

Forward to Lisa Forbes & David Thomas (eds) [The playbook: Professors at play](#). Carnegie Mellon University Press. 2023.

PROFESSORS AT PLAY PLAYBOOK

Foreword by Play Expert Peter Gray

Peter Gray
Research Professor
Department of Psychology and Neuroscience Boston College

I went into academia because it's fun. Perhaps you did too. What a luxury it is to be paid to fiddle around with things. We may fiddle with things in the lab, asking the child's question, "*What will happen if I do this to that?*" We may fiddle with thoughts, ideas in our heads, testing them out to see how they fly when we describe them to others or subject them to some sort of empirical test. We may fiddle with numbers, coming up with new "proofs" of one theorem or another. We are paid to play. Wow.

If you look up the word *academic* as an adjective in any standard dictionary, one of the definitions you'll find is "having no practical value." To some that sounds like a put-down. Why devote time to something that has no practical value? That attitude is also why, as a society, we don't value children's play as much as we should. Play, as part of its definition, is something that is done for no practical gain, at least not conscious practical gain. You do it for fun, because you want to do it, because you experience the high of freedom and joy of life when you do it, not for praise, trophies, pay, improving your resumé, or making the world better.

Why do we play? That's like asking, "Why do we live?" I agree with the 18th century German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller who famously wrote, "Man is only fully human when he plays." What's the point of our brief time on earth if not to enjoy it, and maybe in the process bring some joy to others (our playmates) as well?

Of course, the practical side of me, who has some hunches about the practical side of you, hastens to add that although play is something we do just because it's fun, it often produces practical benefits as side effects. I have devoted much of my research career to documenting the value that play has for children's development. Children play just for fun, but in the process, they develop their intelligence, social and emotional skills, and physical bodies. Play for us adults does some of the same things that it does for children. It opens our minds to new ideas, leads to new insights and inventions (some of which may be useful), and connects us with others as friends and colleagues.

I must also acknowledge that many of us (I included) became professors not *just* for fun, but also to add some benefit to the world. Our choices of what to fiddle with are typically informed in part by our beliefs that such fiddling might help solve some real problem in the world. So, our play might not be *pure* play, like a child's play, done just for its own sake, but we can nevertheless bring a childlike playful spirit to it. That spirit opens our minds in

ways that may lead to new insights into how to solve the problem, which we would not have seen if we were more narrowly focused on what seemed most practical. If you look into the autobiographies of those who have contributed most creatively to our culture, you will find that many, maybe most, say it was for them primarily play.

Why then are we in this situation where we must make conscious effort to bring play to ourselves and students in academies of higher education? Why doesn't it come naturally? The answer has to do with our system of schooling. We force students to go through the motions of "learning" what they are not interested in, where the reward is not the pleasure of doing and discovering but grades, which are passed off as tickets to some hypothetical future success. Play is punished in this system, because it leads students to do things not in the curriculum. It disrupts the orderly classroom and interferes with the spouting back of the lessons the system wants students to spout. By the time students go on to tertiary education their expectations about the nature of "education" are rather well set, as something to endure, not enjoy. And by the time professors become professors all too many have become way too serious in what and how they teach, and the methods in college are not much different from the non-playful methods of earlier on. In school at all levels, we refer to learning as "work," not play.

And so, here we have this valuable book in which professors have written not just about reasons for bringing play and playfulness into their teaching but have collectively provided many examples of ways to do it. You can't turn the system on its head (unfortunately), but you can, within the system, do things that bring out your own and your students' playfulness, despite the forces (such as the grading system) working against it.

I like the way this book is organized. It begins with a chapter on the value of play in our teaching. Then it progresses through chapters with examples of how to bring your own playfulness into the classroom (Ch 2); how to use play early in a course to create a sense of community among students and between students and yourself (Ch 3); how to use play as a means of conveying course content (Ch 4); and how, for some, a play scenario might provide the framework for an entire course (Ch 5). I, like the book's editors, think the purpose of all these examples is not to provide a recipe for you to follow, but to stimulate your own thinking about what might work for you, given your personality, the nature of what you teach, the nature of your students, and your beliefs about what you would like students to take away from your course.

Lisa and David have granted me permission to devote the rest of this forward to describing some things I did back when I was still teaching, some years ago. My primary goal as a professor was to encourage critical thinking. Our testing and grading system has trained students not to think, but to memorize and regurgitate. Critical thinking is play; memorizing and regurgitating are not. Critical thinking is playing with ideas. We turn them upside down to see what happens, contrast them with other ideas to look for consistencies or contradictions, try them out on other people to get their reactions, and so on. Students come into the class believing they don't have permission to think. They are mere students, so their job is to "learn," not think, and learning means memorizing and regurgitating. To disrupt this ingrained schoolish habit and encourage thinking I developed what I call the

idea approach to organizing a course (for more complete descriptions, see Gray, 1993, 1997).

Application of the Idea Approach to a Large Lecture Class

Here's how I brought the idea approach to my introductory psychology course, where there were typically 150 to 200 students. On the first day of class I would open with something like the following:

"What is Psychology? It's not a set of facts or names and beliefs of famous psychologists. It's a set of ideas. It's a set of idea about the human mind and human behavior, about how we humans tick. ... What's an idea? It's something to think about. It's something that could be true or not, or perhaps more often is in some ways true and some ways not. You probably already have some ideas about the human mind and behavior, and it will be interesting to think about them as you go through the course. Facts are specific, objective observations that are only interesting in this course to the degree that they help us verify, reject, or qualify an idea. Famous psychologists are only interesting in this course to the degree that it can be fun to know who came up with some of the ideas we are talking about and what evidence they provided for those ideas."

Notice that I could have said that this course is about *theories* in psychology, but theories is too highfalutin a word. Students, especially in the introductory course, might think they are incapable of theories, but everyone has ideas. I used one of the textbooks I wrote that focused on what I took to be the main ideas in psychology and evidence concerning those ideas, and I used lectures largely to address ideas that the students themselves expressed, or their questions about the ideas in the book.

Even with this big class, I empowered students to play a large role in what I talked about. For example, before giving a lecture on the psychology of sleep and dreams, I would ask students, at the end of a class period, to jot down and hand in their ideas about the following: Why do we sleep (i.e., what purpose does sleep serve?)? Why do we dream? Can we learn anything about a person from their dreams? This would be before most had read the chapter on sleep and dreams (almost nobody reads chapters in advance). Then I would do a quick qualitative analysis of what they wrote and devote the next lecture to discussing the most common ideas they came up with. In my discussion, I would bring in research evidence concerning each idea and maybe ask for thoughts about how one might do a study to gain more evidence for or against the idea.

One day each week the class met in small separate discussion groups, each led by an advanced undergraduate student while I circulated. The purpose of each meeting was to discuss the pros, cons, and limitations of one or more of the ideas that had been presented that week, based on their own experiences in the world as well as their reading of the chapter. To aid discussion, students were required to bring to the group written, thoughtful questions, in paragraph form, about at least one of the ideas to be discussed. I would circulate among the groups and offer a thought if asked.

I can't say that this approach worked for everyone, but it worked for most. I found them really thinking about the ideas and taking some ownership of their learning in the course. There was a degree of personal empowerment and permission that, I think, is the first step toward academic play. Some told me that they had, on their own initiative, applied the idea

approach to their thinking in other courses. The courses became more enjoyable and interesting to them when they thought about ideas instead of just facts to regurgitate on a test. Some said they even did better on the tests because of that. The ideas led to engagement and the facts became more meaningful and memorable.

Application of the Idea Approach to a Smaller Class or Seminar

Once, about midway through my teaching career, I had the experience of walking down hallways looking into one classroom after another. What I saw, in room after room, was one person (the professor) up on the stage, often quite animated, and a bunch of others (the students) in seats looking quite bored. Hmm, I thought, what might I do to get the students on the stage and me in a seat?

So, the next semester I tried a new approach in my relatively small course (about 30 students) in evolutionary psychology. I chose the most interesting readings I could find—books and articles filled with provocative ideas about human behavior from a Darwinian perspective. I told students at the beginning that the assignment, for each course meeting, was to come to class with written thought questions (thoughtful questions, in paragraph form, which might include disagreements) concerning what they found to be the most interesting ideas in the assigned readings. Each meeting would then be led by a pair of students—a different pair each meeting—who would be up on the stage. They would start by presenting what they viewed as the most interesting ideas in the readings and then would chair the rest of the meeting, as students read out their thought questions for discussion. I sat with the other students, inconspicuously in the middle of the room. I told the students at the beginning that I would share my thoughts on any question if asked, but only if asked.

At first the questions and discussion seemed a bit strained, but by the third or fourth week of class the students were into it. They came enthusiastically with ideas and critiques. The discussion was lively, and I observed real debate, critical thinking, and even some laughter as students loosened up enough to joke about some of the ideas or the ways researchers had tested them. Two or three times in a course meeting, sometimes more, someone would ask, “So, Peter (I had by that time gotten them to call me by my first name), what do you think about this?” Then, and only then, I might present some knowledge or thought I had relevant to the question. Students loved the course, and so did I. I think part of the success came from reducing my role as an authority figure, which had the effect of empowering others to debate and think—that is, to play. What a pleasure it was to me to present my thoughts and information only when asked, not to force them on the students.

Doing Rather Than Just Lecturing

Many of the examples in this book involve getting students active in class. Play, by definition, is active. It’s always mentally active and often physically active as well. Such activity is especially useful if it is related to the course content and not just something to get the blood flowing and wake up the brain.

Sometimes in my large lecture class, I would perform a little experiment or demonstration. For example, before lecturing on the psychological phenomenon of group polarization I would conduct a class demonstration in which I asked students to rank their belief about something on a 10-point scale—from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For example, I might ask if the next test in the course should be multiple choice rather than essay in format. Then I'd separate the class into small groups of students who had similar views on the issue. Some groups were of those who favored essays and others were of those who favored multiple-choice. I asked them to discuss the question within their group and then, after about 15 minutes, I brought them back to their seats and asked them to rate, again, the strength and direction of their preference. They handed in their ranking sheets, and I analyzed them before the next class meeting.

The result invariably, which I reported at the next class meeting, was that those who favored essays before the group discussion favored them even more strongly after it, and those who favored multiple choice favored that even more after the discussion. This is the phenomenon of group polarization. When you talk only with people who tend to agree with you, you become even more extreme than before in your belief. After presenting the results, I asked the class why this occurred, and they came up, on their own, with all the possible explanations that research psychologists have ever presented about this phenomenon. They also came up with ways of testing the differing explanations. They were being scientific psychologists.

Finally, let me say something about my teaching of statistics. My experience is that most students, even at the relatively selective college where I was teaching, are math phobic. They don't understand math concepts because they think they can't and are afraid to try. They just memorize and apply procedures, and that has generally worked for them in school. To promote thinking, I began my statistics course by having the students fill out a questionnaire (anonymously) that asked for lots of information, including their gender, height, political inclination (Democrat, Republican, other), average grade in high-school math, degree of self-perceived math phobia, etc. etc. Then I gave them all the data, in a form, of course, that did not include students' names.

As we went through the course, I would ask various questions relevant to the data on that large questionnaire and get people's initial beliefs. As examples: *Are the women in the course more math phobic, by their own accounts, than the men? Is there any relationship between self-reported math phobia and performance on our most recent class test? Are tall people more likely to be Republicans than short people? If so, is this confounded by gender (because men are on average taller than women)?* Then I would ask if people could think of any ways to address the question just asked, using the data we had collected and the statistical procedures we were studying. And then I'd ask students, as homework, to do those calculations and come back with their findings. By doing the course this way, students understood the reasons for the statistical procedures we were going through and found them to be interesting and useful. It was also fun to see whose guesses were supported or not by the data analyses.

I haven't described here all my teaching, but just some things I did as a professor that turned out to be helpful and brought a degree of playfulness to the class. In retrospect, I

could have been more playful, in all my courses, than I was. Had I had access to the book you have in your hands, perhaps I would have been.

Before closing I must mention a book that has helped me, as I've grown older, to be more playful in all aspects of life than before. It's a book by the late Bernie DeKoven – *A Playful Path*, which I recommend to anyone wanting to find more delight in each moment. Here's a quote from the book that I particularly like (p 34):

“You don't have to play to be playful. You don't need toys or games or costumes or joke books. But you do have to be open, vulnerable, you do have to let go... Playfulness is all about being vulnerable, responsive, yielding to the moment... You are loose. Responsive. Present. You have to be present to enjoy the sunrise, to delight in the light of your child's delight, because otherwise you simply aren't there to catch it. It goes by you as if it and you aren't even there.”

Now read on, playfully. Enjoy the book, your students, your courses, and your life.

References

DeKoven, B. L. (2014). *A Playful Path*. ECT Press.

Gray, P. (1993). Engaging students' intellects: The immersion approach to critical thinking in psychology instruction. *Teaching of Psychology, 20*, 68-73.

Gray, P. (1997). Teaching is a scholarly activity. pp. 49-64, In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Teaching introductory psychology: theory and practice*. APA Press.