

## **Abstract**

The article takes its part of departure in 6 distance education courses for librarians in Denmark. The subject was how to use the Internet. The author discovered that some librarians started to play. They were shamed about this fact. Is it okay to play when you are on your job? Is it not stupid to pay for a course where you just play? Do you learn anything? With this background the articles pose the following question: Will librarians start to play when they get access to a virtual learning space? Before the question is answered, the author explores and develops the concept of playing. The concept is considered from different angles e.g. society, work, education, philosophy and theories of learning. New models are presented in the article. The theoretical exercises are followed by the real cases (the courses), which are related to the theoretical findings. In the end the article will provide the reader with some practical hints of how to build a virtual playground and how to be a good playmate. When the subject is related to Internet, one of the conclusions is that the virtual playground results in better learning compared to traditional face-to face courses.

## **A Virtual Playground**

The purpose of this article is to describe, analyse, evaluate and give some practical hints in relation to 6 real cases of distance education courses for librarians in Denmark.

Instead of a comprehensive statistical and pedagogical survey the article states a simple question:

*“Will librarians start to play when they get access to a virtual learning space?”*

### **1.0. Outline**

The article starts up with a description and analysis of the industrial society in relation to education and learning (2.0). The article asserts that there are complex connections between developments in society, pedagogical developments and developments in institutions of education (see Figure 1). The casualty and impact directions between the variables are too complex for a full treatment here. It is sufficient to say that there are connections. On a more concrete level the article presents a hypothesis that society is changing and that the ability to play can be an important skill. Some considerations will be given about adult learners expectations to learning (2.1)

After this macro view the article focuses on the clarification of the concept of playing. In regarding to establish a basic theoretical framework the article gives some links back to philosophers, psychologists and educational thinkers. The thinking of the old Greeks will be central (3.0). Afterwards the article looks on definition of playing (4.0). It will develop four mode of playing which are connected to theories of learning (see Figure 3). The relationship between work, education and play will be developed (5.0). The article presents a heuristic model that is called the Human Activity Model (see Figure 4). It stresses common denominators between work, education, and play. The article continues with a description and analysis of the courses in relation to the theory (6.0). On a more practical level the article gives some hints and requirements if you want to make a virtual playing ground yourselves (7.0). The article ends with a conclusion (8.0) and references to literature (9.0).

### **2.0. Industrial approach to learning**

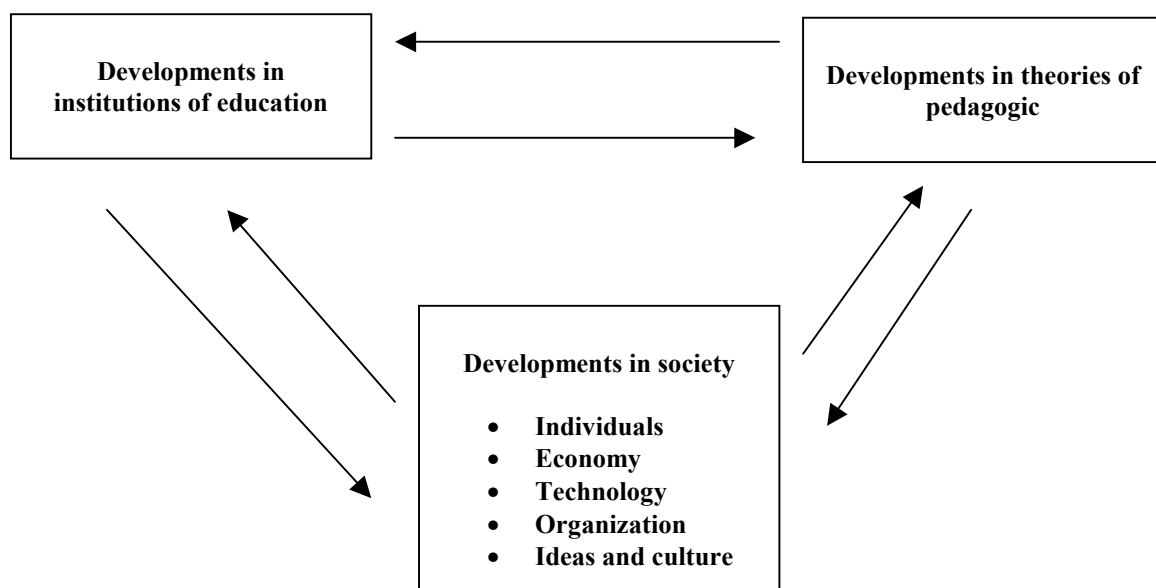
In our workaholic culture playing is childish and without any goal. The modern man is still slave of his ancestors with their Christian puritanical background. Max Weber (1864-1920) has skilfully shown the religious foundation of the early industrial society. If you shall be a good man, a believer in God, and achieve something in your life you shall work hard. Living on earth is a punishment. You are saved when you die. If you have behaved well, you will travel to Garden of Eden and live for eternity.

You have learned to accept the strain and the boringness of repetitive tasks. You have learned to save your money and deny fun and play. You have learned to accept that you are not in charge, but need to subject to parents, a God, a political leader, a boss, an employer or a teacher.

It is given by nature that you need to work in a given space (building), in a given framework of time (schedule), where you can be supervised, controlled, rewarded or punished. Man is characterized as a worker (proletarian), a tool user or a fabricator (Homo-Faber).

From the age of enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century you have inherited the importance of reason (ratio), purposefulness and science. Thinkers stress that human beings learn from experience, observation and math guided by reason. We got Homo sapiens. Human beings need to postpone dreams, feelings, and creativity. Nonetheless Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) did develop a more romantic view. In his book “Emile” he emphasised sentiments, exploring, and play.

**Figure 1: A dynamic model of the relationships between developments in society, pedagogical thinking, and institutions of education.**



Source: © Peter Gorm Larsen, 2001.

Learning is hard work according to the puritanical tradition. You need to suffer, to please and obey your parents, leaders, God, mentors, teachers or professors. As a good Christian believer you shall pursue goals set by a higher divine power. Do not ask any questions. You shall go for good marks and prestigious diplomas and titles. You shall accept to sit on a chair, be quiet and be contained in a box in many years where you cannot escape. The day is scheduled in small pieces of time and subjects. You need to give in. Technocrats and politicians of education conquer your mind, take your time and spoil your mind!

The Germanic tribes have been romanised! According to Tacitus (56-120) (Britannica) the Germanic tribes loved freedom and people did not appreciate authority (Tacitus). They were individualistic and liked games. Order, systems, authority, law, discipline and common values were part of the roman culture.

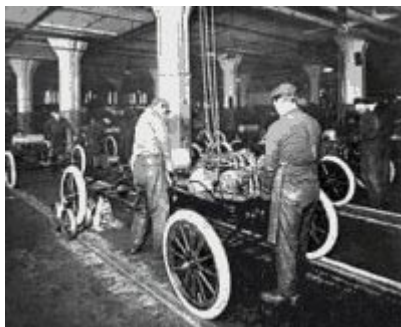
Even today teachers and experts of pedagogic stress methods of learning where focus is on clear goals, purposefulness, planning, rigid structures and static injections of knowledge in the minds of pupils and students. They are social engineers. They regard minds as mechanical devices. They are part of the industrial set-up. Try to read the theory of Freud or Skinner and think of a machine (Atkinson).

Teachers make year plans for teaching. The curriculum is organised linear and with progression. Step by step they force data, information and knowledge on the pupils and students.

Focus is on *just in case learning* instead of *just in time learning*.

In case you will be an engineer, and you shall build a bridge in the far future, you have already learned to differentiate (math) in gymnasium (high school). If you have not forgotten it or the world has not changed! In case you will sometimes in the far away future be a clerk in a firm, which makes trade with Germans, you have already learned how to write a business letter on German, because you had learned German grammar in the primary school. Do not mention word processors with business template and automatic control of grammar.

### **Picture 1: The production of a Ford**



I remember how I learned to make databases in the programme DbaseIII on the university in case I should make a database in the future. The exercise took half a year of my study time. Ten years after this learning I had created a database in Access. It was just in time learning. I have forgotten all the old stuff of dbaseIII. The world has changed and it was a piece of cake to make a database with Access. I could even have downloaded a free database from Internet.

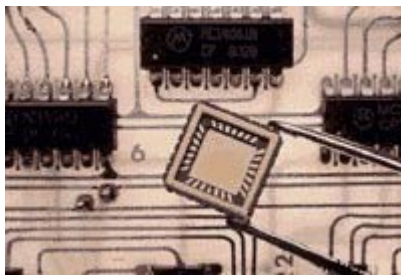
In many instances, just in case learning is quite boring, randomly and ridiculous in a fast changing world (Larsen 2000A).

Teachers and professors talk and talk. In the final examinations the pupils and students try to replay the textbooks and speeches. In return they get symbols from the judges. To be such a superhuman judge requires long education and certification.

The curriculum is often given by the states in laws. Pupils and students are more or less literally put on assembly belts. They are treated like mechanical objects. This set-up is repeated worldwide day after day. For most individuals it is enslavement. Often it takes a quarter of a lifetime. Afterwards pupils and students are ready to get boring jobs and still be satisfied! Most people cope with the boringness, because they earn money, and therefore, have the ability to consume and divert attention!

Today society has changed (Figure 1) and demands new skills, knowledge, norms and values. It requires new thinking in the institutions of education and in the thinking of pedagogic (see Figure 1). We do not live in a society with assembly lines and mass production (Fordist society), but in a Postfordist society or an Information society. But still our educational systems are literally speaking kingdoms of bricks (Larsen 2000B). In many cases you cannot even see the architectural difference between schools and factories. I will label this tradition as the *industrial approach* to learning.

### **Picture 2: A chip in our Information society**



## **2.1. Adult learners**

Especially when you make traditional face-to-face courses for adult learners, you need to fit in to this workaholic industrial approach to learning.

Some have paid a lot of money to be allowed to participate in your course. Maybe they have travelled a long way and stay in expensive hotels. Not for all adult learners is the reason to participate intrinsic motivation, but a more or less explicit demand from their employers. Or the adult learners feel they are forced to upgrade their skills as a simple matter of mere survival on the competitive labour market.

A lot of adult learners have stayed on the labour market in many years. They have only experienced the traditional old fashion school. They have learnt to suffer and cope with repetitive tasks. They have learnt to obey authorities. If this group do not feel that they suffer on your course, they suspect that something is wrong.

### **Picture 3: A Danish primary school from above.**



They expect that the course has a very detailed schedule and a clear goal. No play and chaos. Thank You. They want short and scheduled breaks. They want to sit on chairs and listening to the all-knowing teacher/expert. Very often they appreciate an authoritarian, arrogant, snobbish and ever talking teacher. He must be clever!

Often adult learners find a course good because they feel they really got a lot of facts (information) and huge stacks of paper and other course material. They expect and want the *industrial approach* to learning. The puritanical workaholic culture is reproduced!

## **3.0. Ancient Greeks**

The most innovative culture in the history of the humankind was the ancient Greeks. Was the reason play?

Ordinary work was de-emphasised by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle's. Work was not an end in itself (Hunnicuttt). Compare this view with western futurologists and pundits of theory of management today. They expect that work and leisure will melt together. The modern employee will be in purposeful activity sixteen hours a day, seven days a week!

For the Greeks free time (*schole*) and playing (*paidia*) were very important. Professor Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt writes:

*“The word for education in Greek, paideia is from the same word as child pais and play paidia. Plato often used the similarity of the three words to make the point that education should be play-like and done in the spirit of childhood”* (Hunnicuttt).

Philosophy, the highest form of knowledge, was considered as a joyful game (sic.). In the famous book, “The Republic” written by Plato there are many examples (Krentz). Remember the dialogs where Socrates is playing with arguments. For Socrates and Plato learning (playing) was a lifelong activity. Very often Plato went outside the city walls to fields, springs, lakes and so on to initiate learning processes with his contemporaries.

According to Hunnicutts interpretation of Plato, the freest activities were done for the sake of the activity itself. Unlike work and education, play was not done for some purposes such as money, to make a product, to meet an obligation or to get a diploma. Compare this view to our meritocratic society today. Do you have a purpose for your activities?

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) wrote a book “Homo Ludens” (1938) about the play element in culture (Britannica). He asserts that genuine play is one of the main drivers of civilisation. Playing was an important force in developing the alphabet and the technology of writing (Hobart and Schiffmann). Huizinga defines play as:

*“A voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and space, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life” (Hobart and Schiffmann: 47).*

As the Greeks Huizinga stresses the competitive and agonistic element in play.

Plato did not think that all kinds of play were desirable. He made a distinction between unbounded play and bounded play (Hunnicuttt). Unbounded play was completely free play without any inspiration or guidance. It was dangerous, misleading and chaotic. Bounded play was guided and structured by a teacher (Hunnicuttt).

**Picture 4: Plato and Aristotle, from Raphael's School of Athens**



Source: <http://www.csbsju.edu/philosophy/raphael.html>

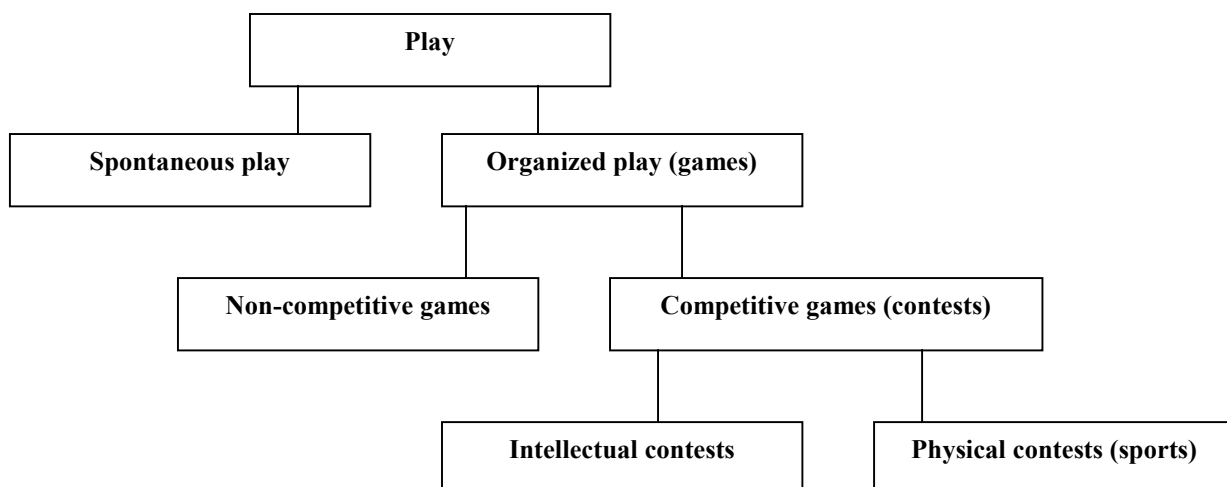
#### **4.0. What is playing?**

Playing has something to do with freedom. You are highly motivated. It is difficult to force people to play. Playing is a state of mind where you transcend time and space. The play mode demand activity and concentration.

It is difficult to give a precise definition of the concept of playing. In the “Encyclopædia Britannica” you can find the following distinctions (see Figure 2).

Play can be subdivided to spontaneous play and organized play (games). Organized play can be subdivided to non-competitive games and competitive games (contests). Competitive games can be subdivided in to intellectual contests and physical contests (sports).

**Figure 2: A distinction of play**



Source: Britannica online. <http://www.britannica.com/>

Another distinction of play is that you can play alone or together with others. In a matrix you can melt this distinction with a distinction between spontaneous play and organised play. Then you get four kinds of playing as it is shown in Figure 3.

#### **4.1. Play in mode 1**

If you play alone and spontaneous it has the contingency to be a very creative process of personal development and a discovery of new ideas and skills. You can be an entrepreneur. For convenience I will call it play in mode 1.

Here you can make you own structure. This kind of playing is a way to transcend a given structure and a given discourse. It is freedom!

**Figure 3: Types of playing**

<b>Playing</b>	<b>Play alone</b> (Constructivism)	<b>Play with others</b> (Social Constructivism)
<b>Spontaneous play</b> (unbounded)	<b>Mode 1</b> Entrepreneur or idiosyncrasy	<b>Mode 2</b> Team based innovation or chaos
<b>Organized play</b> (bounded)	<b>Mode 3</b> Enhancement or waste of time	<b>Mode 4</b> Sport. Winners or losers

Source: © Peter Gorm Larsen, 2001.

When you take a normal course, you have a given curriculum and you need to pass a given exam. You cannot transcend the structure, the discourse and develop new and emergent knowledge. You are forced to repeat and replay the knowledge given by the teachers, the authorities, the handouts, the articles, and the books.

I assert that this traditional approach is not sufficient in a very dynamic and ever changing economy and world (see e.g. Kelly; Downes and Mui). It is one of the reasons why we should start to play in our educational system and on our job. We should begin to fight against the technocratic, rational, and puritanical orientation. We should go beyond the industrial approach. We need not only lifelong learning, but also lifelong playing!

Big institutions of educations mass-produce diplomas, certificates, and titles. The pedagogical orientation is often built on Behaviourism (Atkinson, Labinowiz). The curricula are linear and organized in lectures, hours, months and years. The assumption is that people think and learn mechanical.

In regarding to computers mode 1 has the contingency that you will start to explore the computers, the many features in software and the possibilities on the Internet. The MIT professor Seymour Papert calls people with this kind of approach to computers "Bricoleurs". The opposite are "Planners" (Papert). They do not dare to touch the keyboard before they have got a clear instruction. I assert that they cannot play. Therefore they have not learnt to learn. They will have difficulties to adapt to the many changes in our post-industrial society (see e.g. Tofler, Naisbitt).

The Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980), The father of Constructivism, stresses that playing is very important when children shall learn. The bottom line of math is a comprehension of relations of physical objects. If children shall comprehend math they need to build castles of sand and play with real materials.

**Picture 5: Playing alone on a beach**



A scholar of Constructivism writes that one major insight of Piaget is the distinctions between play and work. Adults make this distinction. He writes:

*“If we look at children before they start school we note that they do not play or work, they simply do: they experience and learn. They interact with the world, explore it, and learn from those interactions. At some point in school (and in society), they are taught a distinction. This distinction between work and play is not always dramatic, but schools essentially tell children that one learn from certain kinds of activities (work) and not from others (play).... Everyone knows, for example, that fifth graders are too old to play with blocks although blocks can pose geometric problems that puzzle adults”* (George Hein in Labinowiz: 171).

The point is in deep contrast to our workaholic culture so I need to provide you with a longer citation:

*“Piaget`s theory gives criteria for the types of experiences which are likely to be rewarding and to lead to learning and to the development of intelligence. But the classification cuts across our whole work-play distinction. It deals with such questions as: is there active involvement for the child (rather than just passive acceptance)?; is the child led to question his own views?; and do the kinds of experiences offered lead to disequilibrium or cognitive dissonance? By this kinds of criteria – involvement, enthusiasm, questioning, and puzzlement – most of the things we call work (writing papers, doing math problems, and taking school tests) would be ruled out, while many of the things we call play (exploring new materials, interacting with peers, testing oneself against others) would qualify as learning experiences. This discussion becomes particularly significant when we remember that we are talking not just about learning particular things but about learning how to learn, developing intelligence”.* (George Hein in Labinowiz: 171).

**Picture 6: A crowded classroom**



If you have the ability to play you can easily adapt to a changing environment. It is the reason why organisations and scientists of organization and management start to pay attention to the process of playing. It is well known that Shell has forced its managers to play with scenarios as a way to forecast and adapt to the future environment (De Geus). To cite De Geus:

*“...games could significantly accelerate institutional learning. That`s not so strange when you think of it. Some of the most difficult and complex tasks in our lives were learned by playing: cycling, tennis, playing an instrument. We did it, we experimented, we played. But how were we going to make it OK to play? Few managers were able to say, “I don` t mind a little mistake. Go ahead, experiment”...We didn` t feel we could go to executives who run some of the biggest companies in the world and say, “Come on, let`s have a little game”.* (De Geus: 96).

That play and idleness have the contingency of inventions and innovation is the reason to 3M`s 15 percent rule. This rule allows 3M`s people to spend up to 15 percent of the workweek on anything as long as it is product related. The most famous example to come out of this is the Post-it-note, which now is a big income for the firm (Harvey and Brown: 8).

On the other hand I acknowledge that some form of spontaneous playing alone can be quite unproductive. I will call it idiosyncratic play. Imagine you go around and kick to stones without any progress. You do not move yourself. May be it is the reason why Plato talked about unbounded and bounded play.

#### **4.2. Play in mode 2**

If you play spontaneously with others it has the contingency to be innovative. I call it for Team based innovation. As a shortcut, play in mode 2.

Language is essential for learning according to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1900-1930)(Moll) and Social Constructivism. It is the reason why other people and society also are important in the processes of learning (e.g. McMahan).

Some scholars talk of collaborative learning. You learn in a social context. Knowledge is created in social environments, learning communities or communities of practice (Lave and Wenger). The dialog between human beings was very important for Plato too. It has greater value than a written text (Hunnicuttt).

#### **Picture 7: Playing near the ocean**



Social Constructivism does not explicit talk about playing. Focus is on learning. I take the freedom to talk about collaborative playing.

Playing with others without any rules also has the contingency to become chaotic. It can develop to anarchy and degenerate to pure individualism, fights and even full-scale war.

But playing near chaos can be very productive. Anarchy, intensive strife and competition between many small independent fiefdoms, city-states and states in Europe were one of the reasons that Europe and the western civilisation supersede China and the Islamic world in the history of civilisations (Kennedy).

One of the pundits of the new economy is not afraid of chaos. He writes:

*“This is where life lives, between the rigid death of planned order and the degeneration of chaos. Too much change can get out of hand, and too many rules – even new rules – can lead to paralysis. The best systems have this living quality of few rules and near chaos. There is enough binding agreement between members that they don’t fall into anarchy, yet redundancy, waste, incomplete communications, and inefficiency are rife. My own involvement in groups that launched*

*successful change, and my second-hand knowledge of many, many others involved in world changing innovation, convinces me that all of these ensembles teetered on the brink of chaos at their peak performance” (Kelly: 113).*

I suggest that playing with others in an unorganised manner can create emergent knowledge. The process of playing can open for new approaches and points of views. A group of people can play and as a by-product learn to adapt to new situations and emergent structures. This ability is essential for individuals and organizations in relation to survival in our more technological, global, competitive, and ever changing society.

This is also one of the clues that explain why the military has a long tradition for use of war games and thinking in scenarios. They generate knowledge of unexpected and incalculable situations and outcomes. The Generals play!

I prefer playing in mode 2. It should be part of the curriculum in schools and life in organizations.

### **4.3. Play in mode 3**

You can play alone in accordance to clear rules. It is organized play. I have labelled it play in mode 3.

It has the contingency to enhance your skills, but you cannot create new knowledge and transcend a given structure. The tracks and footpaths are already made. Often it is not considered as play but boring training and drills.

Organized training can make you a better runner, user of specific software or a better reader. Focus is on repetition, iteration, progression and linearity. In certain circumstances this kind of training can be necessary and good.

In relation to learning the theoretical approach is often Behaviourism (Atkinson, Labinowiz). Focus is on stimuli and response of the individual. This kind of learning will not prepare you for new and other circumstances. It was appropriate in the industrial society. Bad generals make planning and drills in accordance to the last war. They will lose!

Very often this kind of learning and playing is waste of time. For example a child can sit alone in many hours in front of a computer and play organized and closed games. The child enhances the score but so what! It is difficult to transfer the acquired skills from the games to other circumstances.

### **4.4. Play in mode 4**

Very roughly, I label organized play with other people sport or play in mode 4. The interactions are competitive and it is zero sum games. There will be winners and losers. In contrast, spontaneously playing with others is seldom zero sum games. It is win-win games or lose-lose games. No doubt, competitive games can be an important drive for learning. Think of the Olympic games and how people excel. Or how students compete and work hard for good grades. On the other hand too much competition can be dangerous and disruptive for cooperation and development.

It is very difficult for people to transcend or go beyond the structure of a game. You cannot create emergent knowledge or adapt to an emergent structure. Innovation and creativity will be constrained by the rules of the game. It will even be collectively sanctioned, and therefore, difficult to change.

### **4.5. A biological or a societal phenomenon?**

Playing can be interpreted as a cultural/societal phenomenon or as a biological/psychological phenomenon.

The first approach emphasises that playing is conditioned and should be understood in a cultural or societal context. Playing can be observed in all societies but in some societies they play more than in other societies. The second approach says that playing is part of the human nature.

Mammals and birds play when they do not follow the ritualised behaviour pattern as a response to stimuli. Play is common among immature animals as a process of learning adult behaviour (Britannica). By playing the animals learn to exercise hunting and survival skills.

It is common known that children play as a way to prepare for adulthood. Play is often simulation. It is not the real thing. Some psychologists think people play as a safety valve to give outburst for aggression or frustration.

Many thinkers consider playing as a kind of hedonism, idleness, childish and a threat to social order. The American social scientist Daniel Bell (1919-) complains that the old protestant way of life is gone. He thinks it will have dire consequences for the American society (Postrel).

John Dewey (1859-1952), the famous pedagogue, dislikes playing. He thinks play is foolishness, demoralizing, may stifle educational growth and if pursued for its own sake may lead to irresponsible behaviour. He describes play as arbitrary and fanciful, morbid, aimless and useless (Makedon).

### **5.0. Work, education, and play**

It is already showed that there is a distinction between play and work. In this part I will develop it further.

As a heuristic approach I have developed the Human Activity Model (Figure 4). It is rude and simple. You can work; educate yourself in an institution of education or play. The activities can be mixed. In all activities you have the possibility to learn. In this context I define learning as changing in skills, knowledge, norms, and values.

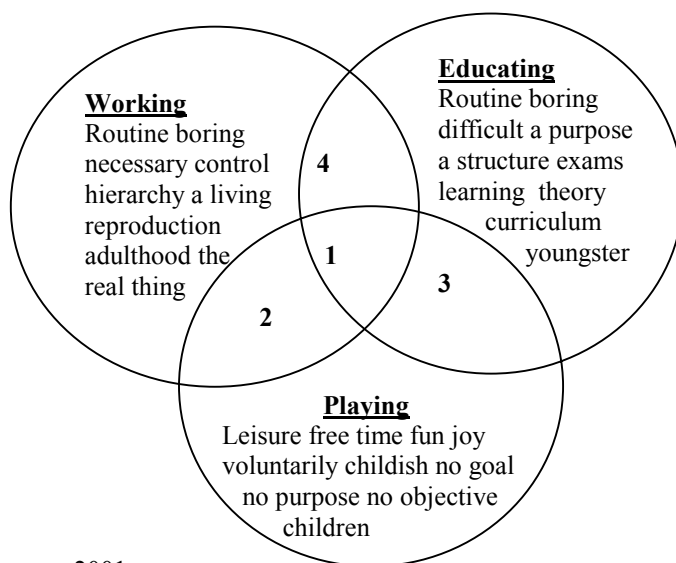
In accordance to common sense I have put some words in the model (Figure 4), which describes work, education and play.

In the beginnings of the human history I imagine that work, education, and play were in the same process, time, and location. It is the common denominator in the middle of the model – position 1.

Work, education and play were separated as the human civilisation develops. Specialisation and differentiation were the mega trends of civilisation in the run for power, law, perfection, rationality, efficacy, productivity, and profit.

It is my point of view that position 1 must be the goal for all human activity. In this position the human being as necessity makes activities for a living (work, reproduction), get new skills, knowledge, norms and values (education, learning, inventions) and voluntarily enjoy the activities (play, feel good). Employers, planners of education, and designers of toys should know this goal.

**Figure 4: The human activity model**



Source: © Peter Gorm Larsen, 2001

Positions 2, 3 and 4 are steps in the right direction. Work and play (2), education and play (3), and work and education (4) should melt together in the common denominator (1).

You can find the trends in buzzwords such as the learning organisation (Senge), situated learning (Lave and Wenger)(melting pot of work and education) (4), edutainment (play and education) (3) and innovative organisations (work and play) (2) (Mintzberg and Quinn 678-703).

Technology, and especially information technology, could be a great facilitator for this melting process and homing in to position 1. It is my prediction that in the future you will work, educate and play in the same process.

## **6.0. Distance education courses for librarians**

I made 3 different distance education courses for librarians. The titles of the courses were “Basic course in how to use the Internet”, “Images, sounds and videos on the Internet” and “Advanced statistics on the Internet”. The courses are built on the same principles so I will constrain my description and analyses to the “Basic course in how to use the Internet”.

The course ran over 5 weeks and was build over 10 modules. The participants should go through the following modules:

- 1) The history and functions of the Internet.
- 2) E-mail, web mail, mailings lists, voicemail, video mail, list servers, registration, online e-mail catalogues.
- 3) Navigation – how to use a browser, copy and paste.
- 4) Catalogues and search machines.
- 5) Pictures, images, graphics and gif-animation.
- 6) Pdf files and Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- 7) Download and Winzip.
- 8) Sounds on the Internet.
- 9) Video, web cams and videoconferences.
- 10) How to build a homepage and put in on a server.

The main purpose was that they got some inspiration to play with the computer and the Internet. The target group was absolutely beginners.

### **Picture 6: The interface – not fancy**



It was a commercial distance education course without any face-to-face meetings. The participants got a personal password. It allowed them to log on to the course. They should only have a web browser and an Internet connection.

No requirement for special software and equipment. The idea was that the librarians should participate in the course when they were on duty in the libraries. The software I used was simple (<http://www.webcrossing.com>). I did not invest a lot of time and energy in the interface for the users. It was rough and simple. It should be a collaborative virtual playground and not a near perfect environment.

My distance education courses have now run two times each. About 30 people have participated in the basic Internet course. All together about 50 people have participated.

The main principle for the design of the courses was found in Social Constructivism and in the idea of playing.

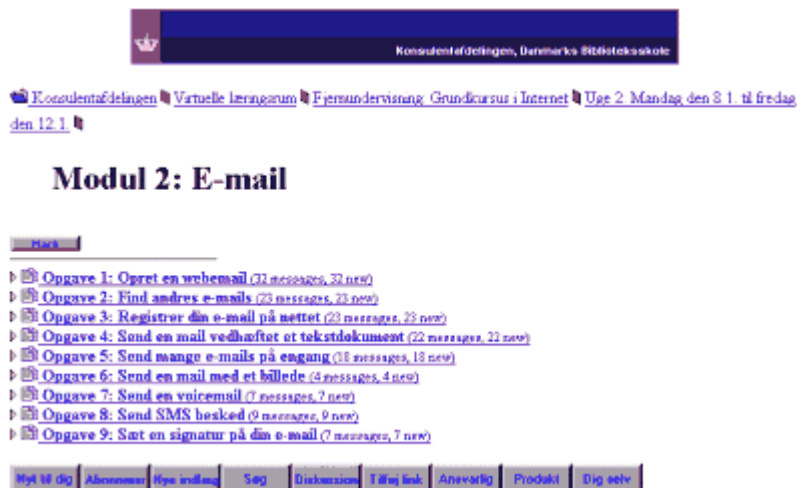
### 6.1. The set-up and the ball game

Every week the participants got access to new tasks. It was impossible for the participants to make all the tasks. It would require too much time. According to the advertisement of the course it should require 4 hours every week. The idea was that the participants were adult learners and they themselves should be allowed to choose which tasks they want to make. It was voluntarily and a way to differentiate between the level of the participants skills. The first tasks were easy and the last tasks were very difficult.

Some librarians had problems with this approach. How could it be voluntary which tasks you want to make? How could they get a course diploma, when they did not make same tasks?

It was designed consciously. I expected that they were responsible for their own learning processes. They should learn to make a selection in the many tasks and make priorities of limited time resources. They should have the freedom to select the tasks they found most interesting and demanding. They could choose the tasks they found most appropriate in relation to their specific job situation.

#### Picture 7: Too many Tasks!



Compared to traditional face-to face courses the participants could now use their own computers instead of fancy computers in a classroom. When they downloaded programs (audio- and video players, image- and html editors) they could use them in the future. They got skills in how to use computers they worked with daily.

The course was not designed as a smooth linear travel, which should produce smiling sheets of evaluations. It was part of the set-up that the participants should be frustrated, bewildered and felt lost. Is it not what learning requires? Changing skills, knowledge, norms, and values is not an easygoing thing. Playing can be hard “work”. A lot of people make a marathon for fun!

Most of the tasks used materials on the Internet. So it was a requirement to the software that it should be easy for all participants to make links to places on the Internet. It is well known that features and programs on the Internet change very fast. So I did not author long manuals and instructions. I made some examples and some links to sites on the Internet. It was all. In realty, my role was simply to provide the bricks and an appropriate environment for playing. I should not be at teacher but a playmate.

### **Picture 8: Examples and links**



Some participants made complaints about this fact. They have expected papers, books, manuals and instructions. They felt lost in a World Wide Wilderness. Some librarians complained that I did not give them a structured and systematic approach to the Internet. They wanted a map over the World Wide Web!

But it was part of my design. They should learn to learn in a chaotic world. They should learn to play. If they did not want to play, it was not my fault!

On the other hand a lot of participants came very far ahead compared to my traditional two days face-to-face courses. They played. Some of them even complained that they were not used to play when they were on work! In relation to Figure 4 this situation is located in position 2. They even logged on to my material in lunch breaks and when they came home after work.

They made gif animations, mp3 recordings, and personal homepages. A librarian made a gif-animation of the face of his newborn baby. Some made a logo for the library. A librarian uploaded an mp3 file, where you could listen to a song performed by his daughter.

They got new skills that were provided by an institution of education - The Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark. We can also talk of Working and educating – position 4. I assert that the course was located in position 1 – the common denominator between work, education, and play.

Some complained that many of the tasks were so difficult that it required help from their colleagues and spouses. In their opinions it was simply too bad. You buy a course and then you need help from others!

It was part of my design and in good fit with Social Constructivism. Very often learning is a social process. I told them flamboyantly that it was good that they had involved their colleagues and spouses. It showed me that they had a drive for learning. Hopefully they played in mode 2 (Figure 3).

In the same manner, some complained that all participants could see each other's solutions to the tasks. They felt annoyed. But in the design of the courses I had stressed Social Constructivism and play in mode 2. It was easy to cheat and copy other participant's solutions, but I felt that it was not my responsibility that some librarians took the easy way. On the other hand I observed that the participants got inspiration from each other. Many librarians tried to develop new answers to the tasks. It was a way to break the boringness of traditional questions and answers. The design gave inspiration to competition and innovation. It was collaborative learning and playing.

**Picture 9: Collaborative playing in an open environment**



Some librarians did not like that there were many different solutions to the tasks. They expect one, and only one solution. But real problems in the real world have more than one solution. When you play there are many possible outcomes.

I used the same approach regarding tools (programs) to solve the tasks. I did not demand that all the participants should use the same image-, html editor or browser. Some used Paint Shop Pro, others Paint, Photoshop or Adobe. Why should they use a specific image-editor or html-editor? They change all the time and why spoil time on a specific program? Focus should be on principles – what is possible – more than commands and specific features. The course should be more than a commercial for the latest products of Microsoft.

As part of the design of the course I emphasised dialog. I made individualized comments to all the participants' solutions. All participants could see my comments. It was praise (appeal to the affective dimension of learning), critics, suggestions, and instructions (appeal to the cognitive dimension of learning). I tried to be a playmate or consultant more than a teacher.

When we approach the final stage of the course I pose an open question to all the participants. Did you learn anything on this course? Often this question started a heated debate between the participants and me.

On the other hand I am not too satisfied with the online dialog. Every week we had a chat time, but it was rarely used! It was also possible to have a videoconference via Netmeeting (a Microsoft programme) but it happens seldom. The programme and the Internet connections were too unreliable for this kind of face-to-face dialog via video. Nevertheless my online support via SMS and my mobile phone were used many times.

## **7.0. Requirements and hints**

I will shortly recap the main requirements to the software and add a few other observations. It could be essential if you will build your own virtual playing ground.

The software should have the following properties:

- Easy to use both for the learners, the teacher (play master), and the administrator.
- Administrator: It should be easy to set-up the software on a server, give people passwords, to log the participant's activities, check new activities, copy an old course and change it to a new course, make backup of the materials.
- Based on the Internet protocols and World Wide Web. It should not demand that the learners have specific software. It should be compatible with the main browsers and it should be possible for learners to participate even behind firewalls. It should be possible to have access from all kinds of computers.
- Not too much graphic, which will slow down the access time.
- Easy to make links to the Internet. Easy to copy and paste from other applications. Easy to upload all kinds of files.
- It should be possible to see a photo of the participants.
- All participants should have access to all communication and activities in the virtual playground. The playground should not be too perfect!

Hints to the organisation of the virtual playing ground:

I will give you a few hints from my own experiences with distance education.

- Make people aware of your pedagogic point of view before they enlist on your Social Constructivist course.
- Make the course short, but intensive. If it is too long people start to lose the attention and motivation.
- Make your course in modules. It should not be too overwhelming.
- Make it possible to differentiate and create a possibility for progression in the course.
- Be bold and frankly in your dialog. Try to make life in the virtual playground. The participants expect that there is life in the other end of the wire.
- Never give free access to your playground. People who will pay are more motivated than free riders. People think that free stuff is not good stuff.
- Make clear deadlines for the activities in the playground. Otherwise you will drown in work. More than one person should be responsible for the virtual playground.
- Do not expect you can make money on virtual playing grounds.

## **8.0. Conclusion**

I have used the same curriculum on traditional two days courses. According to evaluation sheets the participants were very satisfied on my face-to-face courses. But as a teacher I was concerned with the results. We were in a time hurry and many participants never learned more advanced e-mail features, unzip and zip files, make homepages and so forth. I consider my distance education courses as a success regardless of complaints and frustrations by the participants. I can see they did more and got new important skills. But as a business it was bad. Virtual playgrounds require more than 500 percent more time compared to my face-to-face courses.

It is my conclusion that most of the librarians started to play when they got access to a virtual learning space. They even got new skills, knowledge, norms, and values. But some librarians could not adapt to the virtual learning space and the principle behind the design of the courses. It can be explained by their styles of learning (Kolb) or the simple fact that they had forgotten how to play!

On the bottom line they should have an experience where they learn to play. The content of such a play-course could be computer games on net cafés, windsurfing, swimming, skiing, sailing, running, dancing, drawing, running in forest with map and compass, kite building and camp-craft (make fireplaces, fishing, hunting, shelters and so forth). If you cannot play you cannot learn! You will properly get a problem in the future!

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