

Artefact 3
Final Project: Research Question, Proposal and Reflection
Play and Playfulness Pedagogy in Museum Learning Spaces for Adult Audiences
MAIS 602: Doing Interdisciplinary Research

Summary

For my final project in this class, I wanted to focus on a topic that I had strong knowledge in and expand it to search for knowledge that I needed as part of my academic goals. Throughout the semester we were encouraged to write about what we knew; I focused on museum learning for adult audiences. As this was part of my professional career, I wanted to question play pedagogy in the age of covid. I wanted to research how play can enhance museum learning and I wanted to bring playful pedagogy to museum learning practice.

I enjoyed writing this paper because I had a strong foundational knowledge in museology and play pedagogy. I had just attended an international play learning conference and I was inspired to add my own voice. I was careful to address the topic as if I was a novice, and this approach was successful in highlighting blind spots that I held.

One goal of my degree was to critically evaluate the meaning of “decolonization” with respect to various theoretical approaches. For this paper I looked at the role of play and learning in museums as a tool of decolonization. It looks at oppressive systems as well as reflecting on who has been allowed to play- not just in terms of a dividing line between adults and children but also play within childhood.

One of the biggest revelations for me was about dangerous play, what Sicart (2014) calls “carnavalesque” as it appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them, trivialize them or make them “deadly serious”. The idea of exploring death in a museum gives death value. Knowing museum’s role in colonization and ultimately decolonization, this notion was incredibly attractive to me. Because this was a huge breakthrough, I knew that I wanted to work on this later on and make it a major topic of my Capstone research project.

Unfortunately, each day that I continued to spend in museums felt like it was my last. I was also enjoying the concepts of workplace learning and felt a greater attraction in exploring the challenges that came with working in learning and development. I had

spent my whole career in museums, and I wanted new challenges. During this class, I had been experiencing agoraphobia which was brought on by the covid pandemic, and I could no longer enter spaces where large crowds gathered.

I chose to include this artifact because it highlights a change in my academic and professional passions. It demonstrates to me that I would have been successful in continuing to explore playful pedagogy in museums by showcasing my research skills and a passion for the topic. If I were to return to this topic, this serves as an illustration that I have a strong foundational knowledge, but also much to uncover.

Abstract

Increasing adult engagement in museums is a topic that is continually under deliberation, particularly at a time when many museums experienced prolonged closures during the covid pandemic. In recent years there has been an uprising of participatory spaces that model museum experiences, they are fun, playful, engaging, and immersive. Instagram Museums such as the Museum of Ice Cream, Meow Wolf and City Museum enable experiences that are engaging, playful and fun. These spaces are places of play for adults, but they are not educational spaces. To a museum professional this distinction is very clear, but to the visitor who is wanting to spend a fun afternoon with friends, there is no distinction. With over 300 museums in Alberta and more than 2600 museums in Canada, the issue of engagement is extremely relevant. Play and playfulness pedagogy is one way in which museums can increase engagement, increase audiences, and ultimately increase revenue. Play is a universal act that has numerous benefits, it is perhaps the most prevalent “universal characteristic of human existence” (Shaffer, 2014. p. 59) How can museums increase playful

engagement while maintaining high levels of education. Are playful museums at the expense of educational experiences?

With the abundance of playful opportunities for adults, museums need to look at the benefits of these interactions and figure out ways that their spaces can be more receptive to the positive aspects that play and playfulness bring to an experience. As Steward Brown claims “play is essential to develop social skills and adult problem-solving skills. We are designed by nature to flourish through play. Play is deeply involved with human development and intelligence (Brown, 2010). Through careful analysis of play and the way that adults engage in play I hope to bring playful pedagogy to museum learning practices. Museums are stewards of history, gatekeepers of knowledge and through play this information can be better transferred to museum visitors increasing the museum’s value and place in society.

Keywords: Adult Education, museum education, museum pedagogy, play, playfulness, decolonizing, types of play.

Play and Playfulness Pedagogy in Museum Learning Spaces for Adult Audiences

Research Topic

The topic of my research has to do with adult play and playfulness pedagogy. The location for this type of play will be situated in museums. In order to do this research, I will analyze the different types of play and how these can address the needs of the different types of museum visitors. I will look at the role of engagement in museums and the way in which museums provide play opportunities for adult visitors and how this play can subvert arbitrary norms and assumptions of how to *be* in society. Research will highlight successful instances of play as well as attempts to encourage play that are not successful. Finally the research will serve as a guide for museum educators wanting to engage adult audiences through play by demonstrating the reasons why play is beneficial in museum settings, primarily in museum spaces that are exploring interactivity, engagement and rethinking what museums spaces could be. In short, I will outline a movement towards decolonizing museum spaces through engaging in playful pedagogy.

Research Question

Learning in museum spaces for many years has been done by museum professionals for museum visitors. There is a conversation between content and design that results in exhibits, instructional panels, soundscapes, screens and sometimes interactive displays. Museums have always been spaces of dialogue, in recent years this dialogue

has forged headlong into rethinking the museum, and decolonizing the museum, with the subject taking over professional museum discussion. ü Some museums are leading discussions on ethics, reviewing museum practices with origins hundreds of years in the past that reflect and often retain the prejudices of those times. Rethinking museums involves long discussions on deaccessioning, repatriation and bringing forward voices which have been silenced for many years. With all this work happening behind the scenes, museums are still viewed by too many people as being “boring”. In places with complicated histories, can play be a tool to bridge understanding, enhance engagement and change museum spaces? *How can play and playfulness pedagogy drive decolonization in museum learning practice?* Can play be the tool to change museums from reflective spaces to places of dialogue and activation. Can happiness be a tool towards discussing complicated topics? Children’s museums have been using play and playfulness to enlighten, inspire and entertain for a hundred years. The role of play in education for young audiences is widely researched, adult play has mostly been looked at through grownups’ interaction with their children, but it continues to be an important part of what it means to be an adult.

Thesis Statement

Play and playfulness are extremely important to human development, play is particularly important in museum education as it allows prolonged engagement, it allows an entry point to difficult topics and it connects visitors to the material in ways that foster

deeper understanding with difficult subject matters. To play in museums is a revolutionary act disturbing generators of colonial stories and holders of stolen artifacts.

Literature Review

I see play as a revolutionary act, I see play in museums as one step in decolonizing museums. To creep closer to achieving my lifelong dream, the first thing I have to do is define play. Play is described and defined differently by different scholars, it is defined differently by museum educators, and it is defined differently by museum visitors. There are also varied attitudes for play, to have fun in museums has ordinarily come at a cost, if museum visitors are having too much fun, museum workers are on edge. Next, I have to describe what “museums” are. In recent years there has been an uptake in adult playful spaces that are sometimes described as museum experiences, there are adult playful spaces that mimic children’s museums (which is complicated as “children’s museums are often argued to not be “real museums” even by museum professionals themselves). Armed with the understanding of play and museums, I would then move towards playful pedagogy, exploring the world of adult play. ü Describe how play is described to be useful in adulthood, and finally using play in museums as an act of rebellion and a step closer to decolonizing the museum.

Defining Play

Miguel Sicart describes play as a way to “be in the world...It is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human” (Sicart, 2014. p.2). He argues that play is not just

harmless or a positive activity, it can be dangerous, damaging, antisocial and corrupting. Play is a manifestation of humanity, used for expressing and being in the world[NN6] ”.

I particularly love how Sacart calls play “not necessarily fun, it is pleasurable, but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing.” (Sicart, 2014. p.3). His discussions of play are about danger, addictive and destructive behaviors which may lead to types of harm including physical injuries, lost friendships, and emotional breakdowns. This is precisely the type of play within museums that I want to study, the type of play that enhances understanding and is not always pleasurable. Sicart calls play “carnavalesque” as it appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them, trivialize them or make them “deadly serious”. When we explore death within museums - we talk about death as having value. In most cases this is monetary value, but also includes historic value. To make play deadly serious within museums is precisely what I want to focus on.

Play is beneficial to our moral well-being and creating a healthy and mature and complete human life. Through play we experience the world, we construct it, we destroy it. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits. (Sicart, M. 2014. p.6)

Sharon Shen has created an Adult Playfulness Trait scale (Shen, 2014, p.26), it is a measurement of playfulness that assesses an individual's disposition for uninhabited and spontaneous fun. Her definition of playfulness deals with the internal disposition to engage in playful behavior. Her model identifies different types of playful

behavior including playfulness as entertainment, playfulness as goal attainment, playfulness as and leisure boredom (Shen, 2014). Analyzing the types of play and the reasoning behind them has major implications within museum playful experience development. Some researchers have argued that playfulness might help reduce boredom because more playful people tend to engage in play more often which may function as a coping mechanism in the face of boredom. The question to ask here is - can play help change attitudes about the museum going experience? Can a playful approach to museums change society's relationship with inherited knowledge and ways of knowing?

Playful Pedagogy

In the book *Play Matters (2014)*, playfulness is described as a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object and context. Playfulness has to do with an attitude towards things, people and situations. It is a way of engaging with the world derived from our capacity to play but lacking some of the characteristics of play. Play is an activity and playfulness is an attitude (Sicart, 2014. p.21).

Play in Museums

Museum studies are concerned with the museum visitor experience. Who attends, what do visitors expect and are they satisfied with their experience? There is a significant amount of attention given to turning occasional visitors into repeat visitors. John Falk has written extensively about museum visitors, he discusses the institutional goals of the museum needing to line up with visitors' needs and expectations. In 'The Museum

Experience Revisited', he urges that acknowledging and respecting the importance of goals visitors may have beyond those related to learning facts and concepts. Second, museum experiences need to be enhanced so they better facilitate meaningful learning, museums may fail when they see themselves merely as conveyors of information (Falk, J. 2012. p.251). His work urges museums to think deeply about how the visitor's time at the museum fits into their personal, sociocultural and physical dimensions of their life. How will they use the information encountered in the museum? Do all spaces in the museum, including the brochures, restrooms, parking lots, guards and maps work together to create a series of mutually reinforcing contexts for them? The entire institution has to unite to make the visitor's experience resemble the experience the visitor and the museum hopes for (Falk, J. 2012. p251). The overarching question that he urges museums to answer is "how will my community be different in positive and recognized ways because this museum exists?"

Adult play in museums

Marilyn Parrish discusses adult learning in cultural institutions as the concept of free-choice learning, where the learner's choice to visit a specific setting reflects a wide array of competing possibilities. The choice to visit museums is closely connected to issues of identity and self perception. Learning is not even one of the outcomes that visitors are concerned with, they often see museums as locations of entertainment and for opportunities to have fun with family and friends (Parish, M. 2010)

Robin Grenier argues that the potential of play in museums is centered in its ability to promote situations where a person is not only motivated to learn, but is

propelled into the learning process, and finds the process as satisfying and rewarding as the outcome (Grenier, R. 2010). Museum play has been described as the phase in which a visitor is assimilating and mastering skills through practice problem-solving - this is the phase in the museum visit immediately preceding learning, the point where visitors restructure and accommodate new patterns and concepts into their existing knowledge (Yahya,, 1996)

Decolonizing the museum

Thinkers like Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire adapt a Marxist understanding of the individual and his or her relation to power as the means of production, introducing play as a critical liberating force that can be used to explore the ultimate possibility of human freedom. To play is to exercise our being as expressive creatures, including as political creatures. Politics happens when play becomes political action (Sicart, M. 2014. P. 75). Political play takes place when a plaything harnesses the expressive, creative, appropriative and subversive capacities of play and uses them for political expression. Political play is the interplay of form, appropriation, and context, or how politics is expressed and enacted through play in a fluid motion.

Mayo and Borg (2006, p.77) challenge museum educators to recognize the important of countering dominant cultural narratives and interrogating official knowledge as “cultural sites are not neutral repositories, but sites of conflict and contestation with ever-shifting narratives, requiring a critical perspective to truly understanding their reading of reality.” (Mayo and Borg, 2006) When museum visitors are engaged reflectively, their visit has a greater impact on their learning. Playfulness in museums

can facilitate deliberation and decision-making experiences which help visitors learn to develop “responsible social and political action. One role of museums is to help museum learners to become publicly engaged citizens within their community. By making play a central aspect of the museum visit, museums can provide the space to confront dominant stories and existing ideas, and co-construct new meanings, through the act of play, traditional adult visitors as well as underrepresented museum audiences can begin to image the museum differently through alternative ways of constructing knowledge and understanding (Grenier, R. 2010)

Ethical Considerations:

I want to focus on play and playfulness and the notion of glee in adulthood in alternative learning spaces such as museums. Play and playfulness happen everywhere, and the play that happens in museums is usually mediated by museum staff. In some cases museum spaces are set up with small indications of what the visitor is supposed to do, but not all museum visitors adhere to the unspoken rules within the museum's walls. According to the work of John H. Falk, there are 5 types of museum visitors. Each type attends museums for very distinct and unique reasons. The work of John H. Falk is discussed extensively in museum pedagogy and his writing has been influential in the way that museums are set up, and the ways that museum visitors are discussed and catered to. As we worked through articles on ethics I realized that I had not thought about the ethical history within museum practice. ü Several articles called on the researcher to acknowledge their power and to understand the power dynamic between researcher and study participants. In the article by Eve Tuck on Decolonizing Methodologies (2013) it was argued that researchers should acknowledge the ability to

voice and restore colonially silenced truths. Museums have complicated histories and I will need to interrogate this in my research.

There were two other points from Eve Tuck's article (2013) that have caused me to pause, the first was "identify research as a site of struggle" and to "provoke revolutionary thinking". I love play theory, and I understand its revolutionary capabilities, its power to unite communities, to evoke empathy, to connect to one another and to the material of learning in a meaningful way. The roles of humour, play, glee and joy in bridging difficult topics can be a means to revolutionary thinking and an area that I hope to focus on in my research. The role of melancholy in museum practice is perhaps where the intersection of playful pedagogy and revolutionary thinking may be hiding.

Through play and playfulness one experiences many things, but the ultimate goal is to experience happiness. I want to study this process within the walls of museums. I see play and playfulness and happiness as a form of activism, a stand against the worst aspects of the institutions of museums but also a reimagining of the museum learning process. Due to the fact that I want to study playfulness, the method I used has to also be playful. The method that I related to the most was "disturbing". This method deals with improvisation as a process - much like the process of play. I have taught through the lens of absurdity many times, even presenting difficult topics through the speculation of absurdity is a playful entry point which allows learners and participants to laugh through difficult topics. I also connected with the chapter on experimenting by Thomas Jellis, due to its strong connection to play and playfulness. One can't play successfully without experimenting with methodology. Although it carries with it a good deal of epistemic baggage, not least its association with positivism, reclaiming experiment is an

opportunity to reflect on the ends of experiment and to think about how certain forms of experimentation serve to redefine problems for researchers. (Lury,C. 2018, p. 369)

Experimenting is fun, but being experimented on is not.

Lastly, I explore the chapter discussing playing with ethics methodology by Miguel Angel Sicart. I would like to point out the obvious, that the chapter began with the quote “play is ‘in itself neither good nor bad’, that it is ‘outside of morals’” (Huizinga 1992). Play is an exploration of ethics. Sicart discusses the way in which play is valuable for our well being. He argues that play is a moral activity that can contribute to our flourishing as human beings. He discusses the ways in which play is actually very important to the development of ethics because of the risks it carries. “To play as an expressive, appropriative form of being in the world is to assert ourselves in the world of creativity, to explore it under rules we have accepted as valid, that we have agreed to submit to or that we have ourselves created.” (Lury,C. 2018, p. 369[NN12]) He took the words right out of my mouth! Then I began to analyze the areas of research where I had been trying to decipher this very notion. This quote was hiding in a textbook about ethical methodology, not in museum education texts which is where I had been searching. I had to reflect on my own research methods and reimagine play and playfulness and ultimately happiness through an interdisciplinary lens. Everything about this chapter was relevant to me:

“We need to leave behind the idea of play as something that happens separately from the world; as something that is not affected and does not affect the contexts and objects through which it is manifested. Playing is valuable because it is

appropriate, expressive and disruptive – the values of play reside in the way play allows us to explore, train, investigate, study and develop our best potential as human beings. Given that ethics is a way of being in the world that underlies all of our actions, activities and ideas, its relation to play should be obvious. The ethics of play should be seen as the value of play, the way in which, through play, we live a good life. This is not to say that all play is good, that there are no moral risks with play. Play can seduce us; through playthings we can forget that play is a mode of being in the world, and we can lose the relative distance between the action and the context that we need for playing to be ethically and culturally valuable” (Henricks, 2006).

I see play as a Way of Being, a hyper-association with the present moment. I often think, if I am not having any sort of fun, is it worth doing? While researching play, I also must focus on what isn't play - both to reinforce my definition of play but to also explore its influence, its boundaries and its effects.

Reflection:

My original question was: *“Do adult learners benefit from play centered learning practices?”* I have explored the many reasons why this question needed improvements. First of all, it is too vague. The question could easily be answered with a yes, or a no. As an educator it would be easy for me to answer “yes”. I think the difficulty stems from the question I was asking concealing the real issues I was facing. Do I still have a

career in children's museums after covid? Have I made the right decision by doing a masters in adult education? Will the information, experience and knowledge from the first half of my professional career be able to help me in my chosen area of study? Will I be able to continue my career in museums using everything I know about children and applying it for an adult audience?

With more research and reflection my question became "*What is the role of play for adults in informal learning institutions?*" When we studied the role of words, and linguistic analysis, I began to question my choices. Using humour, play, glee and joy can help bridge the gaps in connections when learners are confronting difficult topics. These can be tools to revolutionary thinking- and this curiosity could propel my research in new ways. Through discourse analysis I looked at the words used in play and playfulness pedagogy in museums. I come from a children's museum world where the terms play, hands on learning and mind-body connection are all used interchangeably - yet, in museums where adults are the main audience, these words are rarely used. I am researching play among museum adult visitors, but since play is not normally respected by museum professionals, educators or even adults themselves, the action of play may be hiding behind more articulated descriptive language. Finally, my question has become: *How can play and playfulness pedagogy drive decolonization in museum learning practice?*

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