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2022 Playful Learning Conference Special Issue: Editorial

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ABSTRACT

This piece introduces this special issue of *Journal of Play in Adulthood*, outlining the six articles written by presenters at the 2022 *Playful Learning* Conference. It also highlights an emerging theme from these pieces; that of the playful objects that each article mentions. These objects are both created and used by educators and learners as part of their playful practice.

“We need more objects that allow us to be playful.” (Sicart, 2014: 33)

This issue draws together six articles written by presenters at the 2022 *Playful Learning* Conference, which was held in Leicester, UK in July 2022. *Playful Learning* brings together higher and further education practitioners, researchers and trainers working in adult education in order to share and celebrate playful practice. Through workshops, keynotes and conference games, *Playful Learning* aims to demonstrate the power of play for learning, and to exemplify the profound ways in which we can learn together as a community when we engage in play and games.

Because of this, though it usually takes place in conventional university venues, *Playful Learning* does not look like other conferences. It is often more brightly coloured, messier and noisier than other conferences. Sessions leak out of seminar rooms and into corridors and courtyards, and delegates are just as likely to be found playing a game over coffee as engaging in intellectual debate. In this way *Playful Learning* adapts and changes the physical space in which it takes place, which can be seen even when delegates are not present in the random collection of playful objects (board games, piles of Lego, playground toys, ball pools) that appear when it starts.

The articles in this issue are not explicitly brought together around a theme (beyond having taking part in the conference), but there is a common thread across them in that they tackle, in various ways, the artefacts that are

created when we play, and that we play *with*. Whether they are literal toys and games, or something more abstract like a ruleset or a toolkit, these artefacts are, to paraphrase Sicart (2014), a product of play's creative element, but also provide evidence that play can *change* the world by encouraging us to disrupt established ways of doing things by using old objects in new ways. Playful artefacts act as short-cuts for play, giving us a reason to play together, and a focal point for play, even when they are not as formal as a game or set of rules. As Sicart puts it, 'play is being in the world, through objects, toward others' (p.18).

Two articles deal explicitly with artefacts of play in that they concern the objects that are created by students as part of a learning activity. **Katriina Heljakka**'s piece outlines her use of *comicubes* in several learning activities with students in Finland. These playful paper cubes encourage creativity and appropriation in a tangible way, and she explores the intersection of 'stuff-mess-wonder' in their use. Alongside this **Kim Holfod** writes about Danish higher education students creating playful objects in their work, from 'mood boards' to 'bento boxes', and focuses on the idea that these are 'objects-to-relate-with' that are at the heart of collaboration and interaction between students. In both articles, artefacts are deliberately low-tech and hand-made and encourage learners to 'own' what they are making, especially in comparison with technologically 'cleaner' commercial toys and games.

A second pair of articles deal with more abstract artefacts in that they consider the ways in which rules and toolkits emerge in learning spaces. **Vici Daphne Händel** takes us back to Denmark to consider the limits of playfulness in teacher education, and her reflexive piece outlines the process of negotiation and renegotiation of playful rules that happens within education programmes. There are other elements at play here, beyond the educators and students, that influence individuals' capacity for play. Elsewhere **Deepti Kharod** and **Sandra L. Guzman-Foster** consider the context of postgraduate learning in the United States, examining their own playful and compassionate practice within culturally responsive teaching. For them play and compassion are interrelated, and students engage with both through creating artefacts. But in a world that needs both more play and compassion, perhaps the bigger takeaway is the idea of a 'toolkit' of playful techniques that might work in other contexts to build compassion. Indeed, both of these articles build this idea that practice emerges through play in response to context, and that this can be made more apparent through reflective (and playful) exploration.

Our third pair of articles concern podcasts as playful artefacts, specifically those produced by educators engaged in playful practice. **Andrew J W Middleton** and **Beatriz Acevedo** explore their podcast *Exquisite Education* as a 'playful construct' inspired by the surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse*. Through doing this they identify the way in which a playful 'ruleset' might work to encourage playful conversations. **Michael Collins**, **Jane Secker**, **Chris Morrison** and **Mark Childs** incorporate *Exquisite Education* into their own article, along with

three other playful education podcasts, as they explore podcasting *as* play, and interview hosts and creators of podcasts for professional development. Both articles contain useful tips and tricks for those interested in developing their own playful podcast.

The interesting aspect of this theme of playful artefacts is that it emerged out of the first in-person conference that the Playful Learning Association had held in three years. During the pandemic, we made real efforts (and had success) in drawing people together online, but it was clear that the material elements of play were missing from this to some extent. Coming back together in 2022 gave us an excuse to ‘play with’ the materiality of the conference space too. We created a time machine out of cardboard, explored the green spaces around the conference centre and converted the dining hall into an immersive cinema. We even rubbed against ‘official’ rules and managed some Sicart-style subversive appropriation by accidentally setting the fire alarms off with a bubble machine! All of this speaks to the idea that, as much as it was vital to come back together with other people to play, it was also vital to have objects to play *with*, and for our play to produce objects too.

So, as you read the articles in this issue, I’d encourage you to think about what you can make of them, in a literal sense! Create a mood board, a bento box or a comicube; develop a new toolkit; or even record a podcast. Bring your object along to the next *Playful Learning* conference and contribute to our growing collecting on playful artefacts.

In short, **let’s share our toys!**

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