

# THE ELUSIVE ROLE OF PLAY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

As demand for and use of interactive, experiential, and hands-on learning continues to increase and be used in entrepreneurship education, the concept of play remains elusive. This chapter reflects our strongly held belief that well-constructed play can deliver profound “aha” moments, resonant lessons, and truly rigorous learning experiences, as driven by its ability to immerse, engage, and focus students – all while enhancing or reinvigorating the joy of learning and practicing entrepreneurship. In an effort to shed light on a concept that has so long been seen as elusive, we provide a brief overview of what we know about play from a childhood development perspective and then explore what is known about play in higher education in general, as well as entrepreneurship education. We introduce a philosophical model of using play in entrepreneurship education, concluding with some sample exercises.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education, play, experiential learning, games, adult learning, creativity, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

“You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than you can from a lifetime of conversation.” -Plato

Play has long been linked to early childhood development – recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a fundamental right of all children (1989) and acknowledged by numerous reports from the American Academy of Pediatrics as foundational to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being (Ginsberg, 2007, Yogman et al., 2018). Yet there is a point in time for most, in the journey from childhood to adulthood, when play takes on less positive, less inclusive connotations – no longer viewed as involving developmentally appropriate activities for all, but as describing activities too childish or frivolous to merit adult involvement or attention. This *perceived* lack of professionalism and productivity leads adults to shun play and feel guilty if caught playing in professional settings, including in higher education (Brown and Vaughn, 2009; Forbes 2021). As Neck (2010) noted, adults often associate play with “a time of freedom and imagination where minutes turned into hours, backyards transformed into magical faraway kingdoms, living rooms were reconfigured into tent cities, swimming pools became uncharted waters littered with sunken treasure, and stuffed animals sat at attention waiting for assignment from the young seven-year-old teacher” (p. 41). Adults appreciate play as tourists, enjoying it as fond memories and as real-time experiences lived vicariously through the children in their lives. Few appreciate play as offering adults more direct developmental benefits.

The life-stage separation of play as something appropriate for children and questionable for adults, while common to those of the current generation, is in fact comparatively recent. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the games of children and adults were the same (Bettelheim, 1972) – and the source of the subsequent divide is unknown. Today, though a robust literature on play in early childhood education exists, research efforts

to understand play in higher education are minimal. Sir Ken Robinson, a prolific supporter of creativity in education with one of the most viewed TED Talks (“Do Schools Kill Creativity?”), has described the exclusion of play in higher education as a tragedy in learning. In a twist on the childhood chicken-egg riddle, the provenance of that “tragedy” remains unclear: did higher education stop play because the role of play was misunderstood, or did the role of play simply get set aside as higher education excluded it for its lack of *gravitas*? Forbes (2021) suggests insufficient understanding has stymied the use of adult play in college environments, noting that play helps foster more interactive, more supportive classrooms in which student community and student growth are enhanced.

In recent years, as demand for and use of interactive, experiential, hands-on higher education has grown across myriad fields, the opportunity for more thoughtful consideration of play has emerged. Within entrepreneurship education, the role of play and its uses are of particular relevance – driven in substantial part by the field’s history of applied, hands-on learning. Even in entrepreneurship, however, where we find students readily embracing the utility of play within the classroom, we find instructors who express some reluctance to teach adults so ... entrepreneurially. Neck *et al.* (2014, 2021) introduced five core practices of entrepreneurship education: creation, empathy, experimentation, reflection, and play. Though the first four are easily understood in the context of entrepreneurship education, the practice of play remains a source of mystery and skepticism. Help students *create* new products, services and processes? Check! Help students develop *empathy* for customers, to better understand their needs? Check! Help students *experiment*, test hypotheses, and understand the iterative nature of building a viable and sustainable business? Check! Guide students in a *reflective* practice, so learning from doing is codified into knowledge for longer-term use? Check! Encourage students to *play* with their free and imaginative mind and to immerse themselves in playful experiences. What?! As noted by Neck *et al.* (2021), “The connection between play and education is so taboo that an entire gaming category had to be labeled ‘serious games’ (Abt, 1987) to denote those games playable for education purposes only” (p. 6).

This chapter reflects our strongly held belief that well-constructed play can deliver profound “aha” moments, resonant lessons, and truly rigorous learning experiences, as driven by its ability to immerse, engage, and focus students – all while enhancing or reinvigorating the joy of learning and practicing entrepreneurship. In an effort to shed light on a concept that has so long been seen as elusive, we provide a brief overview of what we know about play from a childhood development perspective and then explore what is known about play in higher education. We introduce a philosophical model of using play in entrepreneurship education and conclude with some sample exercises.

## PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Play has a rich and well-researched history with respect to early childhood development, dating back to Gross (1916) who theorized play as a governing force of instinct underlying many natural biological processes. Later theorists defined play as free activity standing outside the ordinary (Huizinga, 1944); unorganized and spontaneous, yet fun (Piaget, 1962); carried out in leisure for purposes of pleasure and self-expression (Kraus, 1971); make-believe (Vygotsky, 1978), and a by-product of superfluous energy left over when childrens’ primary needs are met by parents (Rubin, 1982). The cumulative breadth of these definitions has facilitated rich empirical research affirming play’s many benefits; these include enhanced cognitive development (Burriss and Tsao, 2002), increased executive function (Diamond, et al., 2007), creative thinking (Russ & Wallace, 2013), better language skills (Pelligrini, 2013), self-regulation (Karpov, 2005), and improved short and long-term academic achievement, motivation, and well-being (Marcon, 2002; Hyson, Copple & Jones, 2007). Additionally, play supports the development and maintenance of physical, behavior, and perceptual skills (e.g., dancing encompasses all three) (Burghardt, 2010). That said, definitional breadth belies limitations with existing approaches as well – play now long lacking a unifying, specific, and accepted definition

In an effort to frame play with more specificity, Lillard (2015) conducted an extensive literature review to support an initial taxonomy of play, encompassing the six categories most commonly discussed (Table 1). She notes that there is (1) overlap across categories, and (2) an inverted U relationship peaking

at some point in childhood but continuing throughout life. The latter suggests a nod to play in adult development. For example, she found that pretend play appears at 12-18 months, peaks around 3-5 years and ceases (on average) at 11 years but that pretend behavior does continue into adulthood in such contexts as theater acting, role playing, and games like Charades (Lillard, 2017).

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INSERT TABLE 1: SIX TYPES OF PLAY ABOUT HERE  
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While Lillard’s typology provides a valuable starting point for discussion, we propose an expansion that situates each type within an overarching continuum – ranging from open, free-form activities (at one end) to structured interactions with clear win-loss conditions (at the other end). The addition of this continuum helps clarify that each of the six types of play presented in Table 1 can be implemented in robustly diverse ways – ranging from simple to complex and limited to expansive. Consider Lillard’s example of sensorimotor play, in which a ball is bounced. At one end of the continuum, ball bouncing might be an individual activity where the bounce is by itself the end goal of the action; at the other end of the continuum, ball bouncing might manifest in a competitive sport like basketball. Similarly, consider the difference between building a sand castle and competing in a sand sculpture competition (construction play) or the difference between climbing a tree and Yosemite rock-climbing (physical play).

### **PLAY IN ADULT LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

Despite the perceived stigma of adult play, a growing (though still very limited) research stream has emerged in recent years that focuses on the role of play in higher education and with adult learners (cf. Melamed, 1987; Harris & Daley, 2008; Brown and Vaughn, 2009; Robinson, 2011; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Forbes 2021). Of particular note within this work is the research of Harris and Daley – who, using a typology of play qualities developed by Melamed (1987), concluded that classroom play fosters greater levels of individual and group social capital (enriching learner engagement, building cooperation among learners, creating a sense of learner connectedness). Harris and Daley mapped each of Melamed’s “qualities of play” (relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, empowering), to a set of in-class play categories (pretend play, role play, improvisation, other playful activities), shedding a new and bright light on the benefits of adult learning and providing a set of observational guidelines (Table 2) that could be used by others with an interest in adult higher education play.

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INSERT TABLE 2: QUALITIES OF PLAY AND IN-CLASS OBSERVATION GUIDELINES  
ABOUT HERE  
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In a more recent study, Forbes (2021) looked at the experience of college students where play was part of every class session. She offers educators a better understanding of what play is and how it can bring increased value to higher education by helping students cultivate relational safety and social inclusion in a classroom environment; remove cognitive barriers to learning; and awaken positive affect, motivation, and learning engagement.

However comparatively or absolutely sparse the literature on play in higher education appears to be, a consistent through-line is that its implementation tends to be positive for learners – in terms of both felt experience and learning outcomes. Against this backdrop, we ask: why have we, as entrepreneurship educators so long committed to experiential and applied learning, not been more open to incorporating play (or more play) into our classrooms? Adulthood is known to have three distinct stages beginning at age 20 – early, middle, and late – each of which is known to influence our continued cognitive development throughout life. Most entrepreneurship students at the university level are classified as early adults. If we

do not catch them at this critical inflection point out of childhood, are we missing an important opportunity to help them further develop their creative, interactive, and social skill sets? Even worse, might the designed or intentional absence of play in higher education in fact limit student development to the extent that it reduces the likelihood that play (and its attendant benefits) will re-enter their lives at a later stage?

## THE STATE OF PLAY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

Perhaps the most popular example at the intersection of play and entrepreneurship is LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP), created by Roos and Victor in the 1990s with a goal of “designing more imaginative, effective, and responsible ways to guide leaders and organizations in their strategy-making” (2018, p. 327). At the core of LSP is an exercise in which attendees use LEGO bricks to build a model that addresses a problem or challenge posed by a facilitator. The models incorporate metaphors, symbols, imagination, and object play to draw out innovative insights that could not have been developed in a more “professional” meeting. In sum, Roos and Victor used all that we know from childhood play research to create an adult play experience that has been called transformational (Hadida, 2013). LSP as an experience is a representation of the uncertainty, information asymmetry, and dynamism that business leaders face (Roos & Victor, 2018). As a result, it is no surprise that LSP has been used in entrepreneurship education with success (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014; Tawalbeh et al., 2018; Zenk et al., 2018).

Beyond LSP, however, we find that the notion of play in entrepreneurship education has been somewhat limited – recognized primarily as important to creativity, but not as an impetus to robustly new pedagogic approaches. In a special issue of *Organization Studies*, Hjorth et al. (2018) explored the intersection of creativity, play and entrepreneurship, from an organizational perspective. They noted that play facilitates exploration not of what something is in concrete terms (i.e., space, object, time), but of what that something can become. Addressing the importance of the word part “entre” in entrepreneurship – translated from the French for “between,” they contend that “entre” describes the condition that inspires entrepreneurship to emerge. Using the analogy of a stop light, they distinguish between the clarity of red and green (stop and go) and the interpretability of yellow (slow down vs. speed up). Play is created by a yellow light moment – an “open, dynamic event with transformative powers” (p. 39), enacted in the in-between space where ambiguity drives flexible interpretations and actions.

In the same special issue, Courpasson and Younes (2018) studied the allure of “playing” and innovating underground in organizations. The allure stemmed from working against the status quo, which felt a bit sneaky, but yielded higher levels of creativity. In a business school environment that emphasizes traditional methods of education, entrepreneurship stands apart as a field known for disrupting norms; perhaps play fits in, thus, as “unconventional” or rule-breaking, in ways that galvanize student engagement and outcomes in part simply by being different. Through play students could be more motivated because of their “I’m not supposed to be doing this in college so I’m super engaged” feeling.

Other connections to play in entrepreneurship education have emphasized simulations, deprioritizing more complex methods of play and practical embrace of “playfulness” as a teaching philosophy (cf, Fox, Pittaway, & Uzuegbunam, 2018; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Wolfe & Bruton, 1994; Cadotte, 2014). Still other work, by Neck and Greene (2011) focuses on games – an activity category clearly within the scope of play. As noted by Greene (2011), educational games align with Piaget’s (1962) early typology of play as based on shared assumptions of rules and fun. Emerging affirmation of these authors’ work can be seen in today’s more prevalent (but still not common) use of escape rooms, enacted founder scenarios (e.g., Wharton’s “The Startup Game”), and board games (e.g., GoVenture Entrepreneur). All involve complex game-like interactions that deploy complex rule sets, clear win-loss conditions, and information asymmetries to engage and reawaken.

As we move forward, however, we also move slowly. As entrepreneurship educators, we tend to acknowledge, pervasively, that we craft and deliver learning experiences that are experience-based, experiential, practice-based, active, immersive, hands-on, self-directed, and student-centered (Kassean et al., 2015; Neck & Corbett, 2018; Neck, et al. 2014; Mukesh, et al., 2019; Hart, 2018; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Harrison & Leitch, 2005; Rasmussen & Sørheim, 2006; Damani & Ghura, 2021). We do not tend to

acknowledge that these experiences should be *playful*. Why not? Why must we be serious? Alternatively, why must even playfulness be couched in serious terms?

Neck, Brush and Greene (2021) ask four questions as part of an “Are you Teaching Entrepreneurially” self-assessment: (1) Do your students report a playful or fun environment regarding your classroom/course? (2) Do they play any games as part of coursework? (3) Do they experience any game mechanics, such as earning points and badges for completing challenges and assignments? (4) Do you use simulations or other means for students to engage in immersive entrepreneurial activities? These questions aren’t asked solely or primarily to confirm a lack or presence of playfulness, but as a mechanism by which educators can begin to understand their own propensity to bring “play” to the forefront – play as an opportunity to experiment; to not only succeed, but fail and demonstrate adaptive resilience; to reflect; and to develop (not just ideas, but people). As noted by Stamp (2016), play allows individuals to practice experimentation, developing the muscle memory and skill set by which we as humans learn to incubate new and novel ideas.

### TOWARD A MORE PLAYFUL TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

Given the outcomes of play highlighted in the childhood development, adult learning, and higher education literatures – and those emerging in the entrepreneurship education literature – the rationale for introducing more play is beginning to take shape. Within entrepreneurship education in particular, which defines the practice of entrepreneurship (Neck et al., 2014) as involving far-reaching outcomes of mindset, skills, competencies and attitudes (Neck & Corbett, 2018; White et al., 2016), most agree that creativity is critical (Stamp, 2016). Creativity supports the emergent novelty that drives value generation through new venture creation (Shane, 2003), and requires aptitude in a wide range of cognitive abilities such as convergent and divergent thinking, cognitive flexibility, conceptual combination, and analogical reasoning (Stamp, 2016; Ward, 2004). Thus, play represents a powerful catalyst for creative thinking that can be a part of the entrepreneur’s toolbox. As noted by Neck et al. (2014), “play is about developing a free and imaginative mind, allowing one to see a wealth of possibilities, a world of opportunities, and a pathway to more innovative ways of being entrepreneurial” (p. 25). In so many respects, by being playful as educators and by encouraging our students to participate in intentional play, we help provide the foundational classroom space in which students can rediscover or first discover not solely their entrepreneurial selves, but also their entrepreneurial concepts.

Inspired by Jones’ (2019) work that introduced a general philosophy to entrepreneurship education, complete with guiding principles that govern conduct, we here propose a simple philosophy related to incorporating play into entrepreneurship education. We further provide a simple framework to act as a guide as for those who choose to add playful elements into their courses moving forward – noting that starting small and building from there is helpful to managing the inherent risk and time requirements of curricular revision (Grossman & Means, 2014). After introducing our philosophy and framework – our “Philosophy of Play” model – we share a few examples from our own play portfolios!

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INSERT FIGURE 1: PHILOSOPHY OF PLAY MODEL ABOUT HERE  
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Before we dive into a deeper discussion of our proposed principles, we address a specific point often raised in discussions with peer educators – namely, the distinction between “play” and “games.” McGonigal (2011) discusses four commonly accepted traits of games: (1) a **goal**, providing a sense of purpose; (2) **rules**, defining boundaries and eliminating solutions that inhibit player creativity; (3) a **feedback system**, assigning points, badges, etc. to keep players motivated in real time; and (4) **voluntary** participation, in which all players “knowingly and willingly [accept] the goal, the rules, and the feedback” (p. 21). McGonigal submits that a win/loss scenario need not be a defining or requisite feature of games.

We depart from this perspective, at the specific level of so-called “serious” games in higher education – in that we believe it creates too expansive a category to be operationally meaningful in a classroom. We contend that destigmatizing adult learner play requires clear categorical descriptions, including clear differentiation of game-like experiences vs. “true” games. While all games involve play, not all play is a game (defined by us as a finite experience with clear rules and win-loss conditions), nor is all play gamified (seen by us as a competitive or comparative activity set involving recognized or publicized bonuses for those who perform better and/or demerits for those who perform worse).

## Guiding Principles

Our teaching philosophy of play includes four guiding principles based on our own experience and use of play in entrepreneurship education: (1) construct, don’t control; (2) keep it kinesthetic; (3) create fun with meaning and purpose; and (4) engage students’ authentic selves. One might consider these as design inputs into the play experience.

We begin with the educator’s desire to maintain control in the classroom – a great thing insofar as it signals planning, organization, and preparation. However, given the unpredictable nature of play, and that integral dependence of play on its players, educators need to get a little more comfortable with loosening the reins. We suggest that educators *construct* the play experience in a manner that does not *control* the play experience. That does not mean an avoidance of rules. Rather, it means the development of rules that are essential to guiding students in an educational direction. Rules define the play space, characterize what’s entirely in bounds versus out of bounds, and help guide the outcome; rules should not pre-determine the outcome at too detailed a level. Consider the adult analogue to finger painting – where the paper and paint is provided, but freedom with respect to what is painted and what colors are created or used. Rules can set the stage for tremendously playful experiences, while supporting immense creativity and invention.

In addition to freedom, play requires movement, all of our senses, and applied immersion. The kinesthetic nature of play is what makes play play! You can’t play basketball without bouncing the ball. You can’t play chess without moving the pieces. You can’t role-play a negotiation unless you sit in front of your colleague and talk through the possibilities; can’t win a video game without a controller; and can’t pass Go if you’re lacking in dice and a top hat (or train or dog). In other words, there is an inherent tactility to play that leads to multi-sensory learning and greater retention (Breckler and Azzam, 2011; Wagner, 2014; Woolwine et al., 2019), even when we are just thinking we are touching something as in virtual reality. Play should be designed to get learners out of their chairs and into active and often interactive, collaborative roles – traversing the classroom or learning space, perhaps handing objects to each other, manipulating marshmallows, cards, raw spaghetti, LEGO, blocks on a screen, and more.

Well-constructed educational play is also purposive and intentional, designed to create a robust, rigorous, and resonant learning experience for participants. In the same way that many of us design courses or programs beginning first with learning objectives, play in the classroom should be designed with a set of learning goals (encompassing connections to core content). Play is meant to shake things up in a very fun way, but the *raison d’être* must be clear – to the instructors at the outset and to the students by the end. Adult learners can tend to chafe, for reasons of personal need and expected return on educational investment, when play is not linked to “aha” moments or rich lessons that render the rationale for “untraditional” education clear.

Finally, powerful, effective play experiences allow students to engage as their authentic selves rather than as “actors” in a business play of others’ creation. Don’t get us wrong: role plays can be marvelous ways to get students to ostensibly imagine and enact specific tasks or roles (e.g., pretend you are a VC negotiating a term sheet or a founder negotiating her founding team’s equity split). But we so often see students take on the roles as they believe others fill them – reenacting, for example, their version of Mr. Wonderful on the popular TV show “Shark Tank.” We believe that well-designed play can get students to shed the costumes and engage as their truest selves – not as they imagine themselves as

characters showcased through mass media, guest speakers, and podcasts. It is through their reflection or post-play debrief that students can understand the implications for their future (in those or other roles).

## Desired Student Outcomes

Inasmuch as the prior section's guiding principles provide an overarching ethos to designing play in entrepreneurship education, they also speak to some inputs that help generate positive learning outcomes. Though our own experiences as entrepreneurship educators, as affirmed by theory, we suggest that play be designed to generate four critical learner outcomes (Figure 1): (1) curiosity and courage; (2) perspective and sensemaking; (3) culture and community; and (4) FUN.

We believe that in asking people to engage authentically, in purposive ways not traditionally associated with higher education, that learners can be acculturated and accelerated toward new ways of thinking, to the value of tackling challenges in new ways, and to the utility of challenging the status quo – asking challenging questions, taking some risks, and revealing one's creativity. They thus can become more courageous in expressing their curiosity. Bruner (1983) described creativity as "figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you currently think." (p. 183). Play gives entrepreneurship students license to see the world in a different way. Play also amplifies what is possible through its inherent promise of freedom to experiment, absent robust negative consequences for what might elsewhere be considered errors. As Gordon & Esbjörn-Hagens' (2007) note,

“New realities dislodge the players from familiar identities, enabling them to encounter difficult material with support and ease, to venture into their growing edge, and to integrate a wider spectrum of emotional responses. Play engenders the optimism needed to take risks and shows that taking risks can bring rewards” (p. 217).

The authors' “paradox of play” is evident here – curiosity and exploration leading students to consciously enact within the “unreal” classroom space the new ways of thinking, new possibilities, and new interpretations that can then generalize to new habits of in the “real” world. Play allows students to challenge the status quo in a manner consistent with developing lifelong, entrepreneurial mindsets.

Curiosity and courage, as key to mindset, flow directly into the notion that entrepreneurship students benefit from perspective building and sensemaking. Consider the student who pitches an idea and believes it will work without conducting true customer discovery. Often, we find that students seek confirmation of their extant beliefs through customer discovery – this despite the fact that some of customer discovery's power lies in discovering disconfirmatory data or insights one didn't know they didn't know (i.e., John Mullins' (2017) unknown-unknowns or unk-unks). Playful experiences allow students to engage in data in a very different way, creating a mechanism by which learners are motivated to see things from others' perspectives. Through play, students begin to make sense of new data in ways they may not have experienced. This process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), giving meaning to experience, helps learners manage or make sense of uncertain, unknowable, or ambiguous situations – scenarios definitely produced by play and entrepreneurship too. Because playful learning is active and entrenched in ongoing sensemaking, dialogue with other students and through self-reflection further brings meaning to the experience (Mezirow, 1997; Melamed 1987). As Weick (1993) so eloquently stated, “the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (p. 634).

As one can imagine, shared and co-created curiosity, courage, and sensemaking are the basic pillars upon which to build a foundational and entrepreneurial culture and strong classroom community – our third desired outcome. As students play together, a culture of positive, communal learning can emerge in a manner that feels organic (even if designed!). In the students' minds, the fun is formative, useful, and worth pursuing. A classroom is just like any other organization we may study in business; it is comprised of people with shared mental models (March, 1991). Because culture emerges from shared basic assumptions that create our mental model, norms begin to develop that guide how we think, do, and act (Schein, 2010). The

shared culture around a class incorporating play experiences versus a standard lecture or even case-based course will produce dramatically different learning communities.

As noted previously, play theorists view the benefits of play across *all* stages of life, and there is empirical support that adult learning through play fosters community building because playful activities require dialogue, trust, sharing, coalition building, and overall vulnerability (Harris & Daley, 2008; Göncü & Perone, 2005; Gordon & Esbjörn-Hagens, 2007). A community does not exist without culture and is created through shared experience. Chavis and Lee (2015) offer us the most poignant definition of community as it relates to what we are working toward in our entrepreneurship classrooms:

“Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other. That treasured feeling of community comes from shared experiences and a sense of—not necessarily the actual experience of—shared history.”

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what\\_is\\_community\\_anyway#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_is_community_anyway#)

A final student outcome in our model is one that happens naturally through play – immersion and fun, both of which are seen as a common denominator of educational play across all literatures and age cohorts. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), immersion is “when we act with total involvement” (p. 41), focused solely on the tasks at hand, not letting anything from the outside in. This state of “utter absorption” (Huizinga, 1944) is called *flow* and is often associated with play and creativity. Think artistic painter or video gamer or chess player! Flow yields a holistic sensation and feeling of “unified movement from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 41). The concept of flow and immersion connects to McGonigal’s work in *Reality is Broken* (2011), where she describes games as representing “[opportunities] to focus our energy, with relentless optimism, at something we’re good at (or getting better at) and enjoy. Gamers don’t want to game the system. Gamers want to play the game. They want to explore and learn and improve. They’re volunteering for unnecessary hard work – and they genuinely care about the outcome of their effort.” (p. 27).

Curiosity, courage, perspective, sensemaking, community, immersive and purposive learning, fun. Is this not what we want for our students? For us as educators? In our classrooms? If yes, it’s time to play!

## ESCALATION AND EXAMPLES OF PLAY IN AN ENTREPRENEURSHIP CLASSROOM

We recognize that it is far easier to write and talk about play than to design and execute play-based activities that deliver the sorts of outcomes we propose. Here, we offer four examples of play in our own entrepreneurship classrooms that fall at different points along our proposed continuum of play – demonstrating options that (1) involve open play and more structured games with rules, and (2) escalation from simple to complex. We recommend that instructors, in bringing play to their classroom, thoughtfully escalate from simpler to more complex over time – to ease adoption and manage the learning process (Figure 2). In other words, if we start with more simple forms of play, educators and students become more comfortable with play over time – engaging with more sophisticated forms of play at later stages of a course. In each example below we offer a description of the exercise, its purpose, and student responses. Though Lillard (2015) offered a comprehensive typology with six categories of play, we focus on symbolic, exploratory, and construction play as the most relevant to entrepreneurship education.

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INSERT FIGURE 2: ESCALATION OF PLAY ABOUT HERE

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### **Symbolic Play and “The Paper Shirt” (from the portfolio of Heidi Neck)**

Students walk in on the first day of class. Blank pieces of colored 8.5” x 11” paper sit on the front table. The professor says to students as they start to trickle in, “Take a piece of paper before you sit down.” Some students eagerly grab a piece of paper, some question the relevance of the different colors, and the rest hesitantly walk to the table, smile at and seem a little scared. It’s the first day of a required MBA entrepreneurship course, a place where some can at last progress long held new venture concepts and others can learn the serious tools and frameworks for innovation. All 50 students have a blank piece of colored paper, and class is about to begin.

“How entrepreneurial are you?” asks the professor. “On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most entrepreneurial and 1 being the least, what number do you give yourself?” By show of hands, the students share their numbers. A little levity is felt by the one “10” in the room – and big applause is offered to the sole “1” in the class. “This student is in the right place!” praises the professor. She notes that the scale is somewhat arbitrary because a “4” for one student may not hold the same weight as a “4” for another student. “So, I have a test for us all to test our entrepreneurial capacity.” Now the colored paper comes into play (pun intended!).

Through a series of steps, the professor facilitates the students in actively folding the paper so that the paper turns into a boat. Once all boats have been created, the professor leads the students in an interactive and immersive story. The students and their movement are critical to the story. 100% participation is required. The professor shares a story about a captain, crew, and boat sailing in an ocean. The students have to start moving their boat to simulate sailing in an ocean. As the story progresses, there is wind (students sound out wind), seagulls (crazy bird sounds), and waves that crash into the boat (students have to tear off a piece of the paper boat when a rogue wave crashes into the boat). After three big waves enter the story, the boat sinks (students spontaneously say “aww”). The professor concludes the story noting, “After the boat sank, search and rescue was on the water for days trying to find some evidence of the sunken boat. The only thing they could find was the captain’s shirt.” Students are then asked to unfold their boat. As the unfolding takes place, all of the paper boats have now become tshirts (due to the proper tearing of three different parts of the paper boats).

The first debrief question is: What does any of this have to do with entrepreneurship? Answers abound. Pivoting, taking risks, managing crises, creativity, don’t go down with the ship, weathering storms are just some of the answers. The second debrief question is: Why am I doing this today in this class? The answers are beautiful. Building a community of trust, hands-on participation, if we can’t handle feeling silly then can we really start something as serious as a business, action under uncertainty, play is important to learning, and yes, it’s okay to play in this class. This was a good first day.

### **Exploratory Play and “The Word Hack” (from the portfolio of Jeffrey Stamp)**

The ability to play with and experiment with conceptual combinations of stimulus inputs or bisociation (Koestler, 1964) is a classic part of any creative aptitude. Musicians during an improv session, combine various sounds and styles to create new music. Artists combine new colors and textures to create new art. Chefs combine new ingredients to create new tastes and textures in culinary creations.

In entrepreneurship education there is a push to create prototypes as a tool for experimentation and validate value creation (Linton and Klinton, 2019). An effective way to engage students in a playful use of bisociative thinking that has both novelty and utility with a prototype as output is the Word Hack exercise – an exercise in creating new hybrid words in the English language. English as a language has a very malleable structure, and there are hundreds of examples of hybrid words that are in common use, such as microscope (micro = small, scope = field of vision). The word hack exercise when utilized in a

supportive creative classroom works amazingly well as a prototyping activity because creating new language sparks a natural intrinsic motivation to own what is created; is testable for social usefulness; has virtually no resource cost; and fits the utility and novelty criteria of a creative work (Stamp, 2016).

The word hack can be done individually or in groups (no more than 3). Have students bring to class some form of current, written news media. Whether as traditional print format or online, the first step is to scan the news for multisyllable words. The key is to not read the news, but to select by quick visual inspection approximately 20 eye-catching multisyllable words (the quickest way is to start at the bottom of the page and scan upwards) and list them on a separate sheet of paper. Next, examine the list of collected multisyllable words and draw a vertical line between the natural syllable splits in the words. In the final step, randomly select any two syllable fragments from different words and combine them together to create a new word.

While this exercise could be done in a brute force recombination of all the possible syllable combinations from a set of 20 words, the play aspect comes in from the random selection and recombination of visually and sound appealing combinations that spark new insights and meaning. This is an exercise in sharpening sensemaking skills. When a student forms an intriguing new word, they must also give the word a definition and supply a use for the word in a relevant sentence. For example, a group of students combined technology + disruptive = techruptive – a new technology that only disrupts the technology in place and not the user’s experience.

The final component of the exercise is to test the newly created words in a real social context. For this, students test the words in any online social media of their choice. The goal of the test (aka experiment with prototype) is to evaluate reaction, reach, and potential re-use of their new prototype words. This social validation activity provides evidence that the playing Word Hack yielded utility and built their creative confidence. For example, a group of students combined fiction + sensational = fictisational – a politician whose ideas for change are absolutely ridiculous. This new word is not found on a Google search and was their unique invention that achieved hundreds of likes to meme posts online during an election year!

### **Exploratory Play and “The \$10 Reality Check” (from the portfolio of Doan Winkel)**

Students arrive for their first class to a pre-determined location (on or off campus) that has plenty of shops and foot traffic. Each group of 4 receives ten \$1 bills from the professor, and receive simple instructions: “You have 30 minutes to make as much money as you can, legally. Whichever team makes the most profit, keeps all the money from all the groups; winner takes all! Be back in the classroom in 35 minutes.” Most students pause in disbelief, trying to process the ambiguity and unique experience into which they have been thrust. Eventually, the groups burst to life with rapid-fire discussion of ideas, resources, locations and tasks. This is the first experience in an Introduction to Entrepreneurship undergraduate course. Students quickly realize this course will be something different, something real, and something very experiential.

Students pursue one of a variety of activities to generate revenue. Some buy and resell a product (e.g., water, cookies, items from their dorm). Some choose a service-oriented model of undertaking tasks for their fellow students or for the local community (e.g., return books to library, tutoring, moving an office). One group may pursue a more high risk investment model where they ask for an ‘investment’ from their peers (mostly friends) to win the challenge and promise a quick and high rate of return. The variety of business models are limited only by the students’ imagination and time, but given they will be in shock, the professor should expect students to make fairly “easy” choices.

As teams arrive in the classroom, the professor notes on the board the profit made by each group, collects their money and distributes all the money to the team that generated the most profit. The debrief that fills the remainder of the class period has two levels. First is a discussion of tactics, with questions such as “How did you arrive at decisions?”, “How did the ambiguity feel?”, “How did you identify a market need?”, and “How did you identify and connect with customers?” The professor then turns to a deeper

reflective discussion with questions such as “Who is your customer? (Did you clearly identify them?)”, “How would your experience have changed if you considered a problem that customers actually need solved?” and “Are there any ethical concerns associated with the decisions you made?”

The \$10 Reality Check exercise gives students the opportunity to experience entrepreneurship first hand and to reflect on the consequences of their decisions. The exercise facilitates learning by providing a common experience for additional learning and reflection throughout the semester. The professor can quickly and easily assess the skills (or skills deficits) of the participants which gives them a baseline for learning throughout the semester. The exercise provides a reference for entrepreneurship in multiple contexts which creates value as a reference point that continues throughout the semester.

### **Construction Play and the “Ultimate Football League” (from the portfolio of Elissa Grossman)**

As students settle in to their seats, all but their writing implements set aside for the ensuing several hours, they are welcomed by the Professor. “It’s that time of year,” she says, “when the Managers in the Ultimate Football League assemble their teams for the Ultimate Bowl, a one-of-a-kind football competition with eight teams and only one winner. That’s right. It’s time for what you never knew existed before: the Ultimate Bowl Draft – or, as the sports pundits like to say, the Rough Draft. And, this year, YOU, yes YOU, have been appointed Manager!” The professor then outlines each Manager’s goals – to (1) negotiate and trade with other Managers; (2) form a Joint Venture with one other; (3) field a high-scoring Team (using the People and Money at their disposal, based on Rules they will learn over time); and (4) win the Ultimate Bowl.

The professor proceeds to distribute briefing folders, each student receiving a *different* (but partially duplicative) set of cards in total, including Rule cards, People cards, Money cards, and one Joint Venture card. The players are told that, after a period of time in which to prepare their approach, they will be allowed to roam the room in an effort to learn the various rules for assembling the best football Team possible, with “best” defined as a group of People with the best qualities relative to other Teams, taking into account all of the provisions on the Rule cards (whether or not the students know them or not). The students are further told that each of them has a Rule card that someone else has, and each has a Rule card that is held only by them. What they are not told is arguably more relevant than what is shared; they do not know, as the draft begins, how many People cards exist or how many each player has, how much Money is available to each player, or how many Rules there are. The game thus begins with preparation focused on how to acquire information from competitive others against a backdrop of dynamic uncertainty – a challenge and context highly aligned with those faced by new venture founders.

Over the course of the ensuing class session, students play a version of what is known as a “haggle game,” a complex card game introduced in Sid Sackson’s *Gamut of Games* (1969) and well known to serious (non-academic) players. A game of resource needs identification, acquisition, and management, the haggle game is particularly well-suited to entrepreneurship education, allowing students to navigate issues of team creation (students may need to partner with unknown others to do well), trust versus uncertainty (i.e., students must rely on competing peers to secure information that may or may not be accurate), and forced operation within a system of unknown rules (students must grapple with the reality of informal rules that are institutionally known, but not codified).

## **THE FUTURE OF PLAY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION**

The complexity of play in tertiary education is complex and multifaceted. This is due in part to our reference of play for adult learners, which has theoretical roots in childhood play but is fundamentally different from an input and output perspective. Furthermore, play in entrepreneurship education is both underutilized and underappreciated, which is somewhat perplexing given the many voices suggesting that entrepreneurship is the most experiential, applied, and practiced-based of all the business disciplines (c.f. Barr et al., 2009; Nabi et al, 2017; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). The lack of play in entrepreneurship is further

confounded by the outcomes highlighted in this chapter. We have suggested that incorporating play experiences and playfulness can lead to student curiosity, courage, perspective building, sensemaking, community, immersive learning with purpose, and fun. So, if there is a future for play in entrepreneurship education, it must be destigmatized. The *perceived* lack of professionalism and productivity associated with play at tertiary levels is a misnomer. Play in entrepreneurship education, if well-designed, are serious, complex, and intense experiences that can lead to transformational learning and development of the entrepreneurial mindset we all seem to be chasing.

We have not given much attention to video games and gaming in this chapter. Our intention was to focus on the spectrum of play representing a continuum ranging from open, free-form activities (at one end) to structured interactions with clear win-loss conditions (at the other end). Video gaming is a form of play that certainly sits on the spectrum and it deserves attention not for what the video game is but who the players are. The generation of students we are teaching today, whether undergraduate or graduate, have grown up playing video games – and continue to play them. Though we are not promoting the use of Minecraft or Grand Theft Auto (the top selling video games of all time), we offer a few interesting facts related to gaming. First, it takes 50-100 hours to master a video game (Pink, 2006) – this is the amount of face time we have with students in a given semester. Those who play video games regularly, play for an average of 13 hours per week (McGonigal, 2011). 38% of all video gamers are between the ages of 18 and 34 years old and 26% are 35-54 years old (Clement, 2021). Further, there is a misperception that only men play video games, but in reality 41% of gamers are women (Clement, 2021). Our point is not to advocate for video games; rather, we simply want to highlight that our students are *playing* a lot of games and they need the same level of engagement, immersion, and focus in their learning activities that are taking place on our campuses, in our classroom, and on our Zoom sessions. Why can't entrepreneurship education be more fun? More playful?

In this chapter we have offered a model based on a philosophy of play (Figure 1) designed to help entrepreneurship educators better design and facilitate play experiences. The guiding principles related to construction, use of physical activity, purposive and meaningful content, and connection to students' authentic selves lead to more robust and creative learning experiences. The benefits of play in childhood development and learning are undeniable and empirically proven. If we agree that learning does not stop after childhood and that entrepreneurship requires lifelong learning, then we should not fear using play in our classrooms. Furthermore, higher education is falling behind even corporate learning – the next level of education many of our students receive. Corporate trainers more commonly use visuals, multimedia techniques, props, music and other play oriented tools and unconventional methods than college educators (Kumar and Lightner, 2007). As we end this chapter, we ask you, the reader, to think about all of the words that come to mind when you think about play in entrepreneurship education. We suspect words like immersion, ambiguity, uncertainty, creative, uncontrollable, win-loss scenarios, interactive, risk, experimenting, figuring it out, taking action, learning as you go, imagination, freedom, rules, no rules, and fun may be on your list. Are these not also words we associate with entrepreneurship education? It is time to play. Game on!

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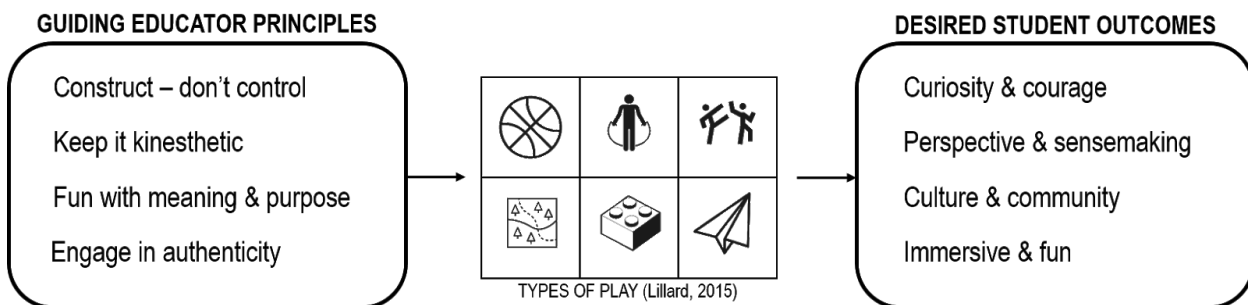
**Table 1: Six Types of Play**

Play Type	Definition	Example
Sensorimotor or Object	Repetitive action with objects	Bouncing a ball
Physical or Locomotor	Using the full body	Climbing a tree
Rough and Tumble	Full body play with another	Play fighting
Exploratory	Multisensory play to satisfy curiosity	Blowing bubbles with different wands
Construction	Using materials to makes things	Using sand to build a castle
Symbolic	Using one object to stand in for another	Using a broomstick as horse

**Table 2: Qualities of Play and In-Class Observation Guidelines**

Qualities of Play from Melamed (1987)	In-Class Observation Guidelines from Harris & Daley (2008, p. 56)
Relational	“Evidence of learners’ connectedness and synergy among one another, and conversations that were enthusiastic and responsive in both real and pretend interactions.”
Experiential	“Evidence of learners engaging in shared activities, sharing their experiences with one another, being absorbed in their play activity, finding common ground, and pooling and comparing one another’s perspectives.”
Metaphoric	“Evidence of learners’ creative thinking, imagination, readiness to suspend reality, flexibility, engaging with both real and pretend layers of meaning, and creating make-believe situations, roles, and dialogue.”
Integrative	“Evidence of learners making connections among people, events, ideas and resources, and connecting past, present and future times.”
Empowering	“Evidence of learners talking about rising above physical realities and perceived limitations, breaking away from conformity, and innovating, experimenting and exploring.”

**Figure 1: Philosophy of Play Model**



**Figure 2: Escalation of Play**

