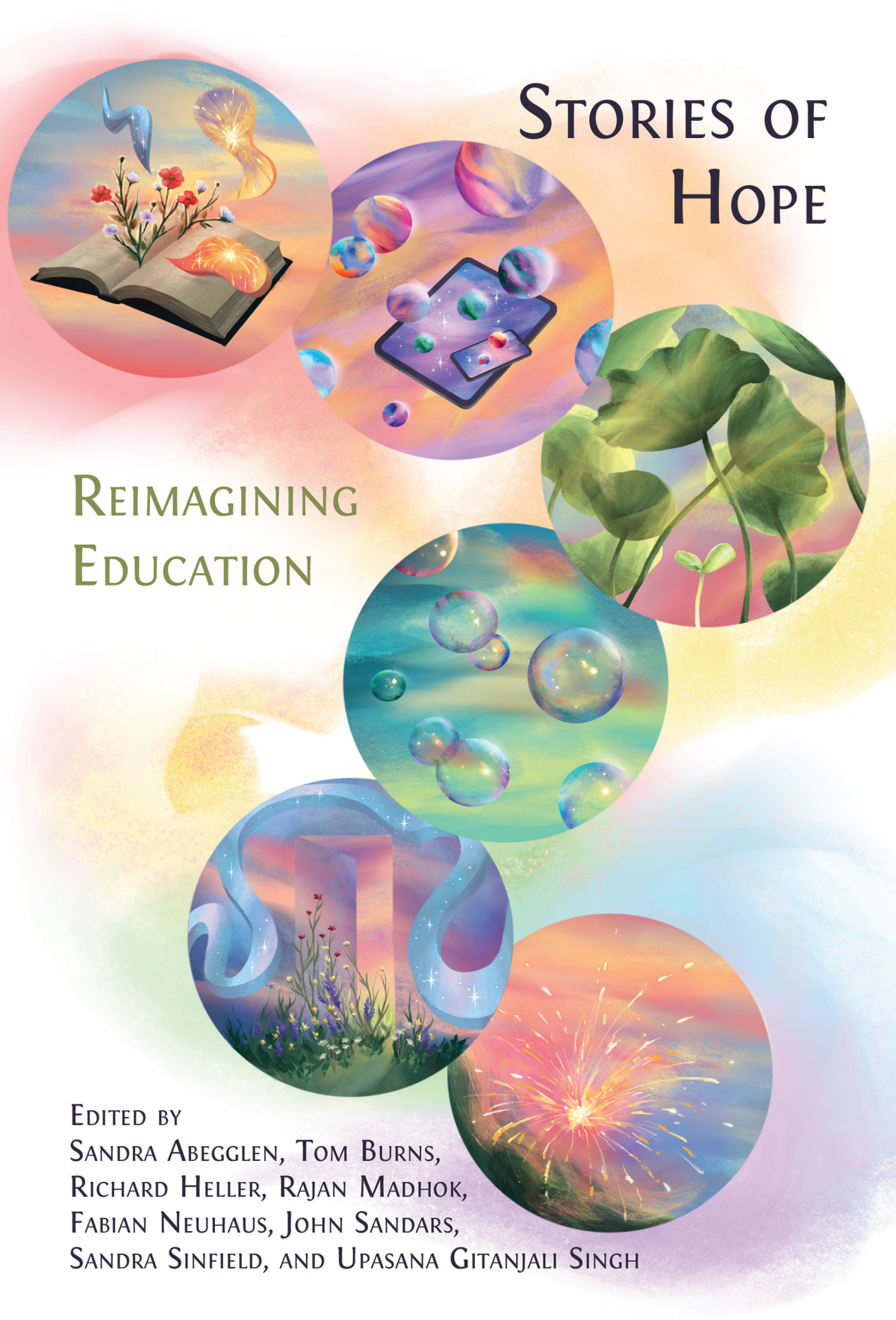# Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

Edited by
Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns,
Richard Heller, Rajan Madhok,
Fabian Neuhaus, John Sandars,
Sandra Sinfield, and Upasana Gitanjali Singh

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

18. Playing with learning: Adopting a playful approach to Higher Education learning and teaching

John Parkin

Abstract

Becoming a university lecturer is an evolving journey marked by ongoing reflection and the continual development of practice. This chapter explores how playful approaches to teaching and learning in Higher Education can enhance the joy of both teaching and learning, while simultaneously supporting the development of students' skills and knowledge. By fostering a safe and engaging environment, playfulness benefits not only students but also lecturers, encouraging experimentation and growth. The chapter argues that for playful pedagogy to flourish, university lecturers must be granted the agency and institutional support to explore innovative teaching practices that enrich learning experiences and strengthen educational outcomes.

Keywords: playful learning; Lego Serious Play®; Playmobil pro®

Introduction

During my transition from primary school teacher to senior lecturer practitioner in Higher Education, I began to experiment with different approaches to teaching and learning. I found that using a playful approach helped me connect my new reality teaching adults to my previous "existence" as a teacher of young children. I found a playful approach to teaching not only helped with this connection, but I also gained a greater level of satisfaction. Using playful approaches brought a sense of joy for me at least, and hopefully for the students I taught. Playful approaches to learning for children have a well-established history (see Papert, 1980; Piaget, 1999)—and there is growing evidence demonstrating the benefits of play in Higher Education in terms of conceptual understanding, creativity, multi-disciplinary learning, and engagement (Rice, 2009). Nicola Whitton (2018) goes on to explain how playful tools, toys, puzzles, and games, along with playful techniques, such as making and role-play, can be utilised.

To help write this chapter, I reflected on my first five years of university teaching from September 2018 to July 2022. I harnessed an autoethnographic approach, hand-writing a reflective journal at the end of that period, considering critical incidents and experiences that had shaped my journey. My reflections explored my beginnings as a lecturer and playful practice from my earlier primary teaching career. I considered how I used Lego® and Playmobil pro® to support student learning and enhance my own personal teaching journey.

Personal reflections: Vignettes

In my first vignette, I explored my first year of teaching in Higher Education. Like the findings of Pete Boyd and Kim Harris (2010), I found that during my first year of teaching in a university, I "felt in the dark" about the material, language, and teaching approaches required. It was a bigger change from teaching in a primary school than I had been expecting. I was appointed as a senior lecturer practitioner, meaning I had to couple my academic skills as a university lecturer and my professional skills as a primary school teacher in my teaching. I was a pracademic (Posner, 2009)—but I was unsure how to be and do this:

I remember my first lecture well. It was a traditional lecture theatre with rows of seats facing the front. Students were huddled together in the middle and I was looking up towards them. I had spent ages preparing, making notes on what to say and with a few questions thrown into the mix. I started working my way through the PowerPoint explaining each point. I would stop every slide or so to ask a question. As the lecture progressed, the students were looking increasingly bored. The way I was lecturing—I won't call it teaching—was an imitation of how I had learnt at university. I became bored of the way I was teaching (lecturing), and so did the students. By the end of the first year of my lecturing, I realised I needed to change how I was teaching.

In this second vignette, I considered how I started using playful activities in my teaching. As a lecturer in education, I felt an important aspect of my role as a pracademic was modelling to students in lectures good practice in the primary classroom (Loughran & Berry, 2005). Through this modelling of the play found in an early years classroom, I saw that students enjoyed and could learn through a playful approach. I understood that learning through play for young children had an established evidence basis (for example, Piaget, 1999; Papert, 1980). From my own experience of primary school teaching, learning through play could be "hard fun" (Papert, 2002) whereby children could learn new things, and collaborate and devise solutions. I wondered if a playful approach in Higher Education could work, as I felt, in the words of Alison James (2019, p. 18), "play makes us better at the complex, challenging, horizon-stretching work that a university needs to do". My experiences of a playful approach are outlined below.

Before I became a lecturer in education, I had been an early years teacher for a number of years. As a result, I wanted to bring this sense of play to my teaching. This was to show students how children learnt in an early years classroom, but also to make my teaching more interesting. For a seminar introducing the early years curriculum, I put on a bubble machine and asked students in groups to think of all the different areas of learning they could teach using the machine. Students worked well together. Their laughter didn't prevent learning but seemed to help it. Then, the pandemic arrived. We were all learning and teaching online. As the bubble machine had always been a great way of introducing the early years curriculum to students, I decided to use the bubble machine anyway. However, I wondered if it would work with me at home putting on a bubble machine with students watching via TEAMS from home. I sat there with bubbles going all over my laptop and students were

typing how they could use a bubble machine with younger children. This unusual introduction to early childhood education stuck with the students (and with me). Several of them came up to me after the graduation to reminisce about the session.

In the penultimate, third vignette, I reflected on using aspects of Lego Serious Play® in my teaching. Again, as a primary school teacher I had used Lego in my teaching with young children to create representations of the world, collaborate and generally support learning. And it was fun! Coming back to Lego Serious Play in this different setting, with adult learners, I thought it had potential. Although Lego Serious Play was originally developed for managers to develop business strategies and let them "describe what they already knew in a new way, and to collaboratively develop new insights" (Roos & Victor, 2018, p. 335), it could also be applied to Higher Education teaching. When exploring teaching and learning, Sean McCusker (2014, p. 29) notes that "the richness is not so much in the LEGO bricks but in what they represent". Furthermore, owing to the playful nature of Lego Serious Play, social hierarchies are reduced and all participants are empowered to share their knowledge and opinions (McCusker, 2020). The third vignette below outlines my early use of Lego Serious Play and my takeaways from using a playful approach with my students.

> I have always included play in my teaching. This is something I used in my practice without knowing it had a special name in Higher Education— playful learning. I noticed a colleague had a huge box of Lego he was using in his outreach work and in computing lectures. I had heard of Lego Serious Play but had never experienced it or used it in my own teaching. Seeing a colleague using the method, I thought I would give it a go in a module I was teaching and see if it was a helpful approach. The module was about social justice in education, so there were lots of difficult concepts to get our heads around. In the first seminar, I asked students to build a model of "social justice" using Lego. We had all sorts of models and some really rich conversations about how we all viewed social justice. It went well. I decided to use the same type of activity in the next seminar: build a model of "inclusion" and discuss the concept. It went well again. For the third week, I thought I should leave the activity. Although I enjoyed the activity, I thought the students would have had enough of the Lego and "want to do proper learning". That day, I arrived in the seminar room without my usual box of bricks. "John, where's your Lego?" They had really liked using Lego and said it helped them discuss

and understand concepts. After that, I brought Lego to each weekly session for the module.

My fourth and final vignette explored how Playmobil pro can be used as a playful tool too. Playmobil pro has similarities to Lego Serious Play as both use children's construction toys to support adults in learning and making representations of concepts and bring joy into the classroom. I used Playmobil pro in my teaching to help students understand concepts related to sustainability education (Parkin, 2023). Furthermore, by creating representations of the world using Playmobil pro, students can explore issues in a safe environment, minimising the risks associated with failure (Heljakka, 2023). However, students need "a state of mind or an attitude" to learn in this way (Whitton & Moseley, 2019, p. 14)— and having introduced them to playful methods before certainly helped ease them into this new activity.

> I was really enjoying using more playful approaches in my teaching. I attended the Playful Learning Conference for the first time in July 2022 and participated in a session led by Karl McCormack about Playmobil pro. I thought this playful resource was a great addition to the method and tools I was already using. Like in Lego Serious Play there were lots of Playmobil figures and accessories for participants to use. I wanted to give it a go in my own teaching. I received funding from my university to purchase some Playmobil pro kits to use. The students enjoyed using the new learning resource. One activity particularly stood out. In a seminar about how students felt about difficult conversations and their experiences, one student made a Playmobil representation of when they had to have a difficult conversation with parents. She picked a small Playmobil child, drew a sad face on the child and put a key in her hand. She explained that she felt like "a child" when having a difficult conversation with a parent. She also selected a key to show how situations like this made her feel like she was "locked up". The Playmobil helped her open up her emotions and feelings. She felt comfortable sharing very personal experiences and thoughts—and the playful approach taken played an important part in this.

In conclusion

As I reflected on my experiences of becoming a senior lecturer "primary practitioner" in education, I surfaced and realised the journey that I had embarked on with the students I teach. When I first started working in

the university, I thought I needed to "lecture" like the lecturers who had taught me. I found this imitation to be unsatisfying personally and professionally—and so did my students. I began to explore different approaches and found that a playful approach to learning brought me hope that I could teach adults in a way that worked and which I enjoyed. Perhaps I found more courage and inspiration to try a more unconventional approach to teaching because I had been a primary school teacher. I had rich positive experiences to draw upon that most university lecturers would not have access to. If universities want to promote more inclusive—and also more successful—teaching and learning environments, they need to support and celebrate different approaches to teaching and learning. More than one way of teaching exists, we need the time and space to play with our practice—to help our students learn—hopefully. Academics need the autonomy to teach in a way that works for them—and for the students and the subject being taught.

Steps toward hope

- Reflect regularly on teaching practices and continuously build on experiences to grow as a university lecturer.

- Incorporate playful approaches to enhance the joy of teaching and learning, while supporting the development of student skills and knowledge.

- Create a safe learning environment for both students and lecturers through playful teaching methods.

- Advocate for time, space, agency, and support to explore diverse teaching approaches.

References

Boyd, P., & Harris, K. (2010). Becoming a university lecturer in teacher education: Expert school teachers reconstructing their pedagogy and identity. *Professional Development in Education*, 36(1–2), 9–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415250903454767

Heljakka, K. (2023). Building playful resilience in higher education: Learning by doing and doing by playing. *Frontiers in Education*, 8. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1071552

James, A. (2019). Making the case for the playful university. In A. James, & C. Nerantzi (Eds.), *The Power of Play in Higher Education* (pp. 1–19). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95780-7_1

Loughran, J., & Berry, A. (2005). Modelling by teacher educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(2), 193–203. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2004.12.005

McCusker, S. (2014). 'Lego®, Serious Play™: Thinking about teaching and learning. *International Journal of Knowledge, Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 2(1), 27–37. https://ijkie.org/IJKIE_August2014_SEAN%20MCCUSKERv3.pdf

McCusker, S. (2020). Everybody's monkey is important: LEGO® Serious Play® as a methodology for enabling equality of voice within diverse groups. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 43(2), 146–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2019.1621831

Papert, S. (1980). *Mindstorms*. Basic Books.

Papert, S. (2002). Hard fun. *Bangor Daily News*. https://dailypapert.com/hard-fun/

Parkin, J. (2023). Enhancing student understanding through playful learning using Playmobil pro. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 16(2), 63–77. https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v16i2.1436

Piaget, J. (1999). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. Routledge.

Posner, P. L. (2009). The pracademic: An agenda for re-engaging practitioners and academics. *Public Budgeting & Finance*, 29(1), 12–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5850.2009.00921.x

Rice, L. (2009). Playful learning. *Journal for Education in the Built Environment*, 4(2), 94–108. https://doi.org/10.11120/jebe.2009.04020094

Roos, J., & Victor, B. (2018). How it all began: The origins of LEGO® Serious Play®. *International Journal of Management and Applied Research*, 326–343. https://doi.org/10.18646/2056.54.18-025

Whitton, N. (2018). Playful learning: Tools, techniques, and tactics. *Research in Learning Technology*, 26. https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v26.2035

Whitton, N., & Moseley, A. (2019). Play and learning in adulthood. In: N. Whitton, & A. Moseley (Eds.), *Playful learning events and activities to engage adults* (pp. 11–24). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351021869-2