EXPLORING PLAY/PLAYFULNESS AND LEARNING IN THE
ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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by

David J. Tanis

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The dissertation of David J. Tanis was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Edward Taylor  
Professor of Adult Education  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Elizabeth Tisdell  
Professor of Adult Education

James Johnson  
Professor-in-Charge of Early Childhood Education

Sam Monismith  
Associate Professor of Health Education

Gary W. Kuhne  
Associate Professor of Education  
Program Coordinator of Graduate Program in Adult Education

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Play and playfulness and their role in learning are researched extensively in early childhood education. However, as the child matures into an adult, play and playfulness are given less attention in the teaching and learning process. In adult education, there is very little research about play/playfulness and its significance for learning. Despite this oversight, there are adult educators who routinely incorporate play and playfulness in their classrooms and see it as central in the teaching of adults.

This study used a comparative case study approach to explore the role of play and playfulness in learning in an adult and higher education classroom context. Based on specific criteria, four playful classrooms were identified and investigated through classroom observations, interviews with the educators, focus group interviews with students, and paper and pencil surveys administered to all students in these classrooms. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the classroom observations were videotaped and reviewed. Inductive analysis and constant comparative technique were utilized to analyze the data.

The findings revealed that educators associated the following elements with play and playfulness: fun, spontaneity, relationship and connection, silliness or goofiness, creativity and imagination. Furthermore, play and playfulness were most frequently manifested in the classroom through risk taking, storytelling, and physical activities. Students identified cognitive gains in terms of engagement, retention, and understanding. More significantly, students indicated that play and playfulness created a unique learning environment that felt safe and encouraged risk taking. Additionally, play and playfulness
created positive affect such as fun, enjoyment, and laughter in the classroom environment.

This study addresses the lack of empirical research on play and playfulness in adult learning. It identifies positive benefits of incorporating play and playfulness in a classroom context and suggests that to fully realize these benefits, educators should adopt a model of learning that embraces the significance of emotions and affect. Play and playfulness facilitate learning in the adult and higher education classroom.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Play is everywhere. We play with words, play war games, watch a play, play the stock market, analyze a football play, and play around. The ubiquitous nature of play is evident in the multiple approaches taken in the study of play. Anthropologists study the play and ritual found in customs and festivals of various people groups. Biologists study the play of animals. Mathematicians focus on games of chance and probability to play war games and devise defense strategies. Psychiatrists utilize play to diagnose and provide therapy for patients. Psychologists study play to understand its role in human development. Sociologists focus on the adaptive aspect of play and how it contributes to socialization. Educators explore the relationship of play and learning; however, this is only explored in the realm of children and more specifically in early childhood education. Very little is written about the role of play and playfulness among adult learners (Melamed, 1985; Cooper, 1996).

This chapter provides an overview of a study which examined play and playfulness in an adult learning context. It begins with a discussion of play and playfulness in society, its integration with learning, and manifestation in adult life. Background for this study is provided by exploring definitions of play and playfulness, examining theories that have been developed specifically for adult play, and reviewing studies of adult play and playfulness. The purpose, research questions, overview of the design, and methodology of the study follow. The conceptual framework for this study is presented to identify this study’s understanding of play/playfulness and learning. Finally,
the significance of the study, definition of terms, assumptions, and limitations are discussed.

**Background of the Problem**

Play behavior is seen in several species on earth. In addition to humans, other mammals, birds and a few fishes and reptiles exhibit playful behaviors (Fagen, 1995). Some researchers speculate that playfulness is a characteristic that is associated with higher evolutionary development as evidenced in the positive correlation between brain size and playfulness in mammals (Furlow, 2001). In other words, the more a species plays, the higher the intelligence. Play is then seen among some evolutionists as an adaptive behavior that increases the chances of a species surviving (Fagen, 1995). One commonality between play in animals and humans is that it is the young who spend the most time engaged in playful behaviors (Brughardt, 2005).

Children play. Most societies associate childhood with play (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). In fact, play is considered so important to childhood development that a child’s right to play is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Conventions, 1989). There is much research on play and playfulness in children (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). Play theorist, Sutton-Smith (1977) provides a sample of some of the research findings concerning play and playfulness with children. Play increases problem solving ability, creative capacity, emotional expressiveness, reading and storytelling competency, literacy, language skills, writing ability, cooperation with other children, and produces better behaved children. Play’s significance in the lives of children and in the education of children is firmly established and can be traced back to ancient times. For example, in Plato’s Republic, children’s
play was supported as an important means of learning through experiences. In fact, the Greek word for play and education were the same (paideia) and were only distinguishable by placement of the accent (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). However, in Greek culture, as a child entered adulthood, they were no longer encouraged to engage in paideia, but rather in agon (meaning contest) (Terr, 1999).

The connection between play and learning for children was transferred into modern America by many educators including Piaget. He formulated a theory which postulates that children progress through distinctive stages in their intellectual development until their thought processes become similar to adults (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). In his theory, play provides a means for children to practice newly acquired skills and concepts. However, Piaget’s theory does not leave any room for adults to engage in play as part of learning because they can “live” in reality rather than “play” at reality (Terr, 1999).

Psychologist Lenore Terr laments the lack of value given to play in the lives of adults. As adults are overworked and overstressed “we are forgetting how to play” (Terr, 1999, p. 25). Play theorist Sutton-Smith (1997) shares her sentiment as seen in the following questions he poses: “why play is seen largely as what children do, but not what adults do; why children play but adults only recreate; why play is said to be important for children’s growth but is merely a diversion for adults” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 7).

Psychologist Nina Lieberman (1977) suggests that playfulness in children develops into a personality trait that is carried into adulthood, but regretfully acknowledges that social manifestations of play are less acceptable for adults. Why are adults not encouraged to play in our society?
One factor that must not be overlooked is the influence of the Puritan or Protestant work ethic in North America. Play is often defined as unproductive and as activity that produces no wealth or goods (Caillois, 2001, Huizinga, 1950). Unproductiveness is the enemy of a capitalistic society which extols productivity as the means of generating wealth. This extreme value placed on productivity in our society is reinforced by the dominant religious belief system. The Puritan or Protestant work ethic prevalent in our society developed from the belief that works (whether material or spiritual) provide evidence of salvation (Fullerton, 1959). The works do not necessarily provide salvation; however, people can know for certain they are “saved” if they produce “good works.” Consequently, the non-productivity of play makes it a target from both the economic and religious paradigms prevalent in our society.

Even though play may be frowned upon, in 2002 Americans spent 634 billion dollars on play or recreation (The Department of Commerce defines recreation spending to include home electronics, radio and television, music, entertainment, sporting goods, amusements, home gardening, toys, books and magazines, and recreation equipment like boats, motor homes, and bicycles)(Census, 2002). This figure accounts for 8.6% of total consumer expenditures. However, this figure does not provide the whole picture of play among adults. Much of the expenditures on play and recreation are hidden in other categories such as travel (cruise ships, vacations, etc.)(The Academy of Leisure Sciences, 2005). Interestingly, most of this money for play is spent on the most popular form of adult play: gambling. In 1996 it is estimated that $400 billion was spent on gambling (Sutton-Smith, 1997). While one might argue if all of these pursuits are truly playful, it is hard to deny the investment of time and resources made by adults in these activities.
There is something significant here. “How can it be that such ecstatic adult play experiences, which preoccupy so much emotional time, are only diversions?” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 7). There is a need to better understand the adult experience of play to further examine if play is merely a diversion or if there is something more to it. The investment in play indicates that it is of value to adults, possibly for the pleasure that it brings. Time and resources are also being invested by adults in education as they are returning to school in growing numbers (Kassworm, 2003). Adults are interested in play and are interested in furthering their education. Perhaps both of these desires could be addressed at the same time through play/playfulness in the classroom. This combination of play and learning is already widely accepted in the education of young children. Play/playfulness might also be beneficial in the educational process of adults. These connections between play/playfulness and adult learning warrant additional inquiry. A starting point in this inquiry process is to identify what is meant by play/playfulness in the adult learning context.

**Play and Playfulness Definitions, Theories and Studies**

The extensive nature of play and playfulness makes it difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of what these words mean. While most everyone plays occasionally and knows what playing feels like, it is difficult to make theoretical statements about play because of its elusive nature. The difficulties in conceptualizing play are exasperated by the fact that various academic disciplines approach play so differently. “Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language – and they all use the word play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 6). Some play theorists have given up hope of adequately defining play: “Given
its elusive nature, it is unlikely that researchers will ever come up with a satisfactory
definition of play” (Power as cited in Burghardt, 2005, p. 46). While the prospect of
arriving at one, satisfactory definition may be dubious, examining various definitions will
provide a starting point for our exploration of play and playfulness among adult learners.

Before launching into various definitions of play and playfulness, it is important
to distinguish between these two words. Play is often used to refer to content or activity
(game, festival, event), while playful is used to refer to the attitude or state of mind
(lighthearted, fun). However, “there is nothing fixed about the distinction” (Sutton-
Smith, 1997, p. 147), and the two are often used interchangeably. In fact, play is often
assumed to include the playful; “play is only play because it is playful” (Ellis, 1973, p.
22). In this study the words are used somewhat interchangeably with play often referring
to activity and playful referring to attitude or state of mind. In discussions that apply to
both play as activity and playfulness as an attitude, the words are written together as
play/playfulness.

**Play**

The following list is comprised of several authors’ definitions of play. There are
contradictions in some of the statements, but at this time the goal is to become familiar
with some of the ways play is conceptualized. Play is fun, enjoyable, pleasurable,
voluntary (no one is forcing you to play), and non-serious (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990;
Huizinga, 1950; Caillois, 2001). It is spontaneous and grants freedom to experiment
(Apter, 1991). Play creates a private world that can be shared with others, but remains
separate from the real world and ordinary time and space. The outside world has no
significance and the real problems from the outside world cannot impinge into the world
of play. This provides the player with a sense of control and mastery (Apter, 1991; Cailllois, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Huizinga, 1950). Play provides a challenging activity that requires skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Play fully absorbs individuals to the point where they can lose track of time and want to prolong the activity. Play is characterized by concentration and focus (Apter, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990;Huizinga, 1950). Its outcome is uncertain (Cailllois, 2001). In play, there are clear goals and immediate feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is unproductive in that it creates no new product or material goods (Cailllois, 2001; Huizinga, 1950). It involves make believe, fantasy, and creates a new reality. If the real world enters in any way, it is transformed and sterilized, so that it appears differently and is harmless (Cailllois, 2001; Apter, 1991). It promotes social grouping surrounded by secrecy and disguised by mask or costume (Huizinga, 1950). It has a preference for immediate gratification (Apter, 1991). While there are many nuances to these definitions of play, in general play is defined as pleasurable, separate from the real world (through imagination or rules), intrinsically motivated, and often spontaneous.

**Playfulness**

Playfulness is the “quintessence” of play (Lieberman, 1977). It is defined as physical spontaneity, social spontaneity, cognitive spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor (Lieberman, 1977). Physical spontaneity is characterized by exaggerated movement, animated gestures or facial expressions, and an eagerness to be involved physically. Social spontaneity is demonstrated by individuals who pursue interactions with others. Cognitive spontaneity is marked by curiosity, inventiveness, imagination, and thinking outside the box. Manifest joy is seen through laughter, enjoyment and
positive disposition toward life. Sense of humor is evidenced when making jokes, entertaining, teasing, and clowning around. Another definition of playfulness for adults is provided by Guidard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005). They identified five components of playfulness: creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity. The creativity, curiosity and spontaneity correspond to Lieberman’s cognitive and physical spontaneity. Sense of humor is a shared component, while pleasure correlates to manifest joy. The essence of playfulness is that it is a state of mind that manifests itself in many ways. When a particular activity is pursued in this playful state of mind, the activity is often described as play.

The purpose of presenting these definitions is to familiarize the reader with the many usages of play and playfulness. As mentioned earlier, different attributes of play/playfulness are studied in various disciplines. The next section will explore how play/playfulness are conceptualized in human development and learning.

**Play/Playfulness and Learning**

There are several play theories that seek to explain the role of play/playfulness in human development and learning. Most of these theories have been developed by studying children and focus on the role of play in childhood development and learning. These theories fall into two categories; those that are concerned primarily with emotional development and those that address intellectual development.

The work of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson is foundational in theories that seek to understand play as it relates to emotional development. These theories are sometimes classified as psychodynamic theories because they focus on how individuals process play experiences in their minds and make meaning from these experiences. For Freud, play
provides children with the opportunity to deal with unpleasant events by providing a means for them to be in a position of power and control (Ellis, 1973). Play is seen as a tool for helping children deal with negative experiences that might otherwise hinder their emotional development. In Erikson’s stage theory of psychosocial development, play was an important tool in helping individuals progress through the stages of development (Johnson, Christie, and Wardle, 2005). For Erikson (1972), however, play is not only significant for children, but is also critical for adult development. An aspect of the adult identity is built upon the heritage of a playful childhood and this playfulness must be renewed on each level of adult development (Erikson, 1972). Erikson is one of the few developmental theorists who advocates for play as an important aspect of the emotional life of an adult.

Play theories focusing on cognitive development are often influenced by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). In these theories, cognition refers to the mental processes of the brain that facilitate understanding and the development of intellect. For Piaget (1951), play parallels children’s stages of cognitive development and helps consolidate the learning that occurs in these stages. Learning occurs through adaptation which requires a balance of assimilation (acquiring new information) and accommodation (altering cognition to fit the reality of the world). For Piaget, play is a tool that promotes assimilation and also provides a means to strengthen newly acquired skills or ideals. For Vygotsky, play helps children to develop abstract thinking. In play, children may use their imagination to assign the meaning of a horse to an object such as a stick (Vygotsky, 1933). Additionally, play is an activity in which
children are often stretched beyond their current understanding, providing opportunity for them to progress in their development (Lambert & Clyde, 2003).

Vygotsky and Piaget claim that play is significant in the intellectual development of children; however, the significance of play decreases as the child matures into adulthood (Vygotsky, 1933; Piaget, 1951). Although Erikson acknowledges the importance of play in adult development, most theories of play and learning focus on children. This provides little basis for exploring play/playfulness as it relates to learning among adults. Although the play/playfulness theories addressing learning and development focus primarily on children, there are several other play theorists who include adults in their conceptualizations of play/playfulness.

**Theories of Adult Play and Playfulness**

While most play/playfulness theories focus on children, there are several scholars who have theorized about adult play/playfulness. Huizinga (1950) raises the status of play to prominence among adult society, Caillois (2001) provides a framework for understanding adult games, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies and defines a state of optimal being for adults which mirrors playfulness, Kerr and Apter provide helpful terms to distinguish between playful and non-playful activities, and Lieberman (1977) identifies aspects of playfulness among adults.

The work of Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga is significant because he esteems play as a legitimate aspect of adult life. In his classic work, *Homo ludens: Man the player*, he postulates that play is a key building block of all human civilization (Huizinga, 1950). He argues that play is evident in law, art, war, poetry and philosophy. Roger Caillois (2001) builds on Huizinga’s theory of play to create a typography which categorizes
various forms of play. His classification system is helpful in thinking about games utilized in play with adults and children in any context, including education. Huizinga and Caillois describe the manifestations of play within society, but Csikszentmihalyi captures the experience of play among individuals.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is not a play researcher; however, his extensive studies of ‘flow’ mirror many characteristics associated with play/playfulness. For this reason, his work is included in this study. Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Our daily activities, whether work or play, can bring about satisfaction and happiness if we are able to enter into a flow state or playful state of mind.

This idea of play or playfulness as a state of mind is shared by Kerr and Apter (1991) as well as Lieberman (1977). Psychologists John Kerr and Michel Apter (1991) edited a book entitled Adult play: A reversal theory approach. They define play as “a way of seeing or being, a special mental ‘set’ toward the world and one’s action in it” (Kerr & Apter, 1991, p. 13). Their discussion of play is couched in reversal theory which is a psychological approach that deals with changes (or reversals) in motivation, emotion, personality, and psychopathology (Apter, 1991). In this theory, the serious state is defined as telic (from Greek ‘telos’ meaning goal or purpose), and the playful state as paratelic (from the Greek ‘para’ meaning alongside me). Telic and paratelic become adverbs that can be applied to any activity. Therefore, play activities like golf can be played in a telic or paratelic state depending on the attitudes of the player. Paratelic golf
is playful golf. Playfulness as an attitude or state of mind has been studied by Nina Lieberman (1977).

She studied young children, adolescents, and adults exploring the relationship between playfulness and creativity. She postulates that there is a “developmental continuity of playfulness as behavior” and that “playfulness survives play [childhood play] and becomes a personality trait of the individual” (Lieberman, 1977, p. 5). Playfulness then is an attribute or personality trait of adults that is characterized by spontaneity, sense of humor, and manifest joy (Lieberman, 1977).

These theories of adult play provide some insight to play/playfulness among adults, but do not specifically address adults in a learning context. Huizinga’s framework is designed to explore the play element in various aspects of society and could be applied to the field of education. This would reveal the elements of play embedded in the system of education, but would not describe the experience of play/playfulness in a classroom setting as it relates to learning. For example, he would discuss how the didactic exchange of questions and answers mirrors the ancient, playful practice of telling riddles.

Caillois’ framework for classifying games is helpful. Yet, games are just one of many possible manifestations of play/playfulness in the classroom setting. The approaches of Lieberman, Apter & Kerr, and Csikszentmihalyi are psychological in nature and focus on adult playfulness as an individual, personal attribute. Many adult learning theories are based in the notion that meaning is created socially, within relationships (Bandura, 1986; hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1998). In studying play/playfulness in adult learning, it is important to utilize a theory of play that accounts for the social element of meaning making. Although there are shortcomings with these theories, they
help provide a broader understanding for play and playfulness in the life of adults. They indicate that play is embedded in human culture (Huizinga, 1950; Caillois, 2001) and that a playful approach to adult activities brings about joy and pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kerr and Apter, 1991; Lieberman, 1977). There are also numerous studies that also contribute to the understanding of play/playfulness among adults.

**Studies of Adult Play and Playfulness**

Although the literature has not been as extensive as the literature on child or animal play, there are studies exploring adult play. These studies typically fall into one of four categories: psychology, leisure, workplace, and education.

In the field of psychology, researchers have explored the adult experience of play. Many of these studies conclude that play is beneficial to adults (Blanche, 1998; Halmo, 1985; Konarzewski, 1984; Pang, 1997; Olsen, 1981; Terr, 1999), but do not examine play/playfulness among adults in a learning context. Additionally, these studies focus only on the individual’s perspective on the play experience and do not consider the social element of play/playfulness.

The leisure literature promotes the value of play in the life of adults, but primarily focuses on play simply as one of the many activities that adults engage in when they are not working. The component of playfulness that focuses on the attitude of the player is not examined in the leisure literature (Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil, 2005). Studies in the leisure literature with an educational component focus on education about the importance of play, not education through play (Eller, 1993; Levinson, 1977). These studies conclude that there should be greater attempts to educate adults on the benefits of play.
Much of the literature addressing play/playfulness with adults focuses on the workplace. These studies have identified benefits associated with play/playfulness within the work environment that include increases in organizational involvement, reductions in anxiety related to new technologies, and increased satisfaction and performance (Abramis, 1990; Bozionelos and Bozionelos, 1997; Glynn and Webster, 1992; Martocchio and Webster, 1992). The pragmatically minded business world has identified the benefits of play/playfulness among adults in the workplace and has begun to further explore this phenomenon (Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil, 2005).

Overall, there is very little empirical research that explores play/playfulness among adult learners in a classroom context. There have been a few articles and a handful of dissertations from the field of education (Adams, 1993; Brooks, 1994; Brougere, 1999; Cooper, 1996; Corbeil, 1999; Cotropia, 1995; Levinson, 1977; Melamed, 1985). Most of these studies do not explore the relationship between play/playfulness and learning, or are conceptual pieces that provide no empirical data. Melamed’s (1985) work is the only study that addresses this topic, as she examines the learning of playful adults.

Melamed (1985) identified five themes concerning play/playfulness and learning; relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, and empowering. Playful learners value relational qualities like cooperation and connectedness. Being judged or competing against others, negatively affected learning. Experiential learning was a key approach because it provided a structure in which the learner could be playful. Playful learners are likely to engage in metaphoric thinking such as imagination, intuition, emotion, etc. The
integrative theme describes the playful learner’s ability to pull together seemingly opposite viewpoints or paradoxical terms. They tend to view things as both/and rather than either/or. Finally, Melamed describes the playful learner as empowered to function within society and to cast dreams about what might be. In addition to these five themes associated with playful learners, play was found to open individuals up to learning, keep them involved in learning, and allow for deeper connections and understanding of self (Melamed, 1985).

Melamed begins to identify the connections between play/playfulness and learning, but there are some limitations to her study. First of all, she studied only women. She conducted her study at a time when differences between men and women in learning were just beginning to be explored. Her findings may be about women’s ways of knowing as much as they are about play/playfulness. More significantly, Melamed’s study examined how playful women perceive their learning, rather than examining the dynamics of play/playfulness and learning in a classroom context. Melamed draws attention to the significance of play/playfulness to adult learners, but does not explore the role of play/playfulness in learning in the context of an adult classroom.

The various theories and studies examined in this section provide some insight to play/playfulness among adults. These studies indicate that play/playfulness is beneficial to adults (Blanche, 1998; Eller, 1994; Halmo, 1985; Konarzewski, 1984; Levinson, 1977; Pang, 1997; Olsen, 1981; Terr, 1999) and in the work environment can increase involvement, reduce anxiety, and increase satisfaction and performance (Abramis, 1990; Bozionelos and Bozionelos, 1997; Glynn and Webster, 1992; Martocchio and Webster,
1992). Melamed’s (1985) study indicated that play opens adults up to learning, keeps them involved in learning, and allows for deeper connections and understanding of self. Playful women appreciate learning that is relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, and empowering (Melamed, 1985). Although all these studies examine play/playfulness among adults, none of them examine the role of play/playfulness in learning in the classroom context.

**Purpose of Study**

Play and playfulness have been studied extensively in the context of learning for children (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005; Ellis, 1973; Lieberman, 1977). However, there is very little written about the role of play and playfulness in learning among adults in an educational setting (Melamed, 1985; Cooper 1996). The only study that has explored the relationship between leaning and play/playfulness for adults examined playful women and how they learned. Play /playfulness were not necessarily an aspect of the learning environment, but rather a personality trait of the learner. The learning context was not considered.

Play and learning are both significant elements in the lives of adults. This is evidenced by financial resources invested in play and recreation (The Academy of Leisure Science, 2005), and the large number of adults returning to school (Kassworm, 2003). Additionally, there is a growing interest in play in the workplace literature where play has been shown to be a positive element in the work environment. Play and playfulness have been shown to be beneficial in certain arenas of adult life, but there have been no studies to explore play/playfulness in the adult learning classroom. This study will seek to fill this gap.
The purpose of this study is to explore play/playfulness as understood by the educator, perceived by the student, and experienced by both the educator and student as it relates to learning in an adult and higher education classroom. Play and playfulness are ambiguous topics that carry various meanings. This study will seek to understand how educators define and make sense of play/playfulness as they bring it into a classroom setting. Additionally, to provide a more complete picture of play and playfulness in the classroom, students’ perceptions of play and playfulness will be explored. The students will also be able to provide insight on how they see play/playfulness connect to learning in the classroom. Finally, the interactive element of play will be explored through observations of the interplay between educator and learner in the adult and higher education classroom. The context of the classroom is significant for several reasons. First, it situates play/playfulness in a context where the overarching goal is learning. Secondly, it focuses this study to explore play/playfulness in a common learning context that is clearly defined.

Research Questions

This study of the role of play/playfulness and learning in the adult and higher education classroom is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the educator’s understanding of play/playfulness as it relates to learning in the adult and higher education classroom?
   
   a. How do they define play and playfulness?
   
   b. How do they bring play and playfulness into their classroom?
   
   c. What is their understanding of the connection between play/playfulness and learning in the classroom context?
2. How do students perceive the playful classroom and what meaning does the experience have for them?

3. What are the observed dynamics of play/playfulness in the classroom?

**Overview of Design and Methodology**

This study used a qualitative research design to explore play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom. Qualitative research is a “systematic, purposeful, and disciplined process of discovering reality structured from human experience” (Merriam and Simpson, 2000, p. 5). This process of discovery is naturalistic and utilizes an interpretive approach. This means that the experience is observed in its natural setting and attempts to make sense of the phenomenon based upon the meaning that people ascribe to that phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The qualitative research paradigm assumes a socially constructed understanding of the nature of reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2001). For the constructivist, knowledge is not discovered, but it is constructed within the minds of people within a particular social context with shared understanding, language and cultural experience. Because knowledge is constructed in the minds of people, different people may make meaning of a phenomenon differently than other people. This could lead to several understandings of a phenomenon or “multiple realities.” One aspect of play/playfulness is that various individuals may experience the same activity as ‘paratelic’ (playful) or ‘telic’ (serious). What is playful for one person is not playful for another. The subjective nature of play/playfulness fits well with the qualitative paradigm and its constructivist understanding of reality that acknowledges multiple realities.
The research type or approach used in this project was the case study. According to Merriam, “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (2001, p. 19). A significant feature of the case study is its focus on a single unit or case. According to Stake (2000), the individual unit of analysis is the defining characteristic of a case study that sets it apart from other forms of inquiry. This focus on a single unit provides opportunity for an intensive investigation of the case. Rather than exploring many units in a cursory manner, the case study focuses on a single unit in-depth utilizing several sources of data. Play/playfulness is a very complex phenomenon, and its nuances in the classroom may be difficult to characterize. The concentrated focus of the case study approach affords a better opportunity to describe and analyze this complex phenomenon. Also, the multiple data sources commonly used in case study provided an opportunity to study the phenomenon of play/playfulness from multiple perspectives.

This study utilized the collective or multiple case study approach, which examines several cases to better understand a specific issue (Stake, 2000). In this study, the classroom was chosen as the case because it provided an opportunity to explore play/playfulness among adult learners. Exploring multiple classrooms provided an opportunity to study various manifestations of play/playfulness with adult learners.

Qualitative research typically uses purposeful samples to provide “information-rich cases” to best illuminate the topic of study (Patton, 2002). In the case study approach, the unit of analysis is “the case” and for this study the playful adult classroom was the case or unit of analysis. In selecting “information rich” cases of classrooms for this study, the teacher or educator was the primary consideration. In most educational
settings, the educator has the greatest amount of influence in shaping the classroom experience. For this study, four educators were selected who evoked play/playfulness in their classroom and could articulate play/playfulness as an aspect of their educational pedagogy. Two of these educators were from the researcher institution, and two were from schools with a broader range of ages represented in the classroom.

Data collection involved several sources and several methods. Sources for data will be the educator, student, and the classroom. The educator were interviewed using semi-structured interviews utilizing an interview guide listing questions and issues to be explored (Patton, 2002). The interview was used to collect demographic information (educational background, teaching experience), the educator’s definition/understanding of play/playfulness, and descriptions/examples of their playful classroom. A second source of data was the students in the playful classroom. Focus groups involving 6-12 students from the classroom of each interviewee allowed students to describe their experience of play/playfulness in the classroom context. Additionally, a paper and pencil survey was administered to all students in the playful classrooms to gain a broader understanding of students perceptions of play/playfulness and learning in the learning context. The third data source was classroom observations. There were 3-6 hours of classroom observations in each of the four playful classrooms. The classroom observations provided an opportunity for the researcher to experience the interplay between educator and student. These three sources and multiple data collection methods provided a vivid picture of play/playfulness in the adult classroom.
Conceptual framework

As discussed previously, play is an ambiguous concept that defies easy definition. Many theories or models of play/playfulness highlight certain aspects of play/playfulness, but neglect other areas. To allow for the full range of possibilities of play/playfulness and its interaction with learning in the adult and higher education classroom, it is important to have a broad framework for understanding the many facets of play/playfulness. At the same time, it is necessary to identify some established structure in which to ground this inquiry. Therefore, it is important to explain the theoretical framework for this study. Merriam and Simpson discuss theoretical framework as the “underlying structure, orientation, and viewpoint of your study” (2000, pp. 23-24). This framework reveals the underlying assumptions of the researcher. The primary topics for this study were play/playfulness and adult learning. The framework for play/playfulness is play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith’s seven rhetorics of play. The adult learning theories that inform this study’s understanding of learning and meaning making are experiential learning and other ways of knowing.

Sutton-Smith addresses the breadth and depth of play by presenting seven rhetorics to categorize various play theories. He defines rhetoric “as being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 8). He identifies these rhetorics: play as progress, play as fate, play as power, play as identity, play as the imaginary, play of the self, and play as frivolous. Four of these rhetorics are “ancient” in that they “predate modern times and advocate collectively held values rather than individual experiences” (Sutton-Smith,
These four rhetorics are fate, power, identity, and frivolity. The rhetoric of play as fate is typically applied to games of chance and is rooted in the belief that life is controlled by destiny. Play as power involves competition, reflects a struggle for superiority between two groups and is associated with sports, athletics, and contests. The rhetoric of play as identity applies to celebrations, festivals, parades, or carnivals where the play tradition is a means to confirm, maintain, or advance the communal identity (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play as frivolity is best captured in the image of a court jester and is characterized by idleness and foolishness.

The more modern rhetorics of play include play as progress, play as the imaginary, and play of the self. The rhetoric of play as progress advocates that children and animals (but not adults), adapt and develop through their play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This rhetoric provides rationale for play in childhood education because it fosters learning and development. The rhetoric of play as the imaginary focuses on creativity and improvisation. This rhetoric is where play and the arts intersect, as play becomes an aesthetic, a way of thinking about culture. The rhetoric of the self is typically applied to individualized activities such as hobbies or high-risk activities like parachuting. The focus is on the player and their fun, relaxation, or escape (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Since little was known about the experience of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom, it was important to begin with a broad framework such as Sutton-Smith’s to ensure certain manifestations of play are not excluded. For instance, adopting the rhetorics of play as progress, imaginary and self would have provided limited lenses that view the play experience only in terms of the individual. It was the rhetoric of play as identity and power that allowed the possibility of play as a social
construction within a particular context or group of people. While Sutton-Smith’s work provided the conceptual framework for play/playfulness, several adult learning theories informed this study’s understanding of the process of learning and meaning making. These theories fall into the broader categories of experiential learning and other ways of knowing.

Experiential learning plays a fundamental role in adult education (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Miller, 2000). Experiential learning is learning by doing with reflection. Experiential learning models such as Kolb’s (1984) or Boud, Keogh, and Walker’s (1985) are often applied to the use of games and simulations in a learning environment. Because of its widespread use in making meaning from games and simulations, it was important to consider experiential learning theories when examining the role of play/playfulness in adult learning. However, many experiential learning approaches in adult education are influenced by pragmatism and favor rational thought (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This is one way to derive meaning from experience, but was not be the most effective model for understanding the role of play/playfulness in the learning context.

John Heron’s (1992) model of experiential learning assigns a greater significance to the role of affect in the learning process. Rather than beginning with the ‘concrete experience,’ his learning model begins with a felt need that seeks resolution. The learning that follows is in response to an emotional need. According to many definitions of play/playfulness, the characteristic of an activity that makes it play or playful is the attitude or emotions of the player. Because of its focus on the affective dimensions, Heron’s model of experiential learning may be helpful in understanding the role of
play/playfulness in adult learning. In addition to learning from experience, play/playfulness may engage other forms of learning and meaning making.

The one significant study that has been done on play/playfulness in adult learning proposed that “play can also be a means of understanding or a way of coming to know something” (Melamed, 1985, p. 123). In the past several decades there has been a growing interest in the multiple ways adults construct meaning. ‘Other ways of knowing’ or ‘multiple ways of knowing’ refer to holistic learning that recognizes that knowledge is not confined to the rational thought processes of the brain. There are other ways that we come to know things that include not only the thinking, but also intuitive, affective, physical and spiritual self (Yorks and Kasl, 2006).

Spirituality and adult learning share many similarities with play/playfulness. This way of knowing acknowledges the transcendent element of the world (Chickering, Dalton, Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003;) which, as discussed later, is a significant aspect of play/playfulness (Ackerman, 1999; Berger, 1969; Van Ness, 1996). Spirituality and play both encourage authenticity and self-awareness (Chickering, Dalton, Stamm, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hamilton and Jackson, 1998; Schiller as cited in Brooks, 1994; Tisdell, 2003). Both have an element of spontaneity or surprise (Huizinga, 1950; Lieberman, 1977; Tisdell, 2003). There are other shared characteristics and experiences that further connect play/playfulness with the literature on spirituality in adult and higher education.

Somatic or embodied learning is another way of knowing that may illuminate play/playfulness among adult learners. Somatic learning considers the significance of the body as a site of learning and knowledge construction (Clark, 2001). There are many
facets of somatic learning that occur within the body. Amann (2003) has created a model of somatic learning that identifies four sources of learning that contribute to somatic learning: kinesthetic, affective, sensory, and spiritual. Kinesthetic learning is centered in the movement of muscles, tendons, and joints (Matthews, 1998). Affective learning occurs when attention is paid to feelings and emotions (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Sensory learning utilizes the fives senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling to construct knowledge. The spiritual dimension of learning focuses on how we make meaning of our lives. Play is a full-body experience that often incorporates movement, involves our senses, evokes our emotions, and engages our spirituality. These multiple ways of knowing may helped shed light on the role of play/playfulness as it relates to learning in the adult and higher education classroom.

**Significance of the Study**

Play’s significance in childhood education is widely accepted. However, there is very little literature that explores play and playfulness among adults in a learning context. Studies of adults from the disciplines of leisure and psychology have documented many benefits associated with play and playfulness in the lives of adults. There are also a growing number of studies in workplace literature that show advantages of play/playfulness in the work context. The potential benefits of play/playfulness in the adult classroom had not been explored. This study addressed this gap by seeking to exploring the role of play/playfulness as it related to learning in context of the adult and higher education classroom.

Another significance of this study was that it laid the foundation for additional studies. This study takes an important step to understanding play/playfulness in the adult
learning classroom. This study described the experience of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom. This was accomplished by examining the educator’s understanding of the phenomenon, the students’ perceptions of the phenomenon, and the researcher’s observations about the phenomenon. The findings of this study serve as a jumping off point for further studies. Now that there is some understanding about the nature of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom, other facets of play and learning can be explored. For example, how can play/playfulness be fostered in the classroom, what are the connections between play/playfulness and other ways of knowing? It also contributes to the adult education literature as it identifies the benefits of play/playfulness in an adult learning context.

This study was significant on a personal level as well. I love to play, and I love to teach. In my experience as an educator, I have witnessed instances of significant learning and growth facilitated by play and a playful environment. Play seems to be of great value in learning, but it was difficult to identify and articulate the specific connections. This study provided some empirical research to identify the role of play/playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom.

**Definitions**

Terms used throughout this study are listed below:

- **Agon** – terminology used by Caillois for games of competition -Greek word for contest.
- **Alea** – terminology used by Caillois for games of chance -Latin word for the game of dice.
- **Ilinx** - terminology used by Caillois for games of swift movement like riding roller coasters. Greek word for whirlpool from which is also derived vertigo.
Cognitive spontaneity – An attribute of playfulness identified by Lieberman that is marked by curiosity, inventiveness, imagination, and thinking outside the box.

Flow – A word used by Csikszentmihalyi to describe a state where an individual is utterly consumed and focused on an activity. The experience is so enjoyable, that they will continue to do it at great cost just for the sake of doing it.

Higher education classroom – refers to a traditional classroom with desks, chairs and tables at a college or university. This is contrasted with distance learning, contextual learning, service learning or other classes where the students are not typically gathered in the same room for a defined period of time.

Ludic – associated with playful behavior

Mimicry – terminology used by Caillois for games that involve simulation and imagination

Paratelic – A term used by Apter and Kerr as an adverb to describe activity that is pursued in a playful state of mind (from the Greek ‘para’ meaning alongside me).

Physical spontaneity - An attribute of playfulness identified by Lieberman that is characterized by exaggerated movement, animated gestures or facial expressions, and an eagerness to be involved physically.

Play/playfulness – Ambiguous concepts that have many definitions depending on the context (see pages 5-7). In this study the words play and playfulness are used somewhat interchangeably, but, play typically refers to content or activity (game, festival, event), while playful and playfulness refer to the attitude or state of mind (lighthearted, fun).

Rhetoric – “A persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and
worthwhileness of their beliefs” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 8). There are seven rhetorics of play: progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, and frivolity.

Social spontaneity - An attribute of playfulness identified by Lieberman that is demonstrated by individuals who pursue interactions with others.

Telic – A term used by Apter and Kerr as an adverb to describe activity that is pursued in a serious frame of mind (from Greek ‘telos’ meaning goal or purpose).

Assumptions of the study

The following assumptions are embedded in this research.

1. Play and playfulness are good and beneficial.
2. Learning is a social process in which knowledge is constructed.
3. The world is patterned and those patterns are knowable and explainable.
4. Educators can identify and articulate their understanding of play and playfulness.
5. Educators’ playfulness flows from their personality and is not forced or counterfeit.
6. Educators in the adult and higher education context have freedom to express playfulness or include play in their classrooms.
7. Educators and students will be honest and accurate in sharing their perceptions and understandings of play/playfulness in the classroom.
8. Playful behavior can be observed in a classroom setting.

Limitations

I was excited about the possibilities of play/playfulness in the higher education setting. This enthusiasm was likely evident to the educator and students and may have influence their responses. Additionally, the concepts of play/playfulness are broad. I’m
sure my own preferences influenced the study in term of my observations, interpretations and understanding of the classroom play experiences.

As is the nature with qualitative research, the sample was small and purposeful, and explored the experience of play/playfulness of particular educators and students in a specific context. This limits how the data can be generalized and used in other settings. Rich, descriptive narratives and descriptions of methodology provide the reader with information to determine how applicable the study may be for their particular situation.

**Chapter Summary**

This first chapter provides an overview of this study which examines play/playfulness in an adult and higher education classroom. The chapter began by exploring the significance of play and how it is manifested in society. To better illuminate the topic of this study, multiple definitions of play/playfulness were presented. This led into a discussion of play theories that addressed learning and adult play/playfulness. After this foundation for understanding play was established, studies that explore play/playfulness in adults were summarized. These studies indicated that play/playfulness in adults was explored in a limited fashion in psychology, leisure, and workplace literature, but is almost completely absent in adult education. This set the stage for the purpose, problem, and research questions. Next, the overview of the research design is presented. The conceptual framework is discussed to further clarify and categorize the multiple meanings of play/playfulness and adult learning. Finally, the significance, definition of terms, assumptions and limitations are also presented.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of play and playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom. The goal of this chapter is to explore the literature that is relevant to understanding play/playfulness in adult learning. It is impossible to exhaustively review all that has been written about play in the last century. However, it is important to establish a general sense of play theory as many current perceptions of play are based upon theory that has long been dismissed. A familiarity with the history of play theory provides an opportunity for the reader to trace their own thoughts about play with regard to the various traditions of play. After exploring classical play theory, current play theories that are utilized to understand play/playfulness in learning will be presented. Although most of these play and learning theories are intended for children, they provide important background information for understanding the role of play/playfulness in adult learning.

Next the focus is turned to adult play by presenting theories of several authors who have been very influential in discussions of adult play. This leads into an examination and discussion of studies that have been conducted in play/playfulness. The work of play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith is examined in depth as it provides the conceptual framework for exploring play/playfulness in this study. In addition to Sutton-Smith’s work, several adult learning theories inform this study’s understanding of the process of learning and meaning making. Play in the form of educational games and simulations, is often incorporated into a learning context utilizing experiential learning.
theories. Popular experiential learning theories will be presented, as will the work of John Heron whose model of experiential learning emphasizes the role of affect in the learning process.

Other learning models that consider the role of affect in learning fall in the broad grouping of “other ways of knowing.” The one significant study that has been done on play/playfulness in adult learning proposes that “play can also be a means of understanding or a way of coming to know something” (Melamed, 1985, p. 123). In the past several decades there has been a growing interest in the multiple ways adults construct meaning. There are several ‘ways of knowing’ that resonate with the ideals of play/playfulness in learning. Spirituality in adult learning will be explored due to its similarities with play/playfulness and because the spirituality literature acknowledges the transcendent element of creation which, as discussed later, is a significant aspect of play/playfulness. Furthermore, somatic learning considers the significance of the body as a site of learning and knowledge construction. Many forms of play involve physical movement and a presence with others. The experience of movement and an awareness of the body in the process of play may contribute to the learning that occurs in play.

Familiarity with the somatic learning literature will allow these connections to be readily made. The study itself will provide insight on which theory is actually most helpful in understanding the role of play and playfulness in adult learning.

Play Theory

In Why People Play, Michael Ellis (1973) provides an analysis of the content and assumptions of the many theories and explanations for play behavior. He organizes play theories into three categories: classical, recent, and modern. In this section, classical
theories will be discussed followed by other theories that help provide an understanding of how play/playfulness are connected to learning. Finally, influential works that address adults and play/playfulness will be explored.

**Classical theories**

The five classical theories date back to the 19th century and are heavily influenced by Darwinian thought. A commonality to these theories is their focus on the motive of the player in defining characteristics of play (Ellis, 1973). These theories were based upon philosophical reflection and reason rather than upon experimental research (Ellis 1973). Additionally, they reflected ideas that were in vogue during that time period, such as the notion that human energy had fluid-like properties (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005).

The first two theories deal with the concept of energy. In the surplus energy theory, play results when the body produces more energy than is needed for survival. The extra energy is expended in the form of play. This theory was first presented by German poet and philosopher, Fredrick Schiller and later expounded upon by Spencer in 1855. While this theory provides some explanation for why children play more than adults (they have less responsibilities for energy consuming survival activities and therefore have a greater surplus of energy), it does not explain why children continue to play even beyond the point of exhaustion.

In contrast to the surplus energy theory, the relaxation theory advocated by Lazarus and Patrick in 1916 stated that play is necessary for the body as a type of activity contrasted with work to provide opportunity for recuperation. While this theory provides some explanation for the desire of working adults to play, it does not provide sufficient
reason for children to engage in play. As with surplus energy, this theory provides some rationale for play behaviors in certain situations, but is not comprehensive enough to address the complexities of play. In this case, these theories address some of the physiological phenomenon of play, but do not consider the psychological or communal elements of play.

A third classical theory called instinct theory was endorsed by William James and McDougall. This theory states that play is genetically transferred and the body naturally responds in playful activity. In other words, that humans engage in play because playful behavior is built into their genetic code. This approach to play is not helpful in understanding play because it simply states that because there is play behavior there must be a motivation and arbitrarily calls that motivation instinct. The instinct psychologists of this era were formulating an instinct for every type of behavior they wished to explain (Ellis, 1973).

The final two classical theories are linked to activities necessary for survival. Preparation theory postulates that play is preparation for acts that are necessary for survival later in life. Groos’ two works, *The play of animals* and *The play of man*, were influential in promoting this idea of play. Play provides animals (and humans) with the opportunity to practice and perfect instinctual behaviors that are not inherited in their complete form. An obvious example of this in the animal world is the play fighting of young tigers. For humans, it provides an opportunity for socialization. One of the difficulties of this theory is that it requires the organism to have an inherited knowledge of what type of behavior will be necessary for future survival. The influence of this theory is still felt in contemporary understandings of play as seen in the popular notion
that play is valuable for children because it helps them develop social skills that will
benefit them in their adult life.

Another influential theory was the recapitulation theory. In this theory, play is a
genetic “remembering” of activities that were once (and are no longer) necessary for
survival (Ellis, 1973). Additionally, children needed to play through these primitive
behaviors in sequence as part of the maturing process (Sutton-Smith, 1980). This theory
of play was influential in the “playground movement” of the early part of the 20th century
as seen in apparatuses such as the monkey bars (Sutton-Smith, 1980). As with most
classical theories, the recapitulation theory explains some play behaviors but not others.
It may be possible to argue that modern forms of play such as baseball harken back to an
age when accurate throwing ability, precise club swinging, and fast running may have
been necessary for survival. However, this theory does not explain current fascination
with forms of play that involve the application of technology to provide competitive edge
such as car or boat racing (Ellis, 1973). Furthermore, this theory indicated that an
individual would sequentially progress through stages of play that replicated evolutionary
stages. According to this theory, a child’s play activity would progress from climbing
trees to group play, to mirror evolutionary development from primate activity to tribal
activity. Children’s play does not typically follow such a linear progression (Johnson,
Christie, Wardle, 2005).

All of the classical theories dealt with the motives of play. There was very little
research carried out to support these theories. Most were refuted through flaws in their
logic or reasoning. However, their impact is still seen today. For example, in many
schools, recess is seen as a time to vent energy to enable children to be ready to learn
(Evans and Pelliegrini, 1997). This approach to play is grounded in the outdated surplus energy theory. While exploring play and playfulness among adult learners, it is important to be able to identify how their views and perceptions of play are shaped by these early theories of play.

**Play/playfulness and learning**

There are several play theories that seek to explain the role of play in human development and learning. Unlike the classical theories that relied on philosophical reasoning, these theories were developed in the age of scientific method and positivism. As a result, these theories seek to explain and predict events as well as provide understanding for the causes of play (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). Most of these theories have been developed by studying children and focus on the role of play in childhood development. The theories presented below fall into two categories; those that are concerned primarily with emotional development and those that address intellectual development.

**Play and emotional development.** The work of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson is foundational in theories that seek to understand play as it relates to emotional development. These theories are sometimes classified as psychodynamic theories because they focus on how an individual processes play experiences in their mind and makes meaning from these experiences. For Freud, play provides children with the opportunity to deal with unpleasant events by providing a means for them to be in a position of power and control. He states:

> It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so they abreact the strength of
the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation”  

Play not only shifts the locus of control, it provides the opportunity for unpleasant experiences to be repeated to allow children to assimilate these emotions and come to terms with them (Ellis, 1973). In this approach, Freud sees play as a tool to deal with experiences that would be considered negative or abnormal. In contrast, Erikson explored the role of play as it relates to normal personality development.

Erikson proposed a progression of play that corresponds to his stage theory of psychosocial development. The first years of play focus on a child’s body, involving sensory and motor skills. The second year includes toys, and the preschool years expand to include other people and social interactions (as cited in Johnson, Wardle, and Christie, 2005). For Erikson, however, play is not only significant for children, but is also critical for adult development. “Whatever the precursors of a specifically adult playfulness, it must grow with and through the adult stages even as these stages can come about only by such renewal” (Erikson, 1972, p. 158). He further emphasizes the importance of play in adult life by stating, “In order to be truly adult, he must on each level renew some of the playfulness of childhood and the sportiveness of the young” (Erikson, 1972, p. 158).

Erikson is one of the few developmental theorists who advocates for play as an important aspect of the life of an adult.

Both of these theories advocate for the significance of play in the emotional development of humans. Although Freud discusses play primarily among children, Erickson extends the emotional significance of play into adult life. These theories of play may be helpful in understanding the significance of play in an adult learning
environment, but they do not paint a complete picture. Learning is a complex activity that involves many facets of our being in addition to our emotions. Cognitive theories presented below consider the intellectual development that occurs in play.

**Cognitive Theories.** Cognitive theories focusing on the intellectual development of children gained popularity in the United States in the 1960’s due to the influence of Piaget and Vygotsky (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). In these theories, cognition refers to the mental processes of the brain that facilitate understanding and the development of intellect. This approach represented a significant shift in play theory away from the social-emotional adjustment to its role in the development of children’s thought processes. Both of these writers are referenced extensively in literature exploring the role of play in education.

For Piaget (1951), play parallels stages of cognitive development and helps consolidate the learning that occurs in these stages. Development or learning occurs through adaptation, which requires a balance of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process of a child acquiring new information that they fit into existing cognitive structures. In accommodation, the child alters their cognitive structures to conform to the reality of the world. In play, assimilation is the primary process engaged in children. Therefore play is not learning, but is an aspect of the learning or adaptation process. Furthermore, play serves to strengthen and practice newly acquired skills or ideas. This process of assimilation and accommodation is a model for childhood development only. Piaget thought that play would decrease as a child progresses through the stages of cognitive development to the point where play would not be necessary for an adult. Play and development is reserved strictly for children in Piaget’s theory.
Similar to Piaget, Vygotsky (1933) believed that play was significant in cognitive development. For Vygotsky, play helps children to develop abstract thinking. “In a very young child there is such an intimate fusion between word and object, and between meaning and what is seen, that a divergence between the meaning field and the visible field is impossible” (Vygotsky, 1933 p. 545). In play, children develop beyond this fused concept of meaning and object and are able to think about meaning independently of the object. Through the use of the imagination, children may assign the meaning of a horse to an object such as a stick.

Additionally, Vygotsky viewed play as an activity in which children would push themselves beyond their current understanding, and thus promote their own development through a process he referred to as the zone of proximal development. In this zone, children were able to progress from their actual level of ability to their potential level through the help of a teacher or more capable peer (Lambert & Clyde, 2003).

In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior (Vygotsky, 1933, p. 552).

For Vygotsky, as with Piaget, play served a significant role in facilitating the intellectual development of children. Play provides a vital means for children to acquire new information as they push beyond their normal experiences, thus providing the raw materials necessary for their intellectual development. However, the role of play was increasingly limited as the child matured (Vygotsky, 1933; Piaget, 1951). These theorists
did not consider play significant once the child matured into adulthood. Nevertheless, there are other authors who discuss play/playfulness as a vital aspect of adult life.

Theories of adult play and playfulness

Several authors are consistently referenced in discussions about play/playfulness with adults. These authors are Huizinga, Csikszentmihalyi, Caillois, and Apter & Kerr. Another author, Stuart Brown, is included because of his influence in popular culture on the importance of play for both children and adults. A basic understanding of these individuals’ theories of play is necessary to navigate through the various studies of adult play/playfulness. The follow sections outline the salient points of their theories.

Huizinga. Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga was one of the first to theorize play as an integral part of adult life. Specifically, he views play as the building block of human civilization. In his classic work, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, Huizinga demonstrates how elements of play are evident in art, law, war, poetry, and philosophy. “For many years the conviction has grown upon me that civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (1950, p. ix). Huizinga presents an argument for the significance of play by highlighting the elements of play that are present in all forms of human culture.

Huizinga is frequently (almost always) referenced in discussions of play and playfulness with adults. His work greatly influences much of what is written on play, and so it is important to be familiar with his conceptualization of play. Huizinga’s (1950) definition of play is:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at
the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (p.13).

In defining play, Huizinga chooses to leave the work of his predecessors and critiques their theories because “they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose” (Huizinga, 1950, p. 2). He sees play as important and valid not because of what it does, but because of what it is. He seeks to distance play from profit and material interest. He emphasizes play’s distinctiveness from the normal world by identifying it as “outside ordinary life” and recognizing that play “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space.” He further removes play from the ordinary life by identifying play as a “free activity,” which means it is a voluntary activity. Unlike ordinary life where individuals have obligations and things that must be done, in play individuals are free to engage or not engage.

This focus on the intrinsic motivation of play is also evident in the attention that Huizinga gives to the “fun” element in his discussion of play. Although he doesn’t mention it in the definition sited above, he considers fun an important aspect of play. We often choose to play because it is fun. He presents a lengthy discourse on the appropriateness of the English word fun to capture this critical aspect of play.

One of Huizinga’s (1950) most significant contributions to play theory is the prominence he gives to play as an adult activity. “Play cannot be denied. You can deny,
if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (p. 3). According to Huizinga, play is the common denominator of human civilization. An overview of his chapter titles illustrates this point: play and law, play and war, playing and knowing, play and poetry, play-forms in philosophy, and play-forms in art. Huizinga’s work gives play a prominent role in adult life and sets the precedent for examining the play element in all aspects of culture, including adult learning.

**Caillois.** In *Man, Play and Games*, French philosopher, Roger Caillois creates a typography to categorize games played by adults and/or children. In his conceptualization of play, he begins with Huizinga’s definition of play, but critiques it on a couple of points. Caillois disagrees with Huizinga’s definition on the point about play promoting secrecy. Caillois acknowledges the relationship between secrecy and play, but believes that secrecy and the mysterious must be transformed to become play activity. In this transformation, the secrecy and mystery are revealed because play exposes and typically includes pageantry that draws additional attention to the event. (Caillois, 1958/2001). In other words, play tends to remove the nature of the mysterious as it creates a space celebrated with fanfare and clearly defined with rules and boundaries.

Another issue that Caillois has with Huizinga’s definition is his phrase indicating that play is not connected to material gain and that no profit can be gained by it. Caillois points out that in gambling and games of chance, profit and material gain may occur. A more accurate statement would be that play creates no wealth or goods. Caillois also recognizes that professional athletes experience material gain as a result of their “play,” but he dismisses their involvement in sports as work and not play.
With these clarifications, Caillois defines play as an activity which is essentially:

1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;

2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;

3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;

4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;

5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;


Caillois clarifies that in this definition, number five and six are typically mutually exclusive: that is, play either has set rules or is make-believe. He explains this by noting that rules or make-believe serve the same function: rules in play create a fiction or separation from the rules that govern ordinary life, just as make-believe creates a separation from ordinary life.

Caillois develops four categories (agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx) for the classification of play and games. Agon is characterized by competition and skill around some quality such as speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, etc. The next category is named alea,
which comes from the Latin for dice. Alea focuses on chance. Mimicry is play manifesting itself in costume, fantasy, and make-believe. Theatre, drama, and the use of ritualistic masks and costumes fit into this category. Finally, ilinx comes from the Greek word for whirlpool and refers to the experience of vertigo that momentarily destroys the stability of perception. Rollercoasters and other high adrenaline activities are explained by this category. Individuals will approach these categories of games with an attitude that falls on a continuum from paidia (which is child-like, care-free, joyful, and spontaneous) to ludus (which is discipline, effort, patience). This continuum indicates the “way” an individual plays the game (Caillois, 1958/2001).

Caillois (1958/2001) makes observations about the relationships of these four categories to each other. For instance, agon and alea form a strong association that characterizes many games which unite chance and skill such as backgammon, dominoes, and most card games. He also points out these have opposite attitudes, but follow the same law in that they both strive for conditions of equality. Ilinx and mimicry are also strong partners. This combination of masks and costumes combined with vertigo and movement is best illustrated in the rituals of primitive cultures.

Relationships exist between other categories of games. Agon and mimicry are partners in competitions that are also spectacles, as seen with the uniforms and pageantry that often surrounds today’s sporting events. Alea and ilinx are also compatible as games of chance and often include the physical manifestations of vertigo that seize the player and heighten the experience. In these cases, the gambler may not be aware of fatigue or may be entranced by the question of where the ball will stop next (Caillois, 1958/2001). Relationships that do not work are agon and ilinx, or alea and mimicry. Competition is
about discipline and control while vertigo seeks to destroy this condition. Likewise, in
alea, everything is abandoned to chance and it makes no sense to try to deceive or pretend
with chance (Caillois, 1958/2001).

The work of Caillois is significant in considering play in adult learning,
particularly when considering the use of games. Games are one of the many ways to
bring play/playfulness in the learning environment. An understanding of games as
described by Caillois is helpful both in the design and facilitation of games. In game
design for example, games of chance require no skill and are therefore less threatening
for a group of adults who may be hesitant to participate. At the same time, they require
no investment of skill or intelligence and negate work, patience, and experience (Caillois,
1958/2001). Depending on the audience and goals, games involving greater chance may
be desirable or counterproductive. As illustrated here, a thorough understanding of
games is necessary to fully realize the potential of this form of play in an adult learning
environment. Caillois and Huizinga tend to think of play/playfulness as activity. The
following authors look at play/playfulness as an attitude, mindset, or approach to life.

apply a psychological theory called ‘reversal theory’ to the subject of play with adults.
This theory takes a phenomenological approach that explores the event or phenomena as
it was experienced, rather than viewing it through the specialized lenses of a particular
discipline. Reversal theory states that individuals frequently shift between two
‘metamotivational’ states (Kerr and Apter, 1991). Metamotivational states are distinct
ways for an individual to experience something about their motivation instead of it being
a motivation in and of itself. Reversal theory has defined the serious as telic (from the
ancient Greek ‘telos’ meaning a goal or purpose) and the playful state as *paratelic* (Greek meaning alongside). Therefore, an individual can engage in any activity, whether it is work or play, with a telic or paratelic approach. The paratelic state embodies all the positive characteristics of play, while the telic state is goal oriented and serious.

In the paratelic state, the process is more important than the outcome. These are other characteristics of the paratelic state:

- Its emphasis on immediate gratification whenever possible; a preference for spontaneity and freedom of action; a willingness to experiment and ‘mess around’; a disposition to fantasize and indulge in pretense and make-believe; and
- a tendency to prolong the activity wherever possible (Apter, 1991, p. 17).

Apter continues by stating another significant characteristic is a preference for intense, high arousal experiences where the individual is ‘worked up’ and emotionally charged. According to reversal theory, an individual is always in one of these two modes: paratelic which experiences arousal as pleasurable and telic which experiences arousal as high anxiety.

The significance of Kerr and Apter’s work in adult play is captured in their concept of telic and paratelic. All human activity can be experienced in either the telic or paratelic mind frame. Consider two individuals playing a game of golf. The first is focused on her form, is intent on reducing her handicap, and a bad performance on the course makes the whole day bad. The second player is enjoying being outside, appreciating the opportunity to exercise, and having fun whacking the ball. The first is ‘playing’ golf in the telic state, the second in the paratelic state. These terms are helpful because of the multiple meanings assumed with the word play. Some would say that both
were playing golf. Others would argue that the first player was not really ‘playing.’

Utilizing the terms telic and paratelic removes the ambiguity. Furthermore, it removes the work/play dichotomy. Both work and play can be pursued in a telic or paratelic mode.

In addition to providing descriptive language to talk about experiences, this theory also explains why the same activity might elicit different responses from individuals. Depending on their metamotivational state they may experience an activity as either pleasurable or tedious. It also explains why extreme sports are appealing to some. In the paratelic state, high arousal produces more pleasure than low arousal.

The most significant weakness is their lack of explanation and description regarding the switch from telic to paratelic. The reversal theory states that humans are constantly switching back and forth, yet gives no reasons why or how this switch occurs. Consequently, as a theory, it is very helpful at explaining, but does not help predict future outcomes. Kerr and Apter view play as a “state of mind, a way of seeing and being, a special mental ‘set’ towards the world and one’s actions in it” (1991, p. 13). This is an overly psychological perspective considering only the individual with little appreciation for the social nature of play. The extreme emphasis on play as a state of mind also downplays the significance of context upon the play experience. This psychological bent continues with the work of Csikszentmihalyi.

Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) contribution to the discussion on play/playfulness comes from his work in the study of flow. Although Csikszentmihalyi’s theory is not a theory of play, flow is described in terms that parallel descriptions of play/playfulness and is therefore included. Flow is “the state in which people are so
involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990, p. 4). He talks about “optimal experience,” which is when “a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3). Csikszentmihalyi begins with Aristotle’s thought that above all else, men and women seek happiness. Happiness is found by being fully involved in every moment of life, to experience life as a string of optimal experiences.

There are two strategies to bring happiness, 1) make external conditions match our goals or, 2) change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better. He defines happiness as a feeling of contentment that is achieved whenever information in the consciousness indicates that expectations created by biological functions or social conditioning are met (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Enjoyment occurs when a person has met and exceeded these expectations and typically requires an unusual investment of attention.

This sets the framework for Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) eight elements of optimal/flow experiences:

1) a challenging activity that requires skill
2) the merging of action and awareness
3) clear goals
4) immediate feedback
5) concentration on the task at hand (total involvement and focus)
6) the paradox of control (distinct from ordinary life, a sense of control of the situation)
7) the loss of self-consciousness (union of self with environment)
8) the transformation of time (p. 49).

The combination of all of these elements results in deep pleasure that Csikszentmihalyi calls an optimal experience. Optimal experiences are intrinsically rewarding and are an end in themselves. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that certain activities serve a primary function of providing enjoyable experiences. These activities have a disposition making them conducive to producing optimal experiences.

Elements of the optimal experience coincide with several characteristics that have been associated with play. These are, challenge, total involvement and focus, control of the situation, and transformation of time. Due to these parallels, Csikszentmihalyi’s theory is helpful in examining play/playfulness with adults. Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow provides an eloquent description and framework for capturing the feelings that many have associated with play/playfulness. Additionally, his work shows the value of these feelings and experiences as they contribute to happiness and contentment. His research is extensive; thus indicating that these feeling are experienced broadly within the adult population. A particularly significant contribution is that he has shown that it is possible to enjoy work and experience pleasure in the workplace. In essence, it is possible to pursue work playfully.

A strength of Csikszentmihalyi’s work is the extensive empirical research from which his theory has developed. He utilized a system of data collection called experience sampling method (ESM), which uses beepers to act as prompts for participants to record what they are feeling and thinking. The beepers were activated randomly eight times a day for a week. He has collected over a hundred thousand cross sections of experience
from different parts of the world (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A shortcoming of Csikszentmihalyi’s work is its individualistic approach. Like Kerr and Apter, the experience of playfulness, or flow, is in the attitude of the individual. This theory does not account for the communal, relational aspect of play that makes it a potentially powerful tool in adult learning.

Csikszentmihalyi, Apter, Kerr, Caillois, and Huizinga are influential in the current discussions of play/playfulness among adults. In exploring play as adult activity, Huizinga lifts the status of play to prominence in civilization, and Caillois provides a framework for understanding adult games. In examining playfulness as an individual attitude, Kerr and Apter provide helpful terms to distinguish between playfulness and non-playfulness, and Csikszentmihalyi carefully describes the conditions associated with an optimal state of being for adults which mirrors playfulness. The extent of their influence can be seen in the next section that explores more recent studies of play/playfulness among adults.

Brown. Stuart Brown (2009) is a medical doctor who has a passion for play and has written a book titled, *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. Additionally, Brown has produced a three part PBS series on play and is founder of the National Institute of Play. His book is not based on a research study, but rather is derived from over 6000 ‘play histories’ he has conducted with people from different walks of life. He identifies the following properties of play: “apparently purposeless (done for its own sake), voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation desire” (Brown, 2009, p. 17). His conceptualization of play/playfulness does not contribute
anything new to the work of the authors listed above. However, his work is included because of his influence in popular culture’s conceptualization of play/playfulness and because his properties of play present accepted characteristics of play in language that is more up to date.

**Studies of adult play and playfulness**

This section explores studies of adult play/playfulness. While the literature has not been as extensive as the literature on child or animal play, there is a growing body of literature exploring adult play. An examination of current articles and dissertations revealed a number of studies that fall into one of four categories: psychology, leisure, workplace, and education.

**Psychology.** In the field of psychology, researchers seek to shed light on the adult experience of play. Examples from this body of literature include the role of playfulness in intimacy in the context of marriage (Klein, 1980; Lutz, 1982), or the connection between play and good mental health (Terr, 1999). Characteristics of play in adult life as identified in several of these studies include spontaneity and freedom to engage/disengage, sense of excitement or increased energy, pleasure, novelty, mental and/or physical activity, primary purpose of fun, creativity, multiple realities, and connections (Blanche, 1998; Eller, 1993; Pang, 1997) Studies that examined the therapeutic aspects of play found that play can increase a person’s problem solving capabilities, reduce stress, and provide a helpful change of pace (Terr, 1999). All of these studies from the field of psychology indicate that play/playfulness are a significant part of adult life (Blanche, 1998; Halmo, 1985; Pang 1997, Olsen, 1981). Despite these
new understandings, the study of play/playfulness is never set in an adult learning context.

Nina Lieberman (1977) conducted intensive studies of playfulness and its relationship to imagination and creativity. Through her studies, she identified five elements of playfulness: physical spontaneity, social spontaneity, cognitive spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor (Lieberman, 1977). Lieberman indicates that physical spontaneity is characterized by exaggerated movement, animated gestures or facial expressions, and an eagerness to be involved physically; social spontaneity is the pursuit of interactions with others; and cognitive spontaneity is marked by curiosity, inventiveness, imagination, and thinking outside the box. Manifest joy is seen through behaviors such as smiling, laughter, chuckling, singing, dancing, and facial expressions indicative of enjoyment. Sense of humor includes jokes, entertaining, teasing, and clowning around (Lieberman, 1977).

These studies included students in grade school, high school and college. As such, it is one of the few studies that develops a definition of playfulness for both adults and children. Within her model, Lieberman conceptualizes playfulness as a personality trait that emerges in adulthood as a function of the play quality of children (Lieberman, 1977). Lieberman’s model of playfulness not only addresses adults, it was also developed in an educational context. However, Lieberman’s study focuses on creativity and imagination, not on learning in general. Additionally, it is individualistic and may not account for the aspects of play/playfulness that arise in the realational environment of the classroom.
Leisure. While play is significant in leisure, surprisingly playfulness has not been studied in the context of leisure (Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil, 2005). Leisure is typically defined as what people do when they are not working. Play serves as one of many activities that meet the criteria of leisure. Less concern is given to the playful mindset of the activity. An overly competitive game of softball where the focus is primarily on winning, or an exuberant tromp through the woods with children are both considered play. Leisure does not differentiate between telic play and paratelic play (to use Apter’s terms). Similar to the psychology literature, leisure literature promotes the value of play for healthy, fulfilling living (Eller, 1994; Levinson, 1977), but offers very little about the role of playfulness in the lives of adults.

However, a recent study has acknowledged this gap and has sought to address it by seeking to create a playfulness scale for older adults. Yarnal and Qian (2011) designed a qualitative study to identify the characteristics of playfulness in older adults (65 and older). They developed and tested an instrument to arrive at the following definition:

Playful older adults are happy, optimistic, cheerful, amusing, positive, enthusiastic, and relaxed. In everyday exchanges they tend toward mischief, naughtiness, clowning, joking, and teasing; they embody fun and humor in ways that translate into laughter and amusement in others. Although impish, they are circumspect about their behavior in ways that teenagers have not yet mastered. Nevertheless, again, they continue to approach the world with a measure of creativity and whimsy (Yarnal and Qian, 2011, p. 71).
This study lays the foundation in the field of leisure to begin to examine benefits associated with playfulness by providing a tool to measure playfulness in older adults. Yarnal and Qian’s research contributes to this study as it acknowledges the significance of playfulness in adults and creates a definition to identify attributes of playfulness in older adults. However, their study focuses on adults over the age of 65 and notes that attributes of playfulness are different for people at different ages (Yarnal and Qian, 2011). The adult classrooms examined in this study include a broad age range of adults and so their conceptualization of playfulness may not be broad enough to capture the attributes of play/playfulness in the adult learning environment explored in this study.

**Workplace.** Much of the literature addressing play and playfulness in adults is concerned with the workplace (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005). These studies have identified workers’ understandings of play such as “play as game” and “play as goofing around” (Abramis, 1990). Some researchers have concluded that play increases learning, mastery and organizational involvement (Abramis, 1990). It can facilitate learning, adaptation, creativity, community building, increase attention on quality, and better performance (Glynn and Webster, 1992). Playfulness can also reduce anxiety towards new technologies (Bozionelos and Bozionelos, 1997). It is also associated with positive moods and satisfaction with performance feedback during computer software training (Martocchio and Webster, 1992).

A more recent study significant to this research sought to define playfulness in adulthood to determine its possible use in occupational therapy intervention (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005). They conducted a qualitative study using grounded theory in which they interviewed playful adults to explore the characteristics and nature of play.
Findings revealed that playfulness in adults is “a state of mind, an internal predisposition that is composed of creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity” (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005, p. 19). When these attributes were compared to elements of playfulness in children, only pleasure and spontaneity are unanimously agreed upon by all authors. Curiosity, sense of humor, and imagination are also commonly identified in childhood playfulness. The “components of playfulness appear to be the same in adults as in children with the exception of creativity and imagination” (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005, p. 19). The authors suggested that the imagination of children develops into creativity in adulthood.

This study is significant because it is the first to focus on a conceptual definition of playfulness in adults. It provides a foundation or starting point, but this study has yet to be tested by other studies. Their results are clearly influenced by the literature they studied pertaining to playfulness in children. Their framework for understanding play was heavily influenced by Lieberman (1977) who focuses on playfulness as a state of mind or internal predisposition. This is a very individualistic understanding of play/playfulness which trivializes the relational element of play/playfulness. If they had asked different questions, would they have discovered that playfulness has a social element as well?

Recently Kolb and Kolb (2010) published an article that explored playfulness and learning among adults. Within this study, they used the term ‘ludic learning space’ to identify the playful context in which learning takes place. The context that they examined was a weekly, pick-up game of softball that formed during the spring, summer
and fall for over 15 years. They identified the following characteristics of this ludic learning space: freedom to learn, chaos of uncertainty, welcoming foolishness, stepping out of real life, balancing agon and paidia, play community, understanding play signals, and replication of the space through recursive practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). They concluded that the ludic learning space led to “deep learning” which they defined as learning that encompasses all four modes of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning that occurred in the context of the softball league was primarily focused on self-discovery or development, such as learning to forgive oneself or experiencing the authentic self (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). However, Kolb and Kolb identified two ways that the ludic space may have contributed to learning.

First, the absence of extrinsic evaluation in the space freed individuals to set their own learning agenda in their own terms. Second, the space provided a safe environment where players were given an unlimited opportunity to learn and discover through recursive practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2010, p. 47).

This study is significant for numerous reasons. First, it identifies a distinct environment or atmosphere created by play/playfulness. Secondly, it draws connections between that playful atmosphere and the learning. Third, this playfulness and learning occurs with adults. There are many similarities with Kolb & Kolb’s study and my study. However, there are significant differences and concerns with their investigation. The context for their study is a location that has a ludic focus, rather than a learning focus. A softball field is for playing; a classroom is for learning. It is great that learning can occur in a place dedicated for play. However, this study seeks to explore the role of
play/playfulness in a space that is primarily concerned with learning. In fact, in their conclusions, they raise the question if it would be possible to replicate the learning achieved through play in a formal educational or organizational environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). The study presented in this dissertation will seek to answer their question.

In the workplace literature, play and playfulness are viewed individualistically, as an attitude or state of mind. Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow or Lieberman’s model of playfulness shape most studies examining play/playfulness in the workplace. Both of these authors take a psychological approach to play which places the experience squarely in the mind of the individual. While they capture many elements of the play experience, they potentially miss the communal experience of play. Even so, researchers in the occupational fields are setting the pace for studies of play/playfulness with adults. The pragmatically minded business world has stumbled upon the benefits of play/playfulness in work and has sought to understand it. It is possible that play/playfulness have similar potential in adult learning that has yet to be explored and understood.

**Education.** This section identifies and discusses studies from the field of adult and higher education that focus on play/playfulness. There is very little empirical research that explores play/playfulness among adult learners however, five dissertations were identified in Digital Abstract (Adams, 1993; Brooks, 1994; Cotropia, 1995; Levinson, 1977; Melamed, 1985). Additionally, five articles explore the relationship between play and adult learning (Brougere, 1999; Cooper, 1996; Corbeil, 1999; Harris & Daley, 2008; Grenier, 2010). Several of these pieces were conceptual studies (Adams, 1993; Brooks, 1994; Brougere, 1999; Corbeil, 1999; Grenier, 2010). Levinson (1977)
explored the manifestation of play in the lives of men and concluded there needs to be more education about the value of play in men’s lives, while Cotropia (1995) examined three adults and explored connections between their childhood play and their creativity as adults. Cooper (1996) pursued the connection between playfulness and learning, but the paper she presented describes a brief experiment to support her hypothesis rather than a solid empirical study.

Although many of these pieces did not provide empirical data to support play/playfulness among adult learners, a couple of authors indicated that they had experienced play/playfulness in the adult learning classroom and recognized its significance (Brooks, 1994; Cooper, 1996).

I have come to feel that adult learners in college can develop a keen awareness of community, collaboration, and creativity in the direct, shared experience of playing together. Further, I’m interested in adult play as a way of getting in touch with our ability to bring our whole being to the deeper questions that concern our learning and our lives (Brooks, 1994, p. 2).

This author recognizes the potential of play/playfulness and realizes that it “is more than a simple device to make learning more fun” (Brooks, 1994, p. 142). The sentiments shared by this author are right on track with the goals and purposes of this study. However, the actual study focused on the writing of Schiller, rather than on approaches to incorporate play in the classroom. Melamed (1985) concurs with Brooks and provides empirical data for the significance of play/playfulness among adult learners.
Melamed (1985) performed extensive interviews with nine women who described themselves as playful. Playfulness was manifested differently in each woman’s life, but included things like viewing life as an adventure, being able to laugh at themselves, being silly, or wearing very colorful clothes and heart-shaped glasses. The findings of the study revealed five themes concerning playfulness and learning: it is relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, and empowering. Playful learners value relational qualities like cooperation and connectedness. Being judged or competing against others, negatively affected learning. Experiential learning was a key approach because it provided a structure in which the learner could be playful. Playful learners are likely to engage in metaphoric thinking such as imagination, intuition, emotions, etc. The integrative theme describes the playful learner’s ability to pull together seemingly opposite viewpoints or paradoxical terms. They tend to view things as both/and rather than either/or. Finally, she describes the playful learner as empowered to function within society and to cast dreams about what might be (Melamed, 1985).

Melamed concludes that women with playful attitudes are better able to learn as they exhibit the five qualities listed above. Additionally, play opens women up to learning, keeps them involved, and allows for deeper connections and understanding with self (Melamed, 1985). Of all the dissertations on play in adults, Melamed’s presents the strongest empirical evidence for the connections between learning and playing in adults. However, as with any study, there are limitations to her research. She focused on play/playfulness as a state of mind or personal attribute. Play can also be viewed as an activity or content, and this aspect of play is not investigated. In her study she
interviewed nine playful women and investigated their learning. They were not involved in a learning environment that was characterized by play or playfulness. Rather they discussed their learning and how their personal playfulness may have influenced their learning. Therefore, her study explores how playful women perceive their learning, rather than the role of play/playfulness in an adult learning environment such as a classroom. While her study provides valuable insight into playfulness in learning, it does not explore the adult learning environment.

Although the empirical literature from the field of adult and higher education is limited in the exploration of play/playfulness, there is evidence of play/playfulness’ potential for adult learners. A playful disposition enables adults to open up to learning opportunities, keeps them involved in the learning, and allows for deeper connections (Melamed, 1985). Furthermore, the literature reveals that there are adult educators who think that play and playfulness are valuable in the adult learning context (Brooks, 1994; Cooper, 1996). The most extensive study of playfulness and adult learning is limited in that it explores the learning of adults who are characterized as playful (Melamed, 1985). In this case, playfulness was conceptualized as a personality trait, and play as an event or activity within the learning context was not considered. Furthermore, this study only examined women and did not consider the social dynamics of a group engaged in play/playfulness. In the field of adult and higher education literature, there is no significant empirical study that explores the interactions of play/playfulness and learning in the classroom context.
Conceptual framework

As seen thus far, play is an ambiguous concept that defies easy definition. Many theories or models of play/playfulness already explored, highlight certain aspects of play/playfulness, but neglect others. To allow for the full range of possibilities of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom, it is vital to have a broad framework for understanding the many facets of play/playfulness. At the same time, it is necessary to identify some established structure in which to ground this inquiry. Therefore, it is critical to explain the theoretical framework for this study. Merriam and Simpson discuss theoretical framework as the “underlying structure, orientation, and viewpoint of your study” (2000, pp. 23-24). Due to the fact that the main topic of this study is play, it is essential to have a theoretical framework that is centered on some theory or concept of play. However, this study also explores learning, and so it is important to identify the researcher’s assumptions about learning as well. The conceptual framework presented in this section reveals the lenses through which play and learning are viewed in this study.

Play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), provides a comprehensive framework for play in his book, The Ambiguity of Play. The very title of his book acknowledges the difficulties encountered when trying to categorize and define play. As discussed earlier, there are numerous theories of play/playfulness from various academic and professional disciplines. The vast number of approaches to play/playfulness presents numerous options for a researcher seeking to identify a conceptual framework of play for their study. Because play/playfulness has not been studied in the adult classroom context, there is uncertainty about which conceptualization of play would be most helpful in
exploring play/playfulness in this particular context. A comprehensive framework is required to ensure that the specific manifestations of play are not excluded in this initial study of the play/playfulness in the adult classroom. Sutton-Smith provides this framework and addresses the breadth and depth of play by presenting seven rhetorics to categorize the various manifestations of play/playfulness. Rhetoric is defined “as being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 8). The rhetorics include play as progress, play as fate, play as power, play as identity, play as the imaginary, play of the self, and play as frivolous.

**Rhetoric of play as progress.** The rhetoric of play as progress advocates that children and animals (but not adults), adapt and develop through their play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This view is seen in 19th century definitions of play that Ellis (1973) referred to as classical theories. The classical theories include instinct theory (play is genetically transferred), preparation theory (play develops skills necessary for survival), and the recapitulation theory (play is a genetic remembering of activities that were once necessary for survival) (Ellis, 1973). In all of these early definitions there is a common theme that play must serve some function external to play itself, and that function is tied to adaptation and development.

This rhetoric of play as progress has been utilized to incorporate play in childhood education. Psychologically based play research focuses on the developmental stages children progress through, both in cognition and in play. Play is valued in childhood education because it serves to foster development in children. Some argue that play in
this category has lost its enjoyment quality and has become primarily about development (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Play as progress has been dominated by research on the play of children and animals. It is founded on evolutionary biological theories that assume development and progression in living organisms. Play is seen as one of the behaviors of certain animals (including humans) that facilitates development and increases the chances of survival. In this rhetoric, play loses some of its aesthetic and intrinsic value as it is reduced to a biological function that helps propagate a species. While it is possible that play serves some developmental function, its complexities and nuances seem to rise above simple biological function. If play is to be linked directly to learning and cognitive development in adults, this is the rhetoric in which it would be based. It is therefore important to consider this rhetoric in pursuing an understanding of adult play. Some of the shortcomings of this rhetoric as discussed above are satisfied in other play rhetorics.

Rhetoric of play as fate. The rhetoric of play as fate applies to games of chance which manifest themselves most obviously in our society as gambling. Play as fate is one of the oldest of rhetorics, as it is based in the belief that humans are controlled by destiny or fate (Sutton-Smith, 1997). When incorporating play/playfulness into the adult learning classroom, the rhetoric of play as fate may provide some possibilities. Games of chance are not dependent upon the skills and abilities of the players. Because of this, adults who are hesitant to play, may be less threatened by play activities that are based on luck rather than play activities that are based on adults’ skills or abilities and may bring out insecurities. However, there are also some concerns about utilizing this rhetoric to incorporate play/playfulness in the adult learner classroom. Gambling and other games
of chance often bring out the worst in people in the form of addictions that seem to prey on people from lower socioeconomic groups (Sutton-Smith, 1997). It would be undesirable to encourage these addictions through play/playfulness in the classroom context.

**Rhetoric of play as power.** The rhetoric of play as power is associated with sports, athletics, and contests (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This rhetoric is specifically about adult play. Play as power involves competition and reflects a struggle for superiority between two groups. Historically, the play activity represents some real conflict between the groups and whichever side wins brings victory, glory, and power to their group. Even today, this is the form of play that brings prestige in the eyes of society, whether it is winning the Super Bowl or bringing home a gold medal from the Olympics. This type of play also serves to reinforce social hegemony (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Those with power control the game (establish rules, etc.) and use play to fortify their status. This is illustrated in the fact that historically women seldom had a place in this type of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Play as power is another rhetoric that raises concerns when thinking about play/playfulness in an adult learning setting. Play used to subordinate certain people groups for the purpose of elevating others seems questionable. This rhetoric may represent a distortion of play. While it is possible to be playful in sports and competitive games, it is difficult because of the strong cultural pull toward individualism and winning at all cost. As educator Parker Palmer (1993) points out, competition is so prevalent in our culture that our pedagogy and even our ontology are shaped by it. This leads to fragmentation as it places learners in opposition of each other as competitors rather than
in relationship with each other as a “community of learners” (Palmer, 1998). Learning and playing are often communal acts. The rhetoric of play as power could potentially be counterproductive to understandings of learning and playing as communal acts.

At the same time, the rhetoric of play as power may help foster community. In team sports there is a camaraderie that develops between teammates as they play together. This has the potential to develop into something deeper than simple camaraderie as players enter into a “reflexive consciousness” where team members think and act as one, knowing instinctively how other teammates will respond (Cheville, 2005). Additionally, competition is a powerful motivator for many people. As with the rhetoric of fate, there are potential positive and negative outcomes for this rhetoric of play in an adult learning context.

**Rhetoric of play as identity.** The rhetoric of play as identity applies to celebrations, festivals, parades, or carnivals where the play tradition is a means to confirm, maintain, or advance the communal identity (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Festivals like the Mardi Gras draw people together to celebrate their communal identity. Play in this rhetoric calls individuals into relationship and community. Play becomes a social phenomenon that creates a synergistic atmosphere. This communal aspect of play is an important aspect in this study’s conceptualization of play. It is possible to play as an individual, but playing in a social context adds breadth and depth to the play experience as the complexity of relationships and group dynamics are added to the experience. This resonates with the call for community that is being articulated by some educators (Palmer, 1998; hooks, 2003). The rhetoric of play as identity is particularly significant for this study because play/playfulness is being examined in a group context – the adult
and higher education classroom. It may be that play/playfulness will create a communal atmosphere that fosters learning in the classroom context.

**Rhetoric of play as the imaginary.** The rhetoric of play as the imaginary focuses on creativity and improvisation. This rhetoric is where play and the arts intersect. The players are writers, artists, composers, actors, and other imaginative people (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play is manifest in literature, poetry, metaphor, daydreams, dance and drama. The forms of play are limited only by the imagination which is given free reign within this rhetoric. This rhetoric is rooted in the Romantic Movement which “has been characterized as an attitude of mind that glorifies freedom, originality, genius, the arts, and the innocent and uncorrupted character of the childhood vision” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 129). Play is an aesthetic, a way of thinking about culture. This rhetoric offers great potential for understanding play/playfulness in adult learning. Role playing, playing with ideas, and artistic expression all find support within this rhetoric.

**Rhetoric of the self.** The rhetoric of the self is typically applied to individualized activities such as hobbies or high risk activities like parachuting. The focus is on the player and their fun, relaxation, or escape (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This type of play is very prevalent in our society today and is described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as optimal experience or flow. This rhetoric focuses on the individual and their experience of play and has its psychological origins with Freud (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This rhetoric may also be significant in understanding play/playfulness in the adult learning classroom. The connection is not in the individualistic aspect of this rhetoric, but rather in the fun and motivational element of play. This rhetoric captures the exhilaration, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivations of play. If play can evoke these
attitudes and emotions in the classroom context, they may be transferred to the process of learning. This rhetoric of play describes how play/playfulness may make learning fun.

**Rhetoric of play as frivolity.** The rhetoric of play as frivolous is best captured in the image of a court jester and is characterized by idleness and foolishness. It is this manifestation of play that is challenged by the Protestant work ethic prevalent in our society (Fullerton, 1959). This rhetoric undermines all the others as it characterizes play as pointless and utterly useless. Play as frivolity is play for play sake. The court jester provides a helpful image of this type of rhetoric. Play as frivolity, more than any other, captures the spontaneity and excitement associated with play. This exuberance may play a role in the adult and higher education classroom, and therefore this rhetoric will be considered in the study of play/playfulness in adult learning.

**Rhetoric summary and further discussion.** Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics provide a comprehensive framework for exploring play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom. The rhetorics presented by Sutton-Smith are distinct in that they each have a particular function, form, and historic sources. Table 2.1 provides a summary of these features (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 215).
Table 2.1 Sutton-Smith’s Rhetorics of Play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Scholars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>Enlightenment, evolution</td>
<td>Adaptation, growth, socialization</td>
<td>Play, games</td>
<td>Juveniles</td>
<td>Biology, psychology, education</td>
<td>Vygotsky, Erikson, Piaget, Berlyne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate</td>
<td>Animism, divination</td>
<td>Magic, luck</td>
<td>Chance</td>
<td>Gamblers</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Bergler, Fuller, Apt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Politics, war</td>
<td>Status, victory</td>
<td>Skills, strategy, deep play</td>
<td>Athletes</td>
<td>Sociology, history</td>
<td>Spariosu, Huizinga, Scott, Von Neumann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Communitas, cooperation</td>
<td>Festivals, parades, parties, new games</td>
<td>Folk</td>
<td>Anthropology, folklore</td>
<td>Turner, Falassi, DeKoven, Abrahams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginary</td>
<td>Romanticism</td>
<td>Creativity, flexibility</td>
<td>Fantasy, troupes</td>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Art and literature</td>
<td>Bakhtin, Fagen, Bateson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Peak experience</td>
<td>Leisure, solitary, extreme games</td>
<td>Avant-garde, solitary players</td>
<td>Psychiatry</td>
<td>Csikszentmihalyi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frivolity</td>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>Inversion, playfulness</td>
<td>Nonsense</td>
<td>Tricksters, comedians, jesters</td>
<td>Pop culture</td>
<td>Welsford, Stewart, Cox</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since little is known about the experience of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom, it is important to begin with a broad framework such as Sutton-Smith’s to ensure certain manifestations of play are not excluded. For example, Csikszentmihalyi’s theory is helpful in understanding the conditions that could encourage a flow experience in the classroom. However, his theory is individualistic and does not account for the communal, synergistic elements of play. Similarly, adopting the rhetorics of play as progress, the imaginary and self would only allow us to see the play experience in terms of the individual. It is the rhetoric of play as identity and power that allows the possibility of play as a social construction within a particular context or group of people. Any one of the seven rhetorics may help illuminate play/playfulness in adult learning.
This study is seeking to explore play/playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom context. There are several rhetorics that have the most potential for describing play/playfulness as it relates to learning in this context. These rhetorics are progress, identity, self and to a lesser extent the rhetorics of the imaginary and frivolity. The rhetoric of progress is where play/playfulness and learning have traditionally intersected. Although, this rhetoric has typically been applied only to animals and children, it may be relevant for the adult learner as well. The rhetoric of play as identity is significant for the adult and higher education classroom context because this rhetoric addresses the communal and relational elements of play/playfulness as well as the socially constructed nature of learning. The rhetoric of self describes the intrinsic motivation and flow state that individuals experience in play/playfulness. In the context of the adult and higher education classroom, this is the rhetoric that explains why learners are fully engaged in the play/playfulness and learning experience.

The rhetoric of play/playfulness as the imaginary is helpful because it accounts for creativity and various forms of expression in the adult and higher education classroom. For example, the teacher may incorporate a game that would have students use their imagination by acting like an animal, whereby capturing their response to a particular topic. This rhetoric also brings in drama and improvisational theatre. There is a relationship between play/playfulness and drama/theatre, but play/playfulness as conceptualized in this study does not include theatre and drama. It is impossible to include everything in a study and theater/drama as a separate area has its own body of literature. Therefore the rhetoric of play as the imaginary is still considered in this study, but not to the full extent of play forms normally considered in this rhetoric.
Similarly, the rhetoric of play as frivolity will be considered but will not be a focus in this study because its elusive nature. This rhetoric baulks at any approach to play that is not for the sake of play itself. This rhetoric does not allow for play to be purposeful, and so an educator who intentionally includes play/playfulness to facilitate learning is operating outside this rhetoric. To consider play’s role in learning in the adult and higher education classroom is to exclude this rhetoric because it connects play to something other than play for its own sake. However, there may be cases of frivolous play in the classroom setting, not serving any role or accomplishing anything beyond the play experience. For this reason, this rhetoric must be considered.

The rhetorics of play as fate and play as power will be considered cautiously in this study. As stated earlier, play as fate and play as power are two areas where play/playfulness have been distorted by our society. The billions spent in gambling each year or the “winning at all cost” mentalities provide evidence of the prevalence of these distorted attitudes of play as fate and play as power. It may be difficult to elicit these types of play in a learning environment without also encouraging the distorted attitudes and perceptions that our society has assigned to these types of play. At the same time, there are strengths to these rhetorics as they provide less threatening games that may entice adults into participation, encourage camaraderie, and for some are very motivating. There may be some potential for these rhetorics in understanding play/playfulness in learning, but they will be approached cautiously because of the rampant distortions of these play forms in society.

The comprehensive nature of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics is both a strength and a weakness. The framework created through his rhetorics is very broad, allowing all forms
of play to be included. However, the framework does not root the study in any particular philosophy or approach to play, but rather leaves it tied to many possible approaches. This will foster inclusiveness, although will not help discriminate aspects that may be peripheral to the primary themes. This framework does provide a starting point for examining play in a context that has not been studied previously.

**Adult Learning Theory and Play/Playfulness**

Although there has been very little written about play/playfulness in adult learning, there are bodies of literature in adult education that provide potential connection points between play/playfulness and adult learning, including experiential learning and “other ways of knowing.” Experiential learning models are very common in adult learning and have typically been employed to incorporate games and simulations into learning contexts. In the next section, I will explore various experiential learning models in adult education including a model presented by John Heron that focuses on the affective dimension of learning. Subsequently, I will examine “other ways of knowing” focusing specifically on somatic learning and spirituality in learning.

**Experiential learning**

In considering play/playfulness in adult and higher education, it is important to explore experiential learning. Experiential learning plays a fundamental role in adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Miller, 2000), and experiential learning models are often applied to the use of games and simulations in a learning environment. Experiential learning is simply described as learning by doing (Lewis & Williams, 1994). However, there are many models and theories that have been developed to explain how we learn from experience. In this section these models or approaches will be examined.
Many of these approaches are influenced by pragmatism and favor rational thought (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This is one way to derive meaning from experience, but may not be the most effective model for understanding the role of play/playfulness in the learning context. The work of John Heron is helpful since he presents an experiential learning model that assigns a greater significance to the role of affect (feelings and emotions) in the learning process. In addition, Fenwick’s (2000) classification of experiential learning in adult education provides additional insight into the interaction of experiential learning and play/playfulness.

**Cognitive models of experiential learning.** There are several models of experiential learning that can be categorized as cognitive because of the emphasis they place on rational thought in the learning process. In these cognitive models, experiential learning is typically defined as learning by doing *with reflection*. This reflection is a crucial stage in the learning cycle and involves revisiting and analyzing the experience through rational thought processes. This is the dominant approach to experiential learning as evidenced in the many authors who discuss learning from this cognitive approach (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987). An examination of these cognitive approaches reveals several common characteristics.

In most of these approaches to experiential learning, a rational engagement is the first response to the experience. Dewey’s model of reflective thought and action begins with an experience characterized as a disturbance in routine where typical responses to situations are no longer effective. The next step is “intellectualization” which is a rational attempt to identify the problem (Miettinen, 2000). Similarly, in Kolb’s (1984) four stage model of experiential learning, the first stage is the “concrete experience”
followed immediately by observation and reflection. Also, in Schön’s (1987) reflection-on-action model the first response to an experience that reveals that previous ways of thinking and doing are no longer effective, is to “think critically about the thinking that got us into this fix” (Schön, 1987, p. 28). All of these modes of experiential learning demand an immediate engagement of rational thought to a particular experience.

Not only is rational engagement the first response, it is the dominate means within the learning cycle. Dewey’s five steps are: 1) disturbance and uncertainty because typical habits do not work, 2) intellectualization to define the problem, 3) studying the conditions of the situation and forming a working hypothesis, 4) reasoning or applying a thought experiment to test the hypothesis, 5) testing the hypothesis by action, and the outcome of the cycle is a concept and solution to the problem (Miettinen, 2000). Three of the five stages occur solely in the mind and involve rational thought. Similarly, Kolb’s (1984) four stages of experiential learning are: 1) concrete experience, 2) observations and reflections, 3) formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, 4) testing implications of concepts in new situations. Again, the dominant action in the learning process is cognitive as the learner reflects and forms abstract concepts. In reflection-in-action the dominance of thought is taken to a new level as the primary action in the learning cycle is to think about the thought process (Schön, 1987). Rational thought is not only used to analyze and understand experiences, it is called up to analyze the thinking that was occurring during the experiences. Cognitive models of experiential learning clearly favor rational thought for making meaning from experience.

Several of these cognitive models acknowledge feeling and emotions in the learning process, but they do not play a significant role. Kolb (1984) identifies two
modes of grasping experience, apprehension (felt qualities of experience) and comprehension (conceptual interpretation of experience). However, in the process of knowledge construction, comprehension plays a dominant role. Kolb cites William James extensively to further explain these concepts and the passage includes the following quote: “Through feelings we become acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them” (James as cited by Kolb, 1984, p. 44). In his understanding of experiential learning, knowledge is clearly generated in the cognitive domain.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker, also present a model of experiential learning that acknowledges the role of feelings in the learning process. They identify three stages in the reflection process: 1) returning to experience, 2) attending to feelings, and 3) re-evaluating experience (1985). The second stage involves utilizing positive feelings (to keep the learner focused and motivated for learning) and removing or dealing with obstructive feelings (which might distort perceptions, lead to false interpretations, or destroy motivation for learning)(Boud, Keogh, and Walker; 1985). Although feelings are acknowledged they are not valued as a source of knowledge, but are only valued as they facilitate or hinder the cognitive process. In all these cognitive models, the “experience is not the direct sensation of felt encounter but is the meaning that we make of that encounter” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). In other words, the experience only becomes real or significant when there is a cognitive processing and understanding of that experience. Although cognitive processing of play experiences in an adult classroom context may facilitate meaning making, it does not paint a complete picture. Play is a complex phenomenon that engages a person on many levels including the cognitive and affective
domains. A model of experiential learning that esteems both of these domains may provide a more complete framework for exploring play/playfulness and learning among adult learners in a classroom context.

**Affective models of experiential learning.** The experiential learning theories examined above have one trait in common: they all rely on rational reflection to realize meaning from the experience. John Heron, co-director of the South Pacific Centre for Human Inquiry in New Zealand, presents a learning model that privileges the affective (feelings and emotions) domain of the human psyche. In the opening pages of his book, he summarizes the major premise of his theory. “This book is for readers who are interested in exploring the idea that the nature of personhood is grounded in feeling, in applying this in living and learning, in considering its transpersonal context and who are seeking to reappraise the traditional role ascribed to intellect” (Heron, 1992, p. 2). He identifies four modes of the psyche, which he defines as “the human mind and its inherent life as a whole, including its unexpressed and unexplored potential, as what is manifest in conscious development” (Heron, 1992, p. 14). These four modes are the affective mode, which included emotion and feelings; imaginal mode which includes imagery (perceptions, memory, dreams, and imagination) and intuition; conceptual mode, which includes discrimination and reflection; and practical mode, which includes action and intention (Heron, 1992). These modes are arranged in an ‘up-hierarchy’ which is like a tree with the roots at the base, and the trunk, branches, and fruit grow out of the base rather than the higher levels controlling or ruling the lower levels as occurs in a typically hierarchy. In this model, the affective is the foundation for the other modes. This up-hierarchy can be translated into a cyclical life cycle that the psyche continually cycles
through. Emotion is the stimulus or starting point for the cycle as is manifested as a need for fulfillment or less frustration. From the affective mode of emotion, the cycle progresses to the imaginal mode where an image or vision of what will satisfy the need will arise. In the conceptual mode, discrimination occurs to categorize potential actions and to decide what action to take. Acting on this decision is the final stage of the cycle. The cycle then begins again with the next felt need (Heron, 1992). According to Heron, this basic life cycle can become a simple learning cycle if two things occur. “First, a measure of mindfulness throughout the cycle, being aware of what is going on at each stage, and of how each stage influences the next. And secondly, a sufficient concentration of attention next time round the cycle to try out alternative ways of managing each of the stages” (Heron, 1992, p. 209). This forms the basic learning cycle.

Heron notes that his basic learning cycle can benefit from being included in a broader circle of learners through co-operative learning. This cycle is still immersed in mindfulness and concentration but the order of the cycle is altered. The first stage is still the affective mode where the group of learners gathers and has a time of celebration, communion, and a time to deal with any unresolved tension between group members. The second stage deviates from the basic cycle in that there is movement to the conceptual mode where learners share information from case studies or their own practice and reflect on this cooperatively. From this stage there is movement back to the imaginal mode where learners seek to visualize and imagine what their deliberations from the previous stage would look like in practice. Finally, the learners return to their own practices and put what they imagined into action in the practical mode. Heron (1992) refers to this pattern as a figure 8 because of the pattern created by this alternative cycle.
The four modes of psyche in Heron’s (1992) model lead to four kinds of knowledge which correspond to four types of learning:

Experiential learning is acquiring knowledge of being and begins through empathic resonance, felt participation. Imaginal learning is acquiring knowledge of the patterning of experience through the exercise of intuition, imagination and perception. Propositional learning is acquiring knowledge stated in propositions through the exercise of the intellect. And practical learning is acquiring knowledge of how to do something through the practice of the particular skill in question (Heron, 1992, p. 224).

These four types of learning are arranged in a similar type of up-hierarchy with experiential learning forming the base. In other words, practical knowledge is dependent on a strong base of propositional knowledge, which is based on imaginal knowledge, which is rooted in the affective domain. In practical terms, an application of this up-hierarchy in learning implies a priority on a strong emotional base which might include confidence or positive arousal. Next, to address the imaginal mode of learning, the learning environment should present a wide range of different types of input that involve auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. The conceptual mode is addressed through opportunities for reflection to discriminate the important intellectual aspects of the material. The final stage is addressed by providing an opportunity to rehearse and practice the learned material (Heron, 1992).

This model of learning provides a helpful framework for exploring play/playfulness in adult learning. Heron begins with the affective dimension in his holistic approach to personhood. Play/playfulness are also rooted in this dimension of
being. One of the most salient characteristics of play/playfulness is that it is enjoyable, fun, and intrinsically motivated (Huizinga, 1950). In his discussion of the role of affect in learning, Heron makes the following statement:

People learn more effectively when they are enjoying themselves and what they are doing; when they are satisfying some felt need or interest, and are emotionally involved in what has personal relevance to them; when they feel good about the whole idea of learning and the exercise of their learning competence; when they feel confident, secure and in a low threat, co-operative, non-competitive situation (Heron, 1992, p. 229).

These statements present a strong case for incorporating play/playfulness in adult learning. Play is enjoyable, it is engaging, it involves the whole person, and provides a safe place. Many of the elements of play/playfulness are identified as critical elements of learning in Heron’s model.

Another connection between Heron’s model and play/playfulness is the primary role of imagination. This is a distinct stage in his up-hierarchy and includes an emphasis on imagination as well as intuition and perception (Heron, 1992). Imagination is a significant aspect of play/playfulness. In fact, Sutton-Smith dedicates a whole rhetoric to the imaginary in his framework for understanding play/playfulness. Imagination is a key aspect of play/playfulness, and in Heron’s model it is also an integral part of learning. A shared valuing of the imagination is yet another reason that this model may be helpful in understanding play/playfulness in learning.

York and Kasl (2002) build on Heron’s work and present a model they call learning within relationship. In learning within relationship, the learner strives “to
become engaged with both their own whole-person knowing and the whole-person knowing of their fellow learners” (p. 185). The process of ‘whole-person knowing’ involves the affective, imaginal, conceptual and practical modes of self and their corresponding modes of knowing and learning. Their focus on relationship adds a dimension to Heron’s work that fits well with play/playfulness. In the context of a classroom, play/playfulness is not an individual experience, but becomes communal because of the synergy of play in a group setting. The learning in relationship of York and Kasl (2002) built upon the affective, imaginal, propositional, and conceptual modes of knowing of Heron (1992), dovetail nicely with the second body of adult learning literature that is explored in this study, other ways of knowing. Before examining these other ways of knowing, an examination of Tara Fenwick’s categorization of experiential learning will be explored to gain further understanding of experiential learning models that may be applied to play/playfulness in the adult classroom.

**Categorizing Experiential Learning in Adult Education.** Tara Fenwick has categorized experiential learning into five groups: reflection, interference, participation, resistance, and co-emergence (Fenwick, 2000). These categorizations may provide additional insight into an experiential learning approach to play/playfulness in the classroom. Beginning with the reflection category, the learner reflects on experiences and then interprets and generalizes the experience to create meaning (Fenwick, 2000). She also classifies this as a constructivist perspective because the learner is an independent constructor of their own knowledge to help them understand or make meaning of the world. This category includes the cognitive experiential learning
approaches discussed earlier (Kolb’s model of experiential learning; Boud, Keogh, and Walker’s work on reflective learning; and Schon’s reflection in action)(Fenwick, 2000).

Typically, play in the form of games or simulations are incorporated into learning utilizing the reflective approach. After the experience, time is spent “debriefing” or reflecting on the experience. When utilizing play in the reflective approach, several experiential learning theories are helpful. Kolb’s (1984) model serves to remind the educator of the cyclical nature of learning through experience. Boud and company (1985) stress the importance of reflection and creating space to process the experience. They also provide a helpful framework to help facilitate the debrief process. Schön’s(1987) reflection in action is useful to the playful educator as it stresses the dynamic nature of the learning environment. When utilizing play in learning, it is important to constantly assess the situation and make adjustments to the experience. In these ways, the reflective type of experiential education provides insight on how play/playfulness can contribute to learning. However, there are also weaknesses of this perspective when thinking about learning through play.

The reflective approaches are individualistic and do not emphasize the significance of others in the meaning making process. The relationship between players is significant in understanding the role of play in adult learning. Individualistic play can be beneficial in learning, but the power of play for learning might only be realized in a synergy that is created when a group of learners are playfully engaged. Additionally, the reflective approaches rely heavily on rationalistic thought and reason to elicit learning from the play experience. Learning through play/playfulness involves the whole body, not just the mind, when constructing meaning.
The second category of experiential learning is interference (a psychoanalytic perspective). The focus is on the unconscious self and how it interferes with the conscious to produce knowledge. It is about a process of self-discovery that involves paying close attention to desire, insight, and intuition. This work of Jung and Freud contributes significantly to the psychoanalytical theory that this approach is based upon (Fenwick, 2000). The psychoanalytical perspective provides minimal insight to how play/playfulness may facilitate learning. This approach is very process oriented, as the individual is seeking to understand what their unconscious is telling them. In play, process is important but the interactions among learners tend to be a focal point. The psychoanalytical perspective focuses solely on the individual. Play may provoke and reveal some of the inner conflicts that are critical in the psychoanalytical perspective, but this approach would seem more appropriate for play therapy rather than play as learning.

The participation category of experiential learning emphasizes that learning is rooted in the situation and involves a particular community (Fenwick, 2000). The process itself is part of the knowledge and cannot always be transmitted to other situations. Different situations potentially create different knowledge. The participation or situative perspective captures key elements of the essence of play/playfulness in learning. This perspective places significant emphasis on the context including the community, the tools at hand, and the moment’s activity (Fenwick, 2001). In play, others are an integral part of the experience. Also, the activity and context cannot be separated from the play experience: they define that particular play experience. A playful learning experience is impossible to replicate because the people and the activity will never be exactly the same and will therefore always create a different experience. The situative
perspective captures some of these elements. While this perspective recognizes the importance of others, it does not account for the synergy that can emerge when a group is learning in community. It would simply describe this as the particular context in which an individual is learning.

The resistance or critical cultural perspective focuses on power and power relations within the context of experiential learning. The underlying structures must be analyzed to reveal where power and dominance lie so they can be resisted. This category of experiential learning pays close attention to the politics that are a part of human activity, identity and meaning (Fenwick, 2000). Paulo Freire is an example of an adult educator in this category. The resistance perspective offers little to the understanding of play/playfulness in learning. It is possible to use play to uncover power relations. (For example, there are games to reveal the inequity in food distribution in the world.), Yet, investigating power relationships is not always the primary role of play/playfulness in adult learning.

The final category that Fenwick proposes is co-emergence or the enactivist perspective. This perspective focuses on the interconnectedness between the learner and their context. There is almost a symbiotic relationship between actions and learners that produces learning greater than what could be achieved by the independent participants. This may seem similar to the participation or situated category; however, the enactivist perspective assumes a deep interconnectedness and sees the learner as part of a larger system. The focus of enactivism is not on the components of experience but on the relationships that bind the component together (Fenwick, 2000). The co-emergence or the enactivist perspective provides some insight into the dynamics of play/playfulness in
learning in a classroom context. In play there is often an excitement and synergy that is created that is best explained through the enactivist perspective. Play creates an atmosphere and energy that are impossible to create with just one person present. Everything present, from the people to the physical location, to the props; they all interconnect to create the play experience. This shared experience and the relationships among various elements are key aspects of the play experience. This perspective acknowledges the interconnectedness between learners and affirms the communal nature of play. This enactivist perspective, in addition to the reflection and participation perspectives, helps identify types of experiential learning approaches that address the role of play/playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom.

Fenwick’s classification of experiential learning provides a helpful framework for understanding the possibilities for play/playfulness in experiential learning. It also reveals some of the weaknesses of many experiential learning theories as the paradigm for learning through play. A learning theory that makes meaning from play must place a significant emphasis on the whole body experience, not just on the ability of the mind to process the experience rationally. Another shortcoming of many experiential learning theories is their inability to account for the transcendent nature of play. Play is often described in terms that indicate it is removed from time and space (Apter, 1991; Caillois, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Huizinga, 1950) and evokes strong emotional responses that are described in words like sacred, sanctuary, or deep (Ackerman, 1999). This aspect of play/playfulness cannot be captured in traditional learning theories that focus on rational thought. John Heron’s model of experiential learning provides space for these non-rational, transcendent elements of play. Some of the bodies of literature exploring
other ways of knowing provide additional frameworks to help understand the role of play/playfulness in adult learning.

**Other ways of knowing**

In the past several decades there has been a growing interest in the multiple ways adults construct meaning. ‘Other ways of knowing’ or ‘multiple ways of knowing’ refer to holistic learning that recognizes that knowledge is not confined to the rational thought processes of the brain. There are other ways that we come to know things that include not only the thinking, but also intuitive, affective, physical and spiritual self (Yorks and Kasl, 2006). The one significant study that has been done on play/playfulness in adult learning proposes that “play can also be a means of understanding or a way of coming to know something” (Melamed, 1985, p. 123). It may be that play is another way of knowing. Tisdell (2003) provides a helpful overview that traces the development of these multiple ways of knowing over the past several decades beginning with Gardner’s multiple intelligences.

Howard Gardner’s (1983, 1999) work on ‘multiple intelligences’ is typically applied to primary and secondary education. However, his work set the stage for a broader, more holistic understanding of intelligence that includes bodily kinesthetic intelligences, musical intelligence, spatial intelligence and interpersonal intelligence to name a few. Tisdell (2003) notes that shortly after Gardner’s introduction of multiple intelligences, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) drew attention to the role of relationship and affect in learning among women. More recently, Tisdell (2003) points out that authors like Dirkx have examined the role of emotions and imagination in adult learning, while Clark had drawn attention to the ways we learn from our bodies
through somatic or embodied learning. Many authors are discussing spirituality in adult and higher education and entire journal issues have been dedicated to this topic (Chickering Dalton, Stamm, 2006; English & Gillen, 2000; Higher Education Research Institute, 2003; Hoppe & Speck, 2005; Jablonski, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). While this is not a comprehensive list of authors writing about other ways of knowing in adult and higher education, it provides a brief overview of the various processes of meaning making from sources other than rational thought.

In the many discourses of other ways of knowing, there are two that have significant connections with play/playfulness; spirituality and somatic learning. There are many similarities with play/playfulness and spirituality. Play/playfulness point strongly to the transcendent realm, which the spirituality literature acknowledges and embraces (Ackerman, 1999; Berger, 1969; Chickering, Dalton, Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). Somatic learning considers the significance of the body as a site of learning and knowledge construction (Beaudoin, 1999; Clark, 2001; Matthews, 1998). Many forms of play involve physical movement and a presence with others. The experience of movement and an awareness of the body in the process of play may contribute to the learning that occurs in play. These are the two types of other ways of knowing that will be explored in this study.

**Spirituality.** The purpose of this section is to explore spirituality in adult learning to identify potential connections with play/playfulness. Definitions and conceptualization of spirituality in an adult learning context will be presented, followed by an examination of the ways spirituality is evoked in the adult and higher education
classroom. Finally, commonalities between play/playfulness and spirituality in a learning context will be explored.

_Spirituality in adult education._ There is a growing interest in the spirituality in adult and higher education. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA launched a multi-year research project to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students while in college (HERI Report, 2004). The principle investigators of this project, Helen and Alexander Astin lament the fact that college and universities have focused most of their efforts on the exterior aspects of students’ development while neglecting the inner development, “the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding” [HERI, 2004, p. iv]. Similarly, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm have written a book to encourage authenticity and spirituality in higher education because “characteristics like wisdom, compassion, and such concepts as justice, ethics, values, morality, virtue, and character are ones that most undergraduates fail to consider because the curriculum does not encourage them to do so” (2006, p. 2). To further understand the significance of spirituality in the adult and higher education learning context, it is necessary to explore how spirituality is conceptualized in this context.

An examination of spirituality in the adult education literature reveals a number of definitions (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, English & Gillen, 2000b; Speck 2005; Tisdell 2003). Common themes in these spirituality definitions are inter-connectedness, wholeness, authenticity, meaning making, personal development, and an acknowledgement of the transcendent. In the following discussion of spirituality, I draw on the work of Tisdell (2003), Hamilton and Jackson, (1998) Palmer (1998, 1999), and
Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm (2006). These authors present a picture of spirituality that is representative of the broader literature base and provides a basis for exploring connections to play/playfulness.

Hamilton and Jackson (1998) studied spirituality with women health professionals who served in educational roles. They identified three themes in the responses of their participants; self awareness, interconnectedness, and a relationship to a higher power. Palmer’s definition of spirituality includes these themes, but does so by focusing on the interconnectedness of everything. “[By spirituality] I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos- with our own souls, with one another, with the world of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive” (1999, p. 6). The ‘self awareness’ that Hamilton and Jackson discuss is captured in Palmer’s connectedness with ‘our own souls.’ Their relationship to a higher power is seen in Palmer’s connection with ‘something larger.’ Palmer’s definition also includes relationship with others. The connections are not just about an individual and a higher power or the natural world, but also include the individual in relationship to others. Community and relationships are significant themes in Palmer’s writing and provide a strong connection to play/playfulness as discussed in a later section. Palmer’s and Hamilton & Jackson’s influence is seen in Tisdell’s (2003) work on spirituality in adult education.

Tisdell (2003) identifies seven assumptions about spirituality in adult education based upon interviews with adult educators and other work she has done on this topic.

1. Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many they are interrelated.
2. Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many I interviewed referred to as the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit.

3. Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making.

4. Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment.

5. Spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self.

6. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally.

7. Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise (Tisdell, 2003, pp. 28-29).

Tisdell acknowledges the potential overlap of spirituality and religion, but makes the distinction between the two. Many authors writing about spirituality in adult and higher education also make this distinction. Religion is characterized by shared principles, creeds, doctrine, and codes of behavior (Buttery and Roberson, 2005; English and Gillen, 2000b; Tisdell 2003;). Palmer also notes this distinction and acknowledges that religions may provide helpful insight, but spirituality is not tied to a particular faith tradition (Palmer, 1999). In contrast to religion, spirituality is often presented as an individual’s attitude, personal belief, inner dimension, or deepest core (English and

This focus on the individual is also evident in the assumption about spirituality and authenticity. Authenticity “means having a sense that one is operating more from a sense of self that is defined by one’s own self as opposed to being defined by other people’s expectations” (Tisdell, 2003, p. 32). In other words, spirituality helps you discover your true self. Hamilton and Jackson’s (1998) definition begins to address this concept, however, authenticity is more than just a “self awareness,” it requires an individual to act out of that awareness. Palmer’s “connectedness… to our own souls” better captures the idea of authenticity as “connectedness” implies awareness and action, and “soul” implies the core of our being.

The meaning making aspect of spirituality is particularly important from the perspective of an educator. Palmer talks at great length about the pursuit of understanding and knowing as it relates to the broader concept of spirituality. Spirituality is about connectedness so “we can know reality only by being in community with it” (Palmer, 1999, p. 95). This process of knowing and understanding can only occur in this web of relationship that he calls the “community of truth.” Furthermore, “Spiritual questions … are embedded in every discipline” (1998, p. 8). For Palmer, meaning making and spirituality are woven together and cannot be separated.

Tisdell also notes that spiritual experiences typically happen unexpectedly and often surprise the individual. There is no rote formula for inducing spiritual experiences, and there is no way to predict when they may occur. The individual suddenly
experiences something that they know is beyond a ‘normal’ experience. Sometimes there is a tingling along the spine. Some Christian traditions speak of these moments as ‘standing on holy ground,’ drawing from the Old Testament story of Moses in front of the burning bush where he encounters God and is told to remove his sandals because of the significance of that place at that time. While spiritual experiences occur by surprise, there are ways to encourage these types of experiences. In the Judeo-Christian traditions, ‘spiritual disciplines’ such as fasting, prayer, meditation on scripture, solitude, or silence seek to create a ‘space’ in which God might show up. In an adult or higher education context these types of overtly sectarian practices are typically not appropriate. How then is spirituality evoked in the educational context?

*Evoking spirituality in the adult and higher education classroom.* Various authors have explored how spirituality can be evoked in the adult and higher education classroom. Because of the similarities between play/playfulness and spirituality, these means for evoking spirituality may provide insight on evoking play/playfulness in the classroom. Palmer notes that spirituality “is not something that needs to be ‘brought into’ or ‘added onto’ the curriculum. “It is at the heart of every subject we teach, where it waits to be brought forth” (Palmer, 1999, p. 8). Tisdell (2003) also draw attention to the fact that spirituality is always present in the educational context. If there are similarities between play/playfulness and spirituality, understanding how spirituality is “brought forth” in the classroom may shed light on play/playfulness in the classroom.

While some colleges are introducing courses to address issues of spirituality (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006), Chickering, et al. recognize that “all content areas that typically characterize college and university curricula have potential
for helping students address issues of spiritual growth, authenticity, purpose and meaning” (2006, p. 113). Similarly, Tisdell and Palmer acknowledge that spirituality does not need to be overtly discussed to be brought into the classroom environment. They explore how pedagogical approaches can nurture spirituality in the classroom. Parker presents six ‘paradoxical tensions’ that he seeks to build into his teaching and learning space. The space should:

- be bounded and open, hospitable and ‘charged,’ invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group, honor the ‘little’ stories of the students and the ‘big’ stories of the discipline and tradition, support solitude and surround it with the resources of community, welcome both silence and speech (Palmer, 1998, p. 74).

Embedded in these tensions are themes of authenticity, risk taking, safety (space to be vulnerable), personal stories, connections, and reflection. These elements help create a learning environment that is holistic and draws out the spiritual dimension of learning.

Tisdell (2003) identifies seven principles or elements of a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy. It is important to note that she does not focus on spirituality alone, but on the interactions of spirituality and culture. As discussed above, spirituality has to do with connections and self awareness. Cultural background is a significant aspect of everyone’s understanding of self and understanding of community. The pedagogical principles presented by Tisdell are therefore significant to understanding spirituality in education in general, not just when addressing issues of culture in the classroom. Her principles are as follows: an emphasis on authenticity; an environment that allows for the exploration of the cognitive, affective, relational, and the symbolic (through art forms such as visual art, poetry, music, drama); readings that
reflect the cultures of the members of the class; exploration of individual and communal
dimensions of culture and identity; collaborative work; celebrations; and recognition of
the limitations of the classroom setting (pp. 212-213).

In examining pedagogical strategies for encouraging spirituality in higher
education, Chickering, et al. (2006) present Patrick Morton, a math professor as an
illustration. Morton utilizes the following strategies:

1. Make sure she chooses a topic she really wants to learn about.
2. Make sure the problem is sufficiently large and difficult so as to challenge
   her imagination and provoke widespread exploration, but also sufficiently
circumscribed so that she can make progress
3. Provide readings and exercises that supply background knowledge of the
   subject.
4. Allow time to be playful and to explore, to get stuck and frustrated.
5. Meet regularly to answer questions and discuss the problem
6. In these meeting, continually plant seed related to the overall problem (p.
   119).

These strategies included intrinsic motivation, challenge, playfulness, immediate
feedback, and focus. There are also characteristics of play/playfulness, particularly as
operationalized in Csikszentmihalyi’s conceptualization of flow experiences.

For both Tisdell and Palmer, the teacher plays an important role in creating space
for spirituality to emerge, but are not the source of spirituality in the classroom. Creating
a space where students can be their authentic self begins with an authentic teacher.
Palmer has created a program to bring teachers together “to talk not about curriculum,
technique, budget or politics, but of the deepest questions of our teaching lives” (Palmer, 1998, p. 11). It is important for the teacher to model spirituality, but the spiritual experiences may emerge elsewhere. Tisdell (2003) recounts that the most significant spiritual experience she has encountered in a classroom was in a student led activity. For Palmer, the spiritual experiences can emanate from the very subject that is being studied. In a classroom setting there is the teacher, the students, and the ‘transcendent third thing’ or the ‘great thing’ which has power and “a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do” (Palmer, 1998, p. 117). As noted previously, spiritual experiences often happen by surprise and even the teacher, who has worked to nurture an atmosphere conducive to spirituality, may be surprised when a spiritual moment occurs.

Other authors in adult and higher education have written about strategies for fostering spiritual growth which overlap with the pedagogical approaches presented by Palmer and Tisdell. Vogel (2000) encourages working on critical incidents or case studies, journaling, and using contemporary forms of art such as film and literature as catalysts for discussions around issues such as spirituality. Working on critical incidents fosters relationship as it requires collaborative effort and encourages authenticity as individuals can share significant incidents from their own lives. Journaling encourages introspection and reflection which can lead to better self awareness. Vogel (2000) also encourages the use of creative activities like art, drama and music to encourage connections between cognitive and affective responses.

In a slightly different approach, English (2000) examines three informal learning strategies within adult education theory and seeks to identify how these facilitate spiritual
development. Mentoring fosters relationships and typically increases one’s self awareness. Self-directed learning also works to increase self-understanding and awareness as the individual is responsible for their own learning. Dialogue requires connections between individuals and assists in removing barriers (English, 2000). Similarly, Wickett (2000) explores how the adult education practice of learning covenants fosters spirituality by bringing attention to the significance of relationship in the learning process.

Thus far, we have examined how spirituality is conceptualized in the context of adult and higher education. Spirituality focuses on inter-connectedness, wholeness, authenticity, meaning-making, personal development, and an acknowledgement of the transcendent. Next we explored means for evoking spirituality in the classroom context. The teacher plays a key role as they create a space for spirituality in the classroom by creating an atmosphere of authenticity, risk taking, safety, connectedness, reflection. This next subsection will examine the connections between playfulness, spirituality, adult and higher education.

*Play/playfulness and Spirituality.* There are many points of connection between play/playfulness and spirituality in an adult learning context. This section will explore the relationship between play/playfulness and spirituality. First, the work of various authors that have explicitly made connections between play/playfulness and spirituality will be examined along with definitional overlaps between play/playfulness and spirituality will be presented. Finally a presentation of the possibilities for play/playfulness in a learning context as it relates to spirituality in adult and higher education.
There are books written about spirituality and comedy, spirituality and laughter, spirituality and plays (as in drama), and even theology and play. There are few authors who explicitly write about spirituality and play/playfulness. One such author is poet and essayist, Diane Ackerman (1999). In her book, *Deep Play*, she explores the transcendent nature of a particular kind of play that she identifies as “deep play.” According to Ackerman, “deep play is the ecstatic form of play… all the play elements [as defined by Huizinga, 1950] are visible, but they’re taken to intense and transcendent heights” (1999, p. 12). She clearly views this as a spiritual experience as she claims that “deep play always involves the sacred and holy” (Ackerman, 1999, p. 13). Deep play is more of a mood than an activity, but it occurs more frequently in certain activities such as “art, religion, risk-taking, and some sports – especially those that take place in relatively remote, silent, and floaty environments, such as scuba diving, parachuting, hang gliding, mountain climbing” (p. 12). She notes the work of Csikszentmihalyi and identifies her understanding of “deep play” with his concept of flow. As an essayist, she captures the mystical, transcendent experiences that sometimes occur in play.

However, it is important to point out that she uses the term “deep play” in a way that is different than the typical use in play literature. “Deep play” is a concept made popular by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1976) in his description of Balinese cockfights. In deep play, significant amounts of money are at stake, but “much more is at stake than material gain: namely esteem, honor, dignity, respect, … status” (Geertz, 1976, p. 667). This idea of deep play is often applied to outdoor endeavors that are risky, dangerous, crowd attracting, and gain the individual status and admiration. Although the theme of risk taking is common to both conceptualizations of deep play, the more
common, status seeking version of Geertz is not consistent with the spiritual experience described by Ackerman.

Van Ness (1996) explores the spirituality of playing games as part of an encyclopedic text entitled *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*. He postulates that games invested with aesthetic meaning can be spiritually significant. To illustrate “aesthetic meaning he compares the Western jigsaw puzzle which is a picture cut into pieces, with Chinese Tangram which consist of seven shapes cut from a square that can be used to piece together numerous shapes or figures. There is a creative element of making new patterns and a satisfaction from making many patterns from seven pieces. “The experience of doing this makes possible a perception of an underlying unity amid a diversity of shapes, and as one’s skill at the game increases, this unifying perception is sharpened. This satisfaction, in my view, is potentially spiritual” (p. 527). Playing games can be spiritual, but the spiritual significance of games is lost when games approximate commercial activities. “Games lose both their playful and spiritual character when they become dominated by the commercial culture of contemporary society” (p. 526). In his understanding, the goals and aims of spiritual experiences are not compatible with the profit seeking values of the commercial culture. This is a significant statement because it calls into question the possibility of spiritual experiences in a largest arena of adult play; namely professional sports and gambling. Some would argue that participation in professional sports as a spectator can be a spiritual experience (Holmquist, 1994). Van Ness’s statements leave room for this possibility, although he clearly thinks the more aesthetic forms of game playing present a more fertile ground for a spiritual experience.
Sociologist Peter Berger (1969) acknowledges the spirituality of play in his discussion of ‘signals of transcendence.’ These are “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality” (Berger, 1969, p. 53). He identifies the phenomena of order, play, hope, and humor as signals of transcendence. According to Berger, there are several characteristics of play that point to a reality beyond our ‘natural’ reality. In play, “one steps out of one time and into another” (Berger, 1969, p. 53). He also notes that the primary intention of play is joy. Finally, play can bring us back to our childhood where there was no consciousness of death. Play therefore points to a reality that is beyond this world as it is a reality that is joyful, timeless, and deathless (Berger, 1969). These supernatural aspects of play serve as signals that there is a transcendent realm. Play can therefore be conceived of as a spiritual activity because it provides connections to the transcendent realm.

In addition to these explicit connections made by various authors, an examination of the definitions of spirituality and play/playfulness reveal additional connections. One of the characteristics of spirituality is that it encourages authenticity or self awareness (Chickering, Dalton, Stamm, 2006; Hamilton and Jackson, 1998; Tisdell, 2003). Play is also recognized as an experience that reveals the core of a person. Plato said “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation.” In play, aspects of true character are revealed. German poet, Fredrick Schiller notes that play connects us to our humanity: “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being only when he plays” (Schiller as cited in Brooks, 1994, p. 65). This sense of play revealing the true self is also seen in more recent times in the work of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990). One of the eight elements of
the flow experience is a loss of ego and self consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In flow, the experience and your actions define you. There are no masks and there is not room for your sense of self to be defined by others. This freedom to be yourself is a significant aspect of the play experience (Apter, 1991; Caillios, 1958/2001; Huizinga, 1950).

Spirituality is concerned with transcendent issues. The Temperament and Character Inventory identifies three traits of self-transcendence, one of which is “self-forgetfulness or the capacity to be completely absorbed in an experience” (Buttery and Roberson, 2005, p. 38). There are elements of transcendence in play as seen in the issue of time during play. Play “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space” (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13). Berger discusses the unique nature of time in play.

When one is playing, one is on a different time, no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society, but rather by the peculiar ones of the game in question. In the ‘serious’ world it may be 11 A.M., on such and such a day, month, and year. But in the universe in which one is playing it may be the third round, the fourth act, the allegro movement, or the second kiss. In playing, one steps out of one time into another (Berger, 1969, p. 58).

He goes on to say that in truly joyful play, the time takes on the characteristics of eternity. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also acknowledges the transformation of time in the flow experience. In play, we become so absorbed in the activity that we lose track of time and may spend hours and hours engaged in play. Similarly when we play, we can’t believe how fast time flies. Play’s ability to warp time is an indicator of the transcendent nature of the play phenomena.
Another transcendent characteristic of play is that it creates its own world that is separate from the ordinary world. In play involving fantasy, separate universes may be created with strange worlds and mythical creatures. Even in non-fantasy types of play, there are bounded spaces that are ‘in’ and one is not allowed to move beyond these spaces. Within these bounded spaces there are particular rules that apply that limit the types of responses and actions a player might take. For instance in basketball, a player may not run while holding the ball, an activity that clearly has no negative effects in the real world. The spaces created in play do not operate under the same rules of the ordinary world. In this way, play creates an environment that not only transcends time, but also transcends space.

A similarity between spirituality and play/playfulness is that the experience occurs within the individual. Spirituality and playfulness can be fostered by a community, but ultimately both phenomena are experienced by the individual. Kerr and Apter (1991) discuss the telic and paratelic metamotivational state associated with play. Two individuals may be playing golf. One experiences the game in the telic state which is goal oriented and serious while the second individual experiences the game in the paratelic state which is playful and fun (Apter, 1991). Playfulness is an individual attitude (Lieberman, 1977). While there are important communal elements to both play and spirituality, an experience is deemed to be playful or spiritual by the individual.

Spontaneity is yet another characteristic common to both spirituality and play/playfulness. Spontaneity is a key element of Lieberman’s (1977) study of playfulness and creativity. Spontaneity typically refers to the sudden, unpredictable responses that are often outside of normal responses to that particular situation. In
spirituality, there is a similar sense of spontaneity that Tisdell (2003) refers to as surprise. Spiritual experience often happen by surprise meaning they cannot be planned and are clearly experiences that are outside of the normal, day to day experiences. This spontaneous element is similar in that it is unpredictable, yet an environment can be created where these experiences are more likely to happen. The ‘surprise’ element is also similar in that the experience is uniquely different from ‘normal’ experiences such that it stands out in the participant’s mind. They are surprised not only in the unexpected nature of the experience but also in the uniqueness of the experience. This spontaneity seems to be further evidence of the transcendent nature of play and spirituality. They both arise from somewhere beyond and cannot be predicted or explained.

There are many definitional overlaps between spirituality and play/playfulness. Both foster authenticity and increased self awareness, deal with the transcendent, are experienced individually, and occur spontaneously. The connections between play/playfulness and spirituality are also revealed by examining how play/playfulness can be utilized to help foster spirituality in the classroom. As discussed earlier there are many ways an educator can evoke spirituality in the classroom. Because of the many shared characteristics of these two phenomena, play/playfulness may foster spirituality in a classroom context.

Palmer’s definition of spirituality focuses on connections. These connections are a prerequisite for learning because “real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other and with the subject” (Palmer, 1993, p. xvi). Because of the necessity of relationship, Palmer articulates the need for a classroom characterized by trust and acceptance. Play can help bring students and
teachers into relationship with one another. Furthermore, play can help create a safe space that is insulated from the real world (Apter, 1991) and encourages risk taking. Relationship, safe space and risk taking are means for evoking spirituality in the classroom.

Furthermore, in play, individuals interact with one another on many levels. For example, in the human knot game, participants stand in circle, reach across the circle to grasp two different people’s hands, and then strive to untangle the complicated knot they have created. They engage physically as they hold hands and move around one another to undo the tangle of hands and arms. They engage emotionally as they may laugh together, become frustrated together, or experience excitement together as they succeed at their task. They engage cognitively as they discuss options and think through strategy together. All these realms of engagement are encouraged in the literature on fostering spirituality in the classroom. Additionally, an “underlying spirit of play and conviviality which often forms the basis for a group’s cohesion and best work” (Melamed, 1985, p. 199). This type of collaborative work is another principle suggested by many concerned with fostering spirituality in the classroom. The multiple levels of engagement and collaboration of play/playfulness provide additional opportunities for evoking spirituality. Play/playfulness can also serve to remove some of the barriers that discourage learning and spirituality in the classroom.

In addition, fear is a barrier to learning; fear of failure, fear of appearing incompetent, etc (Palmer, 1998). Challenge and risk taking are often elements of a play experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Taking risks in play will prepare students to take risks in the classroom environment. Play can create a safe space, insulated from the
consequences of the real world. Students may feel ok about taking risks in this environment which will prepare them to take risks in other situations. As the feel they can take more risks, they will overcome some of their fear of failure and will become more authentic in the classroom environment.

Play is intrinsically motivated; people typically play because it is fun (Huizinga, 1950). Bringing play into the classroom can add energy to the environment and engage students; it can help create a ‘charged’ classroom space. Such a space is ripe for learning (Palmer, 1998). Play can open individuals up for learning and help put them in touch with the unconscious world (Melamed, 1985).

In summary, many educators are exploring the role of spirituality is the adult and higher education classroom. Spirituality involves the affective, cognitive, unconscious, and transcendent realms making it a powerful way for people to construct knowledge and make meaning. Acknowledging and fostering spirituality in the classroom can facilitate learning. There are similarities between play/playfulness and spirituality. Both engage people holistically, have transcendent qualities, and encourage authenticity. Furthermore, play can be utilized in a classroom environment to encourage risk taking, create a safe space for learning, foster relationships, engage students collaboratively, and increase energy levels and excitement. Like spirituality, play/playfulness may have a significant role in adult learning.

While there are many proponents for spirituality in adult and higher education, there are also some who question educator’s roles in spirituality. For example, Fenwick (2001) raises the question “What is the real intent of pedagogical interventions (in theory and practice) which integrate or focus on spirituality?” (p. 11). This is valid question in
light of history which reveals that “powerful bonds among the economy, education, and religion have successfully exploited and shaped large populations” (Fenwick, 2001, p. 10). The power of spirituality that enhances learning can also potentially cause great harm. This may also be true of play. Because it is a whole body experience, play in the classroom environment may stir up powerful, negative experiences from the past. Play experience that were designed to enhance the learning could evoke emotions that block learning. Fenwick (2001) raises similar concerns around spirituality as she questions educator’s preparedness to address the ‘darker valleys’ of spirituality.

The individualistic nature of spirituality and play/playfulness pose potential problems for the classroom environment. What is spiritual or playful for one individual might not be for another. Although there is a communal nature to play/playfulness and spirituality, it may be difficult to design classroom experiences evoke playful or spiritual experiences in all class members. Does this, then serve to alienate class members from those who are engaged in play? Additionally, individual’s preference for spiritual expression or play manifestations may conflict with another’s preferences. This too, may serve to hinder rather than enhance the learning experience. Play/playfulness and spirituality are complex and powerful and have great potential in the learning environment. It is important that educators understand what they are getting into when they seek to evoke these experiences in the classroom context.

**Somatic learning.** Somatic knowing is another way of knowing that challenges the notion that knowledge and meaning making occur exclusively through rational thought process in the brain. This privileged position of reason is a result of the Scientific Revolution, beginning with Descartes, when mind and body are split and the
mind is able to transcend the body though reason (Clark, 2001). In this dualistic worldview, knowledge from the body or emotions is treated as unreliable or biased, while knowledge from the mind has grown in prominence such that “the primary way of knowing the world in the modern era has been cognitive” (Clark, 2001, p. 84). However, there are increasingly those who are challenging the primacy of rational thought and engaging other ways of knowing in the adult and higher education classroom. Somatic knowing is one of these approaches that situate knowledge and meaning making outside of the mind alone.

Simply put, somatic knowing draws attention to the significance of the body as a site of learning and knowledge construction (Clark, 2001). Matthews (1998) defines it as “an experiential knowing that involves sense, precept, and mind/body action and reaction” (¶ 4). Various authors stress different elements of the body experience but it can include sensory information or kinesthetics (movement) (Clark, 2001; Brockmann 2001; Beaudoin, 1999; Matthews, 1998). The key aspect of somatics is the centrality of the body in the meaning making process.

The term somatic knowing is used broadly and can look different depending on the author’s interpretation of the term. Matthews (1998) uses the term interchangeably with embodiment and is describes an experience from fifth grade where he and his classmates learned to be scientist by dressing up in lab coats and “becoming scientist” in the classroom. His experience as a scientist was further enhanced as his teacher would encourage him to think like scientist and explore like scientist. This form of somatic learning also engaged sensory knowledge as he employed all five senses to examine and explore various objects. The result was a powerful learning experience that motivated
him to continue to learn outside the classroom. This type of somatic experience engages
the imagination to help the learner become someone or something else as completely as
their imagination will allow.

Other uses of somatic knowing refer to the movements and an awareness of the
body. In his work on multiple intelligences, Gardner (1983) identifies this form of
knowing or intelligence and labels it kinesthetic. Kinesthetic intelligence refers to the
ability to control body movements, handle objects skillfully, or fine motor skills.
Kinesthetics is an aspect of somatic knowing but it does not capture the whole picture. In
addition to the movement, somatic knowing requires an awareness, or mindfulness of the
body. This is the type of somatic knowing that Beaudoin (1999) employed in her study
examining the integration of somatic learning into everyday life. Her participants
practiced Eutonia and other body centered approaches “that help individuals to develop
greater awareness of their body in movement” (Beaudoin, 1999, ¶ 4). These body
centered approaches that employed movement and bodily awareness helped reduce
emotional distress. Embodiment, sensory information, and body centered approaches
create a holistic learning experience that not only engages the mind but the whole body.

There are many connections between play/playfulness and somatic learning. Play
engages the body on many levels including the kinesthetic. Many forms of play involve
movement and a defining characteristic of playfulness is physical spontaneity
(Lieberman, 1977). Play is an experience that fully engages the player, body mind, and
spirit (Huizinga, 1950) and so the somatic knowing help bring meaning to the movement
aspect of play. Additionally, play engages the imagination which was also key element
of Matthews (1998) somatic experience as a 5th grade scientist. The tie between play and
somatic knowing is obvious for Matthews (1998) and he acknowledges the significant role of play and imagination in somatic knowing. “Play is the personal embodiment of one’s imagination, the ability to transform oneself into what one want to become” (Matthews, 1998 ¶ 11).

The literature on somatic knowing is helpful for understanding play/playfulness in learning because it draws the connection between learning and the body. In somatic knowing, the mind is not the only source of knowledge and understanding. This is important because play/playfulness are complex and involve not only the mind, but body, emotions, and spirit as well. In play, there is significance in the spatial arrangement of bodies and the relative movement of those bodies in space. Part of the power of play is that it often engages the whole body in movement in proximity to others who are also involved in movement. Somatic knowing provides a framework for acknowledging the significance of this movement in relationship and recognized that learning occurs as a result of this spatial engagement with others.

A limitation of somatic knowing is that it does not provide a construct for identifying how or why movement and awareness create knowledge. The literature simply provides examples of somatic learning without providing a model to understand the process of meaning making that occurs in somatic knowing. Rational models may not be feasible for the body-based knowledge of somatics, but it would be helpful to have a list of characteristics that help identify somatic learning and parameters to help guide practitioners as they attempt to incorporate somatic learning into the classroom environment.
Chapter Summary

The literature on play is extensive, however, very little of that literature addresses the adult play/playfulness. In this chapter, a broad overview of the history of play theories was provided followed by a closer examination of play theories that examine play/playfulness in learning. Since most of this literature focuses on children, general play theories and current studies that focus on the adult experience of play were presented. The work of play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith was examined in depth as it provides the conceptual framework for exploring play in this study. Next, was a presentation of several adult learning theories that inform this study’s understanding of the process of learning and meaning making. Cognitive experiential learning models as well as affective experiential learning were explored. Heron’s work set the stage for an examination of two ‘other ways of knowing:’ spirituality and somatic knowing. Although there is very little literature that address play/playfulness of adult learners in a classroom context, there is plenty of related literature to help shed light on this topic.
The purpose of this research study is to explore the role of play and playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom. The literature on play/playfulness in childhood learning is abundant; however, there is an absence of literature on play/playfulness in adult learning. Play/playfulness have been shown to be beneficial for adults in the workplace as it alleviates boredom, releases tension, prevents aggression, increases group cohesion, decreases anxiety, improves quality of work and overall performance (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005). It is possible that play/playfulness is beneficial for adult learners in a classroom setting. There is currently no research that explores play and playfulness in an adult classroom learning environment. This study seeks to address this need.

To explore play/playfulness among adult learners, a qualitative case study was conducted. This chapter explains the reasons this approach is best suited for the questions presented in this study. First, the qualitative research paradigm will be discussed and key assumptions of this paradigm will be explored. Next, the case study approach will be presented and elaborated upon as the research type for this study. Finally, the particulars of this study will be presented including data collection, data analysis, and verification methods.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a form of inquiry that is utilized in various disciplines and fields. In an education context, qualitative research can be defined as a “systematic,
purposeful and disciplined process of discovering reality structured from human experience” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 5). This process of discovery is naturalistic and utilizes an interpretive approach. This means that the experience is observed in its natural setting and attempts to make sense of the phenomenon based upon the meaning that people ascribe to that phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative research has its roots in sociology and anthropology. In the 1920s and 1930s the University of Chicago produced large amounts of research in their political science and sociology departments that departed from traditional approaches of general theory or social philosophy and moved towards the empirical investigation of society within specific theoretical frameworks (Bulmer, 1986). This “Chicago school” brought to prominence the qualitative approach for the study of complex interactions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). At the same time, fieldwork methods of anthropology were gaining attention as researchers would immerse themselves in a foreign setting to gain an understanding of customs of other cultures. The use of qualitative research soon spread into other social sciences including education (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

There are two major paradigms acknowledged among researchers; qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research places “an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured … in terms of quality, amount, intensity or frequency” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 13). The quantitative paradigm seeks to quantify phenomena to allow for the measuring and analysis of relationships between variables. There is a focus on cause and effect rather than process, and the inquiry is proposed to be conducted from a value-free framework (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). There are many other characteristics and assumptions
associated with the qualitative paradigm. A close exploration of these characteristics and assumptions will reveal the reasons the qualitative paradigm is most appropriate for this particular study.

The qualitative research paradigm assumes a socially constructed understanding of the nature of reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2001). For the constructivist, knowledge is not discovered, but it is constructed within the minds of people within a particular social context with shared understanding, language and cultural experience. “We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Because knowledge is constructed in the minds of people, different people may make meaning of a phenomenon differently than other people. This could lead to several understandings of a phenomenon or “multiple realities.” This view of the nature of reality is in contrast with the positivistic view common in quantitative research, that holds to the assertion that there is one, objective truth. In the quantitative paradigm, knowledge is found or discovered. As discussed earlier, a key aspect of play and playfulness is the individual’s experience of an event. One participant may experience an activity in a playful, paratelic state while another participant experiences the same activity in a telic state. There is no universal activity or event that is playful for all people at all times. Play and playfulness are extremely subjective, and thus fit better in a constructivist understanding of reality that acknowledges multiple realities.

Constructivism is prevalent in education literature (Phillips, 1997) and is an underlying assumption of qualitative research. Social constructivism shapes the methodology of this study and also influences the researcher’s understanding of the
phenomenon of play/playfulness in the classroom. There are many varieties of constructivism and these can be categorized in various ways. However, the language of relationship used by Gergen (1999) best captures the perspective of knowledge construction embraced in this study. Knowledge only exists as a by-product of our relationship with nature and with others (Gergen, 1999). This bias towards knowledge as a social construction is seen in many ways in this study. The identification of the classroom as the unit of analysis or case was motivated by an understanding of learning and play as a social process involving the interactions and relationships between students, teacher, and the classroom environment. Additionally, as discussed in chapter two, play/playfulness takes on many forms, but it is the social, synergetic manifestation of play/playfulness that is of interest in this study. For these reasons, the social constructivism presented by Gergen (1999) best explains the constructivism paradigm embraced in this study.

Because knowledge is socially constructed and the context is significant, the qualitative paradigm usually requires fieldwork to study the phenomena in its natural setting (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2001). The purpose of this study was not to simply study play and playfulness among adults. This study sought to explore play/playfulness among adults in a particular context, a classroom where learning was the primary goal. Play/playfulness were manifest in particular ways in a classroom environment. It was imperative that the phenomenon was observed and studied in the context of the classroom. The classroom was a defining characteristic of this study and so the phenomenon needed to be explored in this context.
In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data (Patton, 2002). Unlike paper and pencil instruments, humans are able to adapt and adjust to a wide variety of realities that might be encountered in the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The classroom and play/playfulness are dynamic concepts. A researcher is able to adapt and change to acquire the best data possible within this fluid environment. Additionally, there are only a few paper and pencil instruments for measuring playfulness among adults (Barnett, 2006). Of these, none have been designed to measure playfulness in the adult learner classroom setting. If these instruments were applied to the teacher or students of the class they would not paint a complete enough picture of this complex, dynamic phenomenon. Instruments are helpful tools; however, the complexities of play/playfulness and the classroom environment render them inadequate to explore the nuances of play/playfulness in the adult learner classroom environment.

Qualitative research primarily uses an inductive research strategy (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). This means that the analysis emerges from patterns discerned in the data. “Often qualitative studies are undertaken because there is a lack of theory, or existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon” (Merriam, 2001, p. 7). Very little empirical research has been conducted on the topic of this study and no theories have been developed to explain play/playfulness among adult learners in a classrooms setting. The lack of previous theory and exploration of this phenomenon made the qualitative approach a more appropriate paradigm for this study.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there currently is minimal information about the complex phenomena of play/playfulness in the adult classroom. Furthermore,
play/playfulness is a very subjective experience that differs from person to person. For these reasons, it was important to thoroughly describe the phenomenon in this study to ensure that the reader had a more complete understanding of what was meant by play/playfulness in the classroom. Thick, rich description is a characteristic of qualitative research (Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002). The term “thick description” was introduced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz and means that information is presented in detail, creating a vicarious experience of the phenomenon for the reader (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This type of description was necessary to ensure the reader will understand what was meant by play/playfulness in the adult learner classroom. This was yet another reason why the qualitative paradigm was the best fit for this study.

Case Study

The research type or approach used in this project was the case study. According to Merriam, “a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (2001, p. 19). A significant feature of the case study is its focus on a single unit or case. According to Stake (1995) the individual unit of analysis is the defining characteristic of a case study that sets it apart from other forms of inquiry. The case must be a “bounded system,” that is, a single entity or unit with clear boundaries that specifically defines what is to be studied. Yin (1994) argues that Stake’s definition is too broad and would include any study that focuses on a single object regardless of methodology used. Although there may be some disagreement on the degree of importance of the single unit of analysis, there is agreement that the case as a bounded system is a significant characteristic of the case study approach (Merriam, 2001).
The focus on a single unit provides opportunity for an intensive investigation of the case. Rather than exploring many units in a cursory manner, the case study focuses on a single unit in-depth. The phenomenon is explored in a bounded context providing clear limits as to what is to be studied and what is not to be studied. That which is to be studied receives concentrated attention resulting in a detailed picture of the phenomena. The particular context of the phenomenon is part of that detailed picture. According to Yin (1994), the case study is a particularly appropriate approach when the “boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). In this study, the phenomena of play/playfulness and the context of the classroom are interwoven. By definition, this study sought to explore play/playfulness in the context of the classroom. It was impossible to study the phenomenon of play/playfulness separate from the context in which it occurred, because the nature of play/playfulness changes in various contexts. The purpose of this study was not to broadly examine play/playfulness in learning, but rather to specifically examine play/playfulness in a particular learning environment, the classroom. This particular context of the classroom bounds the phenomenon of play/playfulness. “If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case” (Merriam, 2001, p. 27). The classroom context not only makes the study well suited for the case study approach, it is the characteristic that defines the case. For this study, the individual case was the playful classroom of adult learners.

There are many aspects of the case study approach that resonate with the theoretical tradition of constructivism. Constructivism posits that humans make meaning rather than discover meaning. This leads to the understanding that rather than just one reality, there are multiple realities created by various participants. The in-depth focus of the case study
approach presents opportunities for these multiple realities to come to light. In a case study, many sources of data are sought to paint a more complete picture of the phenomenon of interest. There is no set method of data collection for case studies but interviews, observation, and document analysis are commonly used. The emphasis on multiple sources of data is based upon constructivist assumptions that there is more than one understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Play/playfulness is a very complex phenomenon, and its nuances in the classroom are difficult to characterize. The concentrated focus of the case study approach affords a better opportunity to describe and analyze this complex phenomenon. Also, the multiple data sources common in case studies provide an opportunity to study the phenomenon of play/playfulness from multiple perspectives.

This embracing of constructivism is further seen in the reporting of case studies. In case studies, the reader is an important agent in the meaning making process. They determine the significance and applicability of the case for their particular situation. The reader’s ability to make meaning from the study is directly impacted by the depth of description. This is known as “naturalistic generalizations” which is defined as “conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (Stake, 1995, p. 85). The case study report provides enough detail and description to engage the reader to the degree that they are able to add to the interpretation and application of the case as it relates to their own life. The process of meaning making is not confined to the researcher, or even the researcher and participants of the study; it also includes the reader.
There are three types of case studies (intrinsic, instrumental, collective) based upon the purpose or goals of the inquiry. Intrinsic case studies are pursued so the researcher gains a “better understanding of a particular case” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). The primary interest is in the case for the sake of the case. The case is not selected because it represents other cases or because it illuminates a particular problem (Stake, 2000). In an instrumental case study, the case provides insight to a particular problem or issue. The case is selected not for its own sake, but because it will provide opportunity for better understanding of a specific issue. In this study, the classroom was chosen as the case because it provided an opportunity to explore play/playfulness among adult learners. Collective case studies are similar to instrumental case studies in that they are pursued to gain a better understanding of a particular issue or interest. However, in the collective case study, multiple cases are pursued to further illuminate the issue of interest. Yin (1994) identifies this as multiple case studies. This study utilized this multiple approach because examining several playful classrooms provided additional opportunity to explore play/playfulness among adult learners. Little is known about play/playfulness among adult learners. Furthermore, the phenomenon of play/playfulness is both complex and broad as seen in seven rhetorics of play that form the conceptual framework of this study. Exploring multiple classrooms provided an opportunity to study various manifestations of play/playfulness with adult learners. Additionally, “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Herriott & Firestone, as cited in Yin, 1994, p. 45). Increasing the validity of the study was of particular importance because of the marginalized view of play/playfulness in academia.
An additional reason for using the case study approach was the appropriateness of the reporting methods associated with case studies. Rich, thick description provides the reader with a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of play/playfulness in the classroom. It is one thing to describe a classroom environment as fun, spontaneous, a place of wit and physical movement. It is another to paint a picture of a classroom through thick description with specific examples of verbal exchanges, instances of laughter, and detailed description of the classroom setting. Most qualitative approaches incorporate thick description; however, presenting a comprehensive, in-depth picture of a phenomenon is a hallmark of the case study approach.

A final reason for utilizing the case study approach for this study was related to the lack of previous research about play/playfulness in a classroom of adult learners. Merriam (2001) discusses case studies as particularly useful for “presenting basic information about areas of education where little research has been conducted” (p. 38). She further notes that case study “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). Since there was little known about play/playfulness in the adult classroom context, case study provided a broad means for exploring multiple variables. As noted by Bromley, “case studies tend to spread the net for evidence widely” (as cited in Merriam, 2001, p. 33). This was important because it was unknown what variable might prove to be significant.

The strength of case studies is that they provide an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena. Many of the strengths of the case study approach are well summarized by Merriam.
The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers’ experiences. These insights can be constructed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, a case study plays an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base. Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education. Educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluative programs, and for informing policy (Merriam, 2001, p. 41).

Additionally, the “rich and holistic” account referred to by Merriam enables the reader to experience the phenomenon vicariously, providing an opportunity for further interpretation and application.

A weakness of the case study approach is the amount of time necessary to provide rich, thick description and analysis of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 1994). Painting a picture with words can be a challenging and time consuming process, yet it is a vital characteristic of the case study approach. This leads to another limitation of the case study, the abilities of the researcher. Since the researcher is the primary tool of data collection and analysis, the quality of the study is directly related to the skills and abilities of the researcher (Merriam, 2001). Perhaps more significantly, the integrity (or lack of integrity) of the researcher can skew the findings of the data (Stake, 2000). The
researcher chooses which information to include in the write-up and which information to exclude. It is important the researcher is aware of their own biases and that they identify these biases for the reader as well.

**Background of Researcher**

I am an educator who strongly believes that teachers should employ a variety of strategies in their teaching. The traditional lecture format is utilized far too often and many students are disengaged in the classroom. With a background in adventure-based experiential education, I favor a more engaging approach involving the whole body. I am also one who believes that we can “know” things in ways that do not involve the rational part of our minds. These “other ways of knowing” include whole body experiences as well as spiritual encounters. Play and playfulness may be an “other way of knowing” or in the very least provide unique opportunities for learners to engage the material with their peers/instructors. There is power in play/playfulness, and that power is underutilized in the classroom environment.

These biases have the potential to distort the findings and conclusions of this study. I worked to address this in several ways. First, I sought data that would reveal the negative implications of play/playfulness in the classroom. There were questions in the survey as well as in the interview guides to probe the potential negative impacts of play/playfulness in learning. Some of the trustworthiness measures also ensured that protocols were adhered to and that integrity was not breeched. Specifically, confirmability addresses the concern that the findings are not overly influenced by the biases of the researcher (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, Allen, 1993). As discussed in the trustworthiness section, the use of triangulation and audit trails establish confirmability.
Participant Selection

Qualitative research typically uses purposeful samples to provide “information-rich cases” to best illuminate the topic of study (Patton, 2002). Identifying the unit of analysis which makes up the sample is an important step in methodological design. In qualitative research the unit of analysis is often individual people, but could be other things such as groups, events, or time periods (Patton, 2002). The unit of analysis is of particular significance in the case study research. The unit of analysis is “the case” and “as a form of research, the case study is defined by interest in individual cases” (Stake, 2000, p. 435). As discussed earlier, the playful adult classroom was the case or unit of analysis for this study. This was identified as the case for several reasons.

In identifying the case or unit of analysis to study play/playfulness among adult learners, there were several choices: the teacher, students, classroom, or even a particular play element. The problem with examining a particular play element is that it does not provide a holistic picture of the phenomenon, and it gives the researcher too much control by allowing them the power to choose which play element or characteristic to study. Furthermore, studying a playful student in the classroom might have provided some insight into the interaction of play/playfulness and learning, but would have been very individualistic. As discussed earlier, knowledge is socially constructed and playing and learning in the classroom environment are both social phenomena. For this same reason, studying playful teachers would not have provided a complete enough picture of the play/playfulness phenomenon in the classroom. The classroom became a good choice because it created space for the social constructivist nature of play/playfulness and learning. Also, it allowed for multiple perspectives to illuminate the phenomenon
because the classroom included the teacher, students, and provided an opportunity for the researcher to make observations. As discussed earlier, the classroom also created a bounded system with clear limits, making case study possible.

Selection of specific classrooms or cases was the next step in the research process. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling provides information rich samples that exemplify the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Intensity sampling provides “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)” (Patton, 2002, p. 234). In selecting “information rich” cases for this study, the teacher or educator was the primary consideration. In most educational settings, the educator has the greatest amount of influence in shaping the classroom experience. It is they, who have the power to create an atmosphere of play/playfulness in the classroom, and therefore, they were the primary consideration in case selection.

For this study, educators were selected who exhibited characteristics of play and playfulness listed in chapter one. It was not sufficient that they exhibit these characteristics as part of their personality; they needed to be evident in their teaching, and therefore evident in their classroom environment. Some of these characteristics or qualities were active, adventurous, cheerful, clowns around, energetic, friendly, funny, happy, humorous, impulsive, jokes/teases, outgoing, silly, sociable, spontaneous, and unpredictable (Barnett, 2006). As seen in chapter 2, the elements and manifestations of play/playfulness are very diverse. A teacher’s playfulness might be manifested though a broad range of play/playfulness elements or qualities. This made it difficult to set specific selection criteria. However, one element of play/playfulness consistently appears in definitions, and therefore served as a criterion for sample selection. The educator’s
classroom had to be characterized as fun. While there were various combinations of the qualities listed above that might have indicated a playful classroom, “fun” was the defining characteristic for this study.

A preferred criterion for selecting educators for this study was educators who were able to articulate their play/playfulness as part of their educational pedagogy. This would demonstrate a firm understanding of their play/playfulness and how it influences their classroom; thus providing a sample that “manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Additionally, the educator needed to agree to participate in an interview, allow their classroom to be observed, and consent to having students participate in focus groups. To qualify as a participant for this study, the educator needed to answer the following questions in the affirmative.

1. Do you think it is important to have fun in your classroom?
2. Do you see play and/or playfulness as an important aspect of your teaching?
3. Do you believe that play or playfulness facilities learning in your classroom?
4. Are there specific things that you choose to do to bring play and/or playfulness into your classroom?

For this study, four educators were identified employing the criteria established above. In case study selection, Stake (1995) states, “the first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn” (p. 4). This includes finding cases that are hospitable to inquiry and are easily accessible (Stake, 1995). As an employee at a college, I had easy access to classrooms and established relationships with various faculty members. In
talking with various faculty members I knew, one name consistently came up in
conversation, and so I identified my first potential case, Chad. I talked to a couple of
students I knew in the Psychology department, and they confirmed that Chad’s classroom
was very playful. A pre-interview meeting with Chad to ask my criteria question resulted
with Chad’s classroom becoming my first case.

The second case to become a part of this study was Heather’s classroom. I knew
Heather for many years, and even as I was considering this topic, she immediately came
to mind as a potential case for this study. Heather was a faculty member who
consistently utilized the adventure-based experiential learning activities offered by my
office. She had collaborated with me to take her writing classes on trust falls, leaps from
platforms on a high ropes course, and even on a ten day backpacking course as part of a
pre-college wilderness orientation program. I knew Heather fairly well, and she agreed
to be a part of this study. After confirming she met the criteria listed above, she became
the second case.

The demographics of the college where I work are such that most students are 18-
22 years old. To broaden the scope of the study, I wanted to identify two additional cases
that included a broader age representation of adult learners. In the selection of multiple
cases, Yin (1994) cautions that the choice of cases should not follow sampling logic
where multiple cases are viewed as a sample. Rather, to remain true to the case study
approach, replication logic should be employed where each case is an independent unit
that may produce similar results as other cases (Yin, 1994). This is a significant
distinction to distinguish the multiple-case approach from other qualitative approaches.
Snowballing is a strategy that I utilized to identify additional educators that fit the
criteria. In snowballing, key individuals are asked if they know of others who fit the criteria (Patton 2002).

The third case for this study was identified through a type of snowballing. A former student of mine was taking a graduate class at another university in the area. He was aware of my dissertation topic and emailed me to indicate his professor would be perfect for my study. Utilizing ratemyprofessor.com, I confirmed that students had fun in this professor’s classes. After several correspondences via email, I confirmed that she met the criteria, and she agreed to participate in the study.

The final case for my study was also identified through snowballing. In conversations with a colleague, she reminded me about one of the professors we had together in our higher education graduate program. From my experience with Ted as a student in several of his classes, I knew he would be a good case for this study. He met the criteria listed above, agreed to participate, and became the fourth and final case for this study.

Data Collection

Identifying the research questions is important in the case study approach (Yin, 1995). In designing the data collection strategy, the researcher must ensure that sufficient data is collected to address the research questions. The questions driving this study were:

4. What is the educator’s understanding of play and playfulness as it relates to learning in the higher education classroom?
   a. How do they define play and playfulness?
   b. How do they bring play and playfulness into their classroom?
c. What is their understanding of the connection between play/playfulness and learning in the classroom context?

5. How do students perceive the playful classroom and what meaning does the experience have for them?

6. What are the observed dynamics of play and playfulness in the classroom?

These questions are related to the purpose of the study and provided three different perspectives on the experience of play and playfulness in the higher education classroom. Three sources of data were used to shed light on the phenomenon of play/playfulness in the classroom. These sources were the educator, the students, and the classroom interactions of educators, teachers, and physical environment. As discussed below, various data collection techniques were utilized to glean data from these three sources.

Educator served as a key source of data as they had the most control over the atmosphere of the classroom. Interviews were used to collect data from the playful educators. There are three types of interviews in qualitative research: structured, semi-structured, and non-structured. In this study I used semi-structured interviews which utilize an interview guide listing questions and issues to be explored. This approach ensured that pertinent topics were covered while allowing the interviewer the freedom to pursue certain answers in a conversational style (Patton, 2002). The interviews were an hour and fifteen to an hour and a half in length. I utilized an interview guide (see Appendix A) to collect demographic information (educational background, teaching experience), their definition/understanding of play/playfulness, descriptions of what they
did to make their classrooms fun, and how they thought play/playfulness connected with learning in the classroom. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

A second source of data was the students in the playful classrooms. There were two primary means for data collection: a paper and pencil survey and focus groups. The survey was administered to all students in these classrooms during the normal classroom period (the educators graciously gave me 15 minutes of their classroom time). The survey provided opportunity to receive information from students who did not choose to be part of the focus group. The questions were open ended and designed to solicit negative responses as well as positive responses. The questions sought information about students’ descriptions of the classroom environment, perceptions of play/playfulness in the classroom, and understandings of the connection between play/playfulness and learning. A copy of the student survey is available in Appendix C. The response rates were very good: 15 surveys out of 15 students in Heather’s classroom, 12 surveys out of 13 students in Alana’s classroom, 18 surveys out of 22 students in Ted’s classroom, and 23 surveys out of 30 students in Chad’s classroom.

The second means of gathering data from the students was through focus groups. A focus group is “an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand” (Beck, Trombeta, and Share as cited in Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1994, p. 4). This approach allowed students to hear and build upon each other’s thoughts. The goal was not consensus, but to explore individual’s feelings and thoughts about play/playfulness in the classroom. This approach was consistent with the social construction of meaning and the social nature of play and playfulness.
I solicited volunteers from each of the four classrooms to participate in these focus groups. Each focus group or group interview was an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes in duration. The group interviews were digitally recorded and videotaped to better identify the source of various comments. The interviews were transcribed from these recordings. The focus groups for Heather and Chad’s classes occurred during the last week of the semester in a meeting room in the college’s student union. For Heather’s class, four students participated in the focus group (out of a class of 15). Six students participated from Chad’s class (out of a class of 30). The other two focus groups occurred over a lunch a break during the class period I was observing. In Alana’s class six students participated (out of a class of 12). In Ted’s class ten students participated (out of a class of 22).

During the focus groups, or group interview, students were guided in a series of questions to explore their perceptions of play/playfulness in the classroom and their understanding of its role in learning. The interview guide utilized for these interviews is provided in Appendix B. In the focus group for Chad’s class, I played a video clip of a playful instance I observed in their class and asked them to expound on the perceptions of that specific incident. The use of a video clip was not used with the three other focus groups because of the timing of the observation and group interview. In two instances, the group interview occurred during the lunch break of class, and so I did not have time to identify and cue up a playful instance from the morning observation. Similarly, in the third case, a majority of the classroom observation occurred after the group interview. Even though I did not have video footage, I was able to question the focus groups about
specific instances of playfulness I identified during my observation and was able to solicit their feedback on those instances.

For Heather’s class, an additional source of data was provided to me. Students were required to write a reflection paper about their experience in Heather’s classroom. With the students’ permission, Heather provided me a copy of these final papers which provided additional insight to students’ perceptions of play/playfulness in the higher education classroom context.

The classroom was the third source of data for this study. This data was collected in two different ways: through observation and note taking by the researcher, and through video recordings of the class. The benefit of classroom observation was that it provided me, the researcher, with an opportunity to understand and capture the context, learn things that students might be unwilling to talk about or things that they were unaware of, to experience the dynamics between faculty and students, and to draw upon and incorporate my knowledge of play/playfulness (Patton, 2002). Observation of the classroom provided opportunity to describe the unfolding of the play experience in the classroom. Observation also provided another set of eyes to see the phenomena from a slightly different perspective than the students or educator. This contributed to an overall picture of play and playfulness in the classroom.

The number of classroom observations varied from case to case although the total hours of observation were fairly consistent. I observed Chad’s class four different times for one hour. For Heather, I observed two class periods for two hours each. Additionally, I observed a second classroom of Heather’s for an hour. Alana and Ted were teaching their courses in an all-day format. I observed both of these classes for
three hours straight, from the time their class began until their lunch break. The range of observation hours for all the classrooms was three to five hours. The purpose of the classroom observations was to gain a sense of the play and playfulness that emerge in an educator’s classroom. To help guide the data gathering process, sensitizing concepts were identified (Patton, 2002). These concepts and other frameworks helped direct the observations and are listed in Appendix D.

Data was collected on the classroom observations in a couple of different ways. Utilizing the sensitizing concepts, I took observation notes during the class time. Additionally, each class was videotaped and I reviewed each of these tapes taking video notes. Having the classes video recorded was helpful because during the review process I could pause, rewind, and in some cases even review significant portions of the class period to further analyze the dynamics of play/playfulness in the learning environment.

The students and educators were aware of my presence in the classroom and therefore their actions and behaviors may have been influenced by my being there. In all four cases, I was introduced by the educator and was given a few minutes to introduce myself, share my topic, discuss informed consent, and complete the paper and pencil survey. Because of this, student were not only aware of my presence (and the presence of a video camera), but also had knowledge of the general types of behaviors I was seeking to observe. A student in Alana’s class acknowledge my presence by joking with Alana about the “judge” that she brought in to evaluate the structures they were creating for a particular activity (Alana video notes, 2007). However, as my time in the classrooms progressed, students and educators tended to ignore me and the video camera.
As noted in the section describing case selection, I had previous experience with two of the educators, Heather and Ted. My experience with Ted was a friendly student/faculty relationship as he taught several graduate courses in my Master’s program. My relationship with Heather was more extensive as we co-taught a class at one time and interacted with one another several times a year as colleagues at the institution where we both worked. However, these prior relationships seemed to enhance rather than taint the data collected for this study. Because we knew one another, there was a casual feel to the interview and these educators were very open in sharing their thoughts and experiences. Concerning their classroom behavior, it is more likely that their teaching was shaped by their many years of experience teaching the course than influenced by my presence in the classroom. According to the information gleaned from students, the behaviors of the educators on the days I observed were consistent with their behaviors during the rest of the semester. Additionally, Ted’s behaviors during my classroom observation were similar to my previous experiences as a student in his courses. As in any qualitative researcher, the study is influenced by the researcher however, the multiple data sources and extensive observation time helped ensure trustworthiness as discussed in a later section.

In compliance with The Pennsylvania State University Office of Research Protections, participants were protected in several ways. First, an informed consent was administered to the educator and all the students in the classrooms. For two cases there were multiple observations over the course of several weeks. I cross checked the completed consent forms with a class roster to ensure that students who were absent the first day of observation, were informed about the study and completed a consent form
during subsequent observations. Additionally, students self-selected for participation in the focus group and were informed they could leave at any time. Names and personal information were not solicited on the student survey. Also, when the student survey was administered, students were informed they could chose not to participate by returning their survey blank, or by not returning a survey. Pseudonyms were assigned to the educators to protect their privacy. Finally, all research was conducted within the parameters dictated by the of the institutional review board.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis occurred throughout the study beginning with the first classroom observation and continuing through the writing process. The principle of analysis occurring simultaneously to data collection is a distinguishing feature of qualitative research. Erlandson states, “This principle of interaction between data collection and analysis is one of the major features that distinguishes naturalistic research from traditional [quantitative] research” (1993, p. 114). A classroom observation was my first form of data collection, and I began to see specific manifestations of play/playfulness and patterns of interactions among people in the classroom. These were recorded in my observation notes and were referenced as I developed themes for each case. Similarly, the process of interviewing the educator and students involved additional analysis as I listened and noted various observations both during and after the interviews.

The process of personally transcribing the interviews immersed me deeply into the data, as I spent hours re-listening to the interviews and typing what was said. Additionally, in the process of transcribing the group interview, I reviewed the video recording of the group interview in order to add detail to the transcription and to note
who was making a particular comment. When I finally sat down with a hard copy of the transcription, I was very familiar with the content of the interviews. I took extensive notes in the margins of the transcription and began coding the data. As noted by Merriam, “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data. (2001, p. 164). I also kept a separate sheet of notes on which I documented key words and began identifying themes utilizing inductive analysis and constant comparison. According to Patton, with inductive analysis, “patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (1990, p. 390). With constant comparison analysis, a unit of data is compared to another unit of data leading to “tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances” (Merriam, 2001, p. 159). Using these analysis methods, I identified themes from the interview data. This process was repeated for the focus group interview.

The results from the paper and pencil surveys were tabulated by assigning a number to each survey and listing all the responses to a particular question. This allowed me to get a general sense of students’ responses to a particular question, yet I could follow the thread of one student’s responses by following a survey number from question to question. This response summary was then reviewed and coded to identify themes from the data.

The coded data from the observation notes, educator interview, group interview, student surveys, and video notes were gathered into a “case study data base” (Yin, 1994). This case study database helped organize the data to facilitate retrieval during additional
analysis. This data was further analyzed using inductive analysis and constant comparison to discern patterns and themes from one data set to the other. A case study narrative was written following an outline dictated by the guiding research questions. The purpose of this narrative was to create “a readable, descriptive picture of a person or program making accessible to the reader all the information necessary to understand that person or program” (Patton, 1990, p. 388). Each case was written as a stand-alone analysis and description of the playful classroom and appears in chapter four.

Merriam notes, “In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis – the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis” (2001, p. 194). The analysis described above constituted the within-case analysis where “each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself” (Merriam, 2001, p. 194). The second stage of analysis occurred as I compared the four cases looking for themes and patterns that carried across the cases. For this analysis, the key data from the transcriptions and video notes was reprinted. Then, using the “file folder” strategy, this data was coded, cut into individual pieces of data, and placed into file folders labeled by categories or themes (Merriam, 2001). These categories were collapsed, adjusted, and renamed according to the following criteria: categories should reflect the purpose of the research, be exhaustive, be mutually exclusive, be sensitizing, and be conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2001). Simultaneously, the data from the student surveys was re-tabulated into a summative chart. In this chart, each question had four rows (one for each educator) and multiple columns. In the columns I would place words or phrases that appeared in the student surveys. If words were used by multiple students for the same educator, I would list the word multiple times in that educator’s row. Columns were shifted around
to place them adjacent to words or phrases with similar meaning. This allowed me to see similarities and differences from educator to educator as I tracked words in a column from row to row. Moving columns adjacent to similar words or concepts helped to solidify themes as they emerged from the data.

The cross-case analysis revealed themes or categories that were significant in all four classrooms. These categories were reworked and adjusted to accommodate the data. The analysis was reported in chapter five, and the findings were presented according to the strength of the theme.

**Trustworthiness**

A research study must guarantee some level of credibility if it is to contribute to human understanding of a phenomenon. Do the reported findings accurately represent the experience of the participants? To what extent can the findings apply to other contexts? Would the findings be similar if another person was to conduct the research with similar participants in a similar context? How and to what degree have the biases of the researcher shaped the findings? Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that these questions are addressed in quantitative studies through criteria termed internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. In that quantitative paradigm, these criteria are appropriate because there is one reality, probability and random sampling, controlled and stable experimentation, and collection of data through objective instruments. These criteria do not make sense in the qualitative paradigm which acknowledges multiple realities, utilizes purposeful samples, embraces emergent research designs, and relies on humans as the primary instrument for data collection. Guba has proposed different terms
that are consistent with the qualitative paradigm to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility is a type of internal validity that ensures the meanings reported by the researcher are consistent with the meanings the participant assigns the phenomena (Erlandson, et al., 1993). This criteria acknowledges the constructivist view of multiple realities and seeks to confirm that the participant’s experience and understanding of the phenomenon are accurately represented by the researcher. There were several strategies employed to demonstrate credibility.

Triangulation is a particularly helpful process to find convergence of multiple perspectives. In wilderness navigation, triangulation is used to create an accurate picture of your location geographically. It involves the use of both a map and a compass. Distinct landmarks (such as mountain tops) are identified in the surrounding terrain and a compass is used to determine the bearing or precise direction of the landmark from your current position. This landmark is located on the map, and a line is drawn from the landmark on the bearing measured with the compass. A second landmark is identified and the process is repeated. As three or more landmarks are identified, the lines on the map converge in a localized area. The lines never all intersect at one point, but the more bearings gathered from various landmarks, the more accurate the picture of your current location. Triangulation in qualitative research works similarly.

In this study, using multiple sources of data increased the credibility of the findings. Data was collected from the educator, the students, and from the classroom. Additionally, there was triangulation of data collection methods. This study utilized
interviews, focus groups, surveys, documents, and observation. These sources and methods were used to enhance and corroborate each other. For example, observations in the classroom were used to guide questions incorporated into the group interviews. Data gathered from the surveys was used to confirm and solidify the themes that were emerging from the group interviews. The variety of data and methods worked in concert to verify and clarify the phenomenon of play/playfulness among adult learners.

Another means to ensure that participants’ views were accurately represented was to have participants review the data and tentative interpretations to substantiate their accuracy and plausibility (Merriam, 2001). This process of conducting member checks was utilized in this study. Once the cases were written up, copies were distributed to each educator for them to verify accuracy or clarify meaning as necessary. Additionally, prolonged engagement builds credibility in a research study (Merriam, 2001). Participants must spend enough time “in the context being studied to overcome the distortions that are due to his or her impact on the context, his or her own biases, and the effect of unusual or seasonal events” (Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 30). The length of the observation time facilitated this process. Students appeared to become accustomed to my presence and after a while seemed to take less and less notice of the video camera.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the research study can be applied to other contexts (Erlandson, et al., 1993). In this study, thick, rich descriptions and purposeful sampling helped to ensure transferability. As already discussed, rich description is a key characteristic of case study research. The purpose is to provide sufficient information such that the reader is able to determine for themselves
the transferability of the research to their particular context. Detailed descriptions of the classroom and extensive quotes from the interviews and focus groups provide the reader with a visceral experience of play/playfulness in the classroom. In each case description, I included an opening vignette to further immerse the reader into the play/playfulness of each particular classroom. This should enable the reader to add interpretation and application of the case to their own context; a process Stake (1995) refers to as “naturalistic generalization.” This approach is consistent with the constructivist philosophy by creating opportunity for the reader to construct their own meaning from the study rather than have the meaning dictated to them by the researcher.

Purposeful sampling contributes to transferability as it creates the opportunity for thick, rich description by providing information rich cases to effectively illuminate the phenomena being studied (Patton, 2002). In the case study approach, the primary concern is to select cases that maximize learning (Stake, 1995). The four cases presented in this study represented well the phenomena of play/playfulness and provided opportunity to explore various manifestations of play/playfulness in the adult classroom context.

The case study approach is somewhat unique in that transferability or generalization is not the primary goal. “The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (Stake, 1995, p. 8). The primary goal is to understand the case itself. However, the elaboration case studies provide of complex phenomena frequently lead to the modification of generalizations (Stake, 1995). Again, the generalizations or transferability of case studies hinge on the elaboration provided through rich, thick description which is only possible through purposeful sampling.
Dependability

Dependability refers to the extent to which a research study could be duplicated and produce similar findings (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The paradigm of qualitative analysis recognizes that exact duplication is impossible. However, consistency is still a goal, and while variances cannot be eliminated, they should be “trackable,” that is, they should be able to be accounted for through reality shifts, better insights, acknowledged biases, etc. (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The creation of an “audit trail” provides a record to account for the variances.

There are two aspects to an audit, an examination of the process and an examination of the product (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A “dependability audit” focuses on the process and a “confirmability audit” focuses on the product (This is further discussed in the Confirmability section)(Erlandson, et al., 1993). A dependability audit seeks to confirm that the appropriate processes are utilized in the process of inquiry. This audit trail provides documentation and detail about “how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2001, p. 207). The audit trail for this study consists of detailed descriptions of data collection techniques, transcripts from interviews, field notes from interviews and observations, summaries and other data analysis notes, process notes that address methodological issues, and a reflective journal which is a type of diary on the feelings and decision making processes of the researcher (Erlandson, et al., 1993). For each case, I created a three ring binder that included several sections. There was a separate section for each data source that included the printed transcriptions as well as notes detailing the methods used in the data collection process. A separate section in each binder contained
analysis notes as I began to identify patterns and themes within the data. In addition to
the binder, I maintained a journal to capture thoughts and ideas that arose during the
course of this study. These documents and notes provide an audit trail that will serve
both dependability and confirmability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are the focus of the study
and not the biases of the researcher (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Again the qualitative
paradigm rejects the notion of complete objectivity. However, documentation of the data
and the logic used to interpret that data provide opportunity for an external person to
track and evaluate the findings of the researcher. There are several techniques that were
utilized in this study to ensure confirmability.

An audit trail was the primary means for establishing confirmability. As
mentioned in the previous sections, an audit examines both the process and the product.
A confirmability audit focuses on the product of the research to confirm that the findings
follow the data collected in the study (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The audit trail described
in the previous section provides information to enable an auditor to track the findings of
the study to their sources.

Triangulation is another means to establish confirmability. Triangulation
provides opportunity for multiple perspectives to inform the study. The greater number
of perspectives, the less likely that the biases of the researcher would be established as
the norm in this particular type of study. As mentioned previously, this study included
triangulation of data sources and data collection methodology.
Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the particular methodology or research design of this study. This was a qualitative study using a collective case study approach to explore play/playfulness in an adult learning context. The unit of analysis or case was a higher education classroom and the data sources included the educator, students, and the classroom. The data collection techniques included interviews, focus groups, written survey, documents, and observations. Means for establishing trustworthiness were also discussed.
CHAPTER 4
FOUR PLAYFUL CLASSROOMS

In this chapter I will seek to describe each of the four cases, or playful classrooms, that are the focus of this research study. I follow a similar format for each classroom that is informed by the research questions of this study. I begin each classroom description with a vignette that captures the flavor of play/playfulness in that particular classroom. Then, I proceed to the educator because they have the most influence in creating the playful classroom. I provide some brief biographical information and then discuss their conceptualization of play/playfulness by having them recall instances that epitomize play/playfulness for them. Incorporating observational data, I explore the manifestations of play/playfulness within the classroom. This is followed by the educator’s understanding of play/playfulness as it relates to learning in the higher education classroom context.

At this point in each section, I turn my attention to the playful students. After providing some demographic information, I discuss their engagement in play/playfulness in the classroom context. This is followed with an examination of the students’ understanding of the connections between play/playfulness and learning. Finally, the negative influences of play/playfulness in that particular setting are examined.
Ted’s Classroom

Seven students gather around a table chanting “mispaced faith, misplaced faith, misplaced faith.” A different group of students are in a huddle and after a three count, throw their hands into the air and shout “PRIDE.” These enthusiastic adult students have just gathered into groups to work on a classroom assignment. The assignment had nothing to do with preparing cheers, but was rather to prepare to debate a particular theological viewpoint. The cheers and friendly taunting occur because they are learning in a classroom that is playful.

This graduate level course is titled Worldviews and Higher Education and is being offered in a summer intensive format where the students meet for half a day for two weeks. The mock debate assignment comes on day three of the course and students have enthusiastically accepted the challenge from their instructor. He has given them ten minutes to come up with their best argument for their particular position. Ted states, “I want you to have a strong opinion about this. I want you to be so convinced of arguing the case that people who have the opposite opinion, you will want to call them names and make fun of them and tell them how stupid they are for not seeing it the way it really is” (Ted Observation Video, 2008). Ten minutes later, a student passionately articulates her group’s viewpoint. Her teammates support her with nods as they stand around her or sit next to her at their table. Students from the other groups listen intently, trying to find a chink in the argument that they can attack when it is their turn to defend their viewpoint. After all three groups make their opening arguments, the floor is open to comments and words begin to fly across the room. They are working to make their case stronger, trying to exploit weaknesses of other groups’ arguments. All twenty-two students are engaged
in the mock debate. A few are pouring over their Bibles looking for more ammunition, while their teammates respond to questions from other groups. One student who hasn’t been very vocal in the class makes a comment and is interrupted. She responds forcefully, “I’m sorry, I’m not done …” and other students laugh at this uncharacteristic response. In the midst of the mock debate she has found the opportunity to exert her voice in new ways.

Any time the cacophony of responses slow, the instructor, Ted, eggs them on and provides additional fuel for their arguments. He provokes them with comments like, “She has a good point, you’re starting to sound like them, let me ask you a question…” (Ted Observation Video, 2008). After a while, he presents another question for each group to think about from their assigned perspective. The debate begins anew. Much of the time Ted is floating around the middle of the floor moving from group to group. One group becomes stuck and does not have a response to a particular question. Ted drifts over to their table and whispers a potential response. One of the members of that group then confidently restates what Ted just said as if it were his own idea and the debate continues.

Students are very engaged and have strong ownership of their viewpoints. One student rises to his feet with his hands in the air to draw attention to the comments he is making. Ted mimics his motions playfully, keeping the overall mood light. After twenty minutes of debating back and forth, he draws the discussion to a close by pointing out the validity and influence of each of the three viewpoints. Students return to their original seats and in the process a few students continue to playfully toss antagonistic comments toward friends who were supporting different viewpoints.
The above description serves to provide a glimpse into a playful classroom of adult learners. The remainder of this section will paint a more complete picture of this particular playful classroom beginning with the setting of the class. Then I will discuss the instructor, the person who has the most influence over the classroom. I will examine Ted’s understanding of play and playfulness by exploring stories of his experience of play. Observational data will be used to describe how play and playfulness are manifested in Ted’s classroom. Following this, I will sketch his journey as a playful educator, examining significant influences in his teaching career while exploring his understanding of the role of play/playfulness in learning. Although Ted is a significant influence in bringing play into his classroom, the students also contribute to the playful classroom. I will describe these students and their engagement with play and playfulness in the classroom. Finally, their responses and understanding of play and playfulness as it relates to learning will be presented.

The Setting

This playful class was part of an eight week training program for college graduates preparing to begin their careers as campus ministers with a regional Christian ministry organization that focuses on college students in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Maryland. The training program consisted of several courses that could be credited towards a Masters of Higher Education degree through a local college (about half the students in this class were enrolled in the graduate program while the other half were simply participating as a required part of their job training). The college is a private liberal arts college located in western Pennsylvania with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1800 and five master level graduate programs. Ted is a faculty member at
this college and has also had a long history with the campus ministry organization sponsoring this course.

The physical classroom was a large carpeted meeting room located in the basement of a college residential building where the students were housed during their eight week training program. Long eight foot tables were arranged in the middle of the room in a “U” shape with a head table containing an overhead projector. Students sat on one side of the table (outside the “U”) facing the head table at the front of the room. There were 26 students in this course and more demographic information is provided in “The Playful Students” section. I observed this classroom on the third day of Ted’s two week class titled “Worldviews in Higher Education.” It was the fourth week of the eight week training program (Ted Observational Notes, 2008).

The Playful Instructor – Ted

Ted has been involved in higher education since he graduated from college in 1972. For the first 18 years he worked at several colleges in various roles through a campus ministry organization called the Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO). Although his job responsibilities varied during that time, one constant was his role as a speaker. Ted gave talks at conferences or at fellowship meetings on various campuses that the CCO served. In this way, he was very involved in teaching during these first 18 years; although it was not in a formal classroom setting.

It was also during that time that he pursued additional education. Five years out of college, he pursued a Masters degree in religion from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Thirteen years later he completed his Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh in their school of education. His particular focus in the school of education was the religious
philosophical foundations of education, and for his dissertation he compared the concept of meaning making in college students between the developmental theories of William Perry and James Fowler. Upon completion of his doctorate degree, Ted began teaching full-time at the college level and soon began to work at Geneva College where he has been teaching for 16 years. Currently, Ted teaches in the religion department at the undergraduate level and also teaches in their Masters of Higher Education graduate program.

To understand play and playfulness in Ted’s classroom, it is important to explore his conceptualization of play and playfulness in a broader context. When asked to talk about an event that epitomizes his understanding of play, Ted immediately listed playing sports, pranks, parties, and telling stories. Although these four activities are common, they take on a very particular form to qualify as play/playfulness for Ted. In the following section I will further describe his understanding of sports, pranks, parties, and storytelling with the purpose of identifying play elements that influence the play and playfulness he brings into his classroom.

Basketball is the sport that Ted loves playing. He likes that the game is always changing. It is different every time down the court. “The unpredictableness of it, the spontaneous nature of it, that was really attractive to me” (Ted Interview 2008). In addition to the spontaneous nature of the game, Ted likes adding the “goofy” plays because they are “fun.” He states, “You know, the crazy pass, the wild fake. I started learning how to shoot the hook shot just because no one shoots it – because it was fun” (Ted Interview, 2008). The goofy plays were not only a means to make the game more fun, but also to modify play so that one team would not dominate the other. This
approach to competition is seen when Ted explains why he loves playing with a particular basketball buddy, Glen. “He just makes it so much more fun to play with because in many ways he’s not primarily interested in the competition in the sense of competition for dominance over another player. It’s competition to draw a higher level of play out of you… to enjoy the game better” (Ted Interview 2008). For Ted, the focus of competition is not on the outcome, but on the process of playing with the goal of enjoyment and fun. This approach to competition is further reflected in the fact that Ted played pick-up games at particular locations rather than in “competitive leagues that weren’t as much fun.”

The particular locations in which he played were a function of relationship and highlight the social aspect of Ted’s play. He played where he knew there will be particular people that he has enjoyed playing with in the past. He talked about recently visiting a town where he used to live. When he showed up at the playground on Saturday morning, the same guys he used to play with were there even though it had been 15 years. Ted yelled something up to them from the road and one guy turned around yelling something back, knowing exactly who Ted was by the sound of his voice. At different times in his life he has gravitated toward certain groups of guys to play with at established locations. In the context of these relationships, “talking” was very much a part of the game but “not the smack type talking where you’re trying to get into somebody’s head, but just the goofy – saying stuff to people and kidding them when they’re playing badly or trying to make fun of them just for fun’s sake” (Ted Interview, 2008). Ted’s example of basketball illustrates four significant play elements: play/playfulness is relational (he plays with specific groups of people), play/playfulness
is fun (winning isn’t important), play/playfulness involves goofiness and spontaneity (as seen in the outrageous basketball plays he incorporates).

The second example of play/playfulness that Ted presented was the prank. The type of prank that Ted likes to play involves setting people up in such a way to catch them off guard. In one example, he told how he and a colleague were in a small college town recruiting students to work for their organization. In the morning, he ate at one of the only restaurants in town, and when he was paying his bill he paid extra for a milkshake. He told the cashier that he would return later, and asked them to pretend to give the shake to him but only after Ted made it look like he persuaded the cashier to give them free food. This was the set up for what was to come later. On campus, he spent the day bantering back and forth with a college employee about how persuasive he was and why he was such a good recruiter. At lunch time, the college employee invited Ted and his colleague out to lunch and went to the only food place in town. On the way, Ted continued to talk about his persuasive ability and made a bet with the college employee that he could talk his way into some free food at the restaurant. Of course, they ended up at the same restaurant Ted had visited earlier and after much persuasion, the restaurant worker “gave” Ted the food that he had paid for earlier. The college employee was flabbergasted because they had never heard of such a thing at this restaurant. Ted let them in on the joke and had a good laugh with them. The story doesn’t end here, because on the way out of town, Ted stopped at the restaurant and bought a gift certificate for the college employee who hosted him. He left the certificate at the restaurant with the instructions to present the certificate only after they had collected two dollars from the college employee under the premise that Ted and his colleague had eaten there before
they left town, could not pay the balance of their bill, and indicated that the college employee would pay the outstanding two dollars. So, he “got” the college employee twice in a similar manner. As seen in this example, pranks for Ted focus on people rather than gimmicks or stunts. This prank and others he discussed highlight play/playfulness elements of relationship, spontaneity (or the unexpected), and fun.

The third example of play/playfulness that Ted gave was the party. He stated, “I like the good party, you know, the fun party … not just your party where everyone sits around and talks” (Ted Interview, 2008). Fun could mean a theme with people dressing up, writing poems that are hilarious, games inciting unexpected goofiness, or other creative things for people to do together (Ted Interview, 2008). In describing parties Ted reflects back to his years as a student activities director when he was constantly thinking of fun activities. These activities became fun when he added “crazy little twists” or “the unexpected little things.” The spontaneity makes things fun. He gives the example of a murder mystery party that he helped host where in the invitation he gave the impression that there would be only eight guests (eight characters), but they invited 48 (six people playing each character). Everyone came in costume and each character was asked to bring the same food item; so, there were mounds of Swedish meatballs, deviled eggs, and six other items. They were all instructed to say a particular phrases in character when they heard a certain key word. Throughout the night there was a long sequence of ridiculous phrases each triggered by another character’s phrase. They went out into the community in their goofy costumes on a video scavenger hunt and were instructed to capture the reactions of bystanders. Ted’s parties are more than just a social time: he creates an environment for people to do things they would normally never do and have
fun in the process. Ted’s example of parties highlights the play/playfulness elements of fun, spontaneity or the unexpected, goofiness, and relationship.

The final example of play and playfulness that Ted provides is storytelling. He loves a good story no matter who is telling it, and the accuracy of the story is not as important as the delivery. Embellishment is welcome because it’s the way that a person explains what went on and their impressions of various characters that make a story good (Ted Interview, 2008). The significance of storytelling was evidenced in the fact that in the course of the interview he told six stories. As discussed later, storytelling was also very prevalent in his classroom.

Ted’s examples of play and playfulness reveal four elements that are significant in his conceptualization of play/playfulness. These play/playfulness elements are fun, spontaneity (or the unexpected), goofiness, and the importance of relationship. These play/playfulness elements shape the play/playfulness he brings into the classroom as seen in the next section.

**Manifestation of Play/Playfulness in Ted’s Classroom**

In observing Ted’s classroom there are four clear manifestations of play and playfulness: storytelling, spontaneity, making fun of people, and general silliness or goofiness. In this section I will further describe and explore these manifestations of play and playfulness in Ted’s classroom.

Storytelling is an obvious element in Ted’s classroom. On the day I observed, he began his lecture with a story from his past that took seven minutes. In the course of the three hours of class he told six stories, as well as providing many quick examples from his past. Ted is good at telling stories. He utilizes many facial expressions, impersonates
characters in his story, and provides direct quotes from characters in his story rather than paraphrasing from his perspective. His animated gestures and movement bring his stories to life (Ted Video Notes, 2008). He is able to draw people into his stories; they become interested in what he is saying and where he is going with the story.

For Ted, storytelling is about much more than entertainment; he uses stories to draw people into the learning process. When talking about influences in his teaching, he discusses a mentor who used stories in this way.

He would have three or four different things where you couldn’t see how they were connected. I like that, you know, that style, and then he would all of a sudden give the one point that would make sense of them all and you’d be, ‘Oh that’s good, that’s nice teaching’ (Ted Interview, 2008).

Stories are not only a means to attract and retain students’ attention, but they are also used as powerful metaphors or examples of the content he is teaching. In the particular class I observed, this was illustrated in his use of movies.

During class Ted asked students to identify movies that portrayed good descriptions of the consequences of evil, which was the subject for his class that day. Students were quickly able to identify movies and articulate the ways in that they reflected the reality of evil. Surprisingly, Ted had seen all but one of the movies brought up during this 44 minute discussion. Not only had he seen all these movies, but was able to restate and summarize students comments in the terms from the course content. He used the students’ recollection of movies (stories) to deliver his content about the nature of evil. He is very good at using stories, either his own or others’, to teach and illustrate the course concepts.
In his storytelling and other classroom interactions, there are other manifestations of play that are very characteristic of Ted’s classroom: spontaneity, making fun of people (teasing), and silliness or goofiness. These manifestations of play or playfulness are frequently reciprocated by students in the class. Ted and other students would make witty comments in response to comments made in the class. Ted mimicked and repeated animated gestures made by a student as she passionately expresses her views. He impersonated himself as a teenager at a dance. He walked around the room like a zombie to emphasize an observation made about a movie. During the mock debates he goaded students by throwing contrary arguments in their face. A student enthusiastically answered “no” to a rhetorical question Ted posed. Students clap and cheer at different points in the class. Ted has students repeat phrases in unison to emphasize important points (Ted Video Notes, 2008). These are just a few examples of the behaviors observed in Ted’s classroom. Although students were actively involved in this fun, it never got out of control. There were several times in the class when Ted would refocus the students by getting their attention and taking over the direction of the conversation. As an observer, I personally enjoyed his class and the students also seemed to be enjoying themselves as evidenced in their smiles and engagement in the playful interactions.

In summary, play and playfulness is manifested in Ted’s classroom through storytelling, spontaneity, making fun of people, and general silliness or goofiness. This behavior is exhibited not only by Ted, but by students as well. This results in a classroom characterized by funny comments, laughing, impersonations, and playful verbal interactions between students.
**Ted’s Understanding of Play/Playfulness as it Relates to Learning.**

Ted has a well-developed understanding of the connections between his playful pedagogy and learning. A primary motive of Ted’s in using a playful approach is to move students out of their traditional understandings of schooling to a place where they take responsibility for their own learning. He describes traditional schooling as cold, static, and controlled where students are motivated by external factors like grades. Playfulness is a way to make learning different, “lighthearted, friendly, entertaining” (Ted Interview, 2008). He exclaims, “You enter into a way of teaching; they don’t perceive it as schooling” (Ted Interview, 2008). He shares about students “dropping their guard” and “breaking the bad habit of not engaging in their own learning and not taking responsibility for their own learning” (Ted Interview, 2008). According to Ted, fun makes learning enjoyable and less dependent on external motivations. He wants students to have an enjoyable time engaging in the learning process and realizes this requires a significant change for many students in their perceptions of learning.

A second motive for using play and playfulness in the classroom is to throw students off balance, to shake them out of familiar ways of thinking. He discusses Piaget and cognitive disequilibrium where students are not simply assimilating information, but must accommodate and change their thinking patterns. Ted states, “The huge steps forward come from accommodation. They come from rethinking and getting a new paradigm” (Ted Interview, 2008). He uses the example of Jesus who taught in parables where there were familiar points of reference in the story; however, just when you thought the story would go in one direction, it would take a sudden twist. The familiar part of the parable would draw people in, but the twist would challenge their traditional
ways of thinking. He states, “That’s what I’m trying to do, trying to have that moment where the person all of a sudden goes, ‘Oh’” (Ted Interview, 2008). For Ted, the use of story and the playful classroom environment are catalysts for this type of learning to occur. The play/playfulness keeps students off guard, engaged, motivated, and moves them to a place where they take ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

Ted’s articulation of the connections between play and learning reveal a particular of education. This philosophy identifies the purposes of education, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and the significance of the context for learning.

For Ted, the purpose of education is to teach students to think and make sense of the world around them so that they might influence and change the world. He explores with students how various worldviews shape the ways one perceives and engages the world around them. Embedded in his teaching is an understanding that knowledge and action are connected. There is a responsibility to live out what you know and influence others in the process. In the particular context that I observed, he was training adults to work for a campus ministry organization whose goal is to “transform students to transform the world.” It was evident from time in his classroom that he too embraced this goal. Many of his funny stories were examples of people living out of their particular worldview; putting their knowledge and beliefs into action.

The role of the teacher is to facilitate meaning making with the students. Students are an active part of learning and are engaged in process of constructing a worldview that makes sense of their experience, what they see in the world around them, and how others have created or found meaning (Ted video notes, 2008). For Ted, play and playfulness engage the learner in this process and introduces cognitive disequilibrium that leads to
paradigm shifts. While the overarching purpose is to cause social change, the immediate purposes of the education process is to help students construct a worldview that will incite action.

Ted’s primary goal of changing individuals and the way they think about the world around them is consistent with a humanist philosophy of adult education. According to Alias and Merriam (2005), “humanist adult educators are concerned with the development of the whole person with a special emphasis upon the affective dimensions of personality” (111). The focus is on individuals and their development. Relationships and social action are important in Ted’s understanding of learning, however, they are not the driving influences in his educational philosophy.

Ted is a very thoughtful educator who has a clear sense of what he is trying to accomplish in the classroom. His playfulness is an integral part of his pedagogy. In the next section we will explore the students’ experience of the playful classroom and determine if their experience matches Ted’s intentions.

**The Playful Students**

The classroom environment is determined by both the instructor and the students. Now that we have an image of the playful instructor and his understanding of the role of play/playfulness, it is important to explore the students’ experience and understanding of the playful classroom. In this section I will provide some demographic information, describe their engagement of play in the classroom, and present their responses to play/playfulness and their understanding of its connection to learning.

The students in this class were participating in an eight week summer training program to prepare them as campus ministers. Summer training occurred on a college
campus where the organization utilized an apartment style residence hall that contained a classroom space. Students in Ted’s class were living together in the same building, preparing meals together, and attending class together in this residence hall as part of the eight week training program. (Ted Observational Notes, 2008).

During my observation, students trickled into the room, greeted each other, and selected a seat at one of the tables. The tables were joined end to end to form a large “U” shape in the room. Most students were carrying coffee mugs and placed them on the tables with their books. Several were eating the remains of their breakfast, munching on a piece of fruit or granola bar. One person was eating from a bowl containing cereal. They were dressed very casually in jeans, shorts, sandals or flip flops, and several people entered the room with bare feet. There was a casual feel to the room. When Ted entered, he was wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and sneakers. He spent most of his time teaching while he sat or leaned on a table at the front of the room. There was a lectern, but he didn’t use it at all during the three hours of observation. He had a Bible and a sheet of notes on the table at his side. He used the Bible several times during the class, but only looked at the sheet of notes once while giving students their assignment near the end of class.

Of the 26 students in the room, most of them appeared to be in their twenties. Two seemed to be in their thirties and one is in her forties. Almost all of them were white; there are 4 women, three of which were black, sitting in a grouping of comfortable chairs off to the side of the U shaped tables. They were not students in the class, but were summer trainers who served to mentor the new staff members. There was a pretty even balance of men and women (12 and 16 respectively). All the students in the room have completed college.
During my time of observing, students actively participated in the classroom playfulness. They bantered back and forth among each other and with Ted (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). In the group interview, one student stated: “We tease a lot” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). They laughed at Ted’s stories and at each others’ witty comments. They were often animated in their responses and their passion about certain topics was very evident by their fervent comments (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). They enthusiastically participated in the mock debate as noted in the opening vignette. However, the most striking thing about Ted’s class wasn’t the students’ engagement in playfulness, but their engagement in the learning process. Through their comments and questions in class, as well as their statements in the surveys and focus group, students were obviously seeking understanding and working through how to apply the information in their own life. One student captured this sentiment when he stated:

Anybody can sit in a classroom and learn what they have to learn, then have that not shape who they are. And I think Ted really tries to get at our perception about things, so that in turn shapes us, and then makes us look at things differently and act differently (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

He continues on to indicate that play/playfulness is a part of that process. The playfulness in Ted’s classroom was clearly an integral part of the students’ engagement in learning.

Students’ Understanding of Play/Playfulness’ Connection to Learning

The students not only engage in the playfulness in Ted’s class, but were also able to articulate how they felt it connected to their learning. From their comments in the group interview and classroom survey, four themes emerged relating playfulness to
learning in Ted’s class: playfulness engages students by grabbing and keeping their attention, Ted’s playful stories illustrate and clarify abstract concepts with concrete examples and help students remember content, playfulness motivates and challenges students, and finally, playfulness creates a safe environment where students feel free to participate and take risks to play around with ideas as they seek to make meaning. These connections between play/playfulness and learning are further explored in the following paragraphs.

First, students indicated that playfulness engages them by grabbing and keeping their attention. In the survey completed by all students, the word engaging and stories occur more than any other significant words (Student Survey Summary, 2008). Several comments from the student surveys illustrate the impact of play/playfulness in the classroom. In response to a question about play/playfulness in the classroom students stated, “I am more alert and interested,” and “It keeps my attention,” or “He really holds my attention” (Ted Survey, 2008). Ted’s play/playfulness clearly increased students’ level of engagement. Often times this occurred through Ted’s stories because this was a dominant form of Ted’s play/playfulness in the classroom. In the student surveys, when asked to describe why they would identify the instructor as playful, three-quarters of the students wrote something about Ted’s stories (Ted Student Survey, 2008). This particular aspect of Ted’s playfulness could be categorized as entertainment. His storytelling and witty comments were very entertaining; however, Ted’s stories did much more than simply entertain.

Ted’s stories were not only entertaining, but helped illustrate and clarify the various concepts he was teaching as well as contributed to retention. Students saw there
was a purpose to his stories. In the student survey, one student wrote, “He tells engaging stories that make a point” (Ted Student Survey, 2008). Students were aware that the stories served a significant purpose. One thing that the stories accomplished was to provide concrete examples of abstract concepts; thus helping students better understand the course content. A student said, “It was funny a lot of times, but then it also helped you grasp the material (Ted Group Interview, 2008). This relationship of story and understanding was affirmed by another student when he said, “It helps [me] to understand the concept instead of just memorize facts” (Ted Survey, 2008). One aspect of this gain in understanding was that the stories connected course content to real life. “The content of the class becomes more integrated in my mind – it doesn’t seem like something that’s purely intellectual – it’s life,” wrote one student (Ted Survey, 2008). The application of concept through stories also enabled students to connect with course concepts on a personal level. Students commented that playfulness, “helps me to care about the subject” and “helps me really own the info” (Ted Survey, 2008). Ted’s playful stories not only facilitated understanding, but students also felt that it increased their retention of course material. “I remember the ideas he is teaching easily because of the stories he tells,” declared one student (Ted Student Survey, 2008). Ted’s playful stories facilitated learning by providing concrete examples, illustrating application of concepts to real life settings, helping students connect with content on a personal level, and by enhancing retention.

Students also recognized that Ted’s playful approach was motivating and challenged them to take responsibility for their own learning. The enjoyable nature of playful stories provided intrinsic motivation for learning. Students describe Ted’s
classroom as “fun” and “enjoyable” (Ted Student Survey, 2008). These are both emotions that are intrinsically rewarding, therefore motivating students to be involved in the classroom environment. One student summarized it well when she said “I’m learning a lot and enjoying the experience of learning” (Ted Survey, 2008). A student noted that Ted’s storytelling approach was also challenging. He stated:

All his stories do have a point … so once you understand that, it forces you to take ownership of your learning because you can’t zone out. You know it’s going to go somewhere so it forces you to connect the dots on your own. He doesn’t always necessarily make the connection for you (Ted Focus Group, 2008).

Ted forces students to engage in their learning by utilizing stories whose connection to the content are not readily obvious. His stories serve a purpose, but those purposes are not evident unless a student engages in the learning process to make connections.

A final way that play/playfulness connected to learning in Ted’s classroom is that it created a safe environment which invited participation and provided a space to take risks. In describing Ted’s classroom environment, students used words like “relaxed, light atmosphere, open, and free” (Ted Student Survey, 2008). This helped create a space where students were eager to participate in classroom discussions or other learning activities. A student commented, “[Playfulness] really can break down some barriers” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). The removal of these barriers was significant because it created a safe place. “We are able to be ourselves thus more willing to be vulnerable and speak up and participate,” noted one student (Ted Student Survey, 2008). The creation of this safe space not only increased participation, but also freed them to take risks as they
shared ideas and wrestled with content. “We have more freedom to wrestle with things in a lighthearted way,” declared one student (Ted Group Interview, 2008). This feeling of safety and freedom was very significant for students as it appeared in interviews and the student surveys. Another student wrote, “I feel more permitted and free to engage fully in all the topics presented” (Ted Survey, 2008). The playfulness in the classroom created a space where students could freely play with ideas and therefore participate in their own learning in significant ways.

**Negative Responses to Ted’s Playful Classroom**

Despite the overly positive response to Ted’s playful approach to teaching, several students identified concerns or negative aspects of the playfulness in Ted’s classroom. One student was very vocal in expressing her initial skepticism and concern about Ted’s approach. She confesses that her first thought was, “Who is this joker? Is he going to waste my time?” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). Her initial skepticism was replaced as the class continued and she found Ted’s teaching insightful. Another student expressed concerns about the issue of time and efficiency with Ted’s playful approach. His stories were often long and this student felt “that his playful learning takes a lot a time to learn a simple, or what seems like a simple, lesson” (Ted Survey, 2008). “Balance” was a theme that came up in both the Survey and Group Interview. One student noted that the classroom fun is engaging “but, if the teacher spends too much time on funny stories or jokes that are too long, or students’ joking overruns the learning, it is distracting or makes me want to disengage” (Ted Survey, 2008). Elliot recalled a high school teacher who told a lot of jokes and stories, but they were not tied to course content. He was “just a court jester” and the class was a waste of time because it was
about the teacher being liked and accepted by the students, not about learning (Group Interview, 2008).

In addition, two students commented that playfulness can mask the significance of the content. One student identified it as a “paradox” of content and presentational style. The other student wrote that it is hard to take learning seriously with a playful approach: She noted, “It often loses a sense of profundity” (Ted Student Survey, 2008). On a similar note, Zach admitted that he often would get lost in the playfulness because it made him feel good. He would enjoy Ted’s stories as entertainment, but he would not put forth the extra effort to make the connections between the stories and the course content (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

Although there were some concerns with Ted’s playful approach to the classroom, the overall response was very positive. Students were not only positive because they enjoyed the playful classroom, but also because they could identify how it contributed to their learning. Specifically, they identified four connections between their learning and the playful class environment. Playfulness engaged students by grabbing and keeping their attention, playful stories illustrated and clarified abstract concepts and facilitated retention, it motivated and challenged students, and created a safe environment that encouraged participation and exploration.
**Alana’s Classroom**

It’s Saturday morning and in an elementary school classroom, Samantha, a woman in her 20’s is about to take a risk and raises her hand. She is one of thirteen adult learners ranging in age from their early twenties to late fifties sitting in a graduate course titled *Psychological Foundations of Education*. All of the students in this class are teachers. About half are taking this class as a requirement toward their master’s degree while others, like Samantha, are simply trying to fulfill state mandated continuing education units. This is the third and final weekend for this class that met for 8 hours on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the spring at this suburban school.

Raising her hand was risky for Samantha because a few minutes earlier she had answered a question incorrectly. The instructor had asked for an example of concrete learning and Samantha had replied with an example that illustrated the opposite concept, abstract learning. Gary, sitting next to her at the table, playfully laughed at her incorrect response as he casually tossed a green Koosh ball back and forth from hand to hand. Samantha responded to Gary with a smirk. The instructor, Alana, patiently guided her and the rest of the class through additional examples to further explain the concept. Now, ten minutes later, after several additional exercises to explore the elusive concept, Alana asked for an example of a teaching activity that caters to abstract learners, the opposite concept. Even though she “crashed and burned” only a few minutes earlier, Samantha eagerly raises her hand. Alana calls on her and Samantha responds tentatively, “Creative brainstorming.”

The students in the class respond to this correct answer with an eruption of cheers and noises from whistles, rattles, clappers and a variety of noisemakers. Alana too
exclaims “YEAH” as she waves her hands above her head. The class is celebrating with Samantha utilizing the noisemakers placed on their tables by the instructor for just such a purpose. This is a playful classroom of adult learners.

The above description serves to provide a glimpse into a playful classroom of adult learners. The remainder of this section will paint a more complete picture of this particular playful classroom. This picture will begin with the setting of this class and proceed to the instructor, the person who has the most influence over the classroom. I will examine Alana’s definition of play and playfulness and further explore her experiences of play/playfulness by revisiting childhood memories of play. Observational data will be used to describe how play and playfulness are manifested in Alana’s classroom. Following this, I will sketch her journey as a playful educator examining both her career path, as well as her understanding of the ways play/playfulness relates to learning in the classroom. Although Alana is a significant influence in bringing play into her classroom, the students also contribute to the playful classroom. I will describe these students and their engagement with play and playfulness in the classroom. Finally, their responses and understanding of play and playfulness as it relates to learning will be presented.

**The Setting**

This playful classroom is composed of professional educators with a broad range of teaching experiences. Some had been teaching in the K-12 setting for only two years, while others had been teaching for decades. The course is a graduate level course offered through a private university located in northeastern Pennsylvania. The school has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2000 and a graduate enrollment of around
2200. The graduate courses are offered in various satellite locations including this suburban elementary school in south central Pennsylvania.

The instructor, Alana, has specifically requested to meet in an art room because of the room’s versatility. It is not cluttered with traditional desks all lined up in rows but rather is furnished with eight foot long tables and chairs. She has arranged four of the tables into a fan shape, closer together near the front and center of the classroom, spread out towards the rear. On each of these tables is construction paper, pipe cleaners, markers, crayons, noisemakers (spinners, clappers, kazoos, whistles, etc.) and squishy toys like Koosh balls and rubber, sand filled cucumbers. A table on the side of the room adjacent to the teacher’s desk holds more supplies of newspapers, scissors, and desktop tape dispensers. In the front of the room, behind the teacher’s desk, there are three storage tubs containing additional supplies (linen napkins, post–its, juggling scarves, a rope, a branch from a bush, a bottle of bubbles, a doll, gumdrops, marshmallows, toothpicks, “That’s Easy” button, Tinker Toys, and Polaroid cameras). Spread across the back counter are snacks including cookies, pretzels, chocolate bars, and iced tea. A portable CD player is set up in the front of class and was playing up-beat music as students arrived in the morning. There are also some more traditional teaching props in place. An overhead projector, a chalkboard up front, several poster boards hung on the cork tack strip running the length of the chalk board. (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). Alana put forth much effort, carting in several boxes of supplies to help transform this elementary school art classroom into a setting which she thought was conducive to teaching her adult students.
The Playful Instructor – Alana

Alana has been teaching adults for over 30 years. She came from a family of educators and went to college to pursue a degree in elementary education. The school she chose did not yet have state certification in elementary education but promised it would be in place in two years. The state certification was delayed, and so Alana graduated with a degree in behavioral sciences and soon after completed a masters in psychology. She began working in the co-curricular side of higher education in student life, however, made the transition to the classroom in her first couple of years at the prompting of her director who recognized her gift for teaching. Alana began teaching a number of classes and found that she was, in her words, “Enjoying it very much” (Alana Interview, 2008). Her whole career has been in the higher education classroom and she now works independently and teaches various courses for Harrisburg Area Community College as well as education graduate course for Wilkes University, Drexel, and others. In every course she teaches, she is very intentional about establishing a particular classroom environment that includes large doses of fun and playfulness (Alana Interview, 2008).

In order to understand how Alana brings play and playfulness into her classroom, it is first important to understand her conceptualization of play and playfulness independent of the classroom context. When asked to define play, Alana pauses for several seconds and sighs before she continues. She states:

I see it in a very broad sense. I see it as anything from those kind of non-verbal’s that I mentioned [dramatic facial expressions and animated body language] to just having fun. Humor. I see it in terms of movement and activity. I see it in terms of involvement
and belonging feelings with others… something other than just a verbal exchange (Alana Interview, 2008).

Alana did not refer to established play definitions or play theories. However, her definition includes humor, activity, imagination, and relationship which are themes that are common to many formal conceptualizations of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

When asked about the differences or similarities between play and playfulness she responded:

I’d probably say that play is the overarching umbrella and playfulness comes under that. And I can’t, I can’t really divide out those…. The nonverbal, the animation and the humor. You know, the lighthearted positive kind of attitude seems, like playful (Alana Interview, 2008).

For Alana, playfulness is a subset of play that describes the attitude and frame of mind of the player. Throughout her interview she typically used the term play to refer to a concept or activity and playful or playfulness to refer to frame of mind or attitude of an individual or class (Alana Interview, 2008).

Alana’s understanding of play and playfulness were shaped in her childhood and influenced by her family, particularly her dad. She recollects, “When I think of playfulness, I think of him” (Alana Interview, 2008). Her dad, a railroad engineer, built a stage in the basement of their home and would cajole family and extended family members into participating in elaborate theatrical productions. She describes her dad as “very entertaining” and a person who was very animated with body language and facial expressions. The legacy of her father’s playfulness continues in Alana’s home today as she describes the singing and “craziness” that is very much a part of her interactions with
her husband and daughter. She states, “I married someone very much like my dad. I mean, he is very animated and playful to begin with, so I think we are always, as a family we are always doing wild and crazy, funny things at home [laughing]” (Alana interview, 2008). This animated, theatrical playfulness is a significant aspect of Alana’s play. During my interview with Alana, she would frequently take on different voices and mannerisms and use role play and impersonations to communicate her point (Alana Interview, 2008).

From her definition and examples of play/playfulness, there are several elements that are significant in Alana’s conceptualization of play/playfulness: These elements are humor, activity, imagination, relationship, and theatrics. These elements of play/playfulness are very evident in the ways she brought play/playfulness into her classroom.

**Manifestation of Play/Playfulness in Alana’s Classroom**

In observing Alana’s classroom, there are four distinct manifestations of play/playfulness: her animated, theatrical use of voices, impersonations and role plays; the use of playful activities to reinforce course content; the use of noisemakers to celebrate various accomplishments; and the availability of manipulatives for students to play with in the classroom. In this section I will further describe and explore these manifestations of play and playfulness.

Drama and theatrical playfulness are one of the ways that play and playfulness are evoked in Alana’s classroom. In the middle of explaining a concept in class, she decided to provide an illustration by switching into a role play where she acted out one or two different characters complete with different voices and hand gestures (Alana Observation
Notes, 2008). Cheering, hand clapping, and bursting into song or encouraging students to celebrate one another, “Let’s give it up for Holly!” were typical responses from Alana (Alana Video Notes, 2008). These theatrics are reminiscent of the playfulness of Alana’s dad and certainly are an integral part of Alana’s playful classroom. However, there is another form of play that is even more dominant in her classroom.

Activities are at the heart of Alana’s playful classroom. In four hours of observation, Alana utilizes 9 activities involving props and physical movement (Alana Video Notes, 2008). To illustrate the dominance of activities in Alana’s class and to provide a clearer picture of Alana’s playful classroom, I present below a detailed account of the first few hours of her class based on my observation notes and from reexamining the video recording I took of Alana’s class.

As students arrived, lively music was playing. Alana casually greeted people as they came into the classroom. She arrived 45 minutes earlier to bring in her props and set the room up. She began class with a 30 second ice breaker that got students laughing. Students were asked to identify with one of three shapes drawn on the board – a square, a triangle, or a set of parallel squiggly lines. She asked who chose each shape and then stated that their choice revealed something about them. A square meant they like order, triangle meant they are goal oriented, and the squiggly lines meant they are sex craved. This evoked much laughter because most people in the class, including me as an observer, had chosen the squiggly lines. As the laughter died down, she tied the icebreaker into the course content by noting that this was one type of inventory and that throughout the day the class will be examining a couple of different learning inventories (Alana Video Notes, 2008).
From the icebreaker she moved immediately into a review activity. Students were given a pre-made name tag that stated their name and a concept from the last class session. Alana informed the students that they will have several minutes to review their concept before they mill around the class testing other students on their concept. After introducing the activity, Alana started some music on the CD player and casually walked around the room talking with students and verifying that they understand the concept on their card. Most of the students did not take time to look up their concept in their course manual; evidently they remember the concept from the previous class (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). When she indicated that it was time to mill around, students engaged quickly and were up and moving around the room. After a minute, it became evident that there was some confusion with the task. Alana grabbed the students’ attention by tooting on a Kazoo and then clarified the task (test people on your concept, not the concept on their name tag). While milling around, Holly continually tugged and squeezed a green squishy toy. While he was milling around, Gary picked up a toy from a box of props in the back of the room. There was much animated conversations and laughter as the students milled around talking with one another. Alana appeared to be monitoring conversations and eventually blew a Kazoo and announced, “Thank your partner, shake hands, and take your seats” (Alana Video Notes, 2008).

While students were milling around reviewing, Alana took the time to write several things on the boards. She then took several minutes to discuss these concepts which were also review from the previous class session. She then presented the next activity which required the 3-4 students sitting at each table to work together using tinker toys to invent a “memory hook” for one of the concepts written on the board. There were
no groans or sighs from the students about this assignment (Alana Video Notes, 2008). Everyone seemed to jump right into the activity and the students at the nearest table began to discuss their resources (while they fiddled with them) and how they might connect with the concepts written on the board. As time progressed, it appeared that most students were contributing to the project at each of the four tables. Karen wanted another toy person for their project so she began to solicit other tables. At the first table, Gary answered her request by sending her away with a buzzing noisemaker (Alana Video Notes, 2008). Alana overheard Karen’s request and found another toy person from an extra set of tinker toys she had in one of her storage containers. While they were building, Alana walked around the classroom returning graded papers. Several students stopped their building to examine their graded paper. Alana squatted down to speak with one student about their paper. The atmosphere was casual (Alana Video Notes, 2008).

After some time, Alana announced that there were 4 more minutes. Samantha was flying her creation through the air. A woman at table three was looking through her book and reading to the others at her table while they continue to build. Alana asked each group to share and explain their creation. Students listened attentively to one another and the whole class laughed at table 2’s imaginative creation. Table 1 addressed not just one, but all the concepts with their creation. The class responded enthusiastically with their noisemakers and cheers. After all tables had presented, Alana gave the students the option of keeping their creation or taking it apart and putting it away. Two tables choose to keep their creations; the other two disassemble theirs and place the tinker toys back in their containers.
The next 30 minutes was devoted to students sharing with the class how they applied concepts learned in this grad class to their classrooms at their respective schools. Students responded quickly, they seem eager to share (Alana Video Notes, 2008). In all, 7 of the 13 students shared. During this time, students were drinking coffee and eating snacks, as well as playing with the manipulatives (koosh balls and squishy toys) that Alana had placed on the tables. At one point, Gary tossed his Koosh at Tim sitting across the table. The koosh was caught and tossed back.

After this share time, Alana directed them into a time of discussion about a homework assignment. At their tables, students were instructed to summarize and discuss the educational article they reviewed. Students again jumped into conversation with one another quickly. As they talked, some of the students continued to play with koosh balls while another stacked markers on the table. Even in the midst of this activity, they appeared to be listening as they made comments and dialogued back and forth (Alana Video Notes, 2008). To end this session, Alana played a chime with a rubber mallet. “That was a surprising noise,” commented a woman from table #3 (Alana Video Notes, 2008). Alana opens the discussion to the whole class, asking for insights, questions, or interesting conversations that occurred at the table. One student commented, than a second student comments, and a third. Students began to engage with one another from table to table. One quipped, “Can I play devil’s advocate with your comment?” Another exclaimed, “I like your idea!” Yet another inquired, “Can I ask a question about your article?” (Alana Video Notes, 2008). Students were integrating their life experiences with course content. A woman from table three talked about how as a 37 year old no one ever gives her a sticker for being a good mom. She stated, “I’m in a class
now [referring to Alana’s class] and I like getting a sticker on my paper” (Alana Video Notes, 2008). She continued to state that it is satisfying because she never received stickers for making dinner. The class laughed and cheered, celebrating with noisemakers the great dinners she made for her family. The discussion continued for a few more minutes before Alana brings the conversations to a close.

Alana identifies one more concept that they need to review. It was listed on someone’s name tag, and so Alana asks her if people had a good handle on that concept. She was satisfied with their positive responses and launched into the next topic.

She reviewed a handout on Global and Sequential learning in their manual and then asked them to take a relevant lesson plan that they were familiar with from their classrooms and identify global and sequential aspects. After 5 minutes of working on their own, students reported back to the tables and continued to help one another identify the different aspects. As students finished at their tables, they wandered to the back of the room for drinks. Alana called an official three minute break at 9:51 and hits play once again on the cd player (Alana Video Notes, 2008).

During the break, Samantha gathered the koosh balls and squishy toys from the other tables. When another student noticed her actions, she exclaims, “I’m hording them all!” Gary and Tim were singing with the music, “Oh what a night …” Alana was casually talking with a couple of student about a construction project across the street that was visible through the classroom windows. Students were talking with one another. Gary continued to toss the koosh ball back and forth from hand to hand, and Seth, tried some of the noisemakers at a different table. Alana did not appear to be anxious about
hurrying people from their break and at 9:59 she resumes class (Alana Observation Video, 2008).

As this account shows, activities play a central role in Alana’s classroom. During the remainder of the morning, additional activities included juggling scarves, folding napkins, creating a brain out of newspaper and other props, constructing a giant neuron, and making molecules with gumdrops and toothpicks. All of these activities appeared to be carefully planned in advance (all the props/supplies were ready) and Alana’s primary role was to ensure the groups had the supplies they needed and then frame the activity. At the end of the activity, she would solicit feedback from students with questions or by having them share their experience. She utilized a reflective approach to the experiential activities she incorporated into the classroom. As noted in the account above, students were engaged in these activities. They typically participated in the activity enthusiastically and appeared to enjoy the collaborative work. In some instances, students chose to be in a less hands-on role and chose to be the person referencing the textbook (Alana Video Notes, 2007). There were opportunities for people to be involved at different levels.

There are several additional things to note about these activities: they were relatively short in duration, were frequently collaborative, engaged multiple senses, and were focused to illustrate and/or teach an aspect of the course content - sometimes doubly so. For example, folding napkins was used to demonstrate a sequential teaching style. Learning various napkin folds was not critical to the course content, but the sequential process of learning napkin folds was critical. In the neuron activity, Alana had students use various props to construct the various parts of a neuron and demonstrate how the
signal moves from one end of the neuron to the other. The process of constructing the neuron was identified as a way to make a topic more “concrete” (a learning process from the course). At the same time, the function of neurons was part of the course content as students learned how the brain functions and the implications of this for teaching. So, in the neuron exercise, the activity served double duty in that it helped teach both content and processes that were a part of the course. In this example, the process of the activity demonstrated a concept and the content aspect of the activity reinforced required course content. As seen in this example, the playful activities Alana incorporated into her class were chosen and integrated very purposefully.

Alana talked about her ability to create meaningful activities as a “gift.” She stated, “I’m really good at adapting ideas into that kind of stuff [classroom activities] and just coming up with an activity” (Alana Interview, 2008). She referenced a notebook that contained all her activities, many that she had adapted from TV game shows, baby showers, or other sources. “My mind never turns off because I’m always thinking about how I could turn something that looks like fun out there into something I can use in my class,” she notes. (Alana Interview, 2008). Alana turns to this notebook as she is preparing to teach a class to identify activities that will help her teach some particular content. For Alana, playful activities and experiences primarily serve to illustrate and amplify course content.

Connecting the activity to the content is important to Alana, but she is also fine incorporating icebreakers that do not connect to the content. In these situations, the icebreakers serve to create a “comfort level,” an atmosphere that is relaxed allowing students to “feel and be open to what’s going to be said” (Alana Interview, 2008). She
states, “Relaxed learning is the most powerful kind of learning and you'll never going to
be more relaxed than when you’ve got done laughing because of a fun activity you did”
(Alana Interview, 2008).

There are many things she did to create that atmosphere in her class: the use of
music before class, during breaks, and while students were working on projects; the
refreshments at the back of class and the reminder to help themselves whenever they
wanted (not just during official breaks); and the manipulatives that she places on each
table and the way she encourages students to play with them. The manipulatives were
prevalent in the classroom and several students played with them constantly throughout
the class (Alana Video Notes, 2008). At one point while Alana was teaching about a
concept, Samantha accidently snapped her Koosh ball so it flew in the air and landed in
the front of the classroom. While she continued to talk, Alana stepped forward, picked
up the Koosh ball and shot it back to Sam using perfect form for a basketball free throw
(Alana Observation Notes, 2008). Alana did not treat these manipulatives as a distraction
to the learning environment, but as an integral part of creating a relaxed learning
environment.

The other objects that Alana brought into her classroom that were not typical are
the noisemakers. Alana has acquired a collection of noisemakers that rattle, clap, quack,
laugh, whistle, click, and buzz. These were distributed on the tables in her class and
students were encouraged to use them to celebrate the hard work and accomplishments of
class members (Alana Interview, 2008). Students in Alana’s class had accepted this
concept and enthusiastically utilized the noisemakers to celebrate their classmates (Alana
Observation Video, 2008).
In summary, there are four distinct manifestations of play and playfulness in Alana’s classroom: the animated, theatrical use of voices, impersonations and role plays; the use of playful activities to enforce course content; the use of noisemakers to celebrate various accomplishments; and the availability of manipulatives for students to play with in the classroom. This was how Alana’s classroom looked currently, however, it has been a long process for her to bring play and playfulness into her classroom (Alana Interview, 2008).

**Alana’s Understanding of Play/Playfulness as it Relates to Learning**

There are four fundamental things that shape Alana’s forms of play and playfulness in the classroom: the PLS theory of learning, brain-based learning research, her involvement with adult trainer conferences, and her background in psychology. These are the learning theories and resources that Alana draws upon when questioned or challenged about her playful approach.

Alana has not always been so playful in her classroom. She connects the beginning of her play transformation to the training she received to teach graduate courses for Wilkes University. The curriculum Wilkes uses for their teacher education graduate program is called Performance Learning Systems (PLS) which identifies particular performance patterns shared by “excellent teachers.” One of these performance patterns validates the use of humor and the training course taught about nuances of humor and how to deliver a punch line (Alana Interview, 2008). This was the first time Alana began to think about the role of play and playfulness in the classroom. Alana’s notions of play and playfulness in the classroom were further expanded in a PLS class during a discussion about learning styles and the prevalence of kinesthetic learners.
The instructor challenged her to not simply use games and activities as “energizers,” but to teach the content through activities. This is a challenge that she now presents to the teachers sitting in her class. “If you have to use it [activity] as an introduction, that’s okay. If you have to use it as a review, that’s okay. Now let’s see if you can actually teach the content through activities” (Alana Interview, 2007).

This was the beginning of Alana’s journey to create a playful classroom but it is important to point out that her motivation around play and playfulness was to enhance her teaching. Alana is a student of teaching. Effective teaching is the content of the education courses she frequently teaches and is a passion for her as she enters the classroom. The effort she puts into the delivery of her content is evidence that she cares deeply about teaching in a manner that will promote learning. In her years as an educator, she has amassed a library of books that have outgrown the bookshelves in her house and now occupy a wall in her garage (Alana Interview, 2008). In particular, she connects with the body of literature that explores brain-based research and its connections with learning.

Alana’s affinity for the brain-based research is seen in numerous ways. She brought a luggage cart hauling a milk crate full of books to the interview to help explain her approach in the classroom. The majority of these books were brain-based research books as seen in their titles: *Brain Compatible Classrooms, Making Connections – Teaching and the Human Brain, Brain Gym, Smart Moves – why learning is not all in your head*, *Integrated Thematic Instruction- The Model*. Furthermore, in her interview, she made numerous references to Eric Jensen, author of *Brain-based learning* and *Learning with the body in mind: the scientific basis for energizers, movement, play,*
games, and physical education. She notes, “You can tell I’m a real disciple” (Alana Interview, 2008). The aspects of the brain-based research that Alana seemed to resonate with were creating an environment that is conducive to learning and the use of various strategies (often movement related) to foster learning and retention. Her use of play/playfulness often employed games and activities for the purpose of engaging the body as well as the mind. Sometimes the activity itself was tied to the content but at times the activity was employed as a means to engage the body in movement for the sake of reconnecting mind and body (Alana Interview, 2008).

Alana’s educational background (undergraduate and masters) are in the field of psychology. Throughout her interview, she frequently referenced the work of William Glasser. Glasser is a psychologist who has applied his choice theory to several fields including education. He identifies five basic human needs that all people are driven to satisfy: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Alana referenced this need for fun many times throughout the interview and has put a lot of effort into making her class fun (noisemakers, tinker toys, hand manipulatives, juggling scarves, etc.).

Alana connects strongly with facilitators and adult trainers. She indicated that at conferences for adult trainers and facilitators is where she feels most at home; she shares a kindred spirit with people who have a similar approach to teaching like her (Alana Interview, 2008). Additionally, in the arsenal of books that she brought to the interview, she has Fish for Life which is currently popular among trainers and presents a playful approach to work and life. She also has a book by Doug Malouf titled How to teach adults in a fun and exciting way. Examining this book reveals an approach to adult learning that the author summarizes as “content plus entertainment” (Malouf, 2003, p.
Malouf identifies himself as a “professional adult educator” and reveals that his approach was developed by observing people who work as educators. He identified approaches that were effective for others and adopted them as his own. Although this approach to teaching is founded in practice and is not based in empirical research, Alana finds it helpful. In her pursuit of excellent teaching, she connects most with pragmatically driven trainers and has found the literature on brain-based learning to be most supportive and descriptive of her playful approach in the classroom.

There have been times when Alana has been challenged about her approach both by administrators and students in her class. Several years ago when she was teaching a course for a community college, the head of the department came in and observed her. Alana utilized an icebreaker activity to form groups of students who were then directed to work through content in small groups. At the end of the class her supervisor chastised her for “wasting time” on a pointless activity and encouraged her to spend more time lecturing on the content of the course (Alana Interview, 2008). Alana refers to this negative review a couple of separate times during her interview and talks in a subdued voice about the time she actually resorted to plopping her notes down on the “big old lecture stand” and teaching class from one place rather than moving all around the room which is more typical for her (Alana Interview, 2008). In response to this negative review, she added some written assignments around the theoretical concept but still did “her thing” in class, albeit behind closed doors (Alana Interview, 2008).

Students as well, sometime respond negatively to Alana’s approach in the classroom. Alana recalls an instance when a male students sitting in the front row challenged her and asked “Why do we have to do this dumb stuff anyway? I’m here to
get my course and my credit because I can’t get my pay raise without it” (Alana Interview, 2008). Although she spent some time explaining why she incorporated playful activity, Alana acknowledges that he never “got it.” She recalls another occasion when one of her students called her over and noted ‘all during class I was writing down little things you did. It may have just been the fact that you put out a snack for us or that you did this or that, but I found it fascinating.’ Since then, Alana spends more time vocalizing the reasons for incorporating play in her classroom reminding her students that “everything I’m doing here is on purpose. It’s not just happenstance; everything has a reason (Alana Interview, 2008).

Alana’s affinity for certain bodies of literature, as well as her actions in the classroom, reveal a particular philosophy of education. In discussing one’s philosophy of education it is important to identify the purpose of education, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and the significance of the context of learning.

For Alana, it appears the purpose of education in this particular setting is to help individuals become better at their profession. She exhibits a humanistic philosophy of education as individual growth and realization of teaching potential is the primary focus of her teaching. The way this is accomplished is by helping students understand and apply an established curriculum of theories and teaching techniques. The content for learning is predetermined and must be “deposited” into students (often described as the banking approach to education). Therefore, the role of the teacher is to deliver this content in a way that encourages students to remember and apply the course material. For Alana this is best accomplished by making the content entertaining, fun, and by using activities to engage the students, utilizing multiple senses so that they better remember
the content. The playful activities help students assimilate and appropriate the course content. The role of the student is to engage the content and explore it through the course assignments and classroom activities. The goal is to understand the content, remember it, and apply it to settings outside the classroom. Students are not expected to construct new knowledge but rather must learn to apply the content to their particular setting. There are differences between learners, but these are accounted for as individual personality differences identifiable through various inventories that measure attributes such as learning styles. Gender, race, social class or structural systems considerations are not a significant influence in Alana’s classroom.

Although the focus is primarily on individuals, relationships are significant in Alana’s classroom as she spends much time creating a comfortable learning environment and utilizes group tasks. The purpose is not to create a space for students to make meaning together, but rather is a technique to aid the individual in learning the course content. Students gain a broader understanding of the course content as they hear their peers’ experiences and discuss together the content in the context of their own classrooms. This is primarily seen as an application of the course content and the differences in students’ individual classrooms where they will apply the content, is accounted for in terms of individual personality differences.

The Playful Students

The teacher plays a significant role in establishing a particular classroom atmosphere, however, the students in that class also contribute to the tone of the classroom. In this section, I will explore the students of this playful classroom by providing some demographic information, describing their engagement of
play/playfulness in the classroom, noting their responses to play/playfulness in the classroom, and examining their understanding of play/playfulness’s connection to learning.

There was one primary commonality between the thirteen students enrolled in this class; they were all K-12 teachers. Three of the students were men, and all students were white. Interestingly, they chose their seats such that they were grouped by age: the table furthest from the door was occupied by two women and a man in their twenties, the next table by three people in their thirties, the third table by four people in the forties, and the fourth table nearest the door hosted three women in their late forties or fifties (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). This range of ages created a classroom of learners with a wide variety of teaching experience and education. Joyce, who was sitting at the table nearest the door was finishing her “Masters plus 60” indicating she has taken nearly 60 credits of courses beyond her masters degree. For others, this was only their second or third course after college. About half of the teachers were enrolled in the masters of Education program at the university offering this particular course. Some have been teachers their whole lives, while others had recently returned to the classroom as their children have grown. Still others were just two or three years out of college and were just starting their teaching career (Alana Group Interview, 2008).

Students were very willing to participate in the play and playfulness that Alana initiated. They quickly engaged in the activities and in the time I observed, they never groaned or displayed an unwillingness to engage in the activities (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). For example, with the activity of making a neuron, Alana asked for volunteers, and two students stood up immediately. As she assigned them roles and
needed more volunteers, the two tables on the left moved to help. By the end of the activity, all the students in the class had volunteered to help make the neuron. Alana did not need to cajole students to participate or volunteer for this demonstration or other classroom activities (Alana Video Notes, 2008).

Another example of the students’ willingness to engage in playfulness was their use of the noisemakers. The purpose of the noisemakers was to celebrate students’ efforts in the classroom (Alana Interview, 2008). In the four hours I observed the classroom, they were used nine times. All but one of those times of celebration were initiated by students, and on one occasion two students spontaneously came to their feet to provide a standing ovation for one of their fellow students. There were three other times during the observation when students cheered and clapped for one another but chose not to use the noisemakers (Alana Video Notes, 2008). Although Alana established the idea of celebrating effort, my observations showed that students enthusiastically accepted the idea and put it into practice regularly in the classroom.

The students’ level of engagement carried over into non-play activities. During the time I observed, Alana made numerous transitions from play activities to other assignments, some individual and some collaborative (reviewing terms, summarizing and sharing written article reviews, etc.). The students were always quick to make the transition and begin working on the next assignment. Frequently within my field notes I wrote “students jump in quickly” (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). One of the quietest moments during my four hours of observation was when Alana momentarily left the room after asking students to write reflection and application questions. Students were
focused on this particular assignment and in general were engaged in the course material and learning activities.

Another observation pertaining to students’ engagement of play and playfulness in the classroom pertains to the manipulatives and other play objects in the room. Many of the students played with the squishy toys and koosh balls during the class period. On one occasion a koosh was tossed between tables (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). One student in particular, Gary, had one or another manipulative in his hands all throughout the day. He would often toss the manipulative at other students to get their attention before making a comment to them. The students’ engagement with the manipulatives also illustrates a significant dynamic in this classroom; certain students “played” more than others.

Students chose where they sat for this class (Alana Group Interview, 2008). As noted above, the tables furthest from the door contained the younger students and the tables nearest the door contained the older students. The younger students were more often playing with the manipulatives and were often the first to engage in the playful activities. They were more rambunctious, tossing manipulatives back and forth as well as making “smart aleck” comments to one another (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). Everyone in the class engaged in the playfulness of the class, but there were those who engaged more fully. Students were aware of this dynamic and commented about it during the group interview. One student stated, “I think we were sitting back as the older group and were just watching you guys have fun” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). It appears that students were comfortable with the various levels of playfulness and had
self-selected their location in class to correspond to how they wanted to engage in the class.

In summary, the classroom observation revealed students who were very willing to engage in play and playfulness in the classroom. Their engagement not only pertained to activities that were playful, but also to learning activities and assignments that did not contain play elements. It was also noted that various individuals and sub-groups within the class were more playful than others. The observed response to the playful classroom is helpful; however students’ verbal and written responses to the playfulness in the classroom are even more telling.

**Students’ Understanding of Play/Playfulness’ Connection to Learning**

Through the survey and focus group, students were asked to discuss their experience of play and playfulness in Alana’s classroom. Overall, they were very positive about Alana as an instructor and her use of play activities within the classroom (there were a couple of negative comments that will be discussed later in this section). All twelve students indicated that play and playfulness “contributes to” rather than “is a distraction to” their learning (Alana Student Survey, 2008). There were two broad themes that captured most of the students’ responses: 1) play/playfulness in the classroom was fun and helped the students engage the material, retain the material, and apply the material outside of class; 2) play and playfulness in the classroom created a relaxed, open, and safe classroom environment.

Students enjoyed the play and playfulness that Alana brought into her classroom. When asked to describe the classroom environment, 8 of the 12 students used words like fun, enjoyable, exciting, entertaining, or energetic (Alana Student Survey 2008). One
student stated, “You don’t dread coming to class” (Alana Group Interview, 2008).

Another student contrasted Alana’s class to other grad courses where you take notes for three hours: “It’s like slamming you head against the door” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Students’ appreciation for the playful activities is probably best captured by a comment from Holly. She exclaimed, “I liked it because it was totally fun and it felt like you were playing, like, you know, it’s like you’re a little kid just playing” (Alana Group Interview, 2008).

Students in Alana’s class were quick to recognize that the benefits of fun and excitement go beyond the level of mere entertainment. “You just get excited about something and then it makes you want to pay attention. It motivates you” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Students recognized that their level of engagement was greater in Alana’s class than in other classroom experiences. They noted that play “keeps me more alert” or “gets me excited about the topic” (Alana Student Survey, 2008). The fun of play not only captured them for the moment, but prepared them for more learning. One student stated, “It [play] sucks me into the lesson. When I’m interested, I am more attentive and willing to learn.” According to the students in Alana’s class, play enhanced their learning.

The incorporation of play and playfulness in the classroom not only engaged students, but also helped with retention of course content. Several students made comments about remembering the course material because they were engaged in activities that allowed them to experience the concepts. “It helps in retention because we’re actually doing it,” stated one student (Alana Group Interview, 2008). In Alana’s classroom, play activities were a form of experiential learning that provided opportunities
for students to playfully experience the concepts they were learning. One student noted, “The concept is more ingrained in long-term memory because you had to go up and do it, perform and see it in action.” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Students also indicated that their engagement and application of concepts in class enabled them to readily apply the material to their own classrooms during the week. One student said, “We can meet here Sunday night and go in the classroom Monday morning and try it” (Alana Group Interview, 2008).

Many of Alana’s play activities involve movement and students in her class recognized the value of catering to various learning styles. In responding to the survey question about how playfulness in the classroom contributes to learning, one student stated, “I’m a kinesthetic learner and we need movement” (Alana Student Survey, 2008). Other students also commented on their need for movement in their learning process. These students appreciated the physical movement of the various play activities incorporated into their class.

The use of play and playfulness was seen as beneficial to students because it made learning fun, helped them engage the course material, as well as remember and apply concepts. The second way that play helped student learning was by creating a relaxed, safe, and open learning atmosphere. This was an overwhelming theme in both the survey and group interview. Seven out of 12 students used the word relaxed when describing their classroom environment and others described the atmosphere as safe, inviting, welcoming, non-threatening, and open (Alana Student Survey, 2008). Students felt very comfortable in Alana’s classroom and were willing to take risks. This was illustrated in
the example of Samantha in the opening paragraphs of this case. Even though she had answered incorrectly before, she felt safe enough to try again.

This atmosphere invited students to participate and share ideas. One student observed, “You make a comment and it’s open to discussion and I don’t think anyone is scared to say anything” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). This is not simply a matter of comfort; one student recognized the educational benefit of such an environment. She stated, “You get a chance to hear someone’s point of view or suggestions. We can give suggestions to each other without feeling like somebody might like it or might not like it. It’s very open which is a nice thing” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). The safe classroom atmosphere allows students to take risks and explore their own and others’ thoughts and reactions to the course content. In this way, students are able to engage the content and one another at deeper levels.

Students acknowledged that the playful activities were significant in helping form this safe, relaxed atmosphere. While talking about the open and honest classroom environment, Seth commented, “I think that playfulness ties into that and makes us feel less vulnerable” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Other students recalled the numerous icebreaker activities and how these helped them to get to know each other and become comfortable with one another. However, it goes beyond just the activities. The instructor plays a crucial role in enabling students to engage in these activities.

When asked what enabled them to participate in playful activities, students referred to Alana’s passion and excitement. They acknowledge the significant role of the teacher in establishing relationships and rapport. One student noted, “We’ve talked about being comfortable here, feeling like you know it’s a safe environment for us to do and
really engage in the activity and I think that the teacher needs to build those types of relationships” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). They recognized that Alana’s playfulness empowered them to be playful in the classroom environment. Several students expressed an appreciation for the classroom environment Alana created. One student indicated they enrolled in the class based on the fact that Alana was the instructor. While the general consensus was positive about the playfulness in the classroom, students also identified some downsides of play and playfulness in the classroom.

Negative Responses to Alana’s Playful Classroom

The most critical comment made about Alana’s playful classroom was that at times there were too many activities and not enough discussion (Alana Student Survey, 2008). During the focus group, the same student acknowledged that there were various learning styles and that she preferred a more didactic approach. Another student also noted that certain play activities were less appealing than others. She stated, “It’s just an activity I have to weather through and move on” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Several other students shared this sentiment and named particular activities that they did not find playful. Another criticism of the playfulness concerned its connection to the course content. This criticism is captured in Teresa’s comment. She notes, “Sometimes I’m not sure we get how it relates” (Alana Group Interview, 2008). Similarly another student indicated that she had no problem remembering activities, but had difficulty remembering the concept it illustrated. Sarah confessed that she sometimes has a difficult time staying focused in the playful classroom environment (Alana Group Interview, 2008).

There are certainly some detriments to play and playfulness in the classroom; however, the overwhelming consensus was that students were very positive about
play/playfulness in Alana’s class. In summary, play/playfulness was enjoyable and helped the students engage the material, retain the material, and apply the course content outside of class. Furthermore, play and playfulness created a relaxed, open, and safe classroom environment enabling students to take risks and engage the material and one another on deeper levels.
Chad’s Classroom

Fran and the other students were laughing even more loudly than Chad, the instructor of this abnormal psychology course. Fran had just turned the tables on Chad and made him the butt of his own funny anecdote. Chad had spent the class period discussing various psychoses, providing examples from his own life experiences, including his years as a clinical psychologist. For example, he shared a story about his encounters with a schizophrenic man riding a bicycle while he was on his early morning run. This man rode his bike alongside of Chad in the dark morning hours and preached to him about how Chad was condemning his children to hell. Several students asked follow-up questions pertaining to this disease. Fran asked if he encountered this bicycling man frequently. Chad responded, “All the time.” Fran continued, “You know the scary thing is that the bicycling man isn’t really there and he’s just in your mind” (Chad Video Notes, 2007). In her comment, Fran demonstrated her understanding of the psychosis and playfully implied that Chad might be schizophrenic and was making up the man on the bike. Chad joined the students in laughter and commented, “Very good, very well played.”

This teacher-student interchange is yet another example of a playful classroom of adult learners. In this playful classroom, humor and witty comments are one aspect of the play/playfulness present in this higher education setting. In this section, I will describe the setting of this course and will explore Chad’s conceptualization of play and playfulness and its role in learning using data from his interview and observation data from his classroom. Students’ perceptions of the playful classroom will also be presented, as well as their understanding of its impact on their learning.
The Setting

This particular classroom was an undergraduate psychology class at a private college in south central Pennsylvania. The school has an undergraduate enrollment of about 2800 students, most of which live on campus. This particular class was an upper level course primarily populated with students majoring in psychology. There were 30 students in this class, all but four were men which according to Chad is typical for this major (Chad Interview, 2007). The classroom was rectangular with a blackboard and screen on one wall and two small windows on the opposite wall. There was a consul in the front corner with a computer, document camera, VCR/DVD player, and touch screen to control the inputs for the multimedia projector mounted on the ceiling. A table with a lectern stand was situated in the front and center of the room. There were approximately thirty-six chairs with armrest desks arranged in 4 long rows (Chad Observation Notes, 2007).

The Playful Instructor – Chad

Chad has been teaching psychology in higher education for ten years. For twenty years prior to teaching, he worked as a clinical psychologist therapist and was involved in running clinical programs as well as individual therapy. The transition to education occurred slowly during a five year period, during which he taught a few courses as an adjunct instructor. His role as an adjunct instructor developed into an annual teaching contract and eventually to a tenure track position that he has held for the past three years. He never intended to get into teaching because, as he stated, “I really loved therapy” (Chad Interview, 2007). His decision to make this transition to education was because he was “energized” by his time in the classroom and found himself looking forward to
teaching more than his time in therapy (Chad Interview, 2007). However, he did not leave the therapy world completely and still is involved in counseling on a part-time basis.

Chad teaches in the Psychology Department of a small liberal arts college in south central Pennsylvania. He teaches several sections of Introduction to Psychology and a variety of upper-class courses including Abnormal Psychology, Counseling Theories, and Group Dynamics. The courses he teaches are directly connected to his experiences as a clinical therapist, and in many ways the therapy world is still where he is most comfortable. He stated, “I’m still getting used to academia, I sometimes feel like a fish out of water” (Chad Interview, 2007). Although he may feel out of his element in academia, he thrives in the classroom and his teaching is often used as a model for new professors as they are mentored in teaching at the college (Chad Observation Notes, 2007).

Chad’s own educational background includes undergraduate school at a small Christian College in Ohio, followed by a master’s degree from the University of Dayton, and a doctorate from Wright State University. Throughout his education, he experienced playful professors who inspire his teaching today. One professor from his undergraduate experience told funny stories and was very passionate about certain topics. One time this professor’s habit of rocking his podium back and forth was amplified by his passion about the topic to the point that he rocked straight over onto his face. Chad recalled, “I still remember the Greek Orthodox Easter tradition; because he fell over” (Chad Interview, 2007).
Chad identified another influential professor from graduate school who had a knack for making statistics fun. This professor would often role-play in his class. While lecturing, if there was a question he thought the class should ask, he would reach into his podium and pull out a hat that had a sign on it announcing, “Wally the Student.” He would put the hat on, sit down in the front row and begin to wave his hand frantically. He would then leave the hat in the seat, pop back up to the podium and say, “Yes, Wally, what’s your question?” Back in the seat with his hat on, he would use a different voice and ask the question in a “dumb way” (Chad Interview, 2007). He would then stand up, take the hat off, answer the question and ask the class if anyone wanted to follow-up on Wally’s question. Chad indicated that someone would always ask a follow-up question and Chad concluded that the statistics professor “knew what students needed to ask, but were afraid to ask” (Chad Interview, 2007). Chad recalled other memorable things his statistics professor did in class including humorous hand motions that were consistently used to emphasis key points. In summarizing his professor’s teaching style, Chad stated, “His whole teaching style, how he taught us stats, was laced with humor” (Chad Interview, 2007). Interestingly, Chad has never tried the “Wally the student” approach in his own classroom, and his rationale becomes apparent from examining his definition of play and playfulness.

When asked to define play, Chad admitted that he thought about that question a lot since I had first approached him to see if he would participate in my study as a “playful” teacher. He defined play and playfulness as “the use of some part of your personality, or some part of fun, of humor, to bring a moment of lightheartedness or levity into a situation” (Chad Interview 2007). He continued by saying that in an
educational setting, the purpose was not “just for foolishness, [but] to embed a point that you are trying to make” (Chad Interview 2007). There is much to discuss with this definition, but first is his emphasis that play and playfulness are tied to your personality and therefore are different for each person. He never tried to pull off “Wally the student” because that is not his style of play. He stated, “What is lighthearted and works for me may not work for someone else, and I can’t do what they do” (Chad Interview, 2007).

Given his background in psychology; it is understandable that his definition of play is focused on connections to the individual and their personality. Psychology as a discipline tends to focus on an individual’s understanding and perspective of the world around them, and this perspective is represented in Chad’s identification of a person’s personality as the source of play and playfulness. This perspective is also evident in his purpose of play, which is to bring a “moment of lightheartedness or levity to a situation” (Chad Interview, 2007). The experiences of lightheartedness or levity are emotional responses experienced by individuals. As a result, Chad’s definition of play and playfulness reveal an understanding that is rooted in the individual. This understanding of play and playfulness has also been verbalized by several play theorists (Ellis, 1977). Other elements of Chad’s definition that are common in play definitions include the sense of fun and the identification of humor as typical aspects of play.

Chad’s further elaboration on play and playfulness in an education setting is also telling, as it implies that the “moment of lightheartedness or levity” could be for the purpose of “foolishness.” Yet, in an education context it must serve a particular purpose (“to embed a point you are trying to make”) (Chad Interview, 2007). This too, is consistent with various play theories that affirm play is often intrinsically motivated and
is pursued for its own sake. With these theories of play and playfulness, foolishness is a legitimate outcome of play and playfulness. By acknowledging a particular outcome for the education context, Chad implies that in other contexts foolishness is a worthy outcome in and of itself. This perspective is also affirmed in examples he provided of play outside the classroom contexts. Sometimes this play is simply foolishness, other times its purpose is to embed a message in a way that is more appealing.

When exploring Chad’s conceptualization of play outside the classroom, all of his examples of play and playfulness focused on his family life and most frequently included his four boys. When asked to provide examples of playfulness, Chad indicated, “I don’t look at [my] life and say, ‘That’s playful.’ Although, certainly, with my own boys, uh, we have lots of fun” (Chad Interview, 2007). While hesitant to use the playful label, it was easy for Chad to identify numerous examples of fun with his boys. For example, singing silly songs spontaneously created to incorporate lessons from life to pass on to his boys. This is an example of play and playfulness for a purpose, not just for foolishness’ sake. Chad further explained this “silly” approach with his boys, “I hate lecturing my kids, and so it’s hard for me to have life discussions with them without making it a funny time or a fun time” (Chad Interview, 2007). A similar example of purposeful silliness was during chore time when Chad projected voices into pieces of firewood and had a conversation, sometimes even an argument with the firewood, while working with his boys to make “the job go much quicker and much better than it would otherwise” (Chad Interview, 2007).

In addition to these times when play/playfulness served a particular outcome, there were times when it was simply fun for its own sake. Chad described the prayer
time that occurred with his boys just as they were going to bed as “pretty insane.” He further explained that when praying with his boys, he prayed for silly things. For instance, that their cat would have wisdom and make good decisions, so it wouldn’t get stuck in the attic again, or that his younger boy would remember important life lessons like flushing the toilet when he was done (Chad Interview, 2007). These instances certainly created lightheartedness and levity, but did not serve any specific goal or outcome. It was fun and silliness for its own sake. This example also revealed a certain amount of playful teasing that occurred between Chad and his boys.

These examples of play and playfulness outside the classroom context reveal themes of Chad’s play/playfulness and are similar to classroom manifestations of play/playfulness. These themes are spontaneity, the use of humor as manifest in funny comments, goofiness or silliness, and a significance of relationship as revealed through teasing. These manifestations of play and playfulness in the classroom will be further examined in the next section.

**Manifestations of Play and Playfulness in Chad’s Classroom**

The previous section painted a picture of Chad’s play/playfulness outside the classroom. In this section, observation and interview data will be used to describe how play and playfulness are manifested in Chad’s classroom. First, I will provide a general description of Chad’s pedagogical approach and the general tone in his classroom. Then I will explore how the themes of spontaneity, relationship, humor, and goofiness or silliness identified in Chad’s play outside the context of education are also evident in his classroom. Finally, I will discuss Chad’s use of humorous stories and illustrations because this too is a significant aspect of his playfulness in the classroom.
Chad’s pedagogical approach is very traditional, consisting primarily of a lecture following a very detailed PowerPoint presentation. He did not use notes, but stood to the side of the screen, reading the PowerPoint from the screen, and filling in details while providing examples (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Although this approach typically results with the professor dominating the classroom conversation with an ongoing monologue, this was not the case in Chad’s classroom. One of the first things I noticed when observing Chad’s class is that students were very engaged, as evident through their numerous questions or comments (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). In one 60-minute class, students made or asked over 60 comments or questions (Chad Video Notes, 2007). A second notable characteristic of Chad’s lecture based classroom was frequent laughter. In one 40-minute lecture, there were 24 episodes of laughter, some lasting as long as 7 seconds (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Chad’s lecture based pedagogy is not playful; however, the manner in which he delivers his lecture, as well as his interactions with students makes his classroom playful.

Although Chad utilized PowerPoint for his lectures, there was an element of spontaneity to his presentation, particularly with humorous comments. For example, when introducing particular course content on Alzheimer’s disease, he noted that it was named after Alois Alzheimer who first described the disease. He then asked, “Can you imagine having a disease named after you? Do I want a disease named after me? ‘Oh, there’s someone with Jones’ disease’” (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). These humorous comments were peppered throughout his lecture and created an informal tone that felt spontaneous. Whether his comment about Jones’ disease was spontaneous or a planned part of his lecture however, is difficult to determine. In his interview, he discussed how
he embeds certain jokes into his “routine” as if they were spontaneous (Chad Interview, 2007). He noted that these jokes or funny comments may become a part of his regular lecture, but they all originated spontaneously in the class. This idea of lecture as “routine” is further enforced by a time he described when he taught three sections of the same class back to back. He had both his first section and last section evaluated and was rated much higher in the last class. He stated, “When I think about it, I had really honed it by the third class and my last class laughed a lot because I knew, I knew by then what worked as far as being funny and what didn’t work, so I could toss out all the duds” (Chad Interview, 2007). Although the actual spontaneity of his comments is questionable, they felt very spontaneous in the classroom and often elicit laughter from his students (Chad Observation Note, 2007). One area where his spontaneity was unquestioned was in his interactions with students in the classroom.

Chad’s interactions with individual students was very playful and relational. While lecturing, students would often ask questions or make comments. Students raised their hands to get his attention, and he responded by calling their name, or more frequently, by pointing to them as he finished his current thought (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). As he lectured, he moved freely back and forth in the front of the room. When he called on someone, he moved across the room until he was in front of the student and would even take a step forward toward the student. He engaged the student as if they were the only person in the class (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). He did not repeat the question for the benefit of the rest of the class or ask the class to respond. He entered into a dialogue with the student that often involved follow-up questions from the student and additional responses from Chad (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Chad was aware
of this tendency and discussed it in his interview. He stated, “... when they ask me a
question I can really get so that it’s a one-on-one conversation with that person” (Chad
Interview, 2007).

The relational element of these interactions was intensified by the fact that Chad
had a “gift” for remembering details and facts about people and would often bring these
into his interactions with students (Chad Interview, 2007). For example, when talking
about a recent news event, the Virginia Tech shooter, he brought up the fact that the
shooter was an English major and that English majors have the highest suicide rate on
college campuses. He turned to a particular student who he remembered was an English
major and said, “I hate to tell you this, but it doesn’t look good for you” (Chad interview,
2007). In the midst of the lecture, Chad had also disclosed that Hungary was the country
with the highest suicide rate. The English major responded to Chad’s comment by
saying, “Yeah, I’m Hungarian too, so what chance do I have?” (Chad Interview, 2007).
As seen in this interaction and in the opening vignette, students felt free to tease Chad
and give him a “hard time” right back. This give and take of humorous comments or
teasing is embedded in relationship and contributes to the playful atmosphere of the
classroom. The importance of relationship for Chad was further seen in his comment:
“My playfulness in the classroom is embedded within the relationship between myself
and the class” (Chad Interview, 2007).

As already discussed, humor was a significant element of the play/playfulness in
Chad’s classroom. There are many facets to his humor, and it is important to identify
these in detail to have a thorough understanding of play/playfulness in his classroom. As
discussed in Chapter 2, there are several taxonomies that have been created to categorize
humor in the classroom. Some of these taxonomies are based on type of humor, while others focus on the content of the humor (Nueliep, 1999). The taxonomies that focus on type, identify jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, and humorous comments (Bryant, 1979). Content-based taxonomies identify teacher targeted humor, student targeted humor, untargeted humor, external source humor, and non-verbal humor (Nueliep, 1999). The type of humor Chad engaged most frequently was humorous comments and funny stories. The content of his humor was most often teacher targeted or student targeted. Chad’s type and content of humor are further explored in the following paragraphs.

Other humorous comments also peppered Chad’s lecture. Some were recurring statements that became familiar to students. For example, he frequently stated, “If God gives you a choice of what disorder you will have, always choose _____” (Chad Video Notes, 2007). This was his way of comparing disorders and expressing which disorder was more serious or had the most significant long-term negative effects. Other funny statements were more spontaneous. When describing manifestations of schizophrenia, Chad commented, “They like to rhyme,…..but they’re not rappers” (Chad Video Notes, 2007). One aspect of Chad’s humorous comments not discussed in the taxonomies was the way they were delivered. Often his funny comments were dry humor or deadpan (said with a straight face). When introducing schizophrenia in one lecture, he stated without cracking a smile, “People think if you’re schizophrenic you have more than one personality. Absolutely not true, you don’t have any, that’s the problem [students laugh]” (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Occasionally, with this deadpan humor, only one student and sometimes no students laughed. When this occurred, Chad simply continued on with his lecture without pause (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Although students sometimes missed
the humor in his deadpan comments, they were unable to escape his student-targeted humor, especially when it was in the form of teasing.

The content of Chad’s humor in the classroom most frequently was either student-targeted or teacher targeted. In the student-targeted category, teasing was identified as a sub-category (Neuliep, 1991). As discussed before, Chad enjoyed giving students a hard time and welcomed similar exchanges from students. In the teacher targeted category, Chad most frequently engaged in humor falling into the sub-category of “self-deprecating” (Neuliep, 1991). Chad often made a funny comment at his own expense or joined the class in laughing at his own mistakes. For example, when talking about hotdog eating contests in the midst of a discussion about eating disorders, Chad had a slip of the tongue and stated, “Again, in the eating disorder contest …” A few students laughed immediately; Chad became aware of his mistake and smiled, which caused the whole class to burst into laughter (Chad Video Note, 2007). He not only laughed at himself, but was also willing to poke fun of his profession as seen in this exchange with a student concerning how to diagnose a particular disorder in accordance with the established standards:

Student: “How do they come up with the time?”

Chad: “They just guess.”

Student: “Well how do they know?”

Chad: “They don’t. [pause while class laughs] Why six months vs. seven? There’s no reason” (Chad Video Notes, 2007).
The funny comment aimed at himself, or the mistakes that he was willing to laugh about seemed to consistently draw the most laughter from the students (Chad Video Notes, 2007). This was also true in the funny stories he told. The stories about himself, and his own shortcomings were often the stories that elicited the most laughter.

An additional type of humor that was significant in Chad’s classroom was his use of funny stories. When discussing a disorder or explaining a psychological theory, Chad often illustrated it with an example from current events, popular culture, his own clinical practice, or with a humorous anecdote from his own life (Chad Video Notes, 2007). When explaining a particular theory to his class, he launched into the following story.

I grew up on a farm and so when I became an adult... I thought, to be a, to be real man you had to have a garden. And so I decided to garden, and uh, then I said you know, you grow up on a farm you gotta be able to do machinery… and I’m not in any way mechanically inclined. And so, to have a tiller is a test of your manhood. So, I talked about, you know trying to start my tiller and not being able to. And the thoughts that went through my head, because he [the theorist] believes psychological problems are caused by your beliefs. And so I said, you know, “my belief is true men must be able to start a tiller.” So, I’m out there pulling my tiller and this tiller is destroying my manhood. I mean it is, it has got me. So, so my anger at my tiller, and my desire to beat my tiller into submission is all about my belief that says this tiller has destroyed my manhood… If you would happen to drive by wondering, ‘Why is Chad out there beating that tiller?’ You would have to really know that it’s my beliefs. That’s the reason I’m beating my tiller is that my tiller has destroyed my manhood and I can’t afford to let that happen… I got out of gardening because I couldn’t, I could never start a tiller and I thought it was
better to be a man than to be tempted to have a tiller that could destroy my manhood (Chad Interview, 2007).

This story demonstrates several things. First, that Chad is a good storyteller. He has an excellent sense of timing and paints a vivid picture of the action. As he was telling the story during the interview, I was laughing because I could feel his angst. He drew me in. Secondly, this shows that he is not afraid of looking foolish in front of his students. This is how the goofiness or silliness of his interactions with his boys begins to migrate into his classroom. In his interview he discussed the “Wally the student” routine that his graduate professor performed. While Chad has never tried that approach, it’s not because he’s afraid of looking foolish. In addition to stories from his own life, he also broke out into silly songs in class to drive home a point (Chad Interview, 2007). This too reveals a direct connection between the manifestation of play with his boys at home and the playfulness of his classroom. And so, goofiness and silliness are yet another aspect of Chad’s play and playfulness in the classroom.

In summary, play and playfulness are manifest in Chad’s classroom in numerous ways. First, there is spontaneity to his class with humorous comments and impromptu one-on-one exchanges with students. These exchanges also reveal a significant relational component to Chad’s classroom as he engages students in playful teasing in which he is both the antagonist and recipient of jests delivered back and forth with the students. Finally, this playful classroom is characterized by humorous comments or stories that often make Chad look goofy and are self-deprecating. I’ve now created an image of Chad’s playful classroom. In the next section I will explore how Chad believes this play/playfulness contributes to learning in his classroom.
Chad’s Understanding of Play/Playfulness as it Relates to Learning

There are several reasons Chad employs play and playfulness in his classroom. Some of these reasons are rooted in his theoretical understanding of learning while others are based upon his practical experience as a therapist. His background in clinical psychology comes through in his teaching in multiple ways. Many of the aspects of his teaching that he considers playful are rooted in therapeutic techniques that worked well for him in a therapeutic setting (Chad Interview, 2007). One of the obvious ways is his focus on individuals and one-on-one conversations in the classroom context. His engagement with individuals in the classroom context mirrors counseling. During the interview, he acknowledged his tendency to focus on the individual and identified it as a weakness in his teaching that is rooted in his therapeutic background. He stated,

I really have to watch that, that it’s not just me and that person and everyone else watching. And so for me, in teaching it’s much harder to include the whole community in the room. Um, and so that, I think, I blame that on therapy because in therapy you’re so much about the person in front of you (Chad Interview, 2007).

This therapeutic influence is seen most clearly in the relational component of his playful approach in the classroom.

Other therapeutic techniques connect to the goofy or silliness component of his playful classroom. One example is a role playing technique called the “dumb Columbo,” named after a TV character. Chad explained, “I act like I know nothing, uh, to get students engaged or to get students to give me an answer that I want them to give me” (Chad Interview, 2007). Another therapeutic technique Chad brought into the classroom
was his willingness to act goofy or “poke fun of” himself. He referenced a psychologist named Ellis who encourages therapist to self disclose mistakes to demonstrate imperfections or your humanity (Chad Interview, 2007). These are several ways that his clinical background has influenced his teaching and made it more playful. These are playful techniques or approaches that he found helpful in the clinical setting, and so he brought them into the classroom. In addition to these pragmatic reasons for bringing play/playfulness into his classroom, he also identified other reasons based in his theoretical understanding of learning.

In his discussion of play and playfulness in the classroom, Chad identified several benefits as it relates to learning in the classroom. Play and playfulness help engage students in the topic, motivate students to learn because it’s fun, and help students to retain information. Additionally, play and playfulness help create a relaxed atmosphere that is safe and creates a positive context for learning.

The idea of using play to engage students and to make a situation fun is not surprising given Chad’s definition of play, which includes the idea of bringing lightheartedness into a situation. In the context of the classroom, he stated play is “like having a good flavored medicine so that you can actually take what you may not want to taste, or take it better” (Chad Interview, 2007). For Chad, play and playfulness can motivate and help engage students to learn even though they may not be excited to learn. This is what Chad experienced in his graduate statistics class. He recalled, “The [professor] made me love stats when otherwise I would’ve hated it, by the way he taught” (Chad Interview, 2007). According to Chad, play makes learning fun. He stated, “It’s a way to help kids love learning” (Chad Interview, 2007).
Chad believes that play/playfulness not only engage and motivate students to learn, but also can help them retain the information they are learning. Chad uses this approach not only in the classroom, but with his boys at home. He stated, “They are going to get those points if I embed them in something that’s funny or something that they will remember” (Chad Interview, 2007). His understanding of the benefits of play and playfulness in terms or retention is rooted in his own experience as a student. He stated:

One of the things that has always struck me about education when I look back on my own college [experience], I can’t tell you much about what my profs said in class except for their stories. Particularly their funny stories are what I remember most (Chad Interview, 2007).

Chad consistently used funny stories in conjunction with the different topics he introduced in class (Chad Observational Notes, 2007). These stories like the rotor-tiller and bicycling schizophrenic were a means to help students remember the content of his course.

The significance of the classroom atmosphere or environment was another theme that emerged as Chad discussed his understanding of play/playfulness and learning. He stated, “I feel like you, you learn better when you’re relaxed and when your defenses are down” (Chad Interview, 2007). For Chad, play and playfulness helped create this type of relaxed atmosphere. In his class, this atmosphere is seen in numerous ways. Students frequently brought food and drinks into his class (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Students casually wandered into class late and felt free to walk across the room to take seats in the front row or far side of the room rather than seats near the door (Chad
Observation Notes, 2007). The most obvious indicator of this relaxed atmosphere was the frequent and informal interactions between Chad and students during class (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). These interactions were typically around course content, but felt very casual. Frequently there were follow-up questions and replies, making the exchange feel like a conversation between Chad and the student (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). In these exchanges, students often shared personal experiences, and Chad too, shared various stories from his past experience that were somewhat vulnerable (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). This climate of self-disclosure contributed to the informal feel of Chad’s classroom environment. It also highlights the need for a safe environment.

A safe classroom environment is a theme that consistently resurfaced as Chad talked about play/playfulness and learning. He was very aware of the personal nature of many of the topics he discussed in class and he sought not to embarrass students, particularly with humor. He stated, “I want them to laugh with me rather than feel like I’m laughing at them” (Chad Interview, 2007). He values engagement and identifies fear as the primary reason students did not ask questions in class (Chad Interview, 2007). He gave several examples of times when he approached students outside of class and apologized if he felt like he went too far with his teasing comments or when he sensed discomfort from the students (Chad Interview, 2007). This shows that he values a safe environment and is diligent to maintain or reestablish trust with his class.

In summary, according to Chad, play and playfulness help students engage in the topic, motivates students because it makes learning fun, and facilitates retention of information. Additionally, play and playfulness help create a relaxed atmosphere that is safe and creates a positive context for learning. This articulation of the connections
between play/playfulness and learning provides a glimpse of Chad’s philosophy of education.

Although Chad never explicitly identified his philosophy of education, it can be deduced from his interview and from classroom observations. In identifying one’s philosophy of education, it is important to identify the purpose of education, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and the significance of the context of learning. As highlighted below, Chad focuses on the students’ individual growth and development which is indicative of a humanistic approach to adult education.

From Chad’s perspective, the role of education in the context of this particular course was to prepare students to serve in the profession of psychology. Specifically, students needed to know how to diagnose various physiological abnormalities as they are defined in a diagnostic book used by professionals. This goal was most evident from his PowerPoint presentations, which would list various abnormalities and provide bullet points to further clarify signs and symptoms associated with the particular abnormalities. Often times these slides were footnoted and referenced the DSM-IV, which is the standard abnormal psychology and psychiatry reference book produced by the American Psychiatric Association. His role was to deposit this information into the minds of the students, which is sometimes referred to as the “banking” approach.

The role of the teacher, according to Chad, is to deposit this information into the minds of his students in a manner that is engaging, fun, and helps the students to retain the information. As discussed earlier, he sees play and playfulness as a way to engage students and motivate them to learn material they might not be interested in learning. Furthermore, he views the playful stories as a means to help students retain the
information just as he was able to remember information he learned in his undergraduate and graduate experience as it was embedded in humorous stories and illustrations.

However, Chad’s teaching revealed that there was more to teaching than simply depositing facts and information. He communicated not only the “what” of the profession, but also the “why.” Chad’s care and compassion for people is infused in his teaching and seems to be an important component of a teacher’s role. Frequently during his lecture when describing an abnormality, he stated, “These people are sick and need help” (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Furthermore, he personalized the abnormalities by giving examples of people he’s worked with rather than describing the diseases in an objective, detached manner. Finally, the way he interacted with students revealed a commitment to relationship and communicated care. In many ways, he modeled the behavior expected of therapists, and students recognized this as seen in the following quote from a student. She stated, “I had three classes with Chad … and I feel like every class is like a therapy session for me” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). For Chad, the role of the teacher goes beyond depositing needed information and includes modeling the behaviors and attitudes indicative of excellent clinical practitioners.

Accordingly, the role of the student is to become prepared to serve as a professional in the field of psychology. In the context of this course, it meant learning the criteria used to diagnose abnormal disorders. Part of the learning process is to understand the material and assimilate it. This is seen in Chad’s eagerness to respond to students’ questions and to hear their various stories. Taking time to engage in this manner in the classroom contributed to students’ assimilation and integration of the course material as they applied it to various personal or professional experiences. Chad
worked to help students connect theory to practice or practical experiences. The experiences of the learner were important, but not because they helped construct new knowledge. Rather these experiences were significant because they aided in the assimilating and integrating of the course material.

The final component in understanding an individual’s philosophy of education is to examine the significance of context. For Chad, there was an awareness of the context of learning, but it was not a significant focal point in the learning. In the course of his lectures, he acknowledged the impact of socio-economics in the diagnosis and treatment of abnormalities (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Similarly, in he drew attention to the differences between the North American diagnostic book and European book and attributed the differences to cultural nuances (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). In doing this, he refrained from making judgmental remarks about one culture vs. another. Chad exhibited an awareness of various context issues in terms of gender imbalances in the classroom and also showed an interest in experiences of students from different cultures. Furthermore, there was an understanding that student’s individual stories will affect their understanding of the various disorders discussed. However, there does not appear to be a significant emphasis on students’ gender, culture, or class in shaping learning in the classroom.

The Playful Students

As the instructor, Chad has a significant influence on the classroom. However, the students and their interactions with the instructor and each other also shape the classroom experience. In this section I will utilize data from the group interview, classroom observations, and written surveys to explore the students of this playful
classroom. I will provide basic demographic information, describe their engagement in play/playfulness in the classroom, and discuss their perceptions of the impact of play/playfulness on learning.

In many respects, the students in this upper level psychology class were fairly homogenous. All were traditional age college students, were psychology majors or minors, and most were female (only 4 of the 30 were male) (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Most of the students were white; there were four students of color (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). The classroom was rectangular with a blackboard and screen on one wall and two small windows on the opposite wall. There was a consul in the front corner with a computer, document camera, VCR/DVD player, and touch screen to control the inputs for the multimedia projector mounted on the ceiling. A table with a lectern stand was situated in the front and center of the room. There were approximately thirty-six chairs with armrest desks arranged in 4 long rows (Chad Observation Notes, 2007).

As discussed above, students were very engaged during the class period. In one 60-minute class, students made or asked over 60 comments or questions. These were made by 15 (out of 30) different students, with four students commenting more than 5 times (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Students not only engaged with the instructor, but also with one another and often times six or more comments/questions occurred in a row as students conversed with one another and Chad (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Their interactions with one another and with Chad felt very much like a conversation among friends. Contributing to this conversation, students frequently brought in their own experiences as it related to the content as they shared experiences from internships or experiences with various acquaintances. “I had a friend…” or “I knew this person
who…” were commonly stated by students as they engaged the course material and sought to integrate it with their own life experiences (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Repeatedly, students would finish conversations with their neighbor as the main conversation moved to the other side of the room or as Chad continued on with the next part of the lecture (Chad Observation Notes, 2007).

Students not only engaged intellectually with the course content, but also with Chad’s playful comments and stories. Students frequently laughed throughout the lecture at the funny comments or anecdotes that Chad shared (Chad Video Notes, 2007). In the group interview, students acknowledged and agreed that they laughed a lot in Chad’s class (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Students not only laughed at Chad’s comments, but also elicited laughter from Chad and their fellow students with witty remarks of their own. The opening vignette is an example of this type of give-and-take playful comments between students and instructor. At another time, a student in the front row made a comment to Chad that was difficult to hear from where I was seated. The students in that area and Chad laughed and I heard Maria say, “You really need to let that go. It’s about getting old” (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Although I didn’t hear the full exchange, and the context was unclear, the student was obviously giving Chad a hard time about something. The observed engagement from students moved beyond a simple engagement in the course material and even beyond an engagement of the humor in the classroom. They have entered into relationship with one another and Chad.

This level of engagement was not only evident from observation, but also from the comments of students in the class. One student reflected back to the video clip of their class that I showed them during their group interview and commented, “It seems
liked we were having a conversation in the middle of class. It wasn’t as much like a lecture, as like a big room with conversation” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Another student commented, “He lets us talk” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). This atmosphere was about more than participating in a class lecture; students seemed to sense there was something more significant occurring. A student outside the psych major commented, “[Chad] makes sure everyone feels like they belong. Everyone has a right to be there, not just a few” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). This sense of belonging was articulated by others in the class as they commented, “We’re accepted” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). When comparing to other classes, one student commented on the academic tension or competition with other students that they often felt was not present in Chad’s class (Chad Group Interview, 2007). When asked to describe the classroom environment in the written survey, eight of the 23 students surveyed used the word comfortable, while another nine used words like “welcoming, relaxed, laid back, friendly, or inviting” (Chad Survey, 2007). The data indicates that students felt the classroom environment in Chad’s class was very open and inviting.

**Students’ Understanding of Play/Playfulness’ Connection to Learning**

When asked about the interaction of play/playfulness with learning, students’ answers revealed several themes. The first was that play/playfulness helped create an open and relaxed atmosphere that was conducive to learning. Second, play/playfulness contributed positively to cognitive functions such as retention and attention. Third, play/playfulness in the classroom brought an element of enjoyment, fun, and motivation for learning.
The survey and group interviews revealed that students saw a connection between play/playfulness and the relaxed, open, conversational atmosphere that existed in Chad’s class. One student found the stories Chad frequently launched into “very relaxing” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Another commented that the playfulness in the classroom “allows for more comfortable interaction and better learning” (Chad Student Survey, 2007). Students connected the playfulness with an inviting, comforting presence and indicated it helped quickly put them at ease (Chad Group Interview, 2007). This comfortable, open atmosphere created a safe place for students to take risks. For example, during one class a student was trying to better understand classifications of cognitive disorders and asked how to classify people with low IQ who can function independently. “Are they stupid?” she asks sincerely (Chad Video Notes, 2007). Other students chuckled at her blunt use of an inappropriate label, and Chad clarified that the proper classification would be “below average IQ.” The student realized how her question sounded and tried to clarify by saying, “I didn’t mean STUPID.” Her statement elicited more laughter; however, it was not a malicious laughter but rather a response to a common word being used in a context where it is not expected. The student who asked this question felt free enough in the classroom to ask another question a few minutes later about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the term “mentally retarded” (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). The classroom environment was safe enough for her to continue to take a risk, asking questions without worrying about having the questions perfectly formulated. The safety students experienced in Chad’s classroom empowered them. A student confessed “When I ask a question, I’m [typically] worried ‘Is this going to sound stupid?’ but I’m really curious ….But he [Chad] doesn’t make me feel bad if I
ask a weird question. He’d still answer it for me, and so now I feel more confident in asking questions” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Another student agreed and stated that she has become more willing to talk in other classes because of her experiences in Chad’s class (Chad Group Interview, 2007).

In addition to creating a safe place for learning, students indicated that play/playfulness aided in cognitive functions such as retention and attention or concentration. Students acknowledged that both the humorous stories and funny comments helped make the content more memorable. One student commented, “I will always remember ‘if God lets me choose which anxiety disorder,’ to take paranoid anxiety” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). An additional benefit of Chad’s stories was that they were so funny that students retold them to their roommates “which then solidifies it in my mind” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Attention or engagement was another benefit of the playful classroom. One student commented, “I start to perk up every time someone starts a story” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Other students discussed how the playfulness kept them from being bored or helped them stay interested in the course (Chad Student Survey, 2007). Both retention and attention were frequently identified by students as benefits of the playful classroom.

The final theme of the connections between learning and playfulness from the students is in the area of motivation, enjoyment and fun. The play and playfulness of Chad’s class make it enjoyable; there is intrinsic motivation for students to participate. “I love class, so I make sure I never miss; so, therefore I’m learning more,” wrote one student (Chad Student Survey, 2007). Enjoyable and fun were common descriptors when students were asked to describe their classroom environment (Chad Student
The intrinsic motivation that comes with fun was invaluable. Students came to class because they wanted to, not because they felt like they had to. One student commented, “I never look at the clock in his class, and then it’s 1:40, like crap, I have to go to my next class and I don’t want to” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). The play/playfulness of Chad’s class makes learning fun.

**Negative Responses to Chad’s Playful Classroom**

In examining students’ perceptions of play in Chad’s classroom, there were only positive comments. During the group interview, one student discussed another professor who they considered playful and shared how this professor spent time in class discussing his plans for landscaping around his house. Another student intervened and indicated that she would have been turned off by that; she indicated there is such a thing as too much play in the classroom. She said, “I need some serious learning you know;” and another student agreed and commented, “making it academic and playful at the same time” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). A third student chimed in that it was important for her to feel like her professors are taking their work seriously. There was general agreement about this among the focus group; however, there was also consensus among that group that Chad had found that balance. There was nothing negative said about Chad’s playfulness in the focus group or in the written survey, which solicited feedback from all class members anonymously for ways play/playfulness is a distraction in the classroom.

In summary, students thought that the play and playfulness in Chad’s classroom was appropriate and contributed to their learning. Specifically, it created an open and relaxed atmosphere, aided retention and attention, and was motivating as it brought an element of enjoyment and fun in the classroom.
Heather’s Classroom

Five students busily worked to put the final touches on the theatrical set they fabricated in the classroom. They showed up to the weekly night class two hours early to ensure they would have time to set up the classroom according to their well thought out plan. To establish a stage area, the desk chairs that are typically arranged in neat rows were shoved into one corner making it necessary for the audience to scramble over and around chairs to find a seat. Several pink drapes were hung from the chalkboard and photographs were placed in the chalk tray to decorate the walls. The lectern was covered with a large quilt to help it blend into the set. Chairs and a coffee table from a nearby lounge were brought in as furniture. A pink tablecloth and candle covered the coffee table. Two chairs were arranged side by side, and a blanket was draped over them so that it appeared to be a couch. An individual chair was arranged nearby to complete the ‘living room’ portion of the set. At one side of the classroom, a table was set with place settings and flowers to create a dining room. This traditional classroom was transformed into a small apartment.

The students involved in this group project were dressed in costumes they had created. Three women wore tight capri pants, revealing tank tops, bright red lipstick, high heels, and large hoop earrings. They spoke with thick “Jersey” accents and were playing the part of women who lived in a rough part of the neighborhood. Two other female students were dressed as men. One, the detective, wore slacks, loafer shoes, a shirt with a button down collar, a tie, and had her hair stuffed into a beret. She also had a mustache drawn on her upper lip. The other “man” wore baggy jeans with one leg rolled
up, a black shirt, sneakers, a baseball cap turned sideways, and a heavy gold chain with a large cross.

The classroom was particularly full this evening. In addition to the 16 women who were a part of this class, an additional five women showed up to watch their friends perform this play. Heather, the instructor, began the class by welcoming the visitors, and then turned it over to the five women standing at the front of class. One of these women introduced their play titled “Small Things” and informed the audience that it was an adaptation of the drama *Trifles*, which the class had read earlier in the semester.

For the next ten minutes, the women performed their play for the class. There were changes of scenes that were bookmarked by the dimming and brightening of lights. Actors read their lines from a script they held in their hand, while they moved from place to place according to the staging plan they had collaboratively devised. Several times the audience burst into laughter at a well-placed, humorous line. At the end, the actresses took a bow as the audience applauded vigorously.

To a casual observer, this spectacle might be expected for a college course; after all, theater students must have opportunity to practice and hone their skills. This however, was not a theater class. It was not even some type of art class. It was an English class; specifically it was a writing intensive course exploring women’s literature. The students embraced this particular assignment and created elaborate costumes, intricate sets, and used their imagination to rework an original play into a modern setting. This was a playful higher education classroom. Students played with the ideas presented in the course and discovered imaginative ways to apply them into their final project, producing a play. The professor, Heather, has established a playful learning environment
and has thought “outside the box” to create imaginative assignments and projects for students to pursue. As one student commented, “I remember the first day of class; thinking, I’m going to have to do so much work for this class, but the work that I did for class, like it ended up being fun” (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

This is yet another example of a playful classroom of adult learners. In this playful classroom, creative assignments are one aspect of the play/playfulness present in this higher education classroom. In this section, I will describe the setting of this course and will explore Heather’s conceptualization of play and playfulness and its role in learning using data from her interview and observation data from her classroom. Students’ perceptions of the playful classroom will also be presented, as well as their understanding of its impact on their learning.

The Setting

This class was an upper level English course offered at a private college with an undergraduate population of 2800 students located in south central Pennsylvania. There were 16 students in the class, all of them women representing a variety of majors (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Some students were taking this course as a major/minor requirement while others were using this course to fulfill a general education requirement.

The classroom was a typical classroom with one wall covered with a chalkboard, another with a dry erase board. The front corner contained a teaching console complete with a computer, document camera, VCR/DVD player, and control panel to control the video projector mounted in the ceiling aiming at the front wall where there was a retractable screen. The room contained about 30 chairs with a desk-like writing surface.
During the classroom observations, these chairs were never arranged in typical rows facing the front of the room. One time they were arranged in a circle, another they were gathered in clusters of 3-5 chairs, and another the chairs were shoved into the corner of the room as noted in the vignette at the beginning of this section.

**The Playful Instructor – Heather**

Heather has been teaching in higher education for over 29 years. She has taught at several colleges and universities prior to her current position at this small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. She held her current position for 15 years and was recently promoted to full professor (Heather Interview, 2009). Heather’s educational background includes a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from a conservative Christian college in Indiana, a Masters of Arts in English from Eastern Washington State University, and a Doctor of Arts in English from Illinois State University. She spent a year teaching in China and several years at the beginning of her career teaching high school students. In her expansive teaching career, writing and/or literature have been the primary areas in which she has taught. She currently teaches First Year Seminar (primarily a writing course), Advanced Writing, Introduction to Creative Writing, Women’s Contemporary Literature, and Writing Seminar. In her many years as an educator, she has developed a unique pedagogy that I consider playful. Before exploring this playful pedagogy, it was important to first discuss Heather’s understanding of play and playfulness.

Heather’s conceptualization of play is complex and is closely tied to her understanding of art. When asked to recall a playful experience, Heather recounted an art retreat she recently participated in. For Heather, art is how her play is manifested most frequently. She stated, “My ultimate play experience is art” (Heather Interview, 2009).
She identified visual art, dance, and creative writing as the art forms that she typically engages in as a form of play. She sees play as the process utilized as you create art. Art is not something that is perfected but is experimented with; played with. In her words, “you are experimenting, you are mixing it with joy and fun and, you know, whatever loosens you up” (Heather Interview, 2009). Throughout the interview, she used play and art interchangeably. Furthermore, art and play are not just an activity, but rather are a philosophical approach to life. In the interview she referred to play as a form of art and discussed “life as art” (Heather Interview, 2009). Heather’s ideas of play and art as a philosophy for life were further seen as she defined play and provided examples of play. Several themes were prevalent in Heather’s conceptualization of play; connections, imagination, risk, joy, and flow.

When asked to define play, connections were the first thing that Heather discussed (Heather Interview, 2009). For Heather, play involves connections in multiple ways; connections within the individual, connections with others, connections with your environment, and connections with powers beyond yourself. A connection within the individual refers to a holistic understanding of the nature of play. For Heather, play engages a person holistically. She stated, “It [play] makes me think of the connection between head, heart and hand” (Heather Interview, 2009). She went on to define these as thinking with the head, experiencing emotions with the heart, and using your physical body, which according to Heather means “using your hands to paint, or hands to make something, or moving your feet” (Heather Interview, 2009). An example of a dance she participated in at an art retreat, best exemplifies the theme of connections that is integral to Heather’s conceptualization of play.
This art retreat was a 5 day experience at an ocean beach house with eight adults (she only knew her friend Mardi who invited her) with the purpose of creating art with one another (Heather Interview, 2009). There was no formal structure to this retreat, but participants were given space to pursue art with one another. Heather engaged in several art forms but chose dance as her primary art form (Heather Interview, 2009). She has a history in dance, as she took extensive lessons from a young age through high school, dreamed of being a dancer as a child, and taught dance for a short while (Heather Interview, 2009). At the beginning of the retreat, when participants were sharing about art forms they enjoyed, Heather noted that one participant was a choreographer, and two others besides her expressed how much they enjoyed dancing. The choreographer helped them create a dance by asking each of the five people who wanted to dance, what they loved most about the ocean (Heather Interview, 2009). As they shared, they were asked to put it into movement, and the choreographer helped turn these into steps by making the movement larger or repeating it several times. They stood in a circle and after they learned all the steps, they would string them together by performing one person’s steps, then performing the steps of the next person in the circle, until they had worked their way all around the circle. After several rehearsals, they put on costumes Heather had brought and performed the dance out on the beach. Heather described this experience as “the highlight” of the retreat, and a time in her life of “probably the most pure fun” (Heather Interview, 2009).

This dance illustrates the importance of connections for Heather in play. The connection within the individual occurred as participants used their heads to think about the ocean, their hearts to identify what they love about the ocean, and their bodies to
create movement to communicate what they loved about the ocean. The connection with others occurred as they each contributed a movement or steps to the dance. Heather discussed how it was easy to learn the dance because each movement was associated with a particular person. However, the connection went beyond simply contributing a step. She stated, “We really were crazy about each other by the end of the –it was like we had made this [dance] ours out of the love of each other” (Heather Interview, 2009). The connection with the environment was seen in the importance the ocean played in their dance. They chose to base their dance on their response to the ocean because the ocean had been such an integral part of their retreat. Heather talked about how they would spend hours, up to four times a day “enjoying and playing in the ocean” (Heather Interview, 2009). According to Heather, there is a connection between the environment and self. She stated “you are, like, so a part of the beauty of the environment, so you feel beautiful” (Heather Interview, 2009).

The final connection that Heather discussed in her conceptualization of play and art is the connection with a transcendent power outside of oneself. She used the term “spiritual connection” when discussing play and art, and she defined this spiritual connection as a “lightness” or not taking yourself too seriously (Heather Interview, 2009). An example Heather gave of this type of spirituality was the Dali Lama, who often responded to people by laughing (Heather Interview, 2009). Another example was a quote she saw and appreciated, “Man thinks, God laughs” (Heather Interview, 2009). There is an acknowledgement that there is a higher power, something outside of self that is significant and important. Play and art help bring a person to a place where they don’t take themselves too seriously, and they can appreciate that there is something beyond
themself. Heather stated that as a person engages in, “real play…. some kind of lightness happens” (Heather Interview, 2009). She indicated this was an important part of play for adults (Heather Interview, 2009).

In addition to connections, imagination is a significant component of play for Heather. In defining play she stated, “Imagination seems huge to do with anything I would call play” (Heather Interview, 2009). Although she did not discuss imagination at length, there was much evidence to illustrate the importance of imagination for Heather. For example, the dance on the beach where participants imagined how to represent ocean water with body movements, or when props such as fancy dresses were used as “glorious” capes by some of the male dancers (Heather Interview, 2009). Additionally, assignments in her classes required students to use their imagination and creativity to write dramatic plays and create sets and costumes to perform the plays for the rest of the class (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). In another class, students needed to use their imagination to create an experiential activity to capture an idea or theme from a required reading (Heather Interview, 2009). This illustrates most clearly Heather’s synonymous view of play and art. Art in many forms requires imagination and creativity and since she sees art and play as similar, play too would involve the imagination.

In addition to imagination and connections, risk is another significant element in Heather’s conceptualization of play/playfulness. In sharing about the art retreat, she made several comments alluding to the risk involved with pursuing art and play in that particular context. Specifically, she described a collaborative painting exercise and recalled how she was intimidated because others were experienced painters; yet, she pushed on even though she was not comfortable (Heather Interview, 2009). She
described the retreat as a “safe space,” implying it was okay to take risk. Another risk associated with the retreat was packing 8 costumes as seen in this dialogue Heather had with herself:

And I was like, ‘should I take them? I only have this one tiny suitcase. What will I do with them when I get there? What am I going to do, put these things on and dance on the beach all by myself?’ But they actually got in my suitcase; I almost left them home, so they were there – secretly (Heather Interview, 2009).

In anticipating the opportunity to play and pursue art, she took a risk to take these costumes even though she was not certain how they might be used or if anyone else would appreciate them. Perhaps the clearest example of the importance of risk for Heather was seen in her classroom. She shared about being observed by another teacher who was amazed at all the risks that students were taking in her class (Heather Interview, 2009). The types of risks students took in Heather’s class were sharing a personal experience, reading their writing to the class, trying an unfamiliar art form like painting, or even jumping off a telephone pole on a challenge course (Heather Observation Notes, 2007; Heather Interview, 2009). Play and art, according to Heather require people to step outside their comfort zone and take a risk (Heather Interview, 2009).

In her conceptualization of play and art, joy and flow are the final two themes that emerged. Both of these reflect Heather’s idea that play or art is a philosophical approach to life. She most frequently talked about joy, rather than fun, as the result of engagement in play. In discussing joy in comparison to fun she stated, “I’m suggesting this deeper, better thing called joy” (Heather Interview, 2009). It almost seems that fun is not a worthy enough goal; that it is too fleeting. Indeed, she stated, “Joy seems like a better
word for furthering one’s life” (Heather Interview, 2009). So for Heather, joy, rather than fun is the typical response to engagement in play or art. She talked about joy in terms of ‘furthering one’s life’ which again points to play and art as a philosophical approach to life rather than a simple activity. This was further espoused in her use of the word flow in describing play and art.

Flow is a concept discussed in Chapter 3 and was coined by Csikszentmihalyi. Although Heather does not mention Csikszentmihalyi by name, it was clear from her comments that she was referring to his concept of flow. In referring to flow, Heather talked about it as a process, “that moment when time stands still and you become the thing or whatever that you are working on” (Heather Interview, 2009). She also talked about her art in terms of spending hours and hours and exclaimed, “[I] can’t hardly stand to stop” (Heather Interview, 2009). These are all consistent with Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow where he talks about distorted sense of time, merging of action and awareness, and intrinsic motivation. Flow is a psychological theory that describes a specific mental set or process experienced by an individual as they engage in an activity. Heather’s use of flow as a means to describe her understanding of play points to a conceptualization of play that is about a mind set or approach to life.

In summary, Heather’s view of play is closely tied to art. Play and art are not seen as activity only, but also as a philosophical approach to life. Play and art are about connections with self, others, the environment, and a power outside of oneself. Additionally, imagination, risk, joy and flow are significant elements in the play experience for Heather.
Manifestations of Play/Playfulness in Heather’s Classroom

The play that Heather brought into her classroom was not as obvious as with some of the other cases in this study. Because she views art or play as a philosophical approach to life, they are infused into her teaching. In other words, Heather is playful in her pedagogy. Playful in the sense that she is imaginative and thinks outside the box in creating learning experiences inside the classroom and with the assignments she gives to students. She is able to get students to play with ideas and holistically experience the content of her courses.

In her classroom, Heather is very intentional in the type of space or atmosphere she creates. There is both a physical element as well as an emotional element to this learning space. Physically, she seeks to create a unique space that feels comfortable for students. For example, in the senior writing seminar I observed, she met in a space on campus used for co-curricular programming that contained several overstuffed couches and beanbag chairs in a living room setting (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). She placed a candle in the middle of the room and relied on the natural light streaming in through a wall of windows that looked out into a wooded area. Students left their shoes in the entry and were sitting in various positions –legs gathered underneath them on the couch, lying on the floor propped up by their elbow, or sitting on the floor, legs crossed, or leaning against the couch (Heather Observation Notes, 2007).

In addition to a unique physical space, Heather works to create a unique emotional space in her classroom. She is able to create a relaxed, safe atmosphere where students can explore or experiment with their ideas and emotions as they relate to the course content. There were multiple elements that helped create this unique atmosphere.
The physical space contributed to this atmosphere, but Heather also utilized name games early in the semester and promoted small group interactions with cluster groups (Heather Student Survey, 2007; Heather Observation Notes, 2007). Heather had a laid back attitude in the classroom and was open to negotiating or changing due dates for assignments (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). She prefers that students refer to her on a first name basis (Heather Group Interview, 2007) and engages students in casual conversation during class breaks (Heather Video Notes, 2007). These elements create a space that one student noted “was unlike any class atmosphere I’ve ever been in” (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

Students described Heather’s classroom atmosphere as “open, safe, relaxed, comfortable, welcoming, laid back, interactive, personal, inviting, creative, free, and engaging” (Heather Student Surveys, 2007). This atmosphere created a space where students were free to share their thoughts and ideas. One student commented, “Since it’s so relaxed, like, it was just easy to like, really be yourself and to say what was on your mind” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). This space was not relaxed simply for comfort’s sake but to create a space where students could pursue deeper learning. In the focus group, one student noted, “It was all about exploring your ideas” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). This opportunity to explore ideas freely in the classroom appeared to be novel for one student. She stated,

I like the way we explore ideas. When I think of exploring I think of, like, when I would go play in the rocks [referring to a childhood play experience she shared earlier in the interview]. Like, that’s when I felt most playful. It was going out and just ‘what’s behind this rock?’ Like exploring ideas in the classroom I think is where playfulness ties
in. It’s not like there’s a risk if you explore something wrong (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

In Heather’s class, students felt free to playfully explore ideas without fear of being ‘wrong.’ This freedom and relaxed atmosphere felt playful to students. One student observed, “Being relaxed for people in our age group is kind of a, something that’s playful because we enjoy being relaxed” (Heather Group Interview, 2007)

This unique atmosphere that Heather created not only gave students freedom to play with their thoughts or ideas; it also gave them permission to explore their emotions. In the course on women playwrights, Heather asked how the play (dramas) would make audiences feel. One student noted, “allowing emotion to play a part made it a lot more relaxed too – saying it was okay” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The women in this class not only felt free to be emotional, but recognized that sharing their emotions contributed to the relaxed classroom environment. They also noted that the fact that this particular class was all women may have contributed to this emotional freedom, as seen in the following quote: “because it was all girls so we weren’t like, worried about the whole emotional thing. It was just okay – plays have emotions, it affects the audience, now what does that mean?” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Although the women in this class may have felt safer to engage their emotions because there were only females in the class, students in the co-ed, senior writing seminar I observed were also vulnerable in sharing emotionally charged writings (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). In both of these classes, Heather had created an atmosphere where students could take a risk and were free to share on an emotional level.
Heather’s playfulness was not only manifest in the atmosphere she created in the classroom; it was also evident in the creative projects she assigned as part of her courses. When asked how play/playfulness was manifest in her classroom, Heather indicated it was by having students do experiential things (Heather Interview, 2009). In essence, she plays with various ideas for assignments and projects to create an imaginative pedagogy. In the women’s literature class I observed, instead of having students simply write a play or write about plays they read (the course was designated a writing intensive course), Heather had them work in groups to perform a short play or adapt an existing play. In this performance they were to include all of the elements of theatre they had studied earlier in the semester, such as lighting, costume, props, blocking, etc. (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). The final exam for the women’s literature course were these performances, one of which I described in the opening vignette. All three groups not only worked collaboratively to create the script, they created costumes, sets, and found various props including sound effects. Additionally, Heather encouraged students to bring snacks and invite their friends and roommates to attend their performance. This was not a drama class, but a class on women’s literature; yet, Heather required them to experience the topic holistically by having them produce a play.

Another example of Heather’s creative assignments came from her first year seminar course, which was a writing course. Students were required to read a book about a doctor’s humanitarian efforts in Haiti and then create an experience to make the book real to the students in the class (Heather Interview, 2009). One group of students had their classmates carry buckets of water up a steep hill on campus to get a sense of the chores that were a daily reality for the Haitians in the book. Another student brought a
hand drum and taught the class a Haitian rhythm in reference to one aspect of the book (Heather Interview, 2009). The creative assignment from Heather fostered creative and engaging responses from the students in her class and allowed them to holistically experience the course content.

In summary, play was manifest in Heather’s classroom in two primary ways. She created a classroom atmosphere that invited and challenged students to experiment with ideas and explore emotions. She also assigned projects that were novel and required students to experience the course content rather than simply think about it. As one student put it, “She gives us assignments that allow us to be creative and have fun” (Heather Student Survey, 2007).

**Heather’s Understanding of Play/Playfulness as it Relates to Learning**

As discussed earlier, Heather’s conceptualization of play and art is a philosophical approach to life: a mindset through which to experience and pursue life. Because of this, her approach to learning is simply flavored by play or art. She would not identify specific ways that art or play relates to learning, rather, she would say learning should be pursued artistically, or playfully. For Heather, this means learning is flavored by pursuit of connections, the imagination, and experiences of joy and flow. In this next section I will explore Heather’s views of the purpose of learning and process of learning she feels are most effective.

According to Heather, the purpose of learning is growth. She stated, “You’re adding something new, you are moving…from where you were before” (Heather Interview, 2009). For Heather, this movement is not simply a cognitive exercise of accumulating more information. It is broader than that as seen in the following quote:
“I’m not talking about memorizing things for a test or anything, I’m talking about growth as a human being” (Heather Interview, 2009). She acknowledges that memorizing is good, that it stimulates the brain and provides a basis for critical thinking, but learning for her is about developmental growth (Heather Interview, 2009).

Heather has come to identify risk taking as an effective way to help students grow or “move from where they were before” (Heather Interview, 2009). Risk taking is something that Heather expects from the students in her class. The teacher-observer discussed earlier was amazed at the risks students took in Heather’s class and thought Heather should praise them for taking these risks and be impressed with their efforts. Heather responded, “I don’t praise students for it, that’s kind of my bottom line. If they are going to be in my class and do well they know that they have to do this [take risks], you know because that is what the class is about” (Heather Interview, 2009). In making this statement, Heather did not clarify what class she was talking about because this is true of all her classes. Students will be expected to risk for the purpose of moving and growing as a human being. It seems that the content of the various courses she teaches is simply a medium through which she stretches and pushes students to grow and develop.

Heather has a clear vision on how to facilitate this growth and development. “I think experience is the best teacher,” she boldly claims (Heather Interview, 2009). Utilizing experience in a learning environment can mean many different things. For Heather, it seems that the purpose of experience in a learning context is to immerse students in the course content in a way that engages their mind, heart, hands (cognitive, affect, physical). For example, as she was reading an excerpt from a biography about a person walking great distances, she had students stand up, close their eyes, walk in place,
and try to imagine and feel what it would be like to be the person in the book (Heather Interview, 2009). She wants students to experience the content but not just so they can rationally discuss and analyze the content. The language that she uses indicates she appreciates the role of affect and the body in the learning process. In the previous example she specifically instructed students to, “try to imagine, and feel with their body” (Heather Interview, 2009). At another time she talked about creating experiences as “finding a way to transfer generalities – abstract generalities – into an experience of knowing this thing inside yourself” (Heather Interview, 2009). Her words, “feel with their body” and “knowing this thing inside yourself” are indicative of a somatic view of learning. This is consistent with her conceptualization of play where she talks about connection or relationship. Learning for Heather involves your whole being, head, heart, and hands. Walking in place is a form of learning for Heather because your body is knowing something about the people from the book. Through your body and imagination you are experiencing the content of the book. She seems to create activities so students will learn both cognitively and somatically.

As part of these experiences, Heather includes a reflective component. In the women’s playwright class this occurred both as a debrief, where Heather asked questions with students responding verbally, and it occurred as a written reflection in the form of a paper (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). Although these reflective components were cognitive in nature, there seemed to be an additional aspect of Heather’s understanding of knowing that was not captured in the cognitive experiential learning models discussed in chapter 3 where meaning is constructed by thinking about experience. The affective model of Heron (1992) seems to better capture Heather’s understanding of the role of
experience with its emphasis on feelings and the role of imagination in the learning process. In addition to this affective model of experiential learning, somatic learning theories are necessary to fully understand Heather’s use of experiences in her teaching. Heather’s emphasis on the relational, somatic, and affective dimensions of learning were manifested in many ways. Her use of name games, small group discussions, and collaborative projects indicated that forming relationships was significant for Heather in the learning process. Additionally, she paid attention to her relationship to students by having students refer to her on a first name basis, by completing and sharing reflective assignments herself, and by having students in her home for dinner, or for a year end retreat to present capstone projects (Heather Group Interview, 2007; Heather Observation Notes, 2007). As discussed previously, Heather emphasized the affective domain of learning by valuing emotions of students and engaging in somatic learning.

The discussion above illuminates aspects of Heather’s philosophy of education. The purpose of education, according to Heather, is help students grow and develop as human beings (Heather Interview, 2009) which is consistent with a humanistic approach to adult education. Heather’s approach to education is holistic and focuses on helping students make connections with their head, hearts and hands (Heather Interview, 2007). The role of the teacher is to create learning experiences that enable students to grow and develop as they holistically encounter the content of the course. These experiences engage students cognitively, affectively, and bodily (head, heart and hands) (Heather Interview, 2009). Additionally, the teacher provides opportunity for the student to demonstrate their understanding of the course material creatively, utilizing a multiple of
mediums such as art, music, drama, writing, or experiential activities. Heather’s playfulness is manifest in her ability to create these imaginative experiences.

The role of the student is to take risks, to step out of their comfort zones and be open to the various experiences they encounter during the course the semester. As noted above, Heather expects her students to take risks in her class; she believes it is necessary for them to grow (Heather Interview, 2009). For this to happen, the classroom space must feel safe and relaxed. The context of learning is significant inasmuch as the classroom atmosphere must be created in such a way that students feel free to express themselves.

However, for Heather, the context of learning extends beyond a particular classroom atmosphere. She works to raise students’ awareness of the influences of gender in learning. In the writing class, this occurred through open discussions which explore differences between women authors and male authors (Heather Group Interview, 2007). It is also evident in the value Heather places on emotion in the learning process and in her use of somatic learning (Heather Interview, 2007). A more subtle indicator of this awareness of gender as it relates to the context of learning was seen in the students’ comments during the group interview. They drew attention to the fact that the class was composed of all women and they were able to articulate differences it created in learning. For example, in discussing the fact that the class was all women, one student commented, “I was able to let some of my walls down with, like really exploring ideas” (Heather Group Interview, 2009). The fact that students brought this up in the interview may indicate a heightened sensitivity to the role of gender in the classroom because this was a
topic that was often discussed in class. For Heather, the context, particularly gender, shapes learning in the classroom.

**The Playful Students**

As the instructor, Heather created the learning environment and had a significant influence on the classroom atmosphere. However, the students and their response to the learning environment also influenced the classroom atmosphere. In this section I will explore Heather’s playful classroom from the students’ perspectives using data from classroom observation, the group interview, the surveys, and papers students wrote as part of their final drama presentations. I will provide basic demographic information, describe students’ engagement in the classroom, and discuss their perceptions of the impact of Heather’s playful pedagogy on learning.

The sixteen students in Heather’s literature class were all women. All were traditional college students, and all but two were white (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). When asked about the lack of men, the women commented that there were two men at the beginning of the semester, but they left after the first week of class (Heather Group Interview, 2007). One woman speculated that they were either overwhelmed with the workload discussed on the first day of class or just felt outnumbered (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The women in the course were from a variety of majors such as political science, humanities, psychology, or elementary education (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The course met a general education literature requirement and also was an elective course for the women’s studies minor housed in the Department of Human Development and Family. Additionally, the course was a “writing intensive” course, which fulfilled an additional general education requirement as part of the “writing across
the curriculum” program in place at this college. Now that we’ve explored who the students were in Heather’s class, we will examine how they engaged in the play/playfulness.

The most observable indicator of students’ engagement in play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom was their involvement in the final plays. As seen in the description in the opening vignette, students really got into this creative and playful assignment. The props they secured, the costumes they assembled, and the sets they created were all indicators of their enthusiasm (Heather Observation Note, 2007). Their enthusiasm could also be an indicator of their desire for a good grade, but their comments seemed to indicate otherwise. Nicole stated, “I really enjoyed this project even more than I anticipated…It’s probably the most fun project I have had all year because it actually involved creativity” (Heather Student Papers, 2007). Jana also commented on how much she enjoyed the final project. She recounted their dress rehearsal, “We all got into our characters and laughed the whole time. We were proud of our play and all of our ideas…. We were excited to put on the show” (Heather Student Papers, 2007). Students’ enthusiasm for this project was also seen in the fact that they invited their friends and roommates to come to class to see their plays (Heather Observation Notes, 2007).

Students were obviously having fun with this project. As noted in chapter three, fun and/or manifesting joy are key elements of play (Huizinga, 1950, Lieberman, 1977). Intrinsic motivation, another element of play (Huizinga, 1950), was also seen in the example of the final plays. Students went above and beyond expectations to secure props and create the sets for the play (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). Additionally, one group, went through the extra effort to rewrite a play even though Heather explicitly
stated this was not an expectation for the assignment because of the extra time involved in re-writing (Heather Student Papers, 2007). Students’ motivation for pursuing this extra work was intrinsic. One group member wrote, “It would be a lot more work to go with our *Trifles* idea, but it would be more fun and personal to make all our own decisions rather than following someone else’s play” (Heather Student Papers, 2007).

The group interview and survey revealed an even more significant aspect of students’ engagement in Heather’s classroom. This was the freedom students felt to discuss and share their thoughts and reactions in the classroom. Over half of the class identified these interactions and discussion as the highlight of the class (Heather Survey, 2007). One student commented, “The discussions are open, and the students are encouraged to express their views honestly” (Heather Survey, 2007). In particular, students commented how they enjoyed the freedom to explore their own ideas. One student stated, “I didn’t go in, like, suspecting that she had somewhere she was trying to take us. It was, it was more like we were free to talk about whatever we found in the plays and she was able to adjust to that” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). This comment showed that Heather did not force discussions in a particular direction, but allowed students to freely pursue their own thoughts and responses to the course material.

Freedom, like the freedom students experienced in pursuing learning in Heather’s class, is a common element of play (Huizinga, 1950).

An additional indicator of student’s engagement in the playfulness of Heather’s classroom is their tremendous creativity and use of imagination as they developed experiences that engaged the content of the course in new and novels ways. The women in the Heather’s literature class rewrote a play, changing the setting to contemporary
times and inserting witty lines that referenced inside jokes that the class had shared earlier in the semester (Heather Video Notes, 2007). Students in Heather’s first year seminar class developed experiences like carrying buckets of water up a hill or learning to drum out Haitian rhythms, which in a classroom setting are novel means for helping students learn about the content of the book. For one student, pursuit of creativity became an even stronger motivator than grades. She stated, “It wasn’t about the grades anymore, it was about being creative and using thoughts and ideas” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Heather herself was often surprised at the imaginative ideas students came up with once they were set free. In discussing one of her assignments she confessed, “You think all the groups might do the same thing and then it is like so amazing—the variety” (Heather Interview, 2007). As explored in chapter 3, imagination and creativity are also a significant element of play and playfulness (Lieberman, 1977).

As discussed above, students contributed to the playfulness in Heather’s classroom in several ways. First, they exhibited a great amount of enthusiasm in engaging in the assignments and projects. In other words, they had fun with the assignments and were intrinsically motivated to put in extra work and go the extra mile. Additionally, they engaged their imaginations to produce creative work. In terms of their engagement in the classroom, students freely participated in discussions sharing their thoughts and feelings as they explored (or played) with various ideas related to the course content. Heather laid the groundwork for a playful classroom, but students contributed significantly through their engagement in that space.
Students’ Understanding of Play/Playfulness’ Connection to Learning

Students in Heather’s class identified three themes connecting learning with play/playfulness: it promotes discussion, it provides opportunity to learn experientially, and it promotes engagement. In a previous section I discussed how the classroom discussion and experiential activities were manifestations of play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom. In this next section I do not revisit how these elements were considered play or playful, but rather present how students saw these elements contributing to their learning.

The classroom discussions were significant for students in Heather’s class. Numerous times students referred to their classroom discussions as a significant contributor to their learning (Heather Group Interview, 2007; Heather Student Surveys, 2007). One student simply stated, “I learned a ton from the discussions” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). However, there were many comments about classroom discussions and closer examination revealed that students appreciated these discussions for various reasons: some liked the freedom to explore their own ideas and emotions, some appreciated the way discussions would challenge them, and others appreciated the way Heather made the discussion applicable and related it to their lives as students.

Students frequently commented on the freedom they experienced in Heather’s class to share what they were really thinking and explore various ideas and emotions. One student identified this freedom to explore ideas without fear of being wrong as playful. She wrote, “Playful is spontaneous, not perfectly calculated and premeditated – therefore my answers can be imperfect but still invited” (Heather Student Survey, 2007). As noted earlier, students enjoyed this opportunity to be uncensored in their thoughts and
ideas. One student recognized Heather’s role in these open discussions by noting, “She stimulates conversation, but allows us the freedom to think for ourselves” (Heather Student Survey, 2007). This last quote not only reinforces the idea that students have freedom to think their own thoughts, but it also hints at the second element of discussion that students appreciated which is the challenge aspect. Heather not only “stimulates conversation,” but as one student noted, “encourages us to think outside the box” (Heather Survey, 2007). At times this type of challenge can be difficult. Hannah recalled a time when a discussion “stretched me in different ways than I’m used to being stretched” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Sometimes this stretching was to help students apply the course content to their own lives. This was the third aspect of discussions that students appreciated as seen in this comment; “In our discussions I felt like she pushed us beyond the controversial, but to see how it applied to our lives” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Another student agreed with this statement remembering that Heather would often ask “What about in your relationships? How do you see this?” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Heather asked students to not only identify various themes and issues in the plays they were studying, but also challenged them to identify these themes and issues in their own lives and relationships.

Students noted that the discussions in Heather’s classroom contributed significantly to their learning and were unique compared to other classroom environments (Heather Group Interview, 2007). They provided space for students to freely play with or explore their ideas, were challenging for students as they were often stretched, and were relevant as they led to an application of the course material to
students’ daily lives. This was one of the ways students identified Heather’s play/playfulness contributed to their learning, another was experiential activities.

As discussed earlier, one of the manifestations of play in Heather’s classroom was her creative assignments and projects that often required students to engage the course content experientially. Students in her class commented on the effectiveness of these experiences in promoting learning. One student stated, “This really taught me more about the process of putting together a theatrical production than I could’ve learned from simply reading a book and taking a scantron test” (Heather Student Paper, 2007). The classroom experiences often included activities that engaged not only the mind, but also required the students to be involved with their bodies and emotions. This sometimes led to learning that would have never occurred if it had only been engaged cognitively. For example, one student reflected:

When I was writing my own mini play I saw the scenes in my head and made creative decisions based on my vision. However, once you begin actually executing the elements of theatre it becomes much more real and you realize that what you see in your head may not necessarily work on a stage (Heather Student Papers, 2007).

The playful project that Heather assigned required this student to engage the course content experientially by putting her ideas into action which led to additional learning.

Engagement was another idea that students referenced when identifying ways play/playfulness contributed to their learning. In the surveys, students commented that playfulness “makes it [learning] more interesting and helps me not get bored,” or “makes it much easier to pay attention” (Heather Student Survey, 2007). One student noted that
the nature of Heather’s classroom kept her mind from drifting in class. She stated, “When I have to interact with others, or act out something I have to think; I cannot retreat into my mind” (Heather Student Survey, 2007). In many ways this theme of engagement is an aspect of the previous two topics: experiential learning and interactive discussion. Engagement is mentioned separately here because it was so frequently noted in the student surveys.

In summary, students identified three ways that the play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom contributed to their learning. The classroom atmosphere that Heather created invited students into discussions that allowed them to freely play with their thoughts, challenged their thinking, and encouraged them to apply course material to their daily lives. Second, Heather’s playful pedagogy immersed students in experiential activities that engaged students holistically (head, heart and hands), thus making the learning more significant. Finally, the play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom engaged students and motivated them to be active participants in their learning. In addition to these positive aspects of play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom, students identified some negative aspects to this learning environment.

Negative Responses to Heather’s Playful Classroom

There were several negative comments made by students concerning Heather’s approach to teaching. Some were student specific, but others were shared by several students. One of the difficulties students experienced with Heather’s approach in the classroom was the ambiguity that it created. Students expressed that they were often frustrated because assignments and projects were not always clear cut and lacked boundaries. One student commented, “I was like, AHHHHH; I need extra guidelines and
I was like, uncomfortable” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Nancy agreed noting the lack of boundaries “was really hard for me the first couple weeks. I was like, ‘what do you want me to write in my journal?’ I’m like, ‘What are we doing?’” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The lack of clear boundaries was also associated with feelings that grading was inconsistent. One student was surprised in the interview to find that she felt it necessary to write 14 pages for one assignment while another turned in 3 pages for the same assignment. Interestingly, students noted that the lack of boundaries became less of an issue as the semester progressed, and eventually they saw it as a positive aspect of Heather’s class because it gave them freedom to push their own creativity (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

The data collected revealed two negative comments that were student specific. The first was a conflict in learning styles. In the student survey, one of the fifteen respondents indicated that play/playfulness in Heather’s classroom was a distraction to her learning. Specifically she stated, “I am a serious thinker who responds best to a lecture environment” (Heather Student Survey, 2007). As an education major, she recognized that people have different learning styles, she simply did not appreciate Heather’s approach because it did not play to the strengths of her learning style (Heather Student Survey, 2007). These types of differences are understandable and are to be expected in a classroom with multiple learners.

The second negative comment that was student specific focused on Heather’s approach as it related to course content. Hannah struggled with the issues raised in the plays studied in the course and did not appreciate the light atmosphere of the class given the seriousness of the content. She stated, “I felt like it was like a conflict between this
serious, serious subject matter which was like, depressing to come to class and talk about; and this like, playful atmosphere. I was kind of conflicted with that” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). In the group interview, other students responded to Hannah’s comment and did not seem to share the same feelings as they brought up several plays that they thought were funny. Hannah acknowledged that there were some funny moments in the play, but overall she thought they were too “morbid and depressing,” to use her words (Heather Group Interview, 2007). In her first comments, Hannah hinted that the issues addressed in the plays were difficult because of personal experience she had in the past. Later in the interview, she brought it up again and shared more detail. She confided, 

I loved Heather, I really liked her and had fun with other people in the class, but I think maybe, I think it just hit too many personal buttons for me. It was almost exactly a year ago that my best friend in the world killed herself, and I had an abusive father and they [the plays] all talked about people dying and killing themselves and being abused and that just gets way too much for me to be able to force playfulness on it (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

Hannah obviously felt strong emotions about these subjects as seen in her comments, and by the fact that she brought it up two separate times in the interview. Discussing these issues in any classroom setting would probably have been difficult for her. However, a light, playful attitude was extremely difficult because the subject matter was too serious and too personal.

The two negative comments discussed above were very specific to particular students because of their past history and psychological disposition. However, they do illuminate a difficulty that might be experienced by other learners. Both of these students
had certain expectations of what was appropriate for a classroom setting. The play/playfulness that Heather brought into the classroom was contrary to their expectations and they had difficulty with it as a result. In her interview, Heather indicated this was a frequent occurrence with students in her classes.

In discussing students’ responses to her teaching, Heather drew attention to the fact that she’s never been “Teacher of the Year.” She attributed that particularly to the low evaluations she gets from first year students. She stated, “So I think that they want to have the traditional thing, know what to expect, what to predict. They are taking a lot of risk, and they are uncomfortable with taking risks… they have this other view of what learning is all about” (Heather Interview, 2009). Heather indicated that students have certain expectations for what a college classroom should look like. They are expecting lectures and well defined assignments. What they get in Heather’s classroom is very different, and they do not always appreciate it. It’s hiking up hills with buckets of water, performing plays, and jumping off tall platforms with nothing but a rope to stop the fall. It’s a collection of ambiguous assignments that are frightening because there is no rote outline to follow, you must rely on your own creative powers. Incidentally, Heather’s senior English majors, gave her rave reviews (Heather Interview, 2009). Apparently they appreciate the growth they’ve experienced, even though the journey has been uncomfortable at times. And this is the reason Heather continues to play with the pedagogy she employs in her classroom. As she discussed the various experiences she employs she stated, “They do it and have an amazing time… I really believe that’s the way people learn best, you know” (Heather Interview, 2009).
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: A COMPARISON OF FOUR PLAYFUL CLASSROOMS

In the previous chapter I presented a detailed picture of each of the four playful classrooms examined in this study. In this chapter I will compare the four cases and explore themes that emerge from the data. There are a multitude of potential comparisons that can be made between these cases. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study will be used to focus the comparisons. These research questions are:

1. What is the educator’s understanding of play and playfulness as it relates to learning in the adult and higher education classroom?
   a. How do they define play and playfulness?
   b. How do they bring play and playfulness into their classroom?
   c. What is their understanding of the connection between play/playfulness and learning in the classroom context?

2. How do students perceive the playful classroom and what meaning does the experience have for them?

3. What are the observed dynamics of play and playfulness in the classroom?

These questions shape the comparisons that will be made in this chapter. However, rather than organizing this chapter according to these questions, the data shapes the organization of the chapter. Specifically, this chapter is organized according to the strongest themes that emerged from these four cases.
First, I will examine the unique classroom environment induced by play/playfulness. These classrooms had a relaxed atmosphere that was informal, casual, flexible and free. These playful classrooms felt safe allowing students to take risks and challenge themselves. After exploring this unique classroom environment, I will discuss play’s role in aiding cognition and personal discovery. Additionally, play’s role in making learning enjoyable, will be examined.

In the final two sections of this chapter I will present the educators’ understanding of play and the way it is manifested in the classroom. According to the educators, play/playfulness was fun, contained elements of the unexpected or spontaneous, involved imagination or creativity, embraced silliness or goofiness, and emphasized relationship or connectedness. In the classroom, play/playfulness often took the form of activities or humorous stories.

**Play: A Unique Classroom Environment**

The strongest theme to emerge from the data was the creation of a unique classroom environment. In all four classrooms, the educators created a unique classroom environment that felt relaxed and was a safe place for students to be challenged and take risks. In exploring this unique environment, I will first examine characteristics of the classrooms in all four of these cases to paint a picture of these unique environments. Next, I will show how students in these playful classrooms felt safe thus creating an atmosphere where they could take risks. Finally, I will examine the educators’ perspective of this unique learning environment. Specifically, the risks they feel and the importance they assign to this environment in terms of their students’ learning.
Relaxed Atmosphere - Informal and Casual

In this study, students provided feedback on their experiences through a paper and pencil survey administered to all students in the class and through a group interview with a smaller group of students from each class. In the written surveys, students were asked to describe their classroom environment. In a total of sixty-eight surveys, over two-thirds of the respondents used the words relaxed, comfortable, laid back, or other synonyms to describe the classroom atmosphere (Student Survey Summary, 2009). Students felt at ease in these playful classrooms as noted also in the group interviews. For example, a woman in Heather’s class succinctly captures this common sentiment when she states, “The overall attitude of the class, it was just very relaxed” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The descriptor relaxed, could have multiple interpretations. A further exploration of the factors that created the relaxed classroom atmosphere can help clarify what students meant when they used the word relaxed.

One aspect of the relaxed classroom atmosphere was the informality between student and instructor. A student in Heather’s class stated, “I think she has a very laid back attitude and creates a very relaxed atmosphere in the classroom … she kind of breaks down the barrier of authority, like she wants us to call her Heather…. It definitely wasn’t a formal classroom” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). For this student, the classroom felt relaxed because of a flattening of the typical hierarchy in the classroom. The instructor and students were on a first name basis. Both Ted and Alana were also on a first name basis with the students in their class (Ted Observation Notes, 2008; Alana Observation notes 2008). Only in Chad’s class did students refer to the instructor as ‘Dr. Jones.’ However, there was still an informal relationship between Chad and his students.
This is most notably seen in classroom interactions when Chad would be discussing elements of course content with students. There would be much dialogue back and forth that felt more conversational than didactic (Chad Observation Notes, 2008). A quote from one of Chad’s students also captures this informal tone. She states, “It seemed like we were having a conversation, like, in the middle of class. And then other people jumped into the conversation. It wasn’t as much like lecture” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). The lack of formality in the classroom, whether manifest through conversational-like interactions or the use of first names, contributed to the relaxed feeling of these playful classrooms.

Not only were the relationships between instructors and students informal, but the physical classroom environment was also informal. All but one of the four classrooms was re-arranged by the instructor into a formation other than the typical lecture hall with seats facing the front. Desks and tables were rearranged so students were sitting in a circle or sitting at tables facing each other (Alana Observation Notes, 2007; Ted Observation notes 2008). Heather even arranged for her class to meet in a living room-type space on campus complete with overstuffed leather couches (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). Alana brought a portable CD player into class playing upbeat music as students entered class and reflective music as students worked quietly on an in-class assignment (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). These alterations served to create an informal physical space that was very different than the typical classroom arrangements.

**Relaxed Atmosphere - Freedom and Flexibility**

Other characteristics of the relaxed classroom fell into the category of freedoms students had in the classroom and flexibility with content and schedule. In all four
classes, students felt free to have food and drinks at their tables or desk during class time. In Ted’s class, one student was even eating a bowl of cereal as the morning class began (Ted’s Observational Notes, 2008). In Alana’s classroom, she provided snacks and drinks in the back of class and encouraged students to walk back at any time to grab refreshments (Alana Observational Notes, 2008). Students also felt free to enter or leave these classrooms without asking for formal permission. In Chad’s class, a couple of students arrived after class started and chose to disregard seats in the back of the class near the door. Instead, they walked across the front of the room while Chad was lecturing to take a seat in the front row near people they apparently knew (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Students in Ted’s and Heather’s classes would also move out of their seats at various times and either stand in the back of the room for a while or exit the room (Heather Observation Notes, 2007; Ted Observation Notes, 2008). In all these cases, the instructors continued teaching and did not appear to be bothered by this behavior. Seth from Alana’s class discussed this when recounting an aspect of Alana’s class that he appreciated. He recalled:

She had that whole back table, I mean this side was lined with food and that side was markers, highlighters, games, toys. And she said, ‘get up and get a toy and just play with it while I'm talking. It won't distract me if it doesn't distract you’ … and there were people just getting up, you know, getting tired of sitting and she wasn't like, ‘where are you going?’ (Alana Group Interview, 2007).

Feeling free to move about the room seems to contribute to the overall relaxed environment that was evident in these playful environments.
Not only did students freely move around in the classroom, so did the educators. Alana moved all around the room as she would demonstrate different activities or gather props. As students were working at their tables she would “float” among the tables asking if there were questions and providing additional comments (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). Ted, too, was seldom in the same place. As he engaged the class in discussion, he would move around the large open area that was created by having tables set up like a “U.” When not moving around the room, he would sit on a table in the front and often swing his legs and take occasional sips from a large McDonald’s cup (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). The physical arrangement of Chad’s room was a traditional lecture style with all the desks facing the front. However, he too, was constantly moving back and forth across the front of the room. In particular, he would often move towards the side of the room where a student might be commenting or asking a question, and then drift back across the room to get closer to the next student who was speaking (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). During the times when I observed Heather’s class, she was sitting among the students, either as a part of a circle of students, or as a member of the audience as students performed their plays (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). In all cases, the educator was not standing in front of class behind a podium lecturing for the class period.

Another aspect of the relaxed environment was a fluid approach to the content. One of Heather’s students stated, “I thought our discussions were like, I don’t know, it wasn't like a lecture, you know. It was more discussion facilitated …. it was more like we were free to talk about whatever we found in the plays and like she was able to adjust to that” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). It appears that this student equates lectures
with a particular content and enjoyed the fact that the unstructured nature of Heather’s class allowed her to pursue her own thoughts about the topic rather than the instructor’s. A student in Ted’s class expressed a similar sentiment when he stated:

He brings a sense of informality to the class. Like you know, he’s not up there with the PowerPoint going off his notes…He allows us to like, understand and engage it in a way that you can’t usually do if it’s so structured, that you can’t explore your ideas the way you need to. He kind of opens that up for us” (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

Both of these quotes indicate that the informal structure of the classroom created space for students to pursue their own thoughts and assimilate the content into their own experiences. In these examples, the instructor exhibited flexibility regarding the content of the course or at least the schedule of when to cover particular content. Students felt like they had time and were not restricted by planned content or a strict itinerary.

Heather and Ted did not have an outline in front of them when they taught (Ted Observation Notes, 2008; Heather Observation Notes, 2007). This, of course, does not mean they did not have a plan. Ted articulated his outline for class to me when I interviewed him the night before I observed his class. In class, he followed his outline; however, he did not cover nearly the amount of material he had hoped (Ted Interview, 2008; Ted Observation Notes, 2008).

Similarly, Chad seemed unconcerned when toward the end of one class he was several slides from finishing his PowerPoint presentation (Chad Observational Notes, 2007). Additionally, all four educators demonstrated flexibility by negotiating with students to change due dates for assignments or to change test scores around a well-argued alternative answer (Alana Observation Notes, 2008; Heather Observation Notes,
This flexibility was another factor that contributed to the relaxed environment.

In summary, there are several characteristics of the relaxed atmosphere that are common in all four of these playful classrooms. There was an informality to the classrooms as students and instructors were on a first name basis and the dialogue in the classroom was more conversational than lecture. Additionally, students and instructors were free to move in the classroom and eat or drink as they desired. Finally, there was flexibility with the content and assignments in the classes. These were all notable aspects of the relaxed atmosphere in these playful classrooms.

A Safe Place

Another strong theme that emerged from the data was the notion of these playful classrooms as a safe place. Safe, meaning students felt comfortable or at ease, enabling them to ask questions and share thoughts they normally wouldn’t discuss in the classroom. One of Ted’s students captures this idea well when he states:

But we get to watch him [Ted], you know, be playful and engage in play and in a sense, because he’s the leader of the class, the leader of the group, we’re welcomed into that. Like, you know, when we make comments, they don’t have to be strictly objective, or they don’t have to follow a certain structure or format. There is still an underlying structure there, but, um, we have more freedom to, I think, wrestle with things in a lighthearted way, you know. Um, like he talks about things that are like, may be typically taboo to talk about in class, and yet we’re all laughing about it. You know, no one feels that uncomfortable, well I don’t ever feel uncomfortable (Ted Group Interview, 2008).
This student indicates that Ted’s playfulness gave students permission to be playful in the way they think about or discuss the topic. One of the defining characteristics of play is that it is not “for real.” This student alludes to this when he talks about making comments that might not follow a certain format or might not be completely thought out. The lightheartedness he refers to is a “non-seriousness” that allows students to talk about “taboo” subjects or topics that are not easy to talk about without feeling uncomfortable. In other words, the playfulness helps create a bounded space where it is safe for students to discuss and explore ideas and topics free from their fears of feeling stupid or being rejected. A woman in Chad’s class echoes this freedom from fear. She states:

He doesn’t make me feel bad if I ask a weird question. He’d still answer it for me, and so now I feel more confident in asking questions and really thinking about the material a little bit more, thinking about it more in depth. So, I can do that in other classes, like I’m more inquisitive now than I used to be. I don’t feel like he’s, he’s rejecting me when I ask a question that might not be the best to ask. So, I think that allows me to ask more questions in my other classes as well (Chad Group Interview, 2007).

The freedom she experienced in Chad’s class empowered her to be bolder in other classes. Additionally, the safety she felt in asking questions also motivated her to think about the course content in more depth.

Alana relied on hands-on activities to teach the content of her courses. A safe environment was critical to enable students to fully engage in the various activities she had planned for them. One student noted, “We talked about being comfortable here,
feeling like, you know, it’s a safe environment for us to be able to really engage in the activity” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). The safe environment also enabled students in Alana’s class to discuss various concepts and disagree. For example, two students piggybacked on each other’s comments stating:

Theresa: You make a comment and it’s open to discussion and I don’t think anyone is scared to say anything.

Joyce: You can say something to someone and no one feels like they’re being attacked. You get a chance to hear someone’s point of view of suggestions. We can give suggestions to each other without feeling like uh; somebody might like it or might not like it. But it’s very open which is a nice thing (Alana Group Interview, 2007).

This freedom to discuss and disagree was especially helpful in the context of Alana’s class because the students were all experienced teachers in K-12 with a wealth of knowledge gleaned from their years in front of the classroom. Alana’s class provided a safe space to discuss and hone their craft.

This sense of safety was also present in Heather’s class. One student articulated a connection between the relaxed environment and a sense of safety. She states, “It was relaxed, like I felt safe there” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Another added to this comment stating, “You could be very open no matter where you were coming from. You didn’t have to be all tense and super formal about stuff; you could just talk” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). The comfortable, informal environment gave the students a sense of openness and freedom to share their minds and even disagree with one another, like the students in Alana’s class observed above. One of Heather’s students observed, “We did not agree on things, but it wasn’t like, combative at all. I was just like we were
discussing our different viewpoints. It was unlike any class atmosphere I’ve ever been in” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). This quote is significant for two reasons. First, it highlights the freedom this student felt to share ideas, disagree with others, and discuss developing ideas. Second, this quote shows that the relaxed, safe environment is very unusual and unique in higher education, or at least in this woman’s experience.

As discussed in this section, all four of these playful classrooms were considered a safe space by the students. This safe place was commonly described as a place free from fear. A place where students felt comfortable asking questions and engaging in learning activities. Furthermore, this space was safe for students to explore and pursue new ideas. Many of the quotes examined from students also showed a strong connection between the relaxed environment and feeling of safety. Feeling safe enabled students to take risks in the classroom. This idea of risk taking in the playful classroom is explored in the next section.

A Place of Risk Taking: Students Pushed Outside their Comfort Zone

As noted thus far in this chapter, the commonality in all four of these playful classrooms is a unique classroom environment that was relaxed and created a safe place for students to be challenged and take risks. As seen in chapter 4, play and playfulness were brought into the classroom in very different ways. Alana brought play/playfulness into her classroom primarily through hands-on activities and use of props like noisemakers. For Chad, play/playfulness was seen primarily in humorous comments and playful dialogues between students and instructor. Ted’s playful classroom was characterized by funny stories and outrageous interactions. Imaginative assignments that draw out the creativity of students, characterized Heather’s playful classroom. Play and
playfulness looked very different in each classroom. It is only with deeper examination that similarities begin to emerge.

In all four classrooms, the educators’ playful approach demanded students take risks. This was probably most obvious in Heather’s class where students had to write plays, read them to peers, and perform plays as part of a composition class. One student noted, “At first, I was uncomfortable getting involved [reading a play]…. But that stretched me in different ways than I’m used to being stretched” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Another student agreed and added, “I was kind of scared to write a play just because it’s something I’ve never done, and like, I just get nervous about that” (Heather Group Interview, 2008). The assignment and exercises Heather gave to students required them to take risks, to try things that they had not done before or that made them nervous or stretched them in new ways.

Ted’s playfulness also served to challenge students to take more risks. In his class, he prodded students to get impassioned when they were arguing their perspective in open debate (Ted Observations Notes, 2008). He stated:

I want you to have a strong opinion about this. I want you to be so convinced of arguing that case, that people who have the opposite opinion, you want to call them names and make fun of them and tell them how stupid they are for not seeing it the way it really is (Ted Video Notes, 2008).

This is not simply a traditional classroom debate, Ted expected students to take a risk and become emotionally involved in the conversations. Students recognized these heightened expectations as they talked about “wrestling with things” or “exploring your ideas” in Ted’s class (Ted Group Interview, 2008). Exploring and wrestling are words
that imply risk taking, and these students were willing to take these risks in Ted’s classroom.

Students in Alana’s classroom also took significant risks. This was most evident in their engagement in non-traditional learning activities like representing their learning with a tinker toy sculpture, sculpting objects with clay, or receiving feedback from their peers (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). Students were not always excited to engage in these activities as noted by Joyce when she said, “I hate the one with the clay” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). Yet, they were willing to take a risk and try things even if they were not excited about an activity. Karen, too, noted she felt safe taking risks and engaging in learning activities in Alana’s classroom, which would be uncomfortable in other settings. She said, “I didn’t feel uncomfortable doing it and a lot of times I would have” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). These quotes demonstrate that students in Alana’s playful classroom were stretched to engage in activities that they were not always excited about and that made them feel uncomfortable. Even so, they took risks to engage in these learning activities.

The primary manifestation of risk taking in Chad’s class was students engaging in conversation and sharing personal stories of their experiences of various psychological disorders that were being studied in the course (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). One student demonstrates this when she stated, “I had three classes with Chad …. And I feel like every class is like a therapy session for me…” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). For one student, simply asking a question was risky, however, they were able to take that risk in Chad’s class. She comments:
Usually, I’m not one to ask too many questions because I just want to sit back and kind of take in the information; write it in my notes. But then, I feel like when I ask a question I’m worried about, ‘Is this going to sound stupid,’ but I’m really curious. But when I push myself enough, Dr. Jones will actually, like, honestly answer the question … He’d still answer it for me, and so now I feel more confident in asking questions (Chad Group Interview, 2007).

This student felt genuine fear in the classroom, but in the environment Chad created in his classroom she felt safe, overcome that fear, and took a risk in asking questions.

Even though there were many overlaps with the educators in their conceptualization of play/playfulness, risk taking is the only commonality in the manifestations of play/playfulness shared by all four classrooms. Students took risks in the classroom by sharing personal stories, asking questions, becoming emotionally involved in classroom assignments, probing ideas, engaging in stretching assignments, and participating in unconventional activities. In this unique learning environment, students felt safe enough to take these risks. However, they were not the only ones taking risks in these playful classrooms.

**A Place of Risk Taking: Educators Going Against the Grain**

According to educators examined in this study, bringing play/playfulness into the classroom was risky for them as well. These risks were different from the risks that students faced in the playful classroom; the risk for educators was of being perceived as outside the academic norm, of being different from their fellow educator. Alana shared about a negative performance review she received that questioned the playful activities
she used in her classroom. As a result, she added more lecture to the remaining of the semester and felt more comfortable behind closed doors (Alana Interview, 2008). Ted too has experienced rebuke for his classroom methods. He recalls:

I've had faculty members come in and ask me to be quiet. They're in another room and they'll say um, ‘I’m going to close the door because it's really loud in the other room, and we’re having a hard time, I'm having a hard time lecturing.’ So I'm like, ‘okay’ [Laughing]. You know there's a message in that, you know, like you shouldn't, this shouldn’t be fun like this. There shouldn't be this kind of noise. You shouldn't be exuberant like this (Ted Interview, 2008).

This is one example of peers questioning Ted’s play/playfulness in the classroom. He indicates there were other occasions when his teaching methods raised questions among other faculty, like the time he received “mixed feedback” from the Dean. Ted recalls:

He’ll say things where he’s trying to affirm that I do well in the classroom … but he’s says it in such a way that I know somebody must have challenged, must have said, ‘Does he ever get anything accomplished in that class because it sounds like they are always laughing and fooling around’ (Ted Interview, 2008).

In bringing play and playfulness into the classroom, these examples illustrate that Ted and Alana have received direct challenges to their teaching methods. Chad and Heather also acknowledged the risks they take in bringing play/playfulness into their classrooms.
Although they did not recount specific instances of questioning from peers or supervisors, Chad and Heather also expressed concerns they felt about their teaching methods. Chad states:

At times I’ve, at times I’ve worried that I’m not legit or that I’m not, I’m not serious enough, that I’m not hard-core academic because it doesn’t seem to fit with hard-core academics. I’ve often wondered what it would be like if certain people sat in my classroom, whether I could really teach the same way. Because I guess for me, I know that some people would just find what I do in my classes to be almost sacrilegious (Chad Interview, 2007).

This statement indicates that Chad perceives his teaching methods to be out of the norm for “hard-core” academia; that he feels the play/playfulness he brings into his classroom does not fit in the context of higher education. Heather too, expressed feelings of not fitting in with other educators in the higher education setting. She draws attention to the fact that she is never elected to serve on committees by her peers. She attributes this to the fact that she says “radical things all the time: ‘Let’s do this’ — ‘how about this’ — ‘is this really what we want to do?’” (Heather Interview 2008). She continues on to state that her way of thinking does not fit into traditional higher education and she feels this is also true of her classroom methods. She notes:

My teacher evaluations are not—they are not high at all with freshmen… I think that they want to have the traditional thing, know what to expect, what to predict. They are taking a lot of risks, and they are uncomfortable with taking risks” (Heather Interview, 2008).
Heather is not simply trying to dismiss poor evaluations; she notes that her evaluations with upper class students are glowing. Her point is that her methods in the classroom are different from what students expect. Her playful classroom is different from the traditional classroom, and so students respond with questioning evaluations because they are not used to taking the kind of risk Heather expects.

The educators in this study identified concerns they have felt bringing play/playfulness into the classroom, whether that is poor performance reviews, questioning from peers, or poor teacher evaluations. A statement by Alana seems to capture the sentiment expressed by all four educators when she exclaimed, “I just felt like I was always out of the norm in terms of stuff that I did” (Alana Interview, 2007). To be out of the norm yet boldly continue on is a risk. With their noisemakers, humorous comments, creative assignments, and outrageous stories; these four educators both take risks themselves and expect risk taking from their students as they bring play/playfulness into their classrooms. They are willing to take these risks because of their understanding of how it positively influences student learning.

**Relaxed and Safe: A Pedagogy**

As discussed so far, the findings show that in all four of these classrooms there was a unique environment with a relaxed atmosphere that made it feel safe for students to take risks. All four educators were striving for this type of atmosphere because they believed it facilitated learning. During their individual interviews, when asked to discuss the connection between play/playfulness and learning, there was only one concept that all four educators listed; the importance of a relaxed learning environment or a safe learning environment. While the concepts of relaxed and safe are not necessarily the same, in
describing their classroom environment these educators indicated a strong relationship between these concepts. For example, Chad states, “I feel like you, you learn better when you’re relaxed and when your defenses are down” (Chad Interview, 2007). In this statement, Chad makes the connection between relaxed and safe by defining a relaxed classroom as a space where your defenses are down. Also important to note in this comment is not only the connection between safe and relaxed, but that he believes these enhance learning.

Alana, too, iterates the importance of a relaxed learning environment and safe place. In discussing her approach in the classroom she states, “You have to create an atmosphere right from the get-go that is real safe, that’s not threatening” (Alana Interview, 2007). The type of atmosphere Alana is striving to create is not only safe, but relaxed. And the purpose of this environment is to maximize learning. She is a big proponent of “relaxed learning,” a concept she’s adapted from a psychologist named Glasser (Alana Interview, 2007). She states, “we know that relaxed learning is the most powerful kind of learning and you’re never going to be more relaxed than when you’ve got done laughing because of a fun activity you did” (Alana Interview, 2007). Play and playfulness in the classroom, according to Alana, help students relax which makes for powerful learning.

The significance of a safe and relaxed environment is also noted by Ted. He states, “A lot of times the sort of more entertaining, playful style engages them and they kind of drop their guard and before you know it they learn something they didn’t intend to” (Ted Interview, 2008). The language of “dropping their guard” is similar to Chad’s statement about “defenses are down.” In both cases, students feel safe enough to engage
or participate at a deeper level than is possible when their guard or defenses are up.

According to these educators, that is when they are able to learn. This is particularly significant for Ted because as discussed in chapter 4, his approach to learning is to shake students out of typical thought processes and patterns of thinking, to create cognitive disequilibrium. For students to dwell in this unstable place, they must feel safe and comfortable.

Of all the educators, Heather is most vocal about creating a classroom space to challenge students to take risk. For her, risk taking is an integral part of teaching and learning. One time she was observed by another faculty member. This person noted the significant number of risks that students took in Heather’s class. Heather recounts:

She just said she is so amazed at how the students are taking all these risks. … as she was talking she said if I wanted to suggest something, it is that you would praise them more for that, you would let them know you are so impressed. As she was talking, I realized I don’t do that. I take it for granted—that’s what learning is…. And I kind of understood what she was saying, but again I don’t praise students for it, that’s kind of my bottom line. If they are going to be in my class and do well, they know they have to do this. You know, because that is what the class is about (Heather Interview, 2008).

This example illustrates that for Heather, risk is necessary for learning. It is her expectation that students are going to take risks in her class, and so it is imperative that she creates an atmosphere where students feel safe and can take these risks.

In describing their pedagogy, a relaxed and safe learning environment was significant for all four educators. According to these educators, this creates a space where students can be stretched, challenged, and experience powerful learning.
The creation of a unique classroom environment was the strongest theme in all four of these cases. This environment was described as relaxed which meant it was informal and casual. Additionally, the relaxed atmosphere was characterized as free and flexible. This relaxed environment felt safe for students, enabling them to take risks like asking questions, exploring ideas, or sharing viewpoints. The educators in each of these classes were purposeful in creating this unique classroom environment and believed that a relaxed, safe environment where students take risk is a central component of learning.

**Play: Aids in Cognition and Personal Discovery**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of play and playfulness in learning in the adult classroom setting. As discussed already, play/playfulness helped create a unique environment that was conducive for learning. Additionally, play and playfulness in the classroom was found to encourage personal discovery and growth as well as aid in cognitive processes such as engagement, retention, and understanding.

**Aiding Cognition**

According to the students and educators, play and playfulness in the classroom aided cognitive processes such as engagement, retention and understanding. Two of the educators cited these benefits to cognition as a primary motivator for incorporating play/playfulness into their teaching. Students in the study indicated that play/playfulness helped engage them in the course material and helped them remember the course content.

Students were engaged in these playful classrooms. This was one of the strongest themes that came from the student data. A student in Ted’s class stated, “I think the benefit of playfulness is that it engages you… I don’t think anyone would fall asleep in one of Ted’s classes” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). The theme of engagement was
evident in the student surveys, focus group interviews, as well as the classroom observations. In the student surveys, over one-third of the students in these four classes described their classroom environment as engaging, exciting, stimulating, lively, not boring, interesting, captivating, or motivating (Student Survey Summary, 2010). Students’ comments demonstrate a range of engagement. On one end of the spectrum, students are conscious and minimally stimulated. Students proclaim, “You stay awake” (Ted Group Interview, 2008), or “I’m not bored” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Progressing on the continuum, students’ attentions are refocused and rejuvenated as seen in this comment, “I start to perk up every time someone starts a story” (Chad Interview, 2007). Towards the other end of the spectrum, students really begin to focus. One of Alana’s students states, “You get that emotional kind of, I don’t want to say attachment, but you just get excited about something and then it makes you want to pay attention. It motivates you” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). These comments from students provide some insight into their perceptions of their engagement in the classroom. Additionally, classroom observations provided significant evidence regarding the characteristic of the playful classroom.

In my observation notes, there are numerous comments illuminating students’ high level of engagement. For Chads class I noted, “dynamic exchange of comments and questions from students” and “most students appear to be taking notes” and “students are engaged and following lecture – providing examples from their personal experience” (Chad Observations Notes, 2007). As described in the case write-up in Chapter 4, students were highly engaged in Chad’s class as evident in the frequent comments and lively classroom discussion (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). This was also true in the
three other classes. In my notes for Ted’s class I wrote, “engaged – Ted asks a question, student responds immediately” and in another place, “students jump into exercise right away - lots of lively chatter” (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). For Alana I noted, “they jump into it right away - started talking about the resources and possibilities of tinker toys.” Or another time when Alana was soliciting help for a demonstration, I wrote, “I need volunteers.’ The women on the left volunteer right away” (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). There are also many examples of engagement for Heather’s class. I noted, “lively conversation from the other group as well – both groups seem to be engaged in what they are working on” (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). These observations indicate that students were listening and following the classroom conversation. They responded quickly to questions because they had something to say: they were thinking and processing the material in the discussion. Similarly students were able to engage in exercises quickly because they were listening, understood the assignment, and had thoughts and ideas pertaining to the assignment. Additionally, the student responses noted above indicate a general attitude of engagement as students were willing to share their thoughts in conversations and participated enthusiastically in class activities. As an observer, I was often surprised at the students’ willingness to participate and expected reluctance as seen in my observation notes. I wrote, “Students jumped in pretty quickly, no groans, conversations were on topic” (Alana Observation Notes, 2008). I expected students to groan or express resistance and found it noteworthy to record the absence of that negative response.

Students were not only engaged with the instructor and the course content, they also engaged one another. This was true in all four classrooms. In Ted’s class I noted,
“Ted asks a question, a student comments, another student comments, then a third; conversation continues between students” (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). It began as a conversation between Ted and individual students, but they began to engage on another. The instructors seemed to welcome this type of interaction between students. As students were conversing about a topic in Chad’s class, I noted, “students talk amongst themselves and Chad jumps in as well, but lets the conversation unfold” (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). Heather and Alana too, encouraged this type of engagement in the class and also created opportunities for more student to student engagement by utilizing small groups.

In Alana’s class, she arranged her classroom so that students were sitting around rectangular tables, 4 to 6 students per table (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). Alana would frequently have students work on activities or talk about concepts with other students at their table. I captured one of these instances in my notes when I wrote:

Lots of talk as people at the various tables are working through the concept with one another – helping each other grasp the concept with more examples. Some appear to get it, some don’t. Alana is talking with one table that has a question while the other tables still hash it out with one another (Alana Observation Notes, 2007).

Small group activities were also used by Heather and Ted in the classroom setting, and there was a high level of student engagement in these contexts. As women worked on their final project during Heather’s class, I noted, “all five women are engaged in the process; contributing comments, working on the computer, number 4 is leaning in and offering more comments” (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). As students dialogued with one another, they weren’t simply sharing their thoughts, but also interacting with their classmates’ ideas. While observing a small group in Ted’s class I noted, students
seem to listen to their classmates sharing – eye contact, nodding, [asking] clarifying questions” (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). The engagement in these classes was clearly seen in both the interactions between students, as well as the interactions between students and the instructor.

High levels of engagement were observed in all four of these playful classrooms. Two instructors, Alana and Chad, acknowledged the connection between playfulness and engagement. Alana commented, “Why do people remember? They remember because you get their attention and how you get their attention? You have to use all kind of peripherals – I put stuff all over the room” (Alana Interview, 2007). Alana believes these playful peripherals, like Koosh balls and noisemakers, help engage students’ attention which facilitates learning. Chad too sees his playful approaches as a means of engaging students in the classroom. He states, “My approach in class is what I call the dumb Columbo approach, where I act like I know nothing. Uh, to get students engaged” (Chad Interview, 2007). For both Alana and Chad, playfulness is a tool to help engage students and make the material more memorable.

Engagement is a strong theme among the playful classes observed in this study. As seen above, there are similarities between the cases in the ways in which students engaged in the classroom. However, each classroom is different with distinct manifestations of play and playfulness resulting in slightly different conceptions of engagement. In Alana’s classroom, engagement is most easily observed through students’ enthusiastic participation in activities, including the prolific use of noisemakers and manipulatives (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). In Chad’s class, engagement is most easily observed through the continuous questions and dialogue between Chad and
the students (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). In Ted’s class, the engagement is characterized by the lively participation in discussion, where comments are emotionally charged and expressed with enthusiasm (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). In Heather’s class, engagement is most easily seen in the investment students make in classroom assignments (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). These investments might be a wrestling with and sharing of their own thoughts or might be an investment in securing props and costumes to help a creative idea come to life in the classroom.

Even though the engagement was manifested differently in each class, the levels of engagement were high. Another finding in reference to cognition was an increase of retention.

Play and playfulness not only enhanced engagement in the classroom; it also aided cognition by increasing retention or aiding memory. For Chad and Alana, a primary reason for being playful in the classroom was to help students remember the course content. Chad states, “One of the things that has always struck me about education when I look back on my own college [experience]; I can’t tell you much about what my profs said in class except for their stories, particularly their funny stories are what I remember most” (Chad Interview, 2007). Remembering funny stories was Chad’s experience as a student, so he incorporates this concept into his teaching. He states, “I believe they are going to remember that; they’re going to get these points if I embed them in something that’s funny” (Chad Interview 2007). Alana too, indicated that playfulness facilitates retention and further explains that the benefits are tied to the emotional engagement associated with play. She claims, “It’s those things that are emotionally
Students indicated that playful stories or activities helped them remember the content of the course. In the written student survey, approximately a quarter of all the students indicated that retention was one of the ways that play/playfulness contributed to their learning (Student Survey Summary, 2010). The way in which it specifically contributed to learning can be seen in comments from the group interviews. One of Chad’s students noted, “His stories are just so memorable” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Another student in Chad’s class also identified the connection between Chad’s funny stories and retention. She stated, “You know it will stick with you because he tells it in a way that you’ll always remember this disorder, because it happens to be about this guy that likes such and such” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Another way that humorous stories aided retention in Chad’s class is through repetition. Several students indicated that they often retold Chad’s stories to their roommates. One student said, “I’m much more willing to retell the information which then solidifies it in my mind” (Chad Group Interview, 2007).

In Alana’s class, students identified the playful activities as an aid to retention. One student contrasted her experience in Alana’s playful class with other courses she’s taken. She states, “I remember so much more from these classes. Like, I’ve taken other grad classes, like the typical, you know, Wednesday night for three hours. I don’t remember anything from those classes, but this sticks” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). A student in Ted’s class alludes to the fact that the positive emotion associated with play aids in her retention. She stated, “With a playful teacher I’m like, ‘Oh, that was fun. I’ll
remember that.’ And I can go back and engage the material in a more jovial, lighthearted way” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). Whether through humorous story, fun activity, or positive emotions, students indicated that play/playfulness contributed to their retention of course material.

The final way that play and playfulness aided cognition in the classroom was by helping students better understand the material. In the surveys, students indicated that play/playfulness contributes to their learning by “adding emphasis and perspective,” or by helping them apply the content, and that they better understand the material because the playful activities and assignments allow them to “experience the course content” (Student Survey Summary, 2010). One student commented, “Ted’s stories lead to clear understanding and learning” (Ted Student Survey, 2008). Another student echoed this benefit of playful stories by stating, “Telling humorous stories that teach a lesson is helpful in learning. It helps [me] to understand the concept instead of just memorizing facts” (Ted Student Survey, 2008).

Alana and Chad noted that play/playfulness help facilitate understanding in the classroom. Alana discusses her thought process when she feels like students are not fully grasping the material. She states, “I need to do something interactive and I need … to have like examples and stories that can make it easier to understand” (Alana Interview 2007). Chad too, uses funny stories to help students understand concepts or other course material. In the interview, he recalled a story of his fear of his inability to start a tiller as an illustration of a particular counseling theory (Chad Interview, 2007). This provided an opportunity for students to better grasp a particular theory as they saw it playfully illustrated through Chad’s story.
Play and playfulness aided cognition in the classroom by enhancing engagement, increasing retention of course content, and by facilitating understanding. These were not only noted by students in these classrooms, but also identified by two of the educators as specific reasons for bringing play/playfulness into the classroom. However, in addition to aiding cognition, play and playfulness enhanced learning in these classrooms by encouraging personal discovery and growth.

**Personal Discovery and Growth**

As noted in the previous section, the primary motivation for bringing play and playfulness into the classroom for two of the educators was to aid cognition. For the other two educators, personal discovery and growth were their primary goals and play/playfulness helped facilitate that process in the classroom. These educators were more interested in challenging the way students think, than in having students master a particular content. Ted states, “The big learning, the huge steps forward, come from accommodation; they come from rethinking and getting a new paradigm” (Ted Interview, 2008). He wants to stretch students beyond familiar ways of thinking into new paradigms or larger frameworks. For Ted, play helps accomplish this by keeping students off balance. He states, “Cognitive disequilibrium is when you, you create in somebody's thinking a piece where they can no longer assimilate it into their previous framework, which means they have to get a more adequate, larger, framework” (Ted Interview, 2008). He talks about how students come into class expecting a familiar, static classroom environment, but through playfulness in the classroom, they find themselves enjoying themselves. He states:
It's not supposed to be lighthearted and friendly and entertaining, it's supposed to be kind of cold and static and controlled and you know, such and such. So, when they find themselves in a different environment maybe you have a chance for some responsible engagement and learning to take place (Ted Interview, 2008).

According to Ted, the playfulness he brings into the classroom shakes students out of familiar ways of thinking and challenges them to see things differently. This shake up occurs by catching students off guard, by surprising them with the unexpected. He compares his approach in the classroom to Jesus’ approach with parables. He pontificates, “The parable structure always had in it the twist in the story... it draws people in. They’ve had points of reference with the characters in the story, and then just when you think the story is going to go one way, it turns” (Ted Interview, 2008). With this twist, students must think differently to make sense of the unexpected turn: and this he sees as real learning.

Heather too, is not primarily concerned with content memorization, but with personal growth. She captures this thought when explaining her views on learning. She states, “I’m not talking about memorizing things for a test or anything. I’m talking about growth as a human being” (Heather Interview, 2009). Heather seeks to facilitate this type of growth by creating playful assignments or learning experiences that force students to think about course material in different ways. Often times these are experiential activities where, for example students carry buckets of water up a hill on campus to relate better to a character in the story that daily needs to fetch water (Heather Interview, 2009). This type of experiential approach is important to Heather because of her view on learning; she is striving for personal growth that involves the whole body, not just the mind. In
speaking about learning she notes, “I like that head, heart, hand thing” (Heather Interview, 2009). The heart, head, hand reference is about involving a person completely in learning, not just by engaging the brain. She states, “Learning is part of growth. You are what you are. Learning means you’re adding something new to that; you’re moving. And that means it’s new from where you were before” (Heather Interview, 2009).

Similar to Ted, the goal is not mastery over a particular body of knowledge, but rather it is the pursuit of learning for the sake of growing: to get students to think about things differently. Heather captures this idea well when she states, “They are suddenly learning in a whole new kind of way” (Heather Interview, 2009).

This idea of learning as growth and personal discovery is also identified by the students in these classrooms. A student in Heather’s class talks about her journey from fear to a point where she was pushing herself. She states:

By the end of the semester though, I was like not afraid at all like, when we were writing the plays and sometimes I was not, like, worried about, ‘I have to do this perfectly; otherwise I'm not going to get an A.’ I wasn't even worried about that. I just wanted to have, like creative and uhh, like see how creative I could get and what was I trying to do and I definitely got more out of it (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

This student discovered a motivation beyond grades. In this playful class, she began to push herself to explore the boundaries of her own creativity. Similarly, a student in Ted’s class noted that the learning in the classroom moved beyond content and was about personal discovery. He states:

Anybody can sit in a classroom and then learn what they have to learn. Then, have that not shape who they, who they are. And I think Ted really tries to get at
how our perception is about things. So that in turn shapes us, and then makes us
look at things and act differently (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

In both of these examples, students identified that the learning in these classrooms shaped
them, changed their perspectives, and caused them to grow.

In summary, both the educators and students were able to clearly articulate
connections between play/playfulness and learning. Two educators indicated that
play/playfulness aid in learning by enhancing cognitive functions such as retention,
engagement, and understanding. The other two educators viewed the purpose of learning
as individual growth or new ways of thinking, rather than mastery of a particular body of
knowledge. Students also identified cognitive gains in engagement, retention, and
understanding. Additionally, they were able to identify how the playful classrooms
encouraged personal discovery and growth. In addition to these benefits of
play/playfulness in the classroom, students identified one other value of play/playfulness
in the classroom. This will be explored in the next section.

**Play: Makes Learning Enjoyable**

Not surprisingly, the data indicated that students enjoy being in a playful
classroom. This isn’t surprising because almost all definitions of play acknowledge that
play involves positive emotional responses such as joy or happiness. In the written
surveys administered to all students in the four classes, over half of the students described
their classroom environment as fun or enjoyable. Words that students used include fun,
enjoyable, lighthearted, playful, and energetic (Student Survey Summary, 2010). In the
group interviews, students also enthusiastically articulated their enjoyment of their time
in class. One of Alana’s students commented, “I liked it because it was totally fun, and it
felt like you are playing, like, you know, it’s like your little kids just playing” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). The content of Chad’s class, psychological abnormalities, is typically not a happy topic and the student seemed to understand the paradox of her comment when she cheerily exclaimed, “He makes abnormalities fun” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). In Heather’s class too, although the content of some of the theatrical plays they were studying was serious and even depressing, students frequently found themselves laughing. One student stated, “We each wrote a play and acted them out and that was fun. I just remember hysterically laughing …. I just remember everyone was cracking up at some of the plays, it was funny” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). In all these examples, students are having fun, but it’s not just fun for the sake of fun: they are learning too. A student in Ted’s class captures this as he describes his classroom experience as, “Engaging, eye-opening, interactive, and fun. I’m learning a lot and enjoying the experience of learning” (Ted Student Survey, 2008).

Although it may be difficult to judge peoples’ level of enjoyment while observing a classroom, it is easy to note laughter. In Chad’s class, because funny comments were a significant aspect of his playfulness, I reviewed video recordings of the class and counted 25 occurrences of significant laughter (lasting more than 5 seconds) during a 50 minute lecture (on average they were laughing once every two minutes) (Chad Video Notes, 2007). A student in Chad’s class indicated that laughter even during exams was a common occurrence because of the funny scenarios he would use in test questions (Chad Group Interview, 2007). A strong indicator of enjoyment was the ubiquitous laughter observed in all of the classes during my observation. My observational notes for all four
classes are littered with comments about laughter (Chad, Alana, Ted, Heather Observation Notes, 2007 & 2008).

Laughter was one indicator of students’ levels of enjoyments. Their comments also revealed how much they liked being in these playful classes. A couple enjoyed their time so much that they didn’t want to leave class or miss class which is not common in higher education. One woman stated, “[Suddenly] it’s 1:40, like, ‘Crap, I have to go to my next class and I don’t want to’” (Chad Interview, 2007). Another claimed, “I would be so sad if I missed class” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). These comments indicate a strong affinity for spending time in this particular classroom. A statement from one of Alana’s students communicates a similar, albeit less enthusiastic, appreciation or enjoyment of class time. In discussing the playful classroom, he states, “You don’t dread coming to class” (Alana Group Interview, 2007).

The data clearly shows that students enjoyed their time in these playful classrooms. This was seen in their comments about having fun in class. Additionally, the observed laughter was another indicator that students were enjoying their time in class. Finally, students’ comments about the quick passage of time or desire for class to continue beyond the allotted time also reinforced the theme that students enjoyed themselves in these playful classrooms. This theme of fun is also one of the shared characteristics of play identified by the educators in this study.

**Play: A Shared View**

The educators examined in this study were the primary agents in bringing play/playfulness into the classroom. Although the manifestations of play in the classroom were very different, there were similarities in the educators’ understandings of
play/playfulness. During the interview, each educator’s conceptualization of play and playfulness was investigated by having them define play/playfulness and then recount an experience that epitomized their understanding of play/playfulness. Each educator had a distinct understanding of play, but there were some commonalities that emerged from their responses. For these educators, play/playfulness was associated with fun, contained elements of the unexpected or spontaneous, involved imagination or creativity, embraced silliness or goofiness, and emphasized relationship or connectedness.

**Fun**

Play and playfulness have a multitude of definitions; however, as seen in chapter two, most all include the idea of fun or enjoyment. For three of the educators in this study, fun was a key element in their understanding of play and playfulness. For the fourth educator, Heather, fun was not explicitly identified as key; however, joy was paramount in her understanding of play and playfulness.

Both Alana and Chad identified fun as part of their definitions of play. For Alana, play is “anything from those kind of non-verbals that I mentioned, to humor, to just having fun.” (Alana Interview, 2007). She identifies several facets of play including fun. Chad shares two of the facets of play that Alana identified, fun and humor. According to Chad, the purpose of play is to bring levity or lightheartedness to a situation. The tools for accomplishing this are “some part of your personality or some part of fun, of humor” (Chad Interview, 2007). In both instances, fun is identified by name as an element of play/playfulness.

Ted, on the other hand, never formally defined play or playfulness in a concise sentence, but rather used four examples, or stories, to communicate his understanding of
As discussed in Chapter four, these four things were playing sports, pranks, parties, and telling stories. In examining his discussion of these four activities, fun is a significant element. When talking about playing basketball he states, “The game became all about those kind of things. You know the crazy pass, the wild fake. I started learning how to shoot the hook shot just because no one shoots it; because it was fun” (Ted Interview, 2008). Additionally, he talks at length about how he played with certain people at certain locations because they were fun to play with. When talking about pranks he recounts, “I’ve done a variation on this one so many times; it’s just so much fun you can’t believe it” (Ted Interview, 2008). In his discussion of parties, he equates a good party with fun when he states, “I like the good, the party, you know what I mean the fun party” (Ted Interview, 2008). And finally with storytelling he definitively states, “I think the telling of a good story is, is a lot of fun” (Ted Interview, 2008). Fun is ubiquitous in his interview as he discusses play and playfulness in his classroom. It is clear from his examples that fun is a key, if not a primary element in his understanding of play and playfulness.

When discussing play/playfulness in her classroom, Heather does not explicitly identify fun as important. In fact, she indicates that it is often difficult for her to have fun, and notes, “I was always serious as a kid” (Heather Interview, 2009). However, in the broader context of her interview, this is more a statement on how seriously she approaches learning, because it is only when talking about learning that she struggles with the word fun. In fact, when discussing learning she identifies joy as a “deeper, better thing” than fun (Heather Interview, 2009). At other times in her interview, she uses the word fun or joy when discussing play. For example, when recounting an
experience that epitomized play for her, she discussed dancing in costumes on the beach and described as “the most pure fun” (Heather Interview, 2009). So with all four educators, fun or joy were significant in the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness. There are several other elements of play that were consistent between these educators.

**Spontaneity**

Spontaneity was a significant element of play and playfulness for all four educators. They all used the word spontaneous at some point in their definitions of play or descriptions of playful experiences. However, within that usage there were two distinct emphases on what they appreciated about the spontaneity. For Alana and Ted, it was primarily about the unexpected and catching people off guard. For Heather and Chad, spontaneity focused on the creativity that emerged in sudden and unplanned ways.

The unexpected and surprise, are key elements of spontaneity for Ted and Alana. In fact for Ted, it was a primary aspect of his definition of play. He states, “Play is where, you know, you’re kind of doing something and the playfulness is in the, the, the unexpected, you know, the surprise, the ... you don’t see it coming, you know, the spontaneous” (Ted Interview, 2008). In the educational setting, both Ted and Alana like to shake their students out of their normal complacency in the classroom. Alana, for example, accomplishes this through the use of props not typical in a classroom setting. She notes, “When they’re walking in I got some upbeat theme going and people are saying, ‘What’s going on here? (Alana Interview, 2007). She wants to keep them guessing about what might be next. She recounts:
I collect all these different noisemakers … and when I have people working in groups and it’s time for them to stop, ‘toot, toot, toot or brrritututute.’ They just laugh and laugh, you know. I always bring something different so they’re always looking to see, ‘Oh what did you bring today?’ (Alana Interview, 2007). Ted not only wants to keep them guessing, but wants to use the unexpected to throw them off balance. He says, “I like that kind of catching them off-guard, confusing them, you know; the surprise kind of thing” (Ted Interview, 2008). This theme was also seen in Ted’s recounting of play experiences; it is the surprise play when playing basketball, or the twist to the murder mystery party, where unexpectedly there are eight of each character (Ted Interview, 2008). Both Alana and Ted enjoy the element of spontaneity in catching people off guard, surprising them with the unexpected.

Another element of spontaneity appreciated by these educators was the creativity that emerged in unplanned ways. For Chad, this most frequently occurred as a witty comment or spontaneous retelling of a humorous story (Chad Observation Notes, 2007). When asked about his comments and stories Chad replied:

> You know I wish I could tell you that I sit around and think about things, ‘Wow! This is what I’m going to do today because this would be really fun to do.’ I don’t. I mean, they’re almost all things that I develop on the spot in class (Chad Interview, 2007).

The significance of spontaneity and the unexpected for Heather, was most evident in her description of the art retreat that epitomized play for her. She noted that the people who organized the retreat, “wanted it to be structure-less” (Heather Interview, 2009). They spent five days together without a formal agenda. Heather recalls that in this
unstructured space, “Things really did emerge in this wonderful way. We had a couple of amazing conversations of like debriefing where we were – you know, that it wasn’t planned – and it was incredibly profound” (Heather Interview, 2009). For both Heather and Chad there is an appreciation of the thoughts, ideas, or comments that spontaneously emerge from a playful space.

The importance of spontaneity in play/playfulness is seen with all four educators. Some appreciate the way spontaneity can catch students off-guard, keeping them on their toes. Others appreciated spontaneity because of the thoughts and ideas that suddenly emerge. In either case, spontaneity is identified as a key aspect of play/playfulness.

**Relationship and Connections**

Relationship and connection were also a common theme in these educators’ conceptualizations of play/playfulness. For Heather, this theme was strongest; in fact it was at the core of her definition (Heather Interview, 2009). However, her conceptualization of play and playfulness was focused on connections and wholeness in general, not only in terms of relationships between students and educator. For the other three educators, they all identified relationship with others as an element of play in the classroom.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Heather’s understanding of play involves connections within the individual (head, heart, hand), with others, with the environment, and with a higher power. At this time, I will focus on the connections with others because this is the type of connections or relationships exhibited by the other educators. Students in Heather’s class identify several ways that Heather nurtures or encourages relationships in her class. One subtle, yet significant way is that she prefers that students
refer to her as Heather in the classroom (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Another student appreciated that Heather has students over to her house for dinner (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Additionally, Heather uses a lot of small group projects in her classes (Heather Observation Note, 2007). These examples may seem insignificant; however, they provide a window to examine the way Heather seeks to put into practice what she states concerning the importance of connection to others in the learning environment.

In defining play Alana states, “I see it in terms of involvement and the belonging feelings with others” (Alana Interview, 2007). There are several ways that she worked to create these “belonging feelings” in her classroom. For example, she devoted time to a name game even though it was the second weekend the class was meeting (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). It was also evident in her classroom arrangement of four to five students sitting around a table facing each other and in class assignments requiring the students at the tables to work with one other (Alana Observation Notes, 2007).

Students in Alana’s class noted that the playfulness they experienced with Alana was connected to their relationship with her. One student observed, “I think good teachers, in order for you to find their class fun and exciting and playful, you need to have some kind of relationship with them” (Alana Group Interview, 2007). It is clear from Alana’s statement and practice that relationships are a key element in her playful classroom.

As noted above, Alana discussed relationship in terms of belonging. This idea of relationship and belonging was also present in Chad’s class. Chad observes, “My playfulness in the classroom is not that kind of playfulness [games or activities]. It’s a very different kind of, uhm, it’s much more embedded within the relationship between myself and the class and that kind of back-and-forth that I can do” (Chad Interview,
The specific back-and-forth that Chad is referring to is a tendency he has to engage individual students in a one-on-one conversation in a classroom setting, much like he does in a therapeutic setting (Chad Interview, 2007). Students also pick up on this highly relational interaction with Chad, as seen in the comment, “I feel like every class is like a therapy session for me” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Students in Chad’s class also brought attention to the sense of belonging they experience in the classroom setting. One stated, “Dr. Jones makes sure that everybody feels like they belong. Everybody has a right to be there, not just a few” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). It is evident that the relational component that Chad articulates as important is experienced by his students in the classroom.

Relationship was also identified by Ted as an important aspect of play in the classroom setting. He states, “I think the better relationship you have with a student or with anyone, you know, the more they know you and you can be yourself, the more effective the play style can be” (Ted Interview, 2008). Ted’s emphasis on relationship was also seen in his examples of play. His prank example centered on relationship and social interaction with the people who were hosting him at the college job fair. His time on the basketball court was more significant when he was playing with particular guys with which he had long standing relationships (Ted Interview, 2008). Additionally, his interactions in class were very relational in that he would playfully tease or make funny comments to students based upon individuality (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). In other words, his comments were specific to people in the class and his engagements with them, not simply funny general comments.
Educators in this study all acknowledge that play and playfulness is embedded in relationships in the classroom. Furthermore, they acknowledge that these relationships are critical and necessary for play to be effective in their classrooms. Relationship is a powerful theme in these educators’ conceptualizations of play and playfulness, particularly in a classroom setting.

**Silliness and Goofiness**

Silliness and goofiness were another theme among the educators in their understanding of play and playfulness. Three educators identify goofy or silly behaviors as an element of their playfulness and exhibit that kind of behavior in their class. The fourth educator, Heather, indicates that she does not perceive herself as silly, yet her playful behaviors can appear to be silly to an outside observer.

Chad and Ted were most vocal about using the words goofy or silly in their descriptions of play/playfulness. One person Chad identified as a role model for him in the classroom was his graduate professor. Chad states:

He wasn’t afraid to be, to be, stupid’s not the right word, to be, uhm, to look silly…. Certainly he would be one of my models that I would use for how I teach class, um, to try to incorporate that kind of same sense of silliness or fun” (Chad Interview, 2007).

He also discusses a psychologist who has written numerous “silly” songs that Chad sometimes will sing in class to help remember various psychological concepts. Referring to his singing in class, Chad states, “Usually I’m not afraid of being silly or looking stupid in class” (Chad Interview, 2007). This is true of Ted also. In his interview, he talked about making “goofy comments” in class (Ted Interview, 2008). In class he
walked around the room like a zombie, impersonated himself as an awkward teenager at a dance, and mimicked one of his students (Ted Observation Notes, 2008). He used the word “goofy” to describe the outlandish basketball plays he would commonly execute (Ted Group Interview, 2007). Finally, he delighted in throwing parties where “people dress up or you have some, you know, you have to write poems and the poems are hilarious or, you know you have some game you’re going to play and the unexpected goofiness of the game by the way people participate” (Ted Interview, 2008). Clearly goofiness is an element of play and playfulness according to Chad and Ted.

Elements of silliness and goofiness are also seen in Alana’s conceptualization of play; although, she did not use those words as frequently to describe this aspect of her play. At one point, she describes the activities that she uses as “silly stuff” that helps students “start feeling really comfortable with one another” (Alana Interview, 2007). Additionally, when discussing manifestations of play outside the classroom, Alana described her family as doing “wild and crazy, funny things at home that people would think we were crazy … you know, singing around the house and carrying on” (Alana Interview, 2007). The most significant evidence of the importance of silliness in Alana’s conceptualization of play, were her actions in the classroom. In class she broke into applause, started cheering, tossed a Koosh ball, and started juggling to name a few of the behaviors that could be labeled silly or goofy (Alana Observation Notes, 2007).

Heather, on the other hand, never used words like silly or goofy when describing her understanding of play/playfulness. In fact, she sees herself as serious rather than silly. She recounts a class when, as part of a group assignment, students asked individuals in the class to carry either a bucket of water or a person up a hill to gain an
appreciation for the daily experience of one of the characters in the book they were reading. Heather recalls:

And so I picked her up and put her on my back and carried her up to the top of the hill and back down. And the way the students, … the way they talked about it, they couldn’t imagine a teacher would do that… But you know—speaking of a sense of playfulness—probably they have this image of what somebody as a professional does and doesn’t do and that I would just—she was heavy—and the fact that I wasn’t being silly about it … And they were talking about that, that I seemed to take it so seriously and it made it seem more important to them. So anyway, the playful thing, I take it really seriously [laughs] (Heather Interview, 2009).

Although Heather indicates she is serious rather than silly, she engages in activities that others may consider foolish or ridiculous. In describing her experience that epitomized play/playfulness, Heather recalls an experience she had at an art retreat. She and four others choreographed and practiced a dance, dressed up in costumes consisting of outlandish dresses acquired from a thrift store, and performed this dance in costume out on the beach. In recalling this experience, she states, “Talk about the highlight of—in terms of the art—doing that dance was like the highlight. Speaking of play—probably the most pure fun” (Heather Interview, 2009). This experience was too significant of an experience for Heather to describe using words like goofy or silly. However, to an outside observer, four women and one man dressed in elaborate dresses dancing on the beach could be considered silly.
Silliness and goofiness are a common theme among the educators. Several of them openly describe themselves in these terms, and all of them exhibit behaviors that demonstrate the significance of these concepts in their understanding of play and playfulness.

**Creativity and Imagination**

The final theme to emerge from the educators’ conceptualizations of play and playfulness was the presence of creativity and imagination. All of the educators identified behaviors that were creative or imaginative such as unique assignments, engaging activities, exaggerated stories, or silly songs. Two educators articulated the significance of creativity and imagination in their understanding of play while the other two demonstrated their creativity, although they did not explicitly connect it to their conceptualization of play and playfulness.

For Heather, creativity and imagination were paramount in her understanding of play/playfulness. In defining play she boldly states, “The imagination seems huge to do with anything I would call play” (Heather Interview, 2009). Her playful approach in the classroom is characterized by imaginative assignments that encourage students to tap into their creativity. For example, while reading passages from a book about a doctor who walks from village to village serving people in Haiti, she had students stand up and walk in place in the classroom (Heather Interview, 2009). Another example is when she assigned students to create an experience to “make what was talked about in this book real to us in this classroom” (Heather Interview, 2009). Even she was impressed with the creativity of the students. She exclaimed, “You think all the groups might do the same thing, and it is like so amazing—the variety …and where [do] they get all this stuff? …
Heather is able to foster this kind of creativity in her classroom. A student notes, “I felt comfortable being creative with her…she made us be creative, not like in a forceful way, but like that stretched me in different ways than I'm used to being stretched” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). As these examples show, creativity is an integral part of play and playfulness for Heather.

Alana, too, discusses the importance of creativity in her conceptualization of play/playfulness, particularly in the classroom context. As discussed in the last chapter, the primary manifestation of play and playfulness in Alana’s classroom is through activities. When asked where she finds these activities, she discusses various resources but then states, “If I'm finding that nothing works, then I invent something. That's one of my gifts, … I'm really good at adapting ideas into that kind of stuff and just coming up with an activity (Alana Interview, 2007). Inventing and adapting are creative processes. Later in the interview, when discussing challenges she faces with her students (who are K-12 teachers), she identifies the ability to invent and implement activities in the classroom as creative. She states, “So a lot of energy is put into helping them understand that they are creative, how to do activities that introduce your lesson and how to do activities that actually have students practicing the information that you're giving them” (Alana Interview, 2007). She notes that it takes creativity to teach through activities and identifies this as one of her gifts. Clearly creativity is a significant aspect of Alana’s conceptualization of play/playfulness.

Ted also acknowledges his creativity. In discussing his playfulness in the classroom, he shares about the option he gives to students to be creative and develop their
own evaluation tool rather than the end of semester exam. He states, “When they come to me and ask for ideas I usually give them the most outlandish kinds of things I can think of or try to be as creative as I can” (Ted Interview, 2008). He acknowledges that he is often creative, particularly in his storytelling which is a significant aspect of his playfulness in the classroom. The creativity is manifest in his “embellishment of the story” because he believes that the storytelling and a core of truth are more important than accuracy (Ted Interview, 2008). Other examples of Ted’s creativity are: inventing new games when he served as a student activities director, devising elaborate pranks, and designing crazy parties (Ted Interview, 2008).

Although Chad does not articulate creativity as part of his conceptualization of play and playfulness, his actions reveal a creative person. His creativity can be seen when he makes up songs to playfully teach a lesson to his children (Chad Interview, 2007), or when he creates funny scenarios in his exams that cause students to laugh in the middle of taking their test (Chad Group Interview, 2007). His imagination is seen when he projects his voice to personify pieces of firewood in order to engage his sons and make chores more enjoyable (Chad Interview, 2007). The connection between creativity and play/playfulness is not explicitly identified by Chad, yet there is ample evidence of the significant role that creativity and imagination play in his understanding of play and playfulness.

Play and playfulness can be defined in many different ways. Although educators in this study had varying definitions and emphasized distinct elements of play/playfulness, they shared some common elements. Fun or joy was significant in everyone’s conceptualization of play. Also, they all agreed there was a spontaneity or
unexpected nature to play/playfulness. Play and playfulness embraced silliness or goofiness, emphasized relationships or connectedness, and involved the imagination and creativity. There were numerous commonalities in the educators conceptualization of play/playfulness. As discussed in the next section, there were also some common elements in the manifestation of play/playfulness in the classroom.

**Play: Manifest through Stories and Activities**

As seen in chapter 4, each of these four educators brought play/playfulness into their classrooms in very different ways: Alana with activities, props and noisemakers; Chad with humorous comments and playful dialogues; Ted with funny stories and outrageous interactions; and Heather with imaginative assignments and classroom activities. It is only with deeper examination that similarities begin to emerge. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, in all cases, risk taking is present as play/playfulness is brought into the classroom. Additionally, in two classrooms, play/playfulness took the form of activities while in the other two classrooms, storytelling was the dominant form.

Play/playfulness were manifest most frequently in both Alana’s and Heather’s classrooms in the form of experiences and activities. A significant element of Heather’s writing class was devoted to the process of designing sets and costumes, and performing plays they had written (Heather Observation Notes, 2007). Furthermore, Heather articulated the importance of experience in the classroom and listed numerous examples of playful assignments such as moving students outside and having them carry heavy objects up a hill to simulate the daily chores of characters in the book they were reading (Heather Interview, 2009). Activities were a key element in Alana’s classroom as well.
Students made sculptures with tinker toys, constructed models using gumdrops and toothpicks, juggled scarfs, and used props to construct a giant neutron (Alana Observation Notes, 2007). Activity is a significant element in her pedagogy and she believes it is an effective way to learn as seen in the comment she makes to the student teachers in her class. She states, “See if you can actually teach the content through activities” (Alana Interview, 2007). For both Alana and Heather, play/playfulness were manifest through activities and experiences.

Chad and Ted also shared a common element of play/playfulness in their classroom; humorous stories. Ted identified storytelling as a significant aspect of his understanding of play. While defining play, he declared, “I think the telling of a good story is, is a lot of fun. And I think I've enjoyed that, both in speaking and teaching and just sort of hanging out, you know, telling stories (Ted Interview, 2008). Chad too, articulates the significance of humorous stories particularly as it relates to learning. In talking about his college experience, he recollects, “I can’t tell you much about what my profs said in class except for their stories, particularly their funny stories” (Chad Interview, 2007). Stories, for both Chad and Ted, draw students into the learning process and engage them in the classroom (Ted Interview, 2008; Chad Interview, 2007). Additionally, stories are used by both Chad and Ted to help illustrate their points and facilitate understanding and retention. This was seen in Ted’s class with his use of movies to illustrate peoples’ conceptualization of evil or with Chad’s story about the tiller to illustrate a psychologist’s theory about behavior (Ted Observation Notes, 2008; Chad Interview, 2007). Their disposition towards story was also evidenced in the numerous
stories both Chad and Ted told during their interviews. It is clear that storytelling was a significant manifestation of play/playfulness in Chad’s and Ted’ classrooms.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I compared the four playful classrooms examined in this study. The strongest theme was that play/playfulness creates a unique classroom environment that is relaxed and feels safe; thus creating an ideal space for students to be challenged and take risks. Educators were intentional about creating this unique environment for the purpose of increasing learning. Two educators indicated that play/playfulness enhances cognitive functions such as retention, engagement, and understanding. The other two educators indicated that play was helpful in facilitating personal discovery and growth which are the aims of learning, rather than mastery of a particular content. Students in this study confirmed that this unique classroom environment enhanced their learning. Specifically, students indicated that play and playfulness made their classroom experience enjoyable and aided cognition by increasing their engagement and retention.

All four educators in this study shared some aspects of their definition of play/playfulness. It was associated with fun, contained elements of the unexpected or spontaneous, involved imagination or creativity, embraced silliness or goofiness, and emphasized relationship or connectedness. Although there was great variety in the manifestation of play/playfulness, the play/playfulness brought into all four classrooms contained significant elements of risk. Additionally, in two classrooms play/playfulness most often took the form of activities or experiences, while in the other two classrooms storytelling was the dominant form.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of play and playfulness in learning in the adult or higher education classroom. This qualitative investigation incorporated a case-study approach and was guided by three research questions: a) what is the educator’s understanding of play and playfulness as it relates to learning in the adult higher education classroom, b) how do students perceive the playful classroom and what meaning does the experience have for them, c) what are the observed dynamics of play and playfulness in the classroom. These questions have provided a focus for the findings presented in the previous two chapters.

In this chapter, I will pursue several objectives in light of these finding and the purpose of this study. First, I will examine significant findings from this study in light of pertinent literature from the field of play and adult education. Next, I will discuss the theoretical framework utilized in this study. Finally I will examine the implications for practice within the field of adult education and suggest areas for further study.

**Ludic College Classroom**

This study focuses specifically on the adult and higher education classroom to center the investigation at the intersection of play/playfulness and learning. The classroom, by definition is a place dedicated to the pursuit of learning. Play and playfulness have been shown to promote learning and discovery with adults in non-
classroom contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). However, this study explored play/playfulness in a context that was focused first and foremost on learning with adults. Given this focus, I will discuss what is core to play/playfulness that promotes learning in the adult and higher education classroom.

The findings of this study reveal two core ways that play/playfulness promote learning in the adult and higher education classroom; play/playfulness create positive affect that makes learning enjoyable, and play/playfulness help create a safe space for risk taking and learning. The educator has the greatest influence on creating a playful learning environment. Therefore, I will also discuss the educators to examine common characteristics and to identify if there are unique conceptualizations or manifestations of play/playfulness in the adult or higher education context.

In this discussion, I utilize the term ludic classroom to identify the unique environment created by play/playfulness in the adult classroom. The term ludic is derived from Latin and is used as an adjective meaning “playful.” The use of this word in the reference to adult play was introduced by Johan Huizinga in his influential book, *Homo Luden: Man the player*. In this book, he identifies the significance of the play element in the evolution of culture and society. More recently, Kolb and Kolb (2010) wrote a paper introducing the concept of a “ludic learning space.” In their case study they identify characteristics of this ludic space and discuss how it fostered learning. The specific space studied was not primarily a space of learning, but rather was primarily a space for play (a weekly pick-up softball game). I will borrow their idea of ludic learning space but not their term because of the different context. Instead, I will define the ludic learning space in the context of a space that is primarily dedicated to learning: the ludic
classroom. Even more specifically, this is a classroom in a higher education context therefore a more exact term therefore would be the ludic higher education classroom or more simply, the ludic college classroom.

I find this term helpful because it connotes more than simply a classroom where play and playfulness are present. It evokes the notion of a unique space that is more than simply a classroom qualified by the adjective of playful. It is a very particular type of space that is different than the traditional classroom. The term ludic college classroom helps identify this space as unique.

**Ludic Classroom: Positive Affect and the Enhancement of Learning**

The students in these four ludic classrooms consistently identified positive emotions associated with their experience in the ludic classroom. As noted in chapter 5, students described their experience in these classrooms as fun, enjoyable, lighthearted, playful, and energetic (Student Survey Summary, 2010). This positive affect was also supported by observations of laughter and smiles that were ubiquitous in these ludic classrooms.

Positive affect is a well-established element of play that is often categorized as fun (Huizinga, 1950), manifest joy (Lieberman’s 1977), inherent attraction (Brown, 2009) or pleasure (Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil, 2005). The findings of this study show that the educators’ conceptualizations of play/playfulness as fun were realized in their classrooms as students acknowledge the enjoyment and fun they experience in these ludic classrooms. However, this positive affect accomplishes much more than simply creating an enjoyable classroom experience; it enhances learning. One aspect of play/playfulness is that it is intrinsically motivated, meaning people play because of the sheer joy or
pleasure that it brings them. Additionally, people seek to continue to play if they are able. Brown (2011) calls this the “continuation desire.” Similarly, Apter describes play noting, “[there is] a tendency to prolong the activity wherever possible” (1991, p. 17).

When play/playfulness are linked to learning in the classroom environment, this intrinsic motivation and continuation desire of play is projected onto learning. People want to learn and continue to engage in learning because it is fun. The concept of this educational benefit of play/playfulness is not new: it is also substantiated in the early childhood education literature (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). Since play is fun and enjoyable, children desire to continue to play, so it becomes intrinsically motivating. Although this conclusion is not new in terms of early childhood education, the findings of this study suggest this educational benefit of play/playfulness also extends to adult learners.

The positive affect not only contributes to learning in terms of intrinsic motivation and continuation desire. It also provides an opportunity for significant meaning making based on positive emotions experienced in the ludic classroom. The role of emotions and affect in adult learning has continued to gain attention in the adult education literature (Dirkx, 2008). In western society with its dualism between body and mind, emotions have often been viewed as something that invade our experience and must be dealt with as an interference to the learning process (Dirkx, 2008). However, Dirkx (2008) notes that engaging in the “emotional work” in a learning context provides the learner an opportunity to “experience and recreate our sense of selves, our subjectivities, our being in-the-world” (p. 90). Emotions are not simply an obstacle to work through, but become the heart of a rich learning experience that connects deeply with the learner. The ludic
classroom fosters a sense of safety, which creates an environment where students can engage in the emotional work needed to make meaning from their classroom experiences. Additionally, play/playfulness evoked significant positive emotions such as joy.

Interestingly, the manifestations of emotions discussed by Dirkx were typically negative emotions such as anxiety, conflict, or re-experiencing pain from the past (2008). The creation of a ludic classroom provides the educator an opportunity to inject the learning space with positive emotions that might also provide an opportunity for the learner to understand themselves and their world in different ways. Positive emotions evoked by play/playfulness may connect strongly to a learner’s sense of self and provide an opportunity for greater understanding. Moreover, the positive affect associated with the ludic classroom may provide the learner with a new set of experiences and relationships that may reshape their understanding and cause positive change. One of Ted’s students discussed her experience in the ludic classroom stating, “It helped me realize, like okay, you can really enjoy life and be disciplined at the same time and be successful in it” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). Her experience of positive affect helped her realize that it is possible and acceptable to enjoy life outside the classroom.

This is one way the concept of a ludic classroom can extend the conversation about the role of affect in adult learning. In a typical adult classroom setting, there is plenty of opportunity for negative affect: the stress of school, the fear of appearing stupid, the potential volatility of group dynamics, etc. The adult learning literature has shown how working through these emotions in the classroom context can provide significant opportunity for meaning making and understanding. Play/playfulness can be evoked in the classroom to bring about positive affect that could also be worked through
to create new meaning and understanding for students. Adult learners may discover or rediscover an aspect of themselves associated with the joy and delight of play.

**Ludic Classroom: A Safe Learning Space**

The second finding of this study is the idea of safety that students consistently noted when sharing their experience of play/playfulness in the classroom. The strong response from students indicates there is a connection between safety and play/playfulness in these classrooms. Do feelings of safety create an environment that promotes play/playfulness or do play/playfulness promote safety? There is certainly a reciprocal relationship; play/playfulness also promote safety in a classroom context, explained by the role of trust in safety and the transformational nature of play, which creates a separate reality from the “real world.”

**Feelings of Safety because Play/Playfulness Build Trust**

To feel safe, people must feel free from danger or harm (Landau, 2000). The type of harm to be concerned about in a higher education classroom is typically not related to physical harm, but emotional harm. According to Palmer (1998), the negative emotion often present in the classroom is fear. He states, “Students, too, are afraid: afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers” (Palmer, 1998, p. 37). In a classroom setting, adult learners are often afraid of others’ responses regarding their thoughts or ideas. Trust is necessary to promote feelings of safety and to reduce the chance of emotional harm in the classroom. When students trust each other, they feel safer and are more likely to share their thoughts and ideas in a classroom context. According to group dynamics expert, David Johnson,
“Group members openly express thoughts, feelings, reactions, opinions, information, and ideas when trust is high (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 122). Play/playfulness in the classroom setting promote trust among students and educators.

Trust also involves risk because the actions of another person can cause you benefit or harm (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). However, to trust someone, you are fairly confident that they will respond in a way that produces beneficial consequences rather than harm. This confidence is developed through an interplay of two distinct behaviors: trusting behaviors and trustworthy behaviors (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Trusting behaviors require an individual to risk harmful consequences by making oneself vulnerable to other people. Trustworthy behaviors are a response to another’s risk taking to ensure that person will experience beneficial consequences (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In addition, trusting behaviors include sharing or being open, and trustworthy behaviors include expressing acceptance, support, cooperativeness and reciprocating disclosures (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Trust can be developed in a higher education classroom in multiple ways, and play/playfulness can accelerate this process.

Engaging in play or playfulness in the context of a higher education context involves risk and can be considered a trusting behavior because it often puts people in a vulnerable position. However, if that risk is reciprocated with trustworthy behaviors of acceptance and support, trust is built. When bringing play/playfulness into the classroom, the educators are providing additional opportunities for trust to be developed. For example, the first time Alana blows a kazoo in her class of adult learners to celebrate a student’s effort, she certainly takes a risk that her students might not respect her as an educator. However, if students reciprocate with supportive and accepting behaviors by
celebrating with their noisemakers, trust is developed. Alana and the other educators in this study accelerated the process of trust building by infusing the classroom with additional opportunities to build trust. But what if Alana’s students did not reciprocate by celebrating with their noisemakers? This question hints at another aspect of play/playfulness that makes it particularly effective at creating a safe environment in the classroom: plays’ transformative power.

**Feelings of Safety because Play/Playfulness Create an Alternate World**

There are multiple ways an educator can create a safe classroom environment. As discussed in the last paragraph, play/playfulness can reduce the potential for emotional harm in the classroom by promoting trust. Another strategy for increasing feelings of safety in the classroom is to lessen the consequences of the emotional harm. The transformational attribute of play/playfulness to create an alternate world or suspend reality, work to dampen the felt consequences of emotional harm in the classroom.

Play/playfulness creates a space that is separate from the real world and operates under its own set of rules. The manner in which I interact with others, and the implications or consequences for my actions, are different in a play space. When the educators in this study utilized play/playfulness in the classroom, they created an alternate reality that is insulated from consequences of the real world. This power of play to transform a space is discussed extensively in the play literature. Huizinga, the most often cited source on adult play, defines play as “standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life … It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules” (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13). Roger Caillois (1958/2001) also identifies the ability of play to create a distinct space that follows a unique set of rules.
He defines play as, “Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance; Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts” (p. 9-10). In the classrooms observed in this study, play helped create a space that was not “ordinary,” that was “separate” from the world outside the boundaries of the classroom.

According to students in this study, these playful classrooms felt different from their typical classroom environment. They felt free to explore ideas, to ask “stupid questions,” to celebrate with noisemakers, to eat snacks, move around the room, and joke with their instructors. The freedom they felt was a function of the ability of play to transform reality, or create an alternate reality. People were aware that the consequences were different in play than they were in the real world. For example, one of Ted’s students acknowledged that rules were different in this playful classroom. She stated, “The laughter is still there and the sense of safety, the fact like, in the sense that I know these people and that they’re just kidding and they’re not really serious (Ted Group Interview, 2008). This student felt safe because she knew they were just kidding, or not serious. She was aware that the rules were different in the playful classroom. Although he has some trouble articulating this thought, this idea of a classroom space with a different set of rules was also communicated by another one of Ted’s students. He stated, “When we make comments, they don’t have to be strictly objective, or they don’t have to follow a certain structure or format. There is still an underlying structure there, but, um, we have more freedom to … wrestle with things in a lighthearted way” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). There are different rules of engagement in the ludic classroom, and this
enables students to take risks, wrestle with ideas, or challenge themselves in ways they typically did not in other classrooms.

For many students in this study, this realization of an alternate reality granted students permission to try something in a playful context that they might not try in ordinary life. This feature of play is explained: “Play, by its very nature, is a little anarchic. It is about stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. It is about bending rules of thought, action, and behavior” (Brown, 2009, p. 193). This quote not only acknowledges that in play you step out of normal life, but it also indicates that in this alternate reality, there is a culture of pushing boundaries and attempting things you wouldn’t normally try. In a play space, the participant is not only allowed to try something they would typically do without fear of predictable consequences, the play space encourages them to try something beyond what they might normally do: to push the boundaries, to act out of the ordinary, to take a risk. This may be what empowered Alana’s students to respond to her kazoo with a cacophony of sound from their noisemakers without fear of looking stupid.

There are several reasons students felt like they could take more risks in these ludic classrooms. First, as mentioned above, play/playfulness helps foster a space that feels safe for students. In this safe place students felt supported and were willing to take a risk to ask questions, share thoughts, and explore ideas that might not be completely formed. Second, the play activities or playing in the classroom models risk taking because it requires students to engage in activities they may not be 100% comfortable with. For example, they may have been asked to create something with clay and found that even though they weren’t comfortable with the activity, it did not harm them to
participate. This positive experience with risk in play can transfer to other areas of the classroom. For example, they may be able to participate in a classroom discussion because they now have experience that reinforces the notion that risk can produce positive results. In other language, taking a risk and stepping out of their comfort zone to engage in play, empowers them to step out of their comfort zone to take risks in classroom discussions.

Another possible way that play/playfulness promote risk is once again connected to the transformational attributes of play. As discussed previously, play often creates a space that is distinct from the real world. There are different rules and participants are clear that the space they are in is set apart from the real world or what is typical. And so, when an educator creates a ludic classroom space, it feels very different from other classrooms, and students begin to act and behave according to the new rules of this particular classroom space. For example, one of Heather’s students noted the distinct feel of the playful classroom. She stated, “It was unlike any class atmosphere I’ve ever been in” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). There are different rules of engagement in the ludic classroom, and this enables students to take risks, think in new ways, or challenge themselves in ways they typically did not in other classrooms.

This notion of a distinct learning space created through play is also captured in the early childhood education literature. The idea of this distinct learning space is called “non-literality” or at other times is captured in the concept of play flames. These terms refer to the fact that play events are separate from everyday experience much like a frame serves to set an image apart from the wall on which it is hung (Johnson, Christie, Wardle, 2005). Within these frames, “the usual meaning of objects, actions, and situations are
ignored” and “children adapt an as-if stance toward reality that allows them to escape the constraints of the here and now to experiment with new possibilities” (Johnson, Christie, and Wardle, 2005, p. 15). It may be that this same process is at work in adult learners allowing them to experiment, explore, and take risks with learning within the distinct boundaries of these frames. In a statement, Heather’s student seems to affirm this. She stated,

I like the way we explore ideas. When I think of exploring I think of like, when I would go play in the rocks, like that's what I felt the most playful. It was going out and just ‘what's behind this rock?’ Like exploring ideas in a classroom I think is where playfulness ties in. It's not like there's a risk if you explore something wrong (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

This quote highlights the freedom that is felt in the playful classroom to take risk in exploring thoughts and ideas within the play frame. The risks or fear associated with being “wrong” is lessened because the rules are different. The consequences of being wrong are diminished because within the play frame, wrong is defined differently or may not exist. Like Heather’s student hinted at, is it even possible to explore something wrong?

There is clearly a strong connection between play/playfulness and safety. As I have just discussed, I think that play/playfulness promote feelings of safety in the classroom because it accelerates trust development and because of the transformative nature of play to create an alternate reality. However, to engage in play/playfulness in the first place, students must feel a certain amount of safety. According to the findings of this study, the relaxed, comfortable environment was significant for the students. It may
be that these factors (and others) contributed to students’ feelings of safety that enabled them to engage in play/playfulness. Even if this is the case, I believe that play/playfulness enhanced and amplified these feelings of safety in these classrooms. The importance of feeling safe in the adult learning context is well documented in adult education literature.

Fear and/or anxiety in the adult classroom hinder learning. Palmer discusses the negative effects of fear in the classroom. He states, “Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, ourselves” (Palmer, 1998, p. 36). For Palmer, learning involves relationship and connection; so, fear’s ability to distance students, subjects, and educators shuts down learning and teaching (Palmer, 1998). Similarly, Kolb & Kolb (2005) discuss the importance of creating a space that is “hospitable” for learning. Kolb indicates that this space must have a balance of challenge and support and notes that historically, higher education is successful in providing challenge, but weak in the area of providing support (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). There is wide agreement on the importance of a learning space that feels supportive, where fear and anxiety are diminished. This study indicates that play/playfulness in the adult classroom creates a space that feels safe and is therefore conducive to learning. As noted by a student in Heather’s class, “The atmosphere did, it helped ease fears…. I definitely think it helped me learn more” (Heather Group Interview, 2007).

It is important to note that there are adult educators who challenge this notion of safety or an alternate reality in the classroom context. bell hooks (1989) discusses her movement away from valuing enjoyment or safety in evaluating her teaching. She notes that her style is confrontational and students do not necessarily enjoy her classroom
experience because she works to encourage students to find their voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or feel at risk (hooks, 1989). This, she asserts, is better preparation for students because it is more consistent with the realities of the real world. She states, “Feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world ‘more rather than less real’” (hooks, 1989, p. 51). Safety and a classroom that feels distinct or separate from the real world are a dis-service to students according to hooks because students need to be able to effectively operate in a world that feels hostile rather than safe. How is it that the elements students identified in this study as significant in contributing to their learning are the very elements that hooks problematizes in a classroom setting?

These divergent perspectives are better understood when considering the philosophical underpinning of the educators. hooks’ approach to education is shaped by radical and critical philosophies of adult education. Radical and critical philosophies of adult education examine socially accepted assumptions and power structures to challenge the status quo and encourage social change (Elias and Merriam, 2005). In contrast, all four educators examined in this study embrace a humanistic philosophy which focuses on the individual growth and holistic development of students. It is expected that various philosophical perspectives of education would embrace different pedagogies. Radical and critical educators are seeking to challenge and change the world, so creating an alternative reality through play might mask the very issues they are seeking to address. Additionally, creating a classroom that feels safe may be counter-productive for educators who are encouraging students to respond in situations that feel unsafe.
However, for this study, I was not specifically addressing issues of power, but rather was trying to better understand the role of play/playfulness in learning in the adult and higher education classroom. In choosing a case study approach, I committed to finding educators who best exemplify play and playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom. It is interesting to note that all four educators approached education with a humanistic philosophy. It may be that play and playfulness are best suited as a pedagogy for educators with a humanistic philosophy. Certainly the benefits identified in this study are humanistic in terms of fostering individual growth and development of the students. However, it is beyond the scope this study to make conclusions about play/playfulness as a pedagogy as it relates to various philosophies of education. It may be that play/playfulness can be utilized with educators who embrace a radical and critical philosophy, but the forms of play/playfulness and what they produce in students may be very different than the results seen among the humanistic educators of this study. The influence of educational philosophy on play/playfulness in the classroom would be an interesting topic for future studies.

Similarly, further research is warranted in examining play/playfulness in the classroom in relationship to issue of power between educators and students. As discussed earlier, the educators shaped the qualities of play/playfulness in each of the four classrooms observed. They had the power and control to establish a particular classroom environment and to establish the types of play/playfulness manifest in the classroom. It may be that certain students who aren’t playful or whose playfulness manifest differently, we marginalized by the play/playfulness brought into the classroom by the educator. For example, students with quick wit would have more influence in Chad’s classroom, while
students who excel at hands-on-activities would be esteemed in Alana’s class. Play/playfulness are different for everyone and are an extension of an individual’s personality. The play/playfulness brought into the classroom by the educator may serve to amplify their personality and therefor their power in the classroom. On the other hand, play/playfulness may serve to level the playing field by empowering the students to have greater influence in the classroom. An example of this would be the opening vignette in Chad’s case where a student was able to tease him because of the playful atmosphere established in his classroom. In this example, playfulness enabled the student to relate and interact with the educator more as an equal thus diminishing the power differential. As noted above, issues of power in the playful classroom were not a focus for this study but would be an interesting topic for future study.

The Educators Who Dare Bring Play/Playfulness Into Their Classroom

Of course this is a playful heading; however, as the findings indicated, there were risks for the educator in bringing play/playfulness into their classroom. These risks centered on feelings that their play/playfulness in the classroom was not “serious” enough for academia. Even so, they chose to bring play/playfulness into their classrooms and without these educators, the ludic classroom would not exist. It is therefore important to focus the discussion on the educators who made the ludic classroom possible. This discussion is particularly significant for educators who may be interested in bringing play/playfulness into their classrooms. They need to have an understanding of the educator’s role in bringing play/playfulness into the classroom. Additionally, they need to understand the characteristics of educators who are successful at bringing play/playfulness into their classrooms. In this section I will examine common
characteristics of these educators. They are passionate about teaching, are relational and care for students, are experienced educators, are willing to take risks, and are playful individuals outside the classroom context. I conclude this section by revisiting the educators’ conceptualizations of play/playfulness in light of the play literature.

**Passionate About Teaching**

The four educators expressed an excitement and zeal for teaching. For example, Chad claims, “It really is fun. Certainly not every day is a great day, [but] just the energy that occurs in the classroom, it’s hard to replace” (Chad Interview, 2007). They did not simply enjoy the classroom because of energy they experienced; their focus was consistently on student learning. Similarly, Ted was recently awarded an “Excellence in Teaching Award” and while accepting the award, he stated, “I was grateful to hear that students felt like they had experienced significant learning in my classes” (Miller, 2012, p. 15). He is not primarily focused on entertaining or students enjoyment in the classroom, but is concerned most about promoting learning. This focus on learning and growth were true of the other educators as well. It appears that this is a significant factor for the educator to assess when considering bringing play/playfulness into the classroom. The play/playfulness must ultimately be for educational purposes; otherwise it becomes a distraction to learning or potentially demotivates students. In the focus group from Ted’s class, several students commented on play in a classroom context that was not helpful for learning. One student reminisces:

I had a teacher like that in high school that was just joking, good times… I didn't learn anything because he was just like the cool teacher who fed us the right
answers and like everybody loved him and got an A in his class, but it wasn’t an educational experience (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

Another student in Ted’s focus group agreed that play/playfulness in the college classroom does not always promote learning. He stated:

I had a professor in college who only told crazy stories and I felt like it was the biggest waste of my time and my tuition money … I would have been better off just reading the book because he wasn't relating it back to the material. It was just like story hour … I wasn't learning anything (Ted Group Interview, 2008).

These comments from students indicate that in the classroom context, their ultimate goal is to learn. If they don’t see the connections between play/playfulness to their learning, then they see it as a distraction to learning. Alana recalls that this was the case for one of the students in a past course.

I remember the guy that sat in the front of the class who said, ‘Why do we have to do this dumb stuff anyhow? I'm here to take my course and get my credit because I can't get my pay raise without it. I don't understand why you are having us do this stuff’ (Alana Interview, 2007).

For educators who choose to bring play/playfulness into their classroom, it seems important to help students make the connections between the play/playfulness and learning. In response to the comment from the guy who wanted the pay raise, Alana commented that she is now more explicit in articulating the connections between her playful activities and learning. At other times, students might be able to pick up on the connections. Students in Ted’s classroom who spent quite a bit of time discussing play/playfulness that did not promote learning, were quick to contrast Ted’s approach
which served learning. One of Ted’s students stated, “And his playfulness and stories were in a context that was grounded and going somewhere, um, purposefully” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). As Knowles (1984) pointed out, adult learners want to understand why they need to learn what is being taught to them. Similarly, it appears that adult learners also want to understand how their classroom activities connect to the learning process. The findings of this study indicate that it is of primary importance that any play/playfulness brought into the classroom would ultimately be for the purpose of enhancing learning. Furthermore, educators should have a clear understanding of the reasons for incorporating play/playfulness into the classroom and might consider sharing that information with their students to ensure they are making the connections between play/playfulness and learning.

**Relational and Care for Their Students**

The educators in this study were not only passionate about teaching; they were also very relational and cared about their students. In caring for their students, these educators treated their students holistically and demonstrated an interest in relating to their students on a personal level. For example, students in Chad’s class commented, “I know his favorite ice cream is moose tracks” and “his love for hockey, and going to Canada to buy chicken McNuggets” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). They indicated that knowing these things about their teacher, “makes him more human” and “very genuine” (Chad Group Interview, 2007). Similar comments were made by students in the other three classrooms.

These educators were not only genuine; they demonstrated care for their students. An example that epitomizes this is from one of Heather’s students. She recalled a time
when Heather noticed she was cold in a night class and after a break Heather returned with a cup of tea for the student that she had brewed in her office. This student was somewhat surprised “that she actually cared and even noticed” (Heather Group Interview, 2007). Heather and the other playful instructors demonstrated care for the students as a whole person, not simply focusing on their academics. That is why a student in Chad’s class can say, “I feel like every class is like a therapy session for me…” (Chad Group Interview, 2008). Or a student in Ted’s class can comment, “He really tries to get at our perception of things which in turn shapes us and then makes us look at things, and act differently” (Ted Group Interview, 2008). The educators are not just interested in students mastering course content, but really desire for them to grow and develop in all dimensions of their lives.

What is the significance of the educators’ relational, caring, holistic approach in terms of play/playfulness? I believe that incorporating play/playfulness is a means by which these educators express their caring, holistic, relational approach. First, at its core, play is fun; it brings happiness and joy. Typically, we wish for good things like fun and joy for the people we care for. Bringing play/playfulness into the classroom may be a means for the educators to further demonstrate their care for their students by making their learning environment more enjoyable. Second, play/playfulness pulls people into a holistic experience. The play/playfulness seen in the classrooms in this study provided opportunities for students to engage mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically. It may be that these educators chose to bring play/playfulness into their classroom as a means of engaging their students more holistically, or it may be that the educators engaged the students in play/playfulness and discovered that it engages their students
more holistically. Either way, there is a strong connection between play/playfulness and holistic engagement in the classroom setting.

Third, the findings revealed that there is a connection between play/playfulness and relationships in the adult and higher education classroom. Relationship and connections were a characteristic of play/playfulness shared by the educators in their conceptualizations of play/playfulness. Additionally, the idea of enhanced engagement was one of the strongest themes to emerge from the data concerning students’ perceptions of the ludic classroom. I believe this engagement in the ludic classroom moved beyond cognition in terms of learning. That is, the engagement element of the ludic classroom was not primarily about students’ abilities to focus on course content, but it was also about engagement in a dynamic group. Students not only engaged in course content, but they engaged with one another and the educator. This was noted in findings and seen in the observational data as students questioned and dialogued with one another, worked on projects and activities, and teased each other. The types of engagement fostered by the ludic classroom served to nurture relationship and connections between the students and educator. In the scope of this study it is impossible to determine if play/playfulness evoked the caring, holistic, relational elements in these classrooms, or if those elements were a necessary prerequisite to engage in play/playfulness in the classroom. I imagine it is some of both. However, the significance is that there is a strong connection between play/playfulness in the classroom and a caring, holistic relational educator.

These attributes of the ludic educator are similar to the adult education literature on authenticity. Cranton (2004) identifies five dimensions of authenticity: self-awareness, awareness of others, relationships with learners, awareness of context, and a
critically reflective approach to practice. Overlap between these ludic educators and dimensions of authenticity occur to some degree in each of the five dimensions. Properties shared by ludic educators and authenticity categories are as follows: a) self-awareness: genuine, brings self into classroom, passionate for teaching; and b) awareness of other: interest in students’ lives and needs outside the classroom; c) relationships with learners: caring for students, helping students learn, dialogue, sharing self with students; d) awareness of context: knowledge of discipline, subject area, content of teaching; awareness of classroom environment; institutional norms and expectations; and e) critical reflection: ludic educators demonstrated some critical reflection of the self, others, relationship and context (Cranton, 2004).

The ludic educators did not demonstrate all five dimensions of authenticity equally, but there was significant overlap. It could be that play/playfulness are a means of expressing authenticity in the classroom context. The play literature affirms this notion of play’s ability to reveal the core of a person (Schiller as cited in Sutton-Smith, 2001). This notion is also seen in a quote from Plato’s Republic, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation.” The findings from this study suggest that play/playfulness might be a means for students to manifest their authenticity in a classroom context.

**Have Extensive Teaching Experience**

In addition to a passion for teaching and a caring, relational approach, the educators in this study have extensive teaching experience. Between the four educators, there are over 105 years of teaching experience. There are several ways this wealth of classroom experience might influence the process of bringing play/playfulness into their
classroom. First of all, these educators are likely to be very familiar with the content they are teaching and can therefore devote more effort in honing their playful pedagogy. Chad’s recollection of the semester when he taught three sections of the same course and was able to dial in his “routine” affirms this notion that the educators’ experience allows them to hone their playful stories or activities in the classroom. Significant teaching experience has provided these educators time to experiment and explore with playful activities and approaches in the classroom. Secondly, their extensive teaching experience has likely emboldened them to bring play/playfulness into their classroom. This is purely speculative; none of the educators commented that their years of experience had empowered them to be more playful in their classroom. Similarly, none of the educators indicated that they are more playful now than they were when they first started teaching. However, it would seem that more teaching experience leads to more confidence in the classroom. Additionally, more experience provides greater opportunity to be promoted through the ranks of faculty and possibly achieve term tenure. Therefore, it is possible that these educators felt greater freedom to bring play/playfulness into their classrooms because of their experience. This relationship between amounts or styles of play/playfulness in relation to teaching experience is an area that could be further explored in future studies.

**Willing to Take Risks**

These educators took a good deal of risk by bringing play/playfulness into their classrooms. Three of the educators noted they had received comments from peers or supervisors that questioned their playful classroom approach. All of the educators expressed feelings of fear or concern about fitting into traditional academia with their
playful classrooms. Given these potential negative consequences, why take the risk to bring play/playfulness into the classroom? I think there are two reasons. First, because they believe the potential gains outweigh the potential losses. And second, because they can’t help but be playful in the classroom because it is a part of their personality.

Risk is often defined as the potential for loss or peril. However, this definition of risk which has been influenced by the insurance industry is not true to the origins of the word (Cline, 2003). A truer understanding of risk in the context of education is similar to the use of risk in the financial world: the potential for gain or loss (Cline, 2003). It appears that the educators in this study believed that the benefits their students experienced through play/playfulness in the classroom was worth any losses they may personally incur because of their playfulness. This is substantiated in some of their comments. For example, Alana stated, “We know that relaxed learning is the most powerful kind of learning. And you're never going to be more relaxed than when you’ve got done laughing because of a fun activity you did” (Alana Interview, 2007). Or Chad who claims, “I feel like it's [play/playfulness] a way to help kids love learning, and it's critical for engaging them in a topic” (Chad Interview, 2007). These are just a couple of comments made by the educators in this study that illustrate the significance of play/playfulness for them in promoting learning. In many ways this connects to the first characteristic I discussed about the educators; they are passionate about student learning. Therefore, the gains in learning for the students in these classrooms vindicate the potential loss in terms of reputation or questioning from peers and administrators in academia.
The second reason I believe these educators take a risk to bring play/playfulness into their classroom, is because it is a significant aspect of their personhood. They are playful people and because of their approach to teaching, it is challenging for them to leave their playfulness at the door as they enter the classroom. It is risky to be playful in the classroom, but it is a risk they seem willing to take because to not be playful would be to suppress an aspect of their personality. This idea of play/playfulness as an aspect of the educator’s personality is discussed further in the next section.

**Playful Outside the Classroom Context**

The educators in this study engage in play/playfulness in their daily lives. Their interviews were full of instances where they engage in play or playfulness: Ted with his pick-up basketball games, Heather with her art retreats, Chad with his silly interactions with his boys, or Alana as she sings and dances her way around her home. These educators have a disposition towards play/playfulness. Lieberman (1977) supports this notion and indicates that playfulness can be conceptualized as a personality trait. Specifically, this meant that she was able to identify behavioral indices that would allow an observer to rate individuals along these traits (Lieberman, 1977). Due to the selection process for this study, the educators who were chosen have playful personalities. This is significant because these educators were not bringing play/playfulness into the classroom simply as an educational technique, but rather as an extension of their personhood. This is connected to the previous section where I discussed these educators’ relationships and authenticity in the classroom. These educators were not distant or disconnected from the students in their classroom. As a result, students felt like they knew their teacher on a
personal level. If playfulness is part of these educators’ personalities, then students will also experience this attribute of their instructors in the classroom context.

In other words, these educators’ classrooms were playful because these educators were playful people. One aspect of the findings that support this notion of playfulness as a personality trait is the diversity of the manifestations of play/playfulness in these classrooms. The findings revealed that the manifestations of play/playfulness were quite varied from classroom to classroom. Personalities vary greatly from individual to individual, and so it is understandable the play/playfulness of each of these educators would manifest itself differently in each of these classroom contexts. For the purpose of this discussion on shared characteristics of the ludic educators, it is important to note they have playful personalities that shape their behavior outside of the classroom as well as in the classroom.

Educators who are considering incorporating play/playfulness into their classroom should carefully consider this finding. Play/playfulness can take many different forms because it is tied to the personality of the educator. This means that the way Alana brought play/playfulness into the classroom might be difficult for Ted to duplicate, because their playfulness is different just as their personalities are different. Additionally, a significant aspect of play/playfulness in the classroom context centers on authenticity of the educator. Therefore, educators should be cautious about duplicating play/playfulness from another educator. The play/playfulness must be their own. Chad alluded to this idea when he talked about the effectiveness of the “Wally the Student” routine that his graduate professor utilized; yet, Chad had never tried it in his own class even though he could not articulate why (Chad Interview, 2007). I am not suggesting
that all educators must be novel in creating opportunities for play/playfulness in their classroom. Rather, if they adapt play/playful ideas from other educators, they need to make sure that the play/playfulness is consistent with their own personality and style of play/playfulness. Helping educators identify their style of play/playfulness would be an excellent area of further study. A potential framework for developing a model evolves out of the following discussion.

**Defining Play/Playfulness: Consistencies and Deviations**

Thus far, the discussion on educators has focused on characteristics they all shared. Now, I focus on their shared conceptualization of play/playfulness. As revealed in the literature, play has a multitude of definitions and can take a variety of forms. Since play/playfulness has not been studied in the adult and higher education context, it is important to examine the educators’ conceptualizations of play/playfulness in light of the play literature. A comparison of these elements of play/playfulness with the characteristics of play/playfulness identified in the literature may provide additional insight into the specific nature of play/playfulness in a learning setting.

The educators had significant overlap with one another in their conceptualization of play/playfulness. All of them identified fun, spontaneity, imagination or creativity, silliness or goofiness, and relationship or connectedness as part of their understanding of play/playfulness. Several of the elements of play/playfulness identified by the educators are seen throughout the literature. Fun, imagination or creativity, relationship or connection, and spontaneity are well documented in the play literature (Huizinga, 1950; Brown, 2009; Lieberman, 1977; Apter, 1991; Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil, 2005). Although the words and conceptualizations of these play elements may vary slightly
between authors, the educators’ use of these terms are similar to the literature. In other words, the educators’ conceptualization of these elements of play/playfulness is consistent with the play literature. However, there was one aspect of the educators’ definition of play/playfulness that did not readily correspond with the play literature. Silliness or goofiness was identified by the educators in this study as a significant element in their understanding of play. Silly or goofy was used to describe the crazy, ridiculous and sometimes foolish actions in the classroom. However, the literature on play does not precisely include these terms in their conceptualizations of play, which raises the question: Is this some new element of play/playfulness that is somehow unique to the higher education context? However, additional reflection reveals some connections to the literature. One way to make sense of silliness or goofiness is through Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of flow where he identifies the element of “loss of self-consciousness.” As a player’s self-consciousness is diminished, they feel free to express themselves in non-normative ways. They can act crazy, ridiculous, or foolish and they feel this freedom because they are less concerned about what others are thinking because they are less self-conscious. Brown (2009) also identifies “diminished consciousness of self” as one of the properties of play. Brown’s conceptualization acknowledges a diminished, not an eliminated consciousness of self. This indicates that individuals will feel more freedom to act silly or goofy, but may still have limits. Chad acknowledges this limit in his interview when he discussed whether or not he was going to push himself to sing silly songs in class. He stated, “It really is that whole sense of, how foolish do I want to look?” (Chad Interview, 2009).
The study by Yarnal and Qian of older adults also captures this idea of silliness or goofiness. In their definition, they identify clowning as one of the attributes of playfulness. Silliness and goofiness are certainly behaviors associated with clowning around and affirm this characteristic identified by the educator. Furthermore, the educator who was the most silly or goofy, Ted, also included teasing in his understanding of play/playfulness which Yarnal and Qian (2011) also discussed in their definition of playfulness.

Another way to make sense of silliness or goofiness is through Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of frivolity. In this rhetoric, play is seen as the activity of the foolish and is pursued for its own sake. Historically, this rhetoric is the antithesis of the Protestant work ethic that dictated all activity must be productive (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Similarly, silly or goofy behavior is typically viewed as purposeless or as a distraction to serious business. This was a rhetoric that I originally did not think would be relevant to this study because it seemed contradictory to the clear purpose of learning in the higher education classroom. However, the data showed otherwise. It is important to note that this rhetoric includes examples that on the surface appear purposeless, but serve a function at a deeper level. For example, Sutton-Smith includes court jester and fools in this rhetoric, but points out that in their tom-foolery, these figures often presented a playful protest to the order of their society (1997). Similarly, the silliness or goofiness of educators in this study may appear pointless at first glance, but serve an underlying purpose.

In a learning context, there may be a benefit to having the freedom to act silly or goofy. In learning we are pushing the boundaries of what we currently know. Just as it is
acceptable to act goofy, so it is acceptable to propose new and outrageous ideas in this safe environment. In fact, the silly or goofy behaviors can create patterns of thinking that can model for students the process of thinking outside the box. Therefore, the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness as silly or goofy affirms the notion presented by Sutton-Smith that there may be a purpose to these seemingly meaningless attributes. Alana also affirms this idea of purpose behind the seemingly purposeless, when she states, “Everything I'm doing here is on purpose” (Alana Interview, 2007).

The silliness and goofiness identified by the educators also fit into the conceptualizations of play/playfulness presented in the play literature. As noted before, the play literature is broad, and so it not surprising that educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness fits into the existing framework. However, the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness did not include several significant elements commonly included in the play literature.

**Missing elements of play/playfulness.** The educators in this study shared a common definition of play/playfulness that included fun, relationship or connectedness, silliness or goofiness, spontaneity, creativity and imagination. The fact that these aspects of play/playfulness were shared by the educators indicates that they are a significant element of play in the context of learning. As seen in the previous paragraphs, the play literature affirms these attributes as typical elements of play/playfulness. There are however, several attributes of play/playfulness discussed in the literature that were absent in the educators’ definitions of play. These are three of the more notable missing attributes: play is typically entered into voluntarily or freely, play is unproductive or pursued for its own sake, and play creates an alternate world and suspends reality.
The play literature contains numerous references to the notion that play is entered into voluntarily, freely, on one’s own volition. Huizinga (1950) uses the term “free activity” to get at this idea, and Caillois (1958) identifies it with the phrase “non-obligatory,” while Brown (2009) simply states it is “voluntary.” In all of these cases, the idea is that the player willingly decides to enter into play by their own choosing.

However, the educators in this study did not emphasize this aspect of play/playfulness in their definitions. One way to make sense of this oversight is to consider the context. In a higher education classroom, one could debate if students really feel like they are freely choosing to be present or engage in the activities presented by the teacher. On one hand, they choose to pursue an undergraduate or graduate degree within whatever field they desire. Similarly, they are often able to choose from a variety of classes or sections to meet their graduation requirements. In my experience, students feel obligated to attend class and participate in classroom activities. In fact, in some higher education courses, attendance and classroom participation is built into the syllabus and has implications for grades.

The educators in this study are experienced teachers and are likely aware of the tension of voluntary vs. obligatory participation in the classroom. For the educators, it is likely a moot point. Students are in their classroom and the educators have chosen a particular teaching style. In the context of this study, the educators created a ludic classroom. In defining play/playfulness, they do not focus on the voluntary nature of play/playfulness because it is not significant in their context. They have a captive audience and like any classroom activity, whether it is playful or not, some students will engage while others may participate at a minimal level. In the context of a higher
education classroom, the voluntary element of play/playfulness may not be as significant as other contexts.

However, it is important to note that this is from the perspective of the educator, not the students. The educators are going to do what they want to do in the classroom. The voluntary element of play/playfulness, however, may influence the students’ responses to the play/playfulness introduced by the educator. The findings from this study indicated that students were very engaged in these ludic classrooms. In other words, they voluntarily chose to participate in the play/playfulness introduced by the educators. It is possible that the educators observed for this study were particularly adept in bringing play/playfulness into the classroom, such that students were compelled to voluntarily enter into the play/playfulness. For educators with less experience with the ludic classroom, it is important to keep this voluntary element of play/playfulness in mind. Educators have the power to integrate play/playfulness into the classroom; however, they are not able to force students to engage in the play/playfulness. So, even though the voluntary element of play/playfulness was not addressed in these educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness, the findings indicate it is significant for the students and therefore should be considered by educators seeking to create a ludic classroom.

The second element of play/playfulness discussed in the literature, but absent in the educators’ conceptualization, is the notion that play serves no purpose. Huizinga proposed this idea by stating, “It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (1955, p. 13). Cailliois (1958) took issue with this statement, particularly since in games involving gambling a player could profit. He refined this
idea by indicating play is, “unproductive; creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game” (p. 9). In both of these definitions, the primary focus appears to be on the economics of play. However, this notion of play as unproductive has persisted in much of the play literature. In subtle ways it appears when Apter (1991) talks about play’s emphasis on immediate gratification. The implications are that play is primarily focused on the immediate, and therefore is not concerned with lasting impact or productivity. It appears even more strongly with Brown (2009) when he identifies one of the properties of play as “apparently purposeless.” Much of the literature discusses play as an activity pursued for its own sake, and that play ceases to be play once it serves some other purpose.

Once again, a way to make sense of this omission is to consider the higher education context. The educators are working to promote learning in their classroom. As they bring play/playfulness into their classroom, they are doing so because they believe it promotes learning. Play and playfulness serves an educational purpose in their context. Although much of the play literature promotes the “unproductive” nature of play, other literature indicates that play can serve other purposes and therefore be productive. Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of play as progress captures this idea. Play as progress advocates that animals and children adapt and develop through their play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). As discussed in chapter 2, Sutton-Smith points out that most biologists believe that play helps animals adapt and that it serves some evolutionary purpose. Similarly, in the field of child development there are many theories that play is a form of adaptation and it facilitates development (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Although much of the play literature
discusses the unproductive nature of play/playfulness, there is a precedent for it to serve a productive function. Therefore, the educators’ exclusion of this element of play is justified and understandable given the educational context from which they are operating.

The third element of play/playfulness addressed in the literature, but not in the educators’ conceptualization, was the transformative power of play to create an alternate world or suspend reality. As explored in a previous section, this aspect of play is well documented in the literature and was a key aspect in the formation of a safe environment, which was one of the most significant attributes of the ludic classroom from the students’ perspective. Even though the findings show this to be significant for students, the educators did not articulate this attribute in their conceptualization of play/playfulness.

It might be the case that educators in this study were unaware of the importance of play/playfulness’ ability to create an alternate world or suspend reality. They may have either knowingly or intuitively incorporated techniques to evoke these feelings of safety associated with operating in an alternate reality. For example, Alana’s incorporation of noisemakers immediately distinguished her classroom from the realities of a typical classroom. Similarly, the arrangement of Ted’s classroom tables into U-shaped formation gave it a distinct feel compared to typical classroom settings. These are small examples of things that might have evoked feelings of an alternate world. It is beyond the scope of this study to identify why play/playfulness create these feelings of suspended reality. However, whether they were aware of this aspect of play/playfulness or not, they did not articulate it in their definitions even though the literature is full of such references. The findings of this study suggest that educators who bring play/playfulness into their classroom should be aware of play/playfulness’ tendency to
create this alternate world. This is of interest because it was such a significant aspect of the students’ experiences in the ludic classroom.

Overall, the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness in the learning context is fairly consistent with the literature. The few exceptions or omissions are easily aligned with a closer examination of the literature or with appropriate consideration of the context. This suggests that play/playfulness in the classroom context is not significantly different from conceptualizations of play/playfulness in other contexts. This is good news for educators who may be considering creating a ludic learning space. There is not a unique type of play/playfulness that educators must learn to create a ludic learning space. Assuming their conceptualization of play/playfulness is consistent with the literature, it should translate easily in the classroom context.

**Conceptual Framework Revisited**

Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics of play were chosen as a conceptual framework for this study because they are very broad; like casting a large net to ensure that all the forms of play/playfulness in the adult and higher education classroom would be captured in its grasp. This was appropriate for this study because the intersection of play/playfulness and learning had not been studied in the adult and higher education context. The conceptualizations and manifestations of play/playfulness were unknown heading into the study and so it was important to utilize a framework that would account for any of the aspects of play/playfulness that might arise in the adult classroom context. Indeed, this framework accomplished this as all of the manifestations and conceptualizations of play/playfulness that emerged from the data fit into one of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics. Many of the other models of play captured some of the elements of play/playfulness
brought up in this study, but no other framework was comprehensive enough to account for all the elements of play/playfulness witnessed by this study.

For example, the findings indicated that the feelings of safety were a significant aspect of the ludic classroom. Additionally, these feelings of safety were connected to the tendency of play/playfulness to create an alternate world or suspend reality. This aspect of play/playfulness could have not been fully accounted for in Lieberman’s (1977) model of playfulness which has been used as a framework for other studies exploring play/playfulness among adults (Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005). This concept is captured in Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of the imaginary and is discussed in greater detail below.

Although it seemed like some of Sutton-Smith’s frameworks would not be applicable to play/playfulness in a learning context, the data showed otherwise. For example, I did not originally think the rhetoric of frivolity would inform this study because this rhetoric views play as the activity of the foolish and in it play is purposeless. However, as discussed previously, the silly and goofy behaviors of some of the educators were explained through this rhetoric. The breadth of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics helped ensure that the researcher’s biases or preconceptions did not limit the findings of this study.

The findings of this study add to our understanding of play/playfulness as it relates to adult learning and highlight several of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics. This study focuses attention on the significance of positive affect and the alternate world created by play/playfulness, and therefore draws attention to the importance of these rhetorics when considering adult learning. Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of self is where the notion of positive affect finds explanation. This rhetoric focuses on the psychology of the individual player, their subjective experience of play, and is often associated with positive emotions
(Sutton-Smith, 1997). Sutton-Smith quotes phrases from play theories embracing this approach, stating,

Play is good because it is ‘fun’; it is an optimal experience, an escape, a release; it is intrinsically motivated; it is voluntary; it is an actualizing of one’s potential; it brings arousal or excitement; it is conflict-free pleasure; it is free choice; it is autotelic or paratelic” (1997, p. 174).

The main point of this category is that individuals’ play experiences are associated with positive feelings and emotions. As seen above, Sutton-Smith’s conceptualization of this rhetoric is broad and the experiences of positive emotion in the ludic classroom are well contained in this rhetoric. The findings do not expand this rhetoric of self; however, they amplify this rhetoric as more significant than other rhetorics in the context of a ludic classroom. This once again draws attention to the affective power of play/playfulness in the classroom context. As discussed in the implications for future study section, the role of affect requires due attention in the ludic classroom.

The second rhetoric that is amplified by the findings of this study is the rhetoric of the imaginary. This too is a broad rhetoric of Sutton-Smith’s (1997) and includes concepts like imagination, creativity, art, metaphor, and flexibility. These are concepts that one might readily associate with learning, but these are not the concept of this rhetoric that the findings emphasize. In addition to positive affect, the safe environment was one of the strongest findings in this study. As discussed earlier, I believe the feelings of safety are most directly related to the alternate world or suspension of reality that was created in the classrooms through play/playfulness. This transformational power of play
is also located in Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of the imaginary, and it is this aspect of the rhetoric that the findings amplify. Creativity, imagination, and flexibility were all evident in these ludic classrooms; however, the transformational power of play to create an alternate world was the finding that was consistently significant in all four of the ludic classrooms.

The findings of this study also suggest that the rhetoric of play as progress should be expanded to include adults. This rhetoric is described as, “the advocacy of the notion that animals and children, but not adults, adapt and develop through their play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997 p. 9). This rhetoric explicitly excludes adults in the growth and development that can occur in play. Those who advocate for play/playfulness as an integral aspect of childhood education find their home in this rhetoric. This study suggests that the rhetoric be expanded to include adults. There are not explicit reasons for Sutton-Smith’s exclusion of adults from this rhetoric. His framework is descriptive in nature and seeks to categorize the various play theories and play terms discussed in the play literature (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Adults are excluded from the rhetoric of play as progress simply because there has been very little discourse on the role of play/playfulness in adult learning. As play/playfulness gain momentum in adult learning and more studies like this one advocate its significance, the rhetoric of play as progress will need to be adjusted to acknowledge the significance of play/playfulness in adult learning.

Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics provided an appropriate conceptual framework for this study. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a comprehensive framework was required to allow for a broad range of possibilities in the intersection of play/playfulness
and learning among adults. The findings amplify the rhetorics of the self and the imaginary as significant in the understanding of play/playfulness in adult learning. Furthermore, this study suggests that Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of play as progress should be expanded to included adults.

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

There are many implications of this study in both the theory and practice of adult education. First and foremost is an encouragement to educators, “Play, educators play!” The findings of this study show that play/playfulness can enhance learning in the adult and higher education classroom. Play/playfulness fosters positive affect in the classroom and helps create a classroom environment that feels safe and encourages students to embrace challenge and take risks. Furthermore, students reported cognitive gains in retention, engagement and understanding in the ludic classroom. These benefits warrant the inclusion of play/playfulness in the classroom setting. As discussed earlier, educators should be aware that play/playfulness can also distract from learning, and educators must have a clear vision of the purpose of the play/playfulness as it relates to learning. Educators in this study testified that their play/playfulness in the classroom is often questioned in terms of its academic significance. The findings of this study validate the significance of play/playfulness in an adult classroom setting and should encourage those educators who wish to create a ludic classroom.

Second, educators who incorporate play/playfulness into their classroom should embrace a theory of learning that values the role of affect. The strongest themes to emerge from the data were the significance of positive affect and the safety students felt in the ludic classroom. Both of these are themes that deal with the affect, or the felt
experiences of students in these classrooms. In adult education there is a growing understanding of the significance of the role of emotion in learning. This appreciation for the role of emotions in the classroom is necessary for the benefits of play/playfulness to be fully realized in a learning environment. Heron’s (1992) model of learning that privileges the affective domain of the human psyche provides a potential model for facilitating play/playfulness in the classroom context. Similarly, Yorks and Kasl’s (2002) model of learning within relationship is another potential model to use in the ludic classroom. This model builds on Heron’s work and adds the social dimension by encouraging learners “to become engaged with both their own whole-person knowing and the whole-person knowing of their fellow learners” (p. 185). Both of these models were discussed in depth in the literature review.

Although none of the educators in this study identified either of these learning theories, their interviews and practices in the classroom demonstrated an understanding of the importance of affect in the learning environment. For example, Heather talked about a holistic approach that focused on head, hands, and heart referring to the cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of learning. As reported by students, play/playfulness produce cognitive gains in the classroom environment, particularly in the area of engagement, retention, and understanding. However, the felt experiences of students in terms of positive affect and safety were more significant according to students. Thus, educators who embrace learning theory that favors rational thought will cultivate increased learning from incorporating play. Nevertheless, the more profound effects of play/playfulness in the classroom context are better understood through learning theories that embrace the significance of affect in the learning environment.
Third, this study affirms the writings of adult educators who identify fear as a significant factor in the adult learning environment (Palmer, 1998). Feelings of safety in the classroom environment were identified as one of the most significant contributions of play/playfulness by the students. Although there are many ways to address fear in the classroom context, play/playfulness provide one means for creating a safe space for students and educators to take risks and challenge themselves to experience growth.

Fourth, play/playfulness have been studied extensively in childhood education. Although there are certainly differences between adults and children in relation to learning, this study suggests that some of the models of play and learning for children may be applicable to adults. The continuation desire of play and learning, as well as the idea of play frames, which are well documented in the early childhood learning literature, were shown to be applicable for adult learners as well. Other child learning theories of play/playfulness may also be applicable to adults. It is possible that this overlap is not because of similarities between children and adult learners, but rather because of the transformational power of play that suspends reality and creates an alternate world. Perhaps adults and children are more similar in this alternate play world.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are numerous questions that this study raises. Because of the lack of research in play/playfulness in adult learning, this study just begins to scratch the surface. In this section I draw attention to areas for future research that are of particular interest to me.

Students in this study identified feelings of safety as a significant aspect of their experience in the ludic classroom. In the discussion, I suggested that these feelings of
safety might be associated with the trust building attributes of play, or its transformational characteristics that suspend reality or create an alternate world. Although there was data to affirm these tenets, this aspect of the ludic classroom warrants additional study. The felt experience of safety was a key finding and there are likely multiple factors that contributed to these feelings. For example, the casual feel, the informality, the quality of relationship between instructor and students, are all factors that likely contributed to the feelings of safety in the classroom. To what extent and how did play/playfulness contribute to these factors? Even more interesting, how significant is the transformative attribute of play/playfulness that suspends reality and creates an alternate world?

An additional area for continued study is to explore the intersection of play/playfulness and spirituality in the classroom setting. In the literature review, I noted that spirituality in the adult classroom addresses themes of interconnectedness, wholeness, authenticity, meaning making, personal development, and an acknowledgement of the transcendent (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, English & Gillen, 2000b; Speck 2005; Tisdell 2003). Additionally, I identified themes in the literature on means for evoking spirituality in the classroom context. I concluded that the educator plays a key role as they create a space for spirituality in the classroom by creating an atmosphere of authenticity, risk taking, safety, connectedness, and reflection. The findings from this study indicate a strong presence of many of these factors in the ludic classroom.

As discussed in this chapter, play/playfulness were associated with connections and relationships between students and educators. Authenticity and caring about students
holistically were characteristics of the playful educators. Additionally, play/playfulness created feelings of safety and promoted risk taking in the classroom context. Lastly, the finding revealed a transcendent aspect of play/playfulness as students noted the warping of time (time passing quickly while in playful classes) and the creation of an alternate world. Play/playfulness is certainly not identical to spirituality in the classroom. However, there is significant overlap as they share similar characteristics. Future studies could further explore the similarities and differences between spirituality and play/playfulness in the classroom. Play/playfulness may help create an environment that is ripe for spirituality and “other ways of knowing” to emerge in the classroom context.

A final recommendation concerns a potential framework for future studies. Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics were an appropriate framework for this study because little was known about play/playfulness in adult learning. However, this framework was broad and did not provide much focus to conceptualize play/playfulness among adult learners. Considering the play theories examined in this study, Nina Lieberman’s (1977) model of playfulness most consistently fit the data.

This study sought to explore the role of play/playfulness among adult learners in a classroom context. To pursue that goal, the classroom was examined through the perspective of the educator, the students and the researcher (observations). Within each of these perspectives, the study examined their conceptualizations of play/playfulness and their understandings of how play/playfulness interact with their learning in a classroom environment. The educators identified fun, spontaneity, imagination or creativity, silliness or goofiness, and relationship or connectedness in their understanding of play/playfulness. Lieberman defines playfulness as: “physical, social, and cognitive
spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor” (1977, p. 23). As seen in Table 6.1 and discussed below, all of the elements of play/playfulness identified by the educators, map directly to Lieberman’s elements of playfulness.

Table 6.1. Comparison of Lieberman’s Model of Playfulness with the Educators’ Conceptualization of Play/Playfulness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lieberman</th>
<th>Educators in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Manifest joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>Cognitive, social, physical spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and imagination</td>
<td>Cognitive spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silliness or goofiness</td>
<td>Sense of Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship or connectedness</td>
<td>Social spontaneity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first aspect of play/playfulness identified by the educators was fun. Lieberman (1977) uses the term manifest joy to identify behavior that brings enjoyment. Rather than discussing abstract labels to define joy, she identifies joyful behaviors such as smiling, laughter, chuckling, singing, dancing, and facial expressions indicative of enjoyment. Laughter was observed in the ludic classrooms of this study, but even more telling was the reported perceptions of students in the ludic classrooms. Students indicated their classrooms were fun, enjoyable, lighthearted, playful, and energetic.
(Student Survey Summary, 2010). Lieberman’s category of manifest joy appears to parallel the fun element of play reported in the findings of this study.

The second element of play/playfulness identified in this study was spontaneity. Educators identified the unexpected, surprise or unplanned occurrence as part of the spontaneity in their ludic classrooms. Spontaneity is so significant in Lieberman’s conceptualization of play/playfulness that she identifies three different types: physical spontaneity, social spontaneity and cognitive spontaneity. These types of spontaneity will be discussed further as they correlate to various elements of the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness.

Creativity and imagination were noted by the educators as a significant element of play/playfulness. The creativity and imagination of the educators were seen in unique assignments, engaging activities, exaggerated stories, or silly songs. Similarly, Lieberman indicates that cognitive spontaneity is marked by curiosity, inventiveness, imagination, and thinking outside the box. These characteristics of cognitive spontaneity describe the creativity and imagination brought into the classroom by the educators.

The fourth element of play/playfulness identified by the educator was silliness or goofiness. This aspect of play/playfulness corresponds to two of Lieberman’s categories: physical spontaneity and sense of humor. According to Lieberman (1977), physical spontaneity is characterized by exaggerated movement, animated gestures or facial expressions, and an eagerness to be involved physically. For example, Ted’s impersonations of an awkward teenager, Heather’s dancing on the beach in costume, Chad’s bursting into animated song, or Alana’s juggling in the classroom fit into Lieberman’s category of physical spontaneity. Some of the silly or goofy behaviors of
the educators also fit into Lieberman’s category of “sense of humor.” She identifies jokes, entertaining, teasing, and clowning around as aspects of her category of sense of humor (Lieberman, 1977). These parallel behaviors identified in this study as silly or goofy.

The final category identified by the educators is relationship or connection. This is manifest in the ludic classroom through group projects, name games, sharing, and feelings of belonging. Lieberman defines social spontaneity as the pursuit of interactions with others (Lieberman, 1977). More than any other model or theory of play/playfulness, Lieberman’s model was most consistent with the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness.

Lieberman’s model fully addresses the educators’ conceptualization of play/playfulness. However, students identified the importance of positive affect and feelings of safety as significant in their experience of the ludic classroom. Positive affect is addressed by Lieberman’s category of manifest joy. There were many factors that contributed to feelings of safety in the ludic classroom, but a significant aspect was the suspension of reality or creation of an alternate world. Lieberman’s model does not explicitly identify this aspect of play/playfulness, but it does create space for this element in the category of cognitive spontaneity. Within this category, Lieberman (1977) discusses imagination and thinking outside the box. Additionally, it is within this category that she discusses the transformation that often occurs in play when an object might become something else (a stick might become a sword). The category of cognitive spontaneity leaves room for the suspension of reality or creation of an alternate universe, but it does not emphasize it. If adopting Lieberman’s model of playfulness among adult
learners in a classroom context, this element of play/playfulness must be drawn out of cognitive spontaneity and explicitly identified because of the significant role it plays in the students experience in the ludic classroom.

One explanation for the similarities between Lieberman’s model and the participants in this study is that Lieberman explored playfulness in the context of educational classrooms (1977). She developed and applied her playfulness scale through observations with kindergarteners, high school students, and undergraduate college students. Most other play/playfulness definitions presented in the literature review, were not developed in an education context. It is understandable that Lieberman’s model was similar to the definition that emerged from the educators in this study because of the similar context.

Lieberman’s model can serve as a tool for educators exploring ways to bring play/playfulness into the classroom. It is important for educators to identify their own style of play/playfulness; otherwise, play/playfulness can seem inauthentic and become a distraction to learning. Lieberman’s categories of sense of humor, manifest joy, cognitive spontaneity, physical spontaneity, and social spontaneity provide a framework for educators to identify the aspects of play/playfulness that they naturally manifest. This can lead to a better understanding of their play/playfulness in a classroom context.

In addition, Lieberman has developed playfulness scales based upon her model of play/playfulness. In her studies, these scales were administered by teachers to assess the playfulness of the students in their classes. Therefore, these instruments are designed to identify playfulness in students, not the educators. However, her model and previous work with playfulness scales could serve as a foundation for the development of a
playfulness scale for adults. The findings of this study support Lieberman’s model as a valid measure to conceptualize play/playfulness among adult learners.

**Final Thoughts**

Robert Fagan, leading animal play theorist, stated, “Play taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that something is behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten how to see it” (as cited in Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 2). Although there is still plenty of mystery associated with play and learning, in the course of this study it has been exciting to shed some light on the ever elusive play/playfulness as it interacts with the adult and higher education classroom.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Before the interview I am going to ask participants to think about a play/playful experience from their past that illustrates their understanding of play/playfulness. At their interview, they will be asked to share this experience in detail (including feelings, setting, actions, etc).

Introduce myself and my topic.

Background information

- Please tell me about your current role here at ___________________ university/college. [Probes – what they teach, who they primarily teach, how much they teach, how long they have taught at this institution, etc]

Professional background –

- Please tell me about your other professional experience. [ Probes – how many years as an educator, etc.]

Educational background

- Where/what did you do your undergraduate, graduate.

Understanding of Play/playfulness

- Please describe the play/playfulness that I asked you to think about before the interview. [note if this is childhood or adult experience]
- What about play/playfulness 1)while you were growing up or 2) in your adult life? [If their memory is from childhood, pursue adult experience and visa versa.]
- How would you define play?
- How would you define playfulness?
- How is play/playfulness a part of your daily life (outside the classroom).
Play/Playfulness in the classroom

- You were selected for this study because you evoke play/playfulness in your classroom. How do you bring play/playfulness into your classroom?
- What is the purpose of play in the classroom?

Play/playfulness and learning
- Why is it important to you to have a fun classroom?
  - What does it mean for you to have fun classroom? – describe it.
- What do you see as the benefits of bringing play/playfulness into your classroom?
- What is your understanding of the relationship between learning and play/playfulness in your classroom?
- What are the detriments [cons] of bringing play/playfulness into your classroom?

Responses to play/playfulness

- What is your perception of students’ responses to play/playfulness in the classroom?
- What type of feedback have you received from students concerning play/playfulness in the classroom? [course evaluations, through journal assignments, verbal feedback, overheard comments, etc.]
- What about negative or non positive reactions by students to play in your classroom? Describe an experience? What were the students reaction?
- How did this experience shape your understanding and approach to play in the classroom context?
- How do you feel about being playful in the classroom?
- Have you ever heard any comments from colleagues about your playfulness?

Clarify and close

- Earlier you defined play and playfulness for me. When you think about the classroom context, do your definitions or conceptualizations of play/playfulness change? How?
- Other thoughts you might have about play/playfulness as it relates to learning in the classroom context?
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thanks again for your willingness to participate in this study. As we begin, could you say your name, year, major, if you’ve been in class with Dr. __________ before, and since it’s a warm day, your favorite flavor of ice cream.

The purpose of my study is to explore play and playfulness in the classroom environment with adult learners. The student’s perceptions of play – playfulness is a very important aspect of this.

When you consider play or playfulness – what comes to mind. Are there other words that you associate with play/playfulness?

First off then, do you think of Dr. __________ classroom as playful? Please tell me why you think that. If not, what is playful?

[Show a section of video tape from classroom observation that seems playful to the researcher]

Do you remember this instance? How would you describe it/characterize it?
Do you find that instances like this contribute to or detract from your learning? Please talk more about this, how do you think they contribute/detract from your learning?

Considering your college experience thus far, what are the top three classes as far as learning is concerned – the classes you feel like you learned the most in.

What three classes have you enjoyed the learning the most, why.

How do you feel about the classroom environment in Dr. _____’s classes?

Is Dr. _____ class pretty typical of all your classes here at ________college/university?

It seems to me that there is a lot of _____________ (interaction, laughter, stories, etc.) in Dr. ______ Class, do you think this is true when you consider your other college classes.

Are there other professors who you would consider playful. How are they similar or different than Dr. ________________?
APPENDIX C
CLASSROOM SURVEY

The following information will help the researcher gain a broader understanding of student’s perspectives of play/playfulness in the classroom. Your participation is appreciated, but is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, either return this paper blank or do not return this paper at all. Thank you.

What I enjoy about this class is ……

I would describe this classroom environment as ……..

Please choose one and complete the sentence.

☐ I would describe this teacher as playful for the following reasons……
☐ I would NOT describe this teacher as playful for the following reasons…..

I define playful as …

Choose one and please explain.

☐ I find that playfulness in the classroom contributes to my learning.
☐ I find that playfulness in the classroom is a distraction to my learning.
Please explain.
APPENDIX D

SENSITIZING CONCEPTS FOR CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Manifestations of play/playfulness in the classroom

Conceptual Framework – Rhetorics of play

- Fate – chance, destiny
- Power – competition, contest
- Identity – celebration, pageantry, communal identity
- Progress – adaptation, development
- Imaginary – creativity, improvisation
- Self – player’s fun, relaxation, escape, high adventure
- Frivolity – play for play sake, foolishness

Responses to play/playfulness

Student responses - body language, level of engagement

Teacher’s response to student initiated playfulness

Classroom Climate

Safe/unsafe, attentive/inattentive, open/closed

Relationship

Student to student, student to faculty

Setting

Physical environment (colors, space, desk configuration, description of students/teacher)

Social Environment

Interactions before class, in class, groups of people, where people sit,

What is not happening?
VITA
Dave J. Tanis

Messiah College
One College Avenue Suite 3050
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania 17055
717.766.2511 ext. 2134
dtanis@messiah.edu

EDUCATION

Dissertation: “Exploring Play/Playfulness and Learning in the Adult and Higher Education Classroom.”


EMPLOYMENT

Senior Lecturer in Adventure Education; Director of Adventure Programs,
Department of Health and Human Performance. Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania; August 2009 to present

Director of Adventure Programs; Senior Lecturer in Health and Human Performance, Department of Student Affairs. Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania; August 2003 to 2009

Campus Minister, Coalition for Christian Outreach, Pittsburg, PA.
With the Coalition for Christian Outreach, I held the following positions.

Director of Issachar’s Loft, Messiah College Grantham, Pennsylvania, August 1995 to July 2003
Chapel Staff, Ashland University; Ashland, Ohio, May 1993 to August 1995
Resident Director, Ashland University; Ashland, Ohio, August 1990 to May 1993