Play-based learning and intentional teaching: 
Forever different?

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PLAY-BASED LEARNING IS a cornerstone of early childhood education provision. Play provides opportunities for young children to explore ideas, experiment with materials and express new understandings. Play can be solitary, quiet and reflective. Play can also be social, active and engaging. While play is commonly understood as the basis for learning in early childhood education, this is not always the situation in all settings. Cultural variations in learning and play suggest that social interactions and observational learning also create powerful pedagogical learning environments for young children. International and national research highlights the value of sustained and reflective interactions between children and educators in promoting children’s learning. Increasingly, the notion of quality in play-based pedagogy invites educators to integrate traditional beliefs about play with new insights into the role of social interactions, modelling and relationships in young children’s learning.

Overseas, the movement towards quality play-based pedagogy reflects debate and policy initiatives captured by the notion of intentional teaching. In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework makes explicit reference to intentional teaching. Intentional teaching arguably engages educators and children in shared thinking and problem solving to build the learning outcomes of young children. However, the pedagogical relationship between play-based learning and intentional teaching remains difficult to conceptualise. This is because the value placed on the exploratory potential of play-based learning can appear to be at odds with the role of intentional teaching in promoting knowledge development. This paper reaches beyond binary constructs of play and intentional teaching, and invites consideration of a new Pedagogical Play-framework for inspiring pedagogical and curriculum innovation in the early years.

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Introduction

Today I wish to speak about a problem. The problem is that of play and intentional teaching. I have been grappling with this problem for about 16 years now, ever since I graduated from my Bachelor of Education at RMIT University. I loved my time at RMIT. I was taught there by three teachers, in the truest sense of the word—Beth Marr, Anne Hanzl and Andrew Walta. Technically, they taught mathematics, literature and psychology, but really they taught me that it is always possible to learn. They showed me that learning was about creating new ideas and concepts that would help students see the world in a different way. They also instilled in me a drive to see the problem of play and teaching in a new way. I first encountered this problem, which Sharon Ryan and Stacie Goffin described in their 2008 paper as the ‘teacher missing in action’, in my own practice as a new graduate. At the time, I was well grounded in constructivism and knew that play was to form the cornerstone of early childhood education. Yet, when as a young and freshly graduated teacher I set the children to their play, they did not always seem to learn in the way my textbooks had promised. Sometimes, I also needed to teach them. Yet, if I was teaching, were they still playing?

Defining a ‘problem’

Now, before I talk too much further about play and teaching I would first like to consider what I mean by a ‘problem’. I have a very dear colleague, Joce Nuttall, and together
we have co-authored publications, jointly supervised research candidates and completed research projects for over a decade. In the course of our collaborations, we have shared many rich and detailed conversations, mainly focused on the problems we face in our work. Often towards the end of these discussions Joce will begin to smile, ‘this’ she says to me ‘is an intractable problem’. Intractable, according to the dictionary, is something ‘not easily managed, controlled or solved’. Intractability defines what I mean by ‘problem’—something not easily managed or controlled. For me, the relationship between play and teaching has been an intractable problem, not something I have managed easily, and definitely not something I have managed to control. However, just because a problem might be difficult, I see no reason to avoid engaging with what it has to offer. As Joce’s smile tells me—playing around with a problem is actually a source of great joy; and anyway, Jerome Bruner (1971) was adamant that problem solving motivates learning.

I shall stay a moment longer on the notion of a problem. John Dewey (1969) as many of you would know is a great friend of early childhood education. His thinking about progressive education is a mainstay of the early years. He had this to say about children’s play:

Play is not to be identified with anything which the child externally does. It rather designates his mental attitude in its entirety and in its unity. It is the free play, the interplay, of all the child’s powers, thoughts and physical movements, in embodying in a satisfying form, his [her] own images and interests. Negatively, it is freedom from economic pressure—the necessities of getting a living and supporting others—and from the fixed responsibilities attaching to the special callings of the adult. Positively, it means that the supreme end of the child is fullness of growth—fullness of realisation of his [her] budding powers, a realisation which continually carries him [her] on from one plane to another (p. 118).

Like others in this field of early education that we are likely to be familiar with, including Piaget, Froebel, Montessori and Pestalozzi (Bergen, 2014), Dewey (1969) understood play as a forward movement. He spoke also in his work of problems—or more specifically, problems pertaining to education. One such problem of which he spoke was the relationship between the child and the curriculum. The only way past a problem, according to Dewey (1969), was to move forward in such a way that we move from a problem state to a more cohesive whole or a new way of understanding what it means to learn and teach—that is to educate. Dewey (1969) believed that problems encountered in the field of education emerge from differences in theory, such as the difference between play and teaching. Problems, he argued, are ‘never gratuitous or invented’, rather they:

Grow out of conflicting elements in a genuine problem—a problem which is genuine just because the elements, taken as they stand, are conflicting. A significant problem involves conditions that for the moment contradict each other (p. 3).

Therefore, a problem is ‘intractable’ in the way Joce describes it because the very elements of which it is comprised conflict with each other. Here I am then, over a decade since first crash-landing into the problem of play and teaching, finally able to define the problem I have been facing for so long—play is not the same as teaching.

As a new teacher, I thought this problem was unique to my classroom. That it was in some way my fault for not knowing how to integrate what I understood and valued about play with what and how I wanted to help children learn through teaching. Now I am a bit wiser, I understand that this problem actually exists within many levels of early childhood education—both nationally and internationally. I know that the problem still exists today in practice—despite the advent of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which advocates that teachers use both play-based learning and intentional teaching with young children. I have seen from my reading of the empirical literature that the problem exists globally, including in the United States of America (USA) (Johnson, 2014), parts of Europe (Stephen, 2010), South Africa (Ogumyemi & Rapport, 2015) and Asia (Adams & Fleer, 2016; Cheng, 2001) where the desire of scholars to defuse the conflict between play as a forward movement and teaching as an act of intentionality has been strong and sustained. A powerhouse read on the problem as experienced in Asia, where the constructivist view of play also conflicts with Confucian thinking is provided by Amita Gupta in her 2014 book, Diverse early childhood education policies and practices. I also see the problem evidenced in policy, where increased attention worldwide has been paid to the importance of early learning for children’s later developmental outcomes such that more is now being asked of early childhood education than ever before (see, for example, Nyland & Ng, 2016).

**Play and teaching in practice**

I want to spend some time now thinking about this problem—that play is not the same as teaching from the perspective of practice. I do not work with young children anymore in an educative sense, so to return to practice I have to imagine that I have a classroom full of 26 four-year-old children, or that I am responsible for six toddlers for the better part of an entire day. Or even, that I have under my care up to five babies aged six weeks to two years of age. As part of the National Quality Framework, released only seven years ago, I am aware that the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) defines both play and intentional teaching.
This represents an advance upon where I was as a new graduate when there was, pretty much, nothing to guide my practice. Turning to the EYLF I read that play-based learning is, a ‘context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 6). I also read what the EYLF has to say about intentional teaching:

Intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and action. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have ‘always’ been done that way (p. 5).

The definitions offered by the EYLF confirm my problem. Play is not the same as teaching because play is a context for learning where children actively engage with people and objects for learning. In contrast, intentional teaching involves being deliberate and purposeful in my decisions and actions. The solution, in terms of moving forward to a new cohesive whole, is not to be found in these definitions. As I imagine myself in practice, I know that I would find the EYLF helpful—because it at least acknowledges that I should be providing play and intentional teaching, whereas once I was firmly convinced my role was only to provide the play as the cornerstone for the learning. However, I think I would still grapple with understanding where I was to be located in the play as the teacher.

The EYLF illustrates that we ask an immensely complex task of practicing early childhood teachers. Children of any given number create a situation in which there are multiple backgrounds, knowledges, languages, skills, beliefs, values, attitudes and motivations, all of which mix, swirl, spill, frustrate and delight. To work from within this situation with two opposing definitions—those of play and intentional teaching in the absence of a concept that integrates how they are to work in practice is not for the faint hearted. For this complexity, we may pay those who do take on the challenge as little as AU$20 per hour.

Now, in pointing out that the EYLF defines play and intentional teaching differently, I do not intend to be critical of the document itself. Instead, I am trying to highlight the construction of the educational problem as defined by Dewey (1969)—in essence, within our national framework for early learning we have two conflicting elements: Play and intentional teaching. An intractable problem, as Joce would say, if ever there were one. I am in fact, of the firm belief that the EYLF is one of the greatest accomplishments of early childhood education this nation has ever seen.

The collective will, political energy, time and vision for children as learners invested in the achievement of the EYLF is testimony to the work of generations of Australian early childhood professionals—policy-makers, teachers, researchers and representational bodies included. In fact, the consortium leading the EYLF to its eventual realisation should be commended for the achievement of a document that had to meet the political situation of its time. The EYLF manages to: reference the various theoretical flavours for thinking about children’s play and learning circulating the nation; address and identify the learning outcomes for more than 1.5 million children distributed across almost eight million square kilometres of land-based and cultural diversity; recognise the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); be deployed in a range of early childhood education and care settings; and fundamentally commit to improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Regardless of any flaws the EYLF might contain, it is a document of which we should be proud. I believe this because the EYLF was brought forth from the sector, for the sector, and accordingly, provides a platform for driving forward practice, thinking, research, debate and the consequent professionalisation of our field in a way that is uniquely ours—that is Australian. A significant publication regarding the birth of the EYLF that is well worth a read was written by some of the consortium members in 2009 including, Jennifer Sumison, Sally Barnes, Sandra Cheeseman, Linda Harrison, Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse.

**Engaging the problem**

Well, I have taken this long so far to establish that we have a problem—both in early childhood education and in the EYLF more specifically. Play is not the same as teaching. Moving past a problem, says Dewey (1969), relies on ‘getting away from the meaning of terms that is already fixed upon and coming to see the conditions in fresh light’ (pp. 3–4). In my own engagement with this problem of play and teaching, it took me a very long time to move away from the terms themselves. At first, after I finished my PhD and commenced working at Monash University I was convinced the solution to the problem lay in developing a deeper understanding of play itself. I was advised at this time in my reading by the Foundation Professor of Early Childhood Education at Monash University, Professor Marilyn Fleer. Marilyn has done much to advance thinking about play in the Australian and international context. In particular, she has highlighted the cultural nature of young children’s play and the extent to which constructivist notions of play should not be considered universal for all children (Fleer, 2009). This was to be important in my own thinking, leading me to understand that not all learning for all children was play-based and/or self-constructed. Observational learning and modelling are also significant for many, many children.

Others also advised me to read as widely as I could. Professor Elizabeth Wood of Sheffield University introduced me to a range of play theorists I had not previously encountered, including Gregory Bateson (1976), Brain Sutton-Smith (2009) and Johan Huizinga (1955). Another colleague, Professor Mindy Blaise of Victoria University, gave me perhaps the best advice of
my career. We were just chatting one day in the corridor at work and she said to me ‘read outside of your field’. This advice gave me the courage to venture outside ‘early childhood education’ and read deeply and widely of many different ideas. Since then, in addition to my reading of Vygotsky on sociocultural theory, I have also engaged with the sociology of childhood, media studies, cultural theory and most recently, for my work on young children learning in a digital age, in the area of computing studies with a small dabbling in quantum mechanics. Reading outside of the problem area itself has given me a broader framework for reflection.

With my courage thus fortified, and increasingly justified as I discovered new and exciting ways to think about play, I found myself engrossed by issues of power, gender, politics, ethics, peer relations, cross-cultural studies, policy, the outdoors, popular-culture and digital technologies—all as they pertain to play and its role and enactment in early childhood education. With a deeper understanding of the sheer complexity of play that now extended beyond a constructivist framework I was slowly, as Dewey (1969) describes, working my way towards seeing play as one of the elements of the problem in a ‘new light’. However, I was not there yet because I still saw teaching as oppositional to play. The act of integration that would take play and teaching for me to a new educative whole had not yet been achieved.

Determined to keep grappling with the problem, I collaborated with another early career researcher also at Monash University—Amy Cutter-Mackenzie, now Professor of Education at Southern Cross University. Amy’s specialisation is in the field of environmental education. Together, we embarked on a program of research in which we were keen to discover how early childhood teachers could help children learn about sustainability using play. The content area was significant at the time we were working, as UNESCO had declared 2005 to 2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Furthermore, early childhood had recently been recognised as a critical foundation for the provision of effective sustainability education at all levels of schooling (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008).

By this time, the research in the early childhood sector had also largely established that play-based learning alone was insufficient for supporting children’s acquisition of content knowledge; there was an increasing acceptance that the teacher needed to perform some type of role in the play experiences provided to children to enable learning. Broadly speaking, this literature describes what Wood and Atfield (2005) define as ‘pedagogical play’—or the use of play in early childhood education by teachers to foster and support children’s learning. For example, prominent early childhood scholars Cecilia Wallerstedt and Niklas Pramling (2012) from Sweden, and Amos Hatch (2010) from the USA, advocated that if children were to attend early childhood educational settings, and if these settings were to operate under the guidance of a nominated curriculum framework, then the children should learn something consequent to their attendance. This body of research advocated different forms of teacher engagement with children during play. For example, in New Zealand, Judith Duncan (2009) spoke of intentional teaching, as did Ann Epstein (2007) in the USA. In Australia, Flear (2011) described conceptual play and Sue Dockett (2010) pedagogical activity. While in the United Kingdom, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) introduced the concept of sustained shared thinking. It is important at this point to remember that my problem has always been with my role as the teacher in the child’s play. It is not to discount the value of play as understood or defined by others. I am not denying, according to the definition provided by Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1983), that play is valuable in of, and for itself, as a freely chosen, literal and intrinsically motivated activity. I am focused instead on the integration of play and teaching as a source for learning in early childhood educational contexts.

Amy and I settled on the three main types of play that we would consider in our work by following Elizabeth Wood’s (2010) definition of pedagogical play. This definition showed play occurring along a continuum of activity with adult-directed activities at one end and child-directed activities at the other. Our first play-type we called open-ended play—what Wood (2010) defined on her continuum as free play. Our second play-type was modelled play. On Wood’s (2010) continuum, this was considered structured play. Finally, we called our third play-type, purposefully-framed play. According to Wood’s (2010) definition, purposefully-framed play involved adult-directed activities. A very strong paper has consequently been published on these three play-types as they are evidenced in the existing research literature about pedagogical play. Authored by Jeffery Trawick-Smith (2012), the paper outlines three distinct approaches to play-based learning in early childhood education. These include what Trawick-Smith calls the ‘trust in play’ approach, the ‘facilitate play’ approach and the ‘enhance learning outcomes through play’ approach.

Once I would have said that Amy and I were lucky enough to have won an Australian Research Council Discovery grant to support our research. However, earlier this year, I attended a lecture by Professor Sue Grieshaber on women in the academy as part of the Dean’s Lecture Series at Monash University. Professor Grieshaber said that women often attribute their career achievements to ‘luck’ as a way of downplaying the appearance of their success. So today, in honour of Sue’s leadership, I will say instead that due to hard work and persistence, Amy and I were awarded a grant that enabled us to research the three play-types on which we had settled—open-ended, modelled and purposefully-framed play.

The details of the research, what we did, how and why and the analysis of the data are widely available now in published form (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).
However, to sum up very quickly—we worked with 16 teachers from a diverse range of socioeconomic and cultural settings in urban, central and semi-rural areas of Melbourne. In total, each teacher worked with seven children meaning that we had 114 child participants across the entire project. The teachers attended a workshop in which we explored the history of play in early childhood education and considered the three play-types. We also examined various sustainability topics in early childhood education such as, animal habitats, plant life and habitat destruction. We invited the teachers to work with a combination of different play-types and to develop and implement a play experience for each type that embodied a sustainability concept. We visited the teachers in the field and videoed the implementation of each play-type. We then returned to each site and showed the participating children the video footage. We invited the children to share their thoughts about what they were doing in each scenario. We videoed the children as they responded to the footage of themselves at play. Then we returned to the teachers and showed them the footage of the children watching the original footage. We invited the teachers to reflect on what they saw happening in each play type. We also collected reflective diaries and copies of the planning and assessment maintained by the teachers. Our research was conducted with careful attention paid to matters of child assent.

The next three years were what I call the ‘thinking years’. The time in which we read, analysed the data, wrote, re-wrote and engaged in conversation. By this time, I was working at the Australian Catholic University as a Principal Research Fellow. It was a blessed period—I was relatively new to the university and had few demands placed on my time. I was able to focus, think and reflect. I worked closely with a group of exciting PhD candidates also dedicated to exploring play—Dr Yeshe Colliver, Dr Deborah Moore, Jo Bird, Elizabeth Hunt, Kristen Hobby, Sarah Young and Debbie Ryder among others. Amy and I expanded our little team of two to include Deborah Moore and an early career researcher from Southern Cross University—Dr Wendy Boyd. To compress the work of these ‘thinking years’ into one short paragraph, I will now share with you what we found.

First, contrary to our expectations it was not one play-type over another that the teachers and children valued. Instead, the children and teachers talked about the play-types in qualitatively different ways. Open-ended play was valued by teachers because it allowed children opportunities to explore materials and to understand the possibilities and properties of the materials they were working with. Teachers could also observe children’s play and establish an understanding of how and why children were thinking about particular ideas and topics—the teachers talked here of learning from the children. Children enjoyed open-ended play because it was fun, interesting and often messy. They could play with their friends. Modelled play in contrast was valued by teachers because they could directly illustrate concepts to children. Children explained this play-type as ‘good’ because ‘the teacher is showing us what to do’. Purposefully-framed play was considered important by teachers because it enabled them to build across, and within, children’s experiences, to introduce new ideas using a variety of materials such as books, posters, songs and videos. Children enjoyed this play-type because they were ‘talking with the teacher’ or ‘learning new things’. Each play-type was as equally valuable as the other—they just offered qualitatively different opportunities for learning and teaching. Second, the teachers spoke of being aware of the play-types as used in combination, not solo forms of teaching or learning. Instead of relying only on open-ended play to promote learning, teachers described using modelled play to support concepts embedded in open-ended play experiences. They talked of how purposefully-framed play extended children’s thinking and consequently informed the quality of play they viewed occurring in the children’s open-ended play. Thus from these findings, we established two principles for using the three play-types:

1. All play-types are of equal pedagogical value.
2. Play-types can be used in multiple combinations to support learning.


Most recently, we have represented the two principles for using the three play-types in a diagram that we call the Pedagogical Play-framework (Figure 1). ‘Pedagogy’ in terms of the educative use of play as I outlined earlier, and ‘framework’ as a teacher guide or concept for action about how play and intentional teaching may be understood as Dewey (1969) says, ‘steadily as a whole’ (p. 5).

**Theory**

I will very quickly touch on how we have been theorising the Pedagogical Play-framework. Here I draw predominately on Vygotsky’s ideas. The first is his thinking about combinatorial activity. Vygotsky (2004) says that there are two main human activities for generating new ideas and representations. The first is reproductive activity and the second combinatorial activity. Reproductive activity occurs when children learn to respond to their environment by reproducing what they experience. Reproductive activity is important because it helps children relate to the environment in which they are growing up. However, children need to do more than relate to their environment. Children also need to be adaptive so that they can respond to new or unexpected challenges that might occur within that environment. Combinatorial activity focuses on the creation of new objects or ideas that help children to respond to new challenges within their environment. Vygotsky (2004) argues that combinatorial activity is a form of imagination because children draw from what is available in the environment to create new ideas or objects.
For Vygotsky, imagination is not necessarily about what we might call ‘imaginative’ or pretend play—imagination is a mental process that helps children make meaning of their world. Core to his thinking about combinatorial activity is the argument that the richer the child’s world—what he calls the child’s ‘reality’—the richer their imagination will be. Vygotsky (2004) says:

The creative activity of the imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person’s previous experience because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed. The richer a person’s experience, the richer is the material his imagination has access to. This is why a child has a less rich imagination than an adult because his experience has not been as rich (pp. 14–15).

In the Pedagogical Play-framework, combinatorial activity suggests that teachers can be located in the play by ensuring the creation of a rich reality for children. This occurs via the provision of materials for exploration and experimentation as valued by teachers and children in open-ended play. It also occurs via the modelled and purposefully-framed opportunities valued by teachers and children for discussing and connecting existing and new information and ideas because content knowledge can, and should be, viewed as part of the rich reality we provide for children. Multiple combinations of play-types in which all three are equally valued for the unique contribution they make to the richness of the young child’s world make for rich imaginations.

The second idea is Vygotsky’s thinking concerning the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This idea is contested in the scholarship about sociocultural theory (Chaiklin, 2003). However, very bluntly, I will describe two interpretations. One interpretation holds that the ZPD illustrates how children are able to enact capacities within their play that they cannot yet sustain outside of their play—Vygotsky (1976) talks about sisters pretending to be sisters. For example, a child can pretend to love her sister enough to die for her in a pretend game of Frozen, yet outside of the play, she may not be able to love this same sister enough to share a desired treat. The second interpretation holds that the ZPD is the difference between what a child can do or understand alone, compared to what they are able to do with the support of an adult (Vygotsky, 1987). In the context of the Pedagogical Play-framework, open-ended play provisions opportunities for children’s play such that they can enact within their play what they cannot yet do outside of play, and simultaneously allows teachers to provide support for new ideas or ways of thinking within the ZPD via modelled and purposefully-framed play.

The final idea is Vygotsky’s (1987) work on mature concepts. Mature concepts are developed by children when an everyday concept merges with what Vygotsky calls an academic or scientific concept (e.g. Askew, 2013). An everyday concept is something the child experiences on a daily level. For example, we brush our teeth after eating. A scientific concept explains a phenomenon—plaque causes cavities. Vygotsky (1987) argues that children acquire mature concepts as the everyday and the scientific merge—so they understand we brush our teeth after eating so that we do not get holes in our teeth.
The advantage of a mature concept for young children is that mature concepts have explanatory power (Gelman & Kalish, 2006). Children know what they are doing and why. Helping children establish mature concepts therefore promotes their agency because they have a basis for informed decision-making. The Pedagogical Play-framework directly attends to the establishment of children’s mature concepts because everyday concepts may be explored and experienced within open-ended play, scientific concepts provided via modelled play and the creation of mature concepts is supported with purposefully-framed play.

Conclusion

The problem with which I opened this talk of play and teaching is for me no longer quite the same. I have taken my lessons from those three teachers so long ago at RMIT very well. Learning means the creation of new ideas that help us see the world anew. Learning is always possible—even if it takes 16 years. In the Pedagogical Play-framework, I have a new concept that helps me to see the world of play and teaching differently. For me, play and teaching are no longer contrasting elements of an intractable problem. The teachers and children with whom Amy and I worked, the conversations in our team, the theoretical ideas of Vygotsky (1976, 1987, 2004) on which I drew, the advice I took in, and how and what to read—all of it coalesced in helping me to see both play and teaching in a new light. Now it seems so easy. Don’t make play oppositional to teaching. Seek to value the open-ended, modelled and purposefully-framed for their qualitatively different characteristics, then use them in multiple, endless and iterative combinations to teach within the play—or as Dewey (1969) says, ‘see the educative steadily and as a whole’ (p. 5).

With this new concept, I have an entirely new world to explore. You see, while I was so busy engaging this problem, the world outside of early childhood education did not stay still. Instead, the age of touchscreen technologies arrived, and issues of the environment and sustainability became even more prominent, increasing emphasis began to be placed on children’s content learning, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and the world of outdoor learning—of forest schools and bush kindergartens—has become increasingly appealing. So as I look around and see that there are new demands on early childhood education I see these demands through the light of the Pedagogical Play-framework. I wonder how teachers would use the framework to teach mathematical or science concepts. I think about using the framework so that technologies represent the different types of play that are integrated in combination with those existing in the classroom. I reflect on how the Pedagogical Play-framework may be used to support children in the acquisition of mature concepts about sustainability to drive their agentic behaviour such that they make respectful decisions pertaining to their life on this planet.

Just last year, in the final hurdle in my quest for a Professorship, I faced a promotions panel. I had included in my application details of the Pedagogical Play-framework. I had to take questions from the panel. One of the members raised his hand and said to me, ‘Well you know this is all well and good for young children, but what does it mean for tertiary education?’ I was momentarily shocked because I thought he was being disrespectful to our sector—you know that assumption we often face in early childhood education, that unless something is good for the older learner it is not really of any significant value. I rallied quickly.

Well, first, I said, the framework is temporal—a teacher can use the play-types in combination across any period of time, in a matter of minutes or in a planned sequence across a week or longer. Second, you need to imagine that for older people you would use the word ‘learning’ instead of play. This means you have a learning framework based on the open-ended, modelled and purposefully-framed learning used in multiple combinations. In a university, this framework could be used by lecturers in their face-to-face and online delivery.

A dawning light of realisation spread over his face. He smiled and he nodded. I think I taught him about play.

References


