The experience that everyone, regardless of academic competences, has to consider playful approaches to learning is also expressed by an educator who says:

> *"Yes, that was certainly true to begin with. Man, I studied hard. I tried to familiarise myself with things and to understand the concept. In fact, I hadn't engaged in rule play, role play, before, but I then discovered that I had done after all, because I also teach physical education and deal with an awful lot of these things" (A2).*

Another educator found the following:

> *"If you're already used to incorporating these playful aspects in your teaching a lot, it then becomes a short step to thinking 'how do we do this occasionally or frequently?' Where I'm thinking, I still need to revise my current approach a little more, to make it relevant." (A3)*

If the academic standards and practice do not have any tradition for a playful approach to learning, it may be difficult for the educator to accommodate a playful approach. The educator thus finds that having to develop a teaching design is too overwhelming and challenging, and it becomes difficult to change his or her teaching habits. Some educators also find that PlayLab as a teaching space calls for a change in teaching practice. One educator says:

"I can't just run a PowerPoint lesson. That's completely impossible for me. Something else MUST be added. It needs to start with a game, and then some PowerPoint. There must also be some talking exercises during the PowerPoint presentation, then half an hour of work with the PowerPoint in some artistic-aesthetic direction, followed by an evaluation." (A1)

Another educator found the following:

"(...) that with everyone's involvement in PlayLab here, something is also happening in relation to building up an expectation that the creative-aesthetic dimensions will become something that the educators who teach pedagogy and educators who teach these subject dimensions will increasingly also have to deal with, but that's obvious (...) because some educators are already engaged in more activity-oriented and movement-oriented teaching. Where my teaching is more analytical and reflective. And it's not an either or, but it's what my exercises focus on to a greater extent and therefore it doesn't become as obvious to me to think 'I'm going to get into the space'. But I could easily get something out of going there." (A3)

The educators experienced at different levels that their previous experiences are of importance to their approach to and use of playful approaches to learning, and that this may be of importance to how playful they were as a starting point. Some educators may find that they are more challenged in relation to incorporating playful approaches to learning in their teaching. The interpretation may thus be that the mood in PlayLab only supports specific forms of teaching and play types.

TONE OF TEACHING

The educators state how they experience a changed practice in relation to teaching in PlayLab. It is about how the teaching space is occupied and how the educator acts in it - academically and in terms of relations and mood (van Manen, 2014). Considerations about presence and attentiveness lead an educator to talk about the challenges of teaching in PlayLab:

"... it's the stairs. It was because you told me to choose something that I think may be a little challenging sometimes. And it's not the physical activity of walking up and down the stairs, but more about it (ed. PlayLab) being on two floors. I still haven't figured out how I can exploit all the great opportunities offered in both places, and I'll probably also find myself in

> *the situation that I can't be in two places at once. I want to cover all the bases, but I can't also be part of their (ed. the students') processes at the same time, and I'm still working on that, on saying well okay then, I can't see them, but I also have to trust them as students, that they're actually doing something when I'm not there, but, at the same time, I also want to show that I'm in both places" (A2).*

Photo of PlayLab at University College Copenhagen

The educator here is telling us how difficult it is to let go of control when teaching in PlayLab. It's about finding the balance between controlling the students' process and sensing and feeling the energy in the process. This requires the educators having to be open and curious about the students' process, while also challenging their own teaching practice. One educator says:

> *"There's more room for improvisation in my teaching here. There's more... It encourages me to improvise more. And say 'let's go for it and just do this instead'." (A1)*

The PlayLab framework invites this educator to try out different possibilities in teaching and to challenge the traditional understanding of how teaching should be conducted. The educator shows that there are didactic considerations about improvisation as a pedagogical tool that can be incorporated in playful approaches to learning. The new forms of teaching make the educators curious about the moods that may be connected with PlayLab teaching. One educator says:

> *"I don't know if curiosity is a mood. But I'm very curious about what, what dynamics there are in the space, and I'm very aware that I'm inviting the students into the space that I'm in myself, and my thoughts and reflections and what it does, so we... Moods are also very much part of it, what it actually does to our concentration that we use this approach, what using this approach actually does to our understanding of teaching, or the teacher's information. What opportunities does using this approach actually give us? We try to be curious together with them. And there is obviously also the creative aspect... how... a sense of reassurance, I think. I mean, the sense of reassurance in experimenting – I think that's actually also a mood I'm quite interested in. So curiosity and reassurance, I think – or the experience of it, or the sense of it. (...)" (A2)*

The educator is here talking about the importance of creating a *safe space* for playful approaches to learning. It requires special attention from both the educators and the students to make room for being curious together. One educator also explains how students can react to the changed teaching practice:

> *"There are also some who... Someone asked me recently if you could be warned in advance about play being used in the teaching... implying that she would probably not attend those classes. So I replied, 'Yes, you can. It will be used every time.' So she couldn't avoid it... She got angry... mega angry." (A1)*

The educator is talking about how putting playful approaches to learning on the agenda requires an authoritative approach, where the educator is comfortable with playful approaches and dares to stick to the approach – also towards the students. In this way, the educator is insisting on this form of teaching being legitimate. In addition, this shows that the use of playful teaching is connected with many feelings.

MATERIALS, MOOD AND SPACE AS DIDACTIC COMPANIONS

University College Copenhagen's strategy focuses on laboratory-based work, and, with the establishment of PlayLab, there has been a shift in relation to the access to materials. One educator talks about how things were previously when they wanted to include the materials in the teaching:

> *"A lot of people have previously said that 'we can't do laboratory-based[1] work, because we don't have post-its or paper or stuff like that'. (...) You had to go and get everything down in the bookstore. (...) Such a small practical matter just made a lot of my colleagues think that 'we simply can't be bothered to spend so much extra time on that' ." (A5)*

When the materials are easily accessible, they invite educators to rethink and experiment with developing new forms of teaching. On the one hand, the materials can be seen as a liberating factor for creativity, but, on the other hand, they can be seen as an obstacle. One educator says:

> *"I'm not just going to relocate my regular classes here and then do exactly the same thing that I usually do. I need to use some of the things, right? And I can do that better down here. (...) So that's where the sense of insecurity comes into play, right. There's so much that I get confused about what I'm to do with it. Or not knowing where to start." (A2).*

We relate to the materials in a space with the experience we bring with us from past experiences. The lived materials speak to us in a certain way and encourage us to use them in a certain way. In PlayLab, there are many options and one educator states:

> *"I improvise more down here in relation to spatial materiality and movement, because it's a space that can do something, whereas, in an ordinary classroom, I work more with small movements and words." (A1).*

Another educator says:

> *"I work a lot with the material generating the ideas. The imagination isn't necessarily triggered automatically, but it happens when you get something to react to." (A4)*

A third educator says:

> *"But you could, in fact, say that I'm challenged in the sense that I encounter loads of other materialities and gadgets and gizmos – (...). So, in that way, you could say that obviously I am challenged. But challenged in that way... Or perhaps it may not be so much a challenge as an inspiration. A 'choose*

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1 The educator is referring to the focus on laboratory didactics in University College Copenhagen's strategy. (University College Copenhagen, 2022)

> *me, choose me!!', which some of the objects almost appear to be shouting. So I choose them. And do something with them." (A5)*

According to the five design principles, PlayLab must be a transformative space and a space that can offer and support diverse play types and moods. But PlayLab can also be experienced based on the moods that the educators brings into the space themselves. One educator says:

> *"Yes, but I think that varies a little. And depending on what kind of door I'm entering. Meaning that sometimes when I walk through the door, I may have that experience of... That is especially if the sun is shining in a special way, then I feel like 'hey!', you're now entering some fantasy world where everything is possible. (...) Other times, I may feel like when I open the door, I will just think that this is a complete mess." (A5)*

PlayLab is influenced by the emotions that the educators bring with them into the space. The educators thus help create the mood of the space and they must be able to embrace the opportunities that the space offers. In that way, PlayLab can be perceived as a safe and secure space one day, but as a confining space the next day.

Play as the pedagogical didactic component

In 'Tone of teaching', Van Manen (2016b) talks about inhabiting your field. Being a competent educator means that you can inhabit or live the field

fully and completely. It is about being both committed and professionally and academically competent. Working with a given subject or having an academic interest may be the first step towards inhabiting the subject as an educator. It is one thing to know a lot about your subject, but being committed to your subject with your entire lived body may be the way to engaging with the subject as a pedagogical didactic phenomenon. Perhaps playful approaches to learning are something educators need to open themselves up to and be able to inhabit.

The pedagogical didactic considerations cannot stand alone. Dimensions such as competences, confidence in one's own abilities (self-efficacy) and motivation apply to the individual educator in relation to the ability to facilitate playful approaches to learning (Handel & Rechnagel, 2018). The best teaching is when the educator and students feel safe (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Handel & Buhl, 2021). Van Manen (2016b) mentions that what constitutes a good educator is that the educator has a diverse methodological basis for his or her approaches to didactics and pedagogy. When playful approaches to learning and teaching call for forms of teaching that can be "joyful", "exploratory", "whimsy" (Whitton & Moseley, 2019), it is important that the educator possesses competences that enable him or her to manage playful processes that can be open, unpredictable and indefinable. Management of teaching and the mood that prevails in the classroom can be seen as a relational competence, where the educator must be able to facilitate a messy and playful process on the way to learning. That's not to say that the teaching has no form of structure and order, because, as van Manen (2016b) mentions, it requires the educator to show discipline in his or her teaching competences. Van Manen (2016b) describes how the educator must possess personal presence, an eye for the different relationships that are present in the teaching and have a sense of what needs to be said and done in challenging situations where organisational rules and routines must be maintained.

Proposals for further work in PlayLab

In our study, we sought to obtain knowledge about the educators' experiences in relation to rethinking, exploring and experimenting with playful approaches to learning. The study does not strive to create generalisable theories, but we do want it to help qualify the ongoing work with developing and testing different teaching designs.

SUBJECT EXPERTISE

Our interpretation is that the educators are calling towards creating more space for subject expertise when developing teaching designs. We acknowledge that the educators and students have *agency,* and that there is a dialectical relationship between the subject expertise, the space and the educators' motivation for playful approaches to learning. Some of the things we can see through the analysis are that the mood and atmosphere in PlayLab can affect the educators' motivation and that their own lived experiences can affect the mood of their teaching and motivation to change their own teaching practice. Our assumption is that if there is increased focus on subject expertise, it will strengthen the educators' lived experience and the mood – and thus create room for *playful learning* as a pedagogical method. In order to build new traditions, existing ones must be challenged and played with. If a subject traditionally does not immediately include materials or approaches to learning that can support playful approaches, new opportunities must be conceived for it to become meaningful and thus form part of the pedagogical method.

EVEN MORE NUANCES IN THE PLAYFUL APPROACH

Our final recommendation is that there should be a more nuanced view of playful approaches in an educational context. We suggest teaching methods and understandings of play in the professional specific subjects or in the pedagogical teaching practice to be differentiated further, so that there is room for different ways of being playful. The analysis showed that PlayLab must support different approaches and use of playful approaches to learning, in relation to the use of PlayLab, as the educators have different criteria for facilitating playful approaches to learning.

Finally, we propose that it should be considered didactically whether the educators themselves, as role models, are to be playful, whether it is the students who are to be playful, whether it is the curriculum that contains playful elements or whether it is more about facilitating a process in which the mood and atmosphere (playfulness) stimulate creativity and curiosity and motivates students to form part of a learning process.

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More on play and learning

Playful Learning Research Extension is a project that is part of the Playful Learning Programme, which aims to develop and encourage a more playful approach to children's development and learning.

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www.playful-learning.dk