Transcript

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You're listening to a special edition of the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

In this extended conversation, Doctor Petrify Taki,

Professor Kathy Hirsh Pasek and Jason Putin discuss playful pedagogies and critically reflect on the educational principles of this approach.

The stand to help promote critical thinking, creativity, and the construction of meaning.

Their discussion tees up an Oxford Education Dinner event on the 25th of March 2026, which promises to be a fascinating,

playful and Hands-On exploration of how educators can implement these principles in their schools.

If, after listening you would like to attend the event, visit the Oxford Education Deanery website at w w w dot education,

the ox, the AC, the UK forward slash Oxford hyphen education hyphen deanery.

We look forward to seeing you there. Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

My name is Feather Fi Dickey, and I am a lecturer in Second Language Acquisition at the University of Oxford.

I am co-hosting this episode with Jason Bruton, who is an education consultant, teacher, educator, and curriculum developer.

Jason also completed his MSC in Learning and Teaching at the University of Oxford,

and continues to be an active member of the Oxford Education Deanery.

Welcome, Jason. Yeah, thank you for having me. We have the pleasure to also be joined by a brilliant guest, Professor Kathy Hersch Pasek.

Kathy is a professor of psychology at Temple University,

a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, and a visiting professor at the University of Oxford.

Hi, Kathy, it's so great to be here.

Thanks for inviting me. This podcast episode is part of an Oxford Education Deanery event that Jason and I are co organising.

The event is titled Playful Pedagogies Critical Thinking, creativity, Constructing Meaning and takes place on the 25th of March.

For more information, click the link in the description or visit the Oxford Education Deanery website.

So thank you both for joining me today. It is such a pleasure to have a conversation with you.

We're going to talk about all things playful learning and how playful learning can promote critical thinking,

creativity, and the construction of meaning in young and perhaps also not so young children.

And I believe that Jason has prepared an icebreaker for us to get in the zone for the discussion.

So, Jason, do you want to start? So actually, Kathy, because because this is our playful podcast.

Okay. When I was last in Australia, I purchased this book, which was called Would You Rather.

And the reason why I bought the book was, um, well, I bought more than one copy was that when I was some supporting sort of colleagues,

um, at the Ministry of Education in Tonga, lots of them.

And I had the experience of being, um, secondary school practitioners, and my role was to support them to develop, uh, the primary school curriculum.

So they were nervous and there was sitting language that they were aware of.

But actually when we got into it, they weren't really sure how to kind of unravel the true meaning for them.

And it was critical thinking. So I bought this book.

Or would you rather to try and support them with an accessible way of, uh, getting their heads round critical thinking?

So, Kathy, here's a question. Please respond playfully, uh, as an adult, but playfully, if you will.

So, Kathy, would you rather climb a tree or jump in a puddle?

Jump in a puddle. I love jumping in puddles.

For one, if we're going to do critical thinking when you jump in a puddle with more force,

that water goes so much higher it can almost reach your knees and you get to see then what happens when the water splashes on the other side?

Enough. The sun is out. It's so amazing you can almost make the puzzle disappear.

What is that about? Why do puzzles in water?

Why does it disappear? Well, that gets you into a discussion of evaporation and what the sun does when it's shining down on the sidewalk.

I mean, there's so many physics lessons in jumping in a puddle.

Plus, it's really fun. So I remember that I jumped in the puddle.

And when I go home, I tell my parents what happened. And you see, it's sticky learning that generalises to other stuff.

I'm. I'm so glad. I'm so glad we asked that question.

That was awesome. What? What does that make you think of Pedro? No.

I would be a, uh, jump in a puddle, uh, person as well.

And I loved the explanation, which was a lot richer than my initial, uh, response in the why question.

Uh, which is because I seen my dog do it, and he seems to be having a great time, and so I,

I would love to do that as well, but unfortunately, I don't often feel like I can.

Uh, but, Jason, what would you be? Do you know, I'm gonna.

I'm gonna be honest. I don't really like getting dirty.

It's something. Climbing a tree, huh? You know, I would climb in a tree.

Yeah. And because you said that, it gave you a memory.

Well, it reminds me of Izzy's. As a child in our garden, we had a huge weeping willow, and it had a rope ladder.

And I used to climb this rope ladder to the top of this weeping willow.

And my dad had got a innertube from, uh, from a car wheel attached to a rope.

I would jump from this up to this tree. I love it.

I Superman scared everybody senseless, but sure, it was fun.

So climbing a tree for me is joyful.

So, you know, Jason, I just wanted to add, I'm working with a lot of people who are trying this playful learning stuff.

And, um, you know, they have, like, these playgrounds, so they build poles,

nim nets on top of them and they say, well, I mean, what is playful learning?

And I said, oh my gosh, I have a great game for you. I said, can you add hatchet marks to the pole?

So they said you just to put tape up to say how far we climb.

I said, yeah, yeah, yeah, just put the hatch marks up. All of a sudden the conversation changes.

And kid one goes, oh, I climbed five feet and one goes, I climbed three feet.

And they're all talking math. So, you know, little tweaks can make it so that fun.

And your memories. How many rungs are on that ladder do you remember?

I bet you that probably a dozen. 12. All right, a dozen 12.

And did you always make it to the top? Like, was there a time when you just thought, I can't do it?

I was pretty energetic, but I never told myself, Kathy, you know, maybe I could have timed how fast I climbed.

I climbed those that ladder, those rungs. Yeah, yeah. So, you see, I mean, there's so much we could do.

Like, what was the angle of it? Like, how fast did you make it?

You know, this is where we even train armies, right? Like you're running through as fast as you can.

But but the point is, all these are wonderful math and physics lessons.

And because we don't change the lens on how we see the world, we just see it as a ladder and a fun activity.

We ended up in this world where they divorce fun from learning,

and the result is nine out of ten people describe school as boring, but sure as heck doesn't have to be.

We will come back to that later on in our discussion, hopefully.

Um, but because you almost there, it gave us a definition of active, playful learning.

I want for listeners who might not know what this term actually stands for, to to have a concrete description if.

Absolutely, absolutely. So let me let me start really by giving you context, because then I think the act of playful learning,

or what we sometimes call guided play will make sense.

We have gotten into this really bimodal distribution of schools where you're either a play for school or you're a school that does direct instruction,

thinking that these two are so different that they could never, ever possibly be married.

Now, the advantage of a direct instruction is it's kind of a pointer.

You know, if I just send you in the backyard, the chances that you come back reading are not high.

Uh, the chances that you come back learning a second language are terrible.

Okay, so what could we do to point you in the right direction of what you're supposed to learn and get the benefits of direct instruction,

but at the same time, use a playful pedagogy as a way to do that.

Directing. So we actually have a formal definition of active, playful learning or as I say, guided play.

It is that, uh, it's the we the characteristics that we consolidated from how human brains learn.

Human brains learn when they're active, not passive.

Human brains learn when they are engaged, not distracted.

Human brains learn when we have meaning making, not when we talk about stuff that nobody can identify with.

They can't build on their past knowledge in the brain. We learn, and this was a shock to many, but I think we learned it in spades in Covid.

We learn when we're socially interacting. We don't learn by just having flashcards.

We learn by engaging with each other. One of my colleagues, uh, professor Pat cool, says we have a socially gated brain.

We have evolved to interact with other human beings, to see one another and to develop relationships.

Human brains learn when they learn in multiple ways to get to the same ending.

I call that iterative. And human brains learn when we're having fun.

That's what we recall. So if you add a learning gold, active, engaged, meaningful, socially interactive,

iterative and joyful, then you get what we call active, playful learning.

It is a targeted pedagogy that is adaptable to any curriculum.

It's not a what. It's a how. And I think if people would use it and teach in the way that human brains learn active, engaged, meaningful,

socially interactive, iterative and joyful, they would find that their students would learn better.

This is an amazing definition. Very. It ties itself really well with each other, jumping in a puddle and climbing a tree, for example,

because I think both situations exemplified really well how you can use such scenarios real or imagined, um, in order to develop all these aspects.

I think that what really strikes me is it used the word targeted.

That's why I was so interested in in your kind of construction of active,

playful learning, because from my own experience, teaching in the in Upper Key Stage two.

So, you know, like ten, 11 year old, the word play is open to a lot of interpretation, misinterpretation.

And so actually the play is really focussed on.

Achieving achieving this? Yeah, I'm completely sold by that.

And I know that if I talk to people in middle school, if I talk to people at high school, they will be much more receptive to framing it that way.

May I ask, how do you kind of make a distinction, perhaps, between the benefits of free play and active, playful learning?

I mean, is there a is a is there a place for it? Absolutely.

But we've said my colleagues and I and I think a 2018 paper that we used to think of, everything is kind of categorical.

You know, it's either play or it's learning. And as I said, once we start with the category, we can create a continuous variable.

And in the continuous variable you anchor one end of it with direct instruction if you will.

And the other end of it with free play.

Now all of them have a role to play. Okay. Sometimes you need direct instruction.

Uh, sometimes you just need to be let alone. And you need free play.

And it it is socially so important. And a lot of times you learn by tinkering.

But in guided play, we've kind of mix the two and made a playful pedagogy with whatever curriculum you have for learning.

It's not just say all play should be that way. It is to say when you have a learning goal, it should be that way.

Now, a couple of things to add to what you said. One is that for teachers, it changes the role in a very positive way.

Teachers actually become less sage on this stage and more guide on this side.

And we have worked very hard to figure out what would teachers need to know to change the classroom they have into an active,

playful learning classroom? Well, have more paired conversations.

Students working together in groups. It seems like a hard thing to do.

It's actually simple. Teachers will say, oh my gosh, what if I lose control of my class?

Actually, no, you don't lose control of your class.

You have much more engaged students, so you have more control of your class, which is insane, right?

When that happens, you have more conversations between students.

Oh, you're building language and vocabulary. Oh, you're having the students have agency,

which we know is absolutely critical for kids to be able to not only thrive in school, but to take the lessons out of school.

So what we are seeing in our research and how to build it theoretically, is that we can do this.

And at the end of the day, our first studies, right now we're in 320 classrooms in the U.S. we started with 42 teachers.

Um, and just asked them, what do you think? And they said, 92%.

We would recommend this. The other week, I was in a state, Connecticut, where they have mandated active, playful learning.

And I was with a group of teachers and they said, why would you ever go back?

This is why I went into teaching. So I think what we're seeing is teachers are happier, kids are more engaged.

They're having the conversations that, by the way, in our classrooms today.

And I would put my money on the fact that England's no different than the US here.

Do you know how much time there was discussion in classroom with teachers?

1100 observations of 42 classrooms. To present.

2% of the time. 5% of the time they get to talk to other kids.

That's not the way human brains learn.

How have we got here? I don't know.

Maybe it was that we thought that we were developing widgets instead of people, and we thought that an assembly line education would work.

It won't, and it hasn't. And we've been trying this for 25 years.

And whether it's in the UK or whether it's in the US, our scores have been flat.

If it were a business model, there's no way you would have stayed developing the widgets that way and now you've got technological change.

Unesco, OECD, Unicef are calling for reimagining education.

So there's a workforce tomorrow. So there are educated citizens of tomorrow.

And here we are still doing the same old thing.

And I must add, there's one more playful thing.

It is said that if Rip Van Winkle came back today, there's only one institution that Rip Van Winkle would go.

Oh, finally, I found something that I remember from 100 years ago.

School systems. So is it because of school systems that we do the same thing?

Uh, despite the evidence? Well, I mean, my gut says, you know, that as educators and you guys hear educators, too, so weigh in.

You know, we would never, like, ask government officials what dentists should do.

You know what I mean? We never say. Could you please mandate how you should fill a cavity?

They don't know. And I wouldn't go to somebody else.

I want a dentist. A trained dentist in my mind.

Our teachers are the most special people in the world.

You know, you talk about essential workers. They're in charge of the future, right?

And they have done this out of a sense of commitment to caring about kids and the future of our society.

And we don't treat them like professionals.

We co-opt education at every turn.

And it's not okay. And so I think part of the problem is we've let this happen.

Uh, a second problem is, sadly, we don't look at the right end game.

Reading is important. But if you only are barking out stuff and you become a carnival barker, as Erica Costanza says, you're not a reader.

You're just a barker. And when you get to like, you know, be nine and ten, you have to to read, to learn instead of learning to read.

You're you're dead in the water. You don't even have the vocabulary.

We've, you know, in many countries, dammed, uh, bilingualism that may be the most important thing we have.

Human brains are perfectly equipped to learn two languages.

Three languages. And boy, does it teach us perspective.

Why does it help us with what we call, you know, meta learning the ability to learn how to learn.

So what are we doing? So for me, um, the bottom line is that just as you use the science for your cancer drugs,

and you use the science to ask what you're going to do at the dentist's office, and you use the science to protect what goes on in food.

For gosh sakes, could we use the science to develop an education system that really works for human brains?

One more point is that I use this system in my college classes.

Now, I would challenge literally anyone to be able to do what my students just told me.

They told me that if I gave them their midterm and final.

A year or two years later, they could ace it.

Yeah. Proof that, you know, we can do it. And we should.

And across ages. And I want to pick on this point because I about bilingualism.

Because this is what I read. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Obviously, uh, you worked a lot on in classrooms and I wanted to hear about, you know, does active, playful learning work well?

Or even better, uh, when you have additional languages or learning through additional languages?

Well, you know, there's no research on that that I know of.

Um, however, we are in schools with kids, um, who are bilingual Spanish, English in the United States.

And the teachers are raving. Now, what is it about this system that is so super exciting?

Well, we use what I call a three part equation.

The first part of the equation is knowing who your audience is and having respect for whatever group for teaching.

Okay. The second part is the how of learning that I already told you.

Active. Engaged. Meaningful. Socially interactive. Iterative and joyful.

The third part of the equation is what do you get out of it?

What do you get out of it? So what you get out of it is what we call the sixes.

You're better at relationships, collaboration. You're better at communication.

Whatever your language is, you are better at content because you have the background in

language.

Because if you don't, the chances that you're going to learn the content.

Reading or math are very low. You're better at you wanted critical thinking, right?

You can think out stuff better because you've been taught to think, um,

you're better at creative innovation because you put things together in new ways, because you're not restricted so much, you're not in a harness.

And finally, you have more confidence in play, right?

Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes you fail, but you get back up, you dust off your shoes, and then you go at it again.

So what we have found is that when you use a playful learning pedagogy, you actually are more inclusive, not less inclusive.

Okay. Um, more people find a way in because it's not a one size fits all, which to my definition is a this size fits no one.

It works for everyone. I think it's so true personally, that when you're playful, I think you're more receptive.

I think my mind is is open to making more connections and being more connected with with others.

And I think that's I think that's true. Like you're just more we're flexibly open.

I must hear a great story. You talk about flexibility though.

And um, so my granddaughter called me one day and she's she's a very serious little girl and she's ten.

And she said to me, why? Why do I have A.D.D.?

Like like it was, you know, she was damned or something.

Well, I have her here. Her grandfather has had her dad has had her uncles have A.D.D.

So I said, well, actually considered positive. And she looked at me like I was a nutcase.

And I said, well, just tell me, are you a more creative person? She goes, I am.

I said, you're more curious about stuff. She goes, I am.

I said, well, that's what it's like to have energy and, you know, be able.

And by the way, I took playful Learning lets you have a space in that if you happen to have A.D.D. and they say it's true for,

um, those on the spectrum as well. But, um, we had a long talk about it.

And then just yesterday I saw a major article come out that said that A.D.D. is a superpower for the default mode network in the brain,

which allows you to make more connections. How about that?

So I can't wait to tell her. But more importantly, I think we are now in a technological seismic shift.

Mhm. Um, with AI coming our way. The work of summative staff of memorised stems can be done in literally seconds.

But what we don't have an AI, at least at this moment, has not yet done well.

Is the creative curious?

Maybe it'll come, I don't know. Way of putting things together that weren't together before.

And so as I see a future of happy, healthy, socially gifted, intelligent kids, it rests on a pedagogical approach that is more open.

And that's about feeding curiosity and connections, dialogue and relationships.

And I think only then will we have a citizenry of tomorrow that will, if you will, outsmart the robots.

I have the the question to close.

What is your best hope for the future?

What is your best hope for a playful world? But I think you've just summarised it beautifully and elegantly.

But thank you, Jason. But you know, I just want to say, you know, that these things, when we think about the world we want for the future.

I hope what we're thinking about is not merely what happens in a classroom because,

you know, classrooms are a great acculturation, an important place to amass information.

But at the end of the day, it's about building citizens of tomorrow.

And right now, if you look at these changes in the world order, and I think they're coming fast and furious, I mean, we're not having fun.

We're not adults are miserable and high anxiety rates, high loneliness rates, high depression rates.

What if what if the world were more about creating a little more?

But I'll call a recess for a moment. I know I need it.

Maybe other adults need it too. What if we created new public parks that were places where kids and families could engage together?

You could even build in the cognitive science.

And we've done that in in 13 countries, in 33 cities around the world with a project we called Playful Learning Landscapes.

So I think we need to broaden our horizons of what education is.

It's no longer trapped, and we now need to think about educating for tomorrow, not educating for yesteryear.

So I think that this brings us to the end of discussion.

Not that we couldn't stay here and talk for hours, but of course, as Jason said,

Kathy has a plane to catch, so we need to end here on that hopeful and playful note.

I'd like to thank you both, Kathy and Jason, very much for joining me today for this discussion, which was both fun and informative.

And thanks, of course, to all of our listeners for tuning in and reminder that this Oxford Education Deanery

podcast episode is associated with a Playful Pedagogies event on the 25th of March,

which promises to be a day full of stimulating discussions and practical workshops with fantastic academics from the University of Oxford.

And as promised, we will link all the relevant information in the show notes and we hope to see many of you there.

Thanks again. Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

Bye, guys. You've been listening to a special edition of the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

To find out more about Playful pedagogies and book your place of the Playful Pedagogies event and to

learn more about the work the Department of Education is doing with educators all over the world.

Visit our website and sign up to our daily newsletter. You'll find the links in the show notes.