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## The impact of fun and enjoyment on adult's learning

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### Abstract

An exploration of the literature has shown that fun and enjoyment are often discussed in relation to the learning of children and older adults and are rarely mentioned in relation to the learning of adults. This paper explores the role that fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs and the impact that this has on adults learning. The focus is on data gathered in 2012 from interviews with adult learners and their teachers in Victoria, Australia. These conversations found that both groups could identify the fun and enjoyment in their adult learning experience. The findings have been analysed firstly as an overall experience, with adult learners talking more freely about fun and enjoyment and teachers talking about engagement, social relationships and safety. Learners identified a number of elements that are part of their experience of fun and enjoyment: the activities they undertake, the process established by the teachers, interacting with others, humour, achievement, their emotions and well-being and personal benefits. Both adult learners and their teachers also believed that fun and enjoyment impacted on adults learning and they were able to articulate the role that fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs. Firstly both having fun and experiencing enjoyment were perceived by both learners and teachers as a motivator to attend classes and learn the knowledge and skills. Secondly fun and enjoyment were considered a mechanism that encouraged concentration by learners and helped in the absorption of learning. Finally having fun and experiencing enjoyment were identified as a proven way to build a socially connected learning environment. The research indicates that a greater focus on the affective domain of adults learning experience, in particular fun and enjoyment could prove to be as beneficial and important as it is currently considered in children's learning. A different approach to the design of adult learning experiences and methods that incorporates greater use of fun may mean that more adults are encouraged and motivated to participate in learning with enthusiasm for the journey and optimism for the outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

This research has aimed to discover the role fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs. In particular what do adult learners identify as fun or enjoyment and what was the impact of the experience of fun or enjoyment on their learning. The research included teacher's perspectives on the role of fun and enjoyment in adult learning programs and aspired to tease out what the implications might have on the field of adult education practice.

The perspective adopted in this research does not reflect a focus on work and jobs and measurable aspects of adult education rather it comes from the affective domain focusing on difficult to measure feelings to consider the learning experiences of adults. It has taken the opportunity to consider the relevance and importance of concepts such as fun and enjoyment in an adult learning context.

## 2. Literature review

An exploration of the literature shows that fun and enjoyment have been discussed in relation to the learning of children and older adults. Creativity in children is thought to be stimulated by fun and humour, when the brain is more relaxed and is less bound by rules (Light, 2002). The role of fun and enjoyment is seen as a natural and important part of the learning process for children. Hromek and Roffey (2009) explain that there is a 'natural affiliation between children, play, and the desire to have fun' which makes games an ideal vehicle for teaching' (p. 626).

The role of fun and enjoyment has also been identified as important in the learning for older adults. In 2005 Lightfoot and Brady found that older 'people talked about the new and exciting ideas they were learning and the joy it provided' (p 230) when describing their learning experiences. In particular a woman in her late 70's reported, "The first word that comes to mind is fun" (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005, p 230). Bowman and Kearns (2007), when investigating E learning for the mature age worker, support this as they found that using a variety of approaches to learning helps to make learning interesting and fun. Davis (2001) also recommends that a focus on creating programs that emphasize fun in learning is needed for older adults.

Armstrong (2002) has identified the lack of literature on the use of humour in adult learning or the process of making adult learning fun. He quotes Cathro's (1995) argument that 'humour has often been unrecorded, and perhaps silenced, within and by academic disciplines' (p 2). Armstrong considered the use of humour in the curriculum (comedy, creative writing, drama), in teaching and learning and in research (Armstrong 2002). He identifies humour as a key teaching quality and quotes Stock's (1970) research into teaching styles and learning. Stock (1970) found that student evaluations rated teacher characteristics 'warmth, humour and responsiveness, concern' (p. 3) as higher than learning gain.

Humour and fun are linked with laughter and play and do affect us as human beings. Panksepp (2000) tells us that human laughter is a primitive reaction but it is also psychologically sophisticated. The ancestral antecedents of social joy are within the human brain and laughter is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Joy lowers the neural threshold for perceiving life events as being positive and hopeful, while raising the threshold for perceiving events as negative and hopeless. Fun and enjoyment can be, and perhaps has been, perceived as frivolous and entertainment rather than as essential to an ideal learning experience. But the experience of fun does not necessarily mean that it is an easy or comfortable experience. Barrett (2005) explored problem based learning (PBL) and hard fun. Barrett's central argument is that 'hard fun is an illuminative threshold concept for understanding learning in PBL' (2005, p 113). He draws upon the work of Papert (1996) to suggest further that:

*'Learning can be fun because it is hard, challenging and stretches participants.....The fun in hard fun is a fun with laughter, freedom, creativity and enjoyment'.* (Barrett, 2005, p. 114).

For Papert, (1996) learning is not fun in spite of being hard, but because it is hard. He defines hardness as level of difficulty and that with a high level of activity learning can take on a transformative nature and produce attitudinal change. 'Fun without hardness is frivolity; hardness without fun is drudgery' (Barrett, 2005, p. 121). The notion of hardness and challenge has also been applied to the concept of joy. Montuori (2008) views joy as a complex phenomenon and that it does not come easy. It arrives through hard work and requires psychological risk (Montuori,

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