



Original Article

Beyond fun and games: Understanding playfulness as a driver of innovation in higher education

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Manuscript ID:
IBMIIRJ -2026-030601

Submitted: 10 May 2026

Revised: 16 May 2026

Accepted: 06 June 2026

Published: 30 June 2026

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-3

Issue-6

Pp. 1-3

June 2026

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.22142090

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22142090>



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Abstract

Play is often associated with childhood and leisure, and is rarely viewed as a serious element of higher education or innovation. However, research indicates that playfulness — characterised by exploration, experimentation, imagination, flexibility, and openness to possibility — is fundamental to creativity and innovation. This paper argues that playfulness is an overlooked driver of innovative thinking. As students progress through formal education, they are encouraged to adopt serious, efficient, and outcome-oriented behaviours. While these qualities support academic achievement, they may suppress the playful mindsets essential for creativity. Drawing on literature from creativity research, educational psychology, innovation studies, and organizational behaviour, this paper examines the relationship between playfulness and innovation. It contends that higher education must rediscover play as a legitimate pathway to creative learning and problem-solving.

Keywords: Playfulness, Creativity, Innovation, Higher Education, Divergent Thinking, Exploration, Imagination, Creative Learning.

Introduction

Play is a natural human behaviour most clearly visible in childhood. Through play, children explore possibilities, test assumptions, construct imaginary worlds, and make sense of their environment. However, as individuals progress through formal education, playful behaviours are gradually pushed aside in favour of structure, discipline, and performance. By the time students reach higher education, play is often considered irrelevant or inappropriate within academic contexts. This paper challenges the conventional view that playfulness has no place in serious higher education. It argues that playfulness — a cognitive orientation involving exploration, experimentation, imagination, flexibility, and openness to possibility — is a powerful but overlooked driver of creativity and innovation. While educational systems rightly emphasise rigour and seriousness, an excessive focus on these qualities may suppress the very mindsets that fuel innovative thinking. The paper examines the disappearance of play in education, clarifies the nature of playfulness, analyses its contribution to innovation, and proposes practical ways to reintroduce it in higher education.

The disappearance of play

Children play naturally. They build imaginary worlds from ordinary objects, invent games without instructions, and ask questions that adults often dismiss as impractical. Through play, they explore possibilities, test assumptions, and make sense of their surroundings. As individuals grow older, however, play gradually disappears from educational settings. Schools become more structured, assessments gain dominance, and performance takes precedence over exploration. By the time students enter higher education, play is frequently viewed as something that belongs outside the classroom. This transition appears logical — universities are expected to prepare students for professional careers and serious responsibilities. Yet this raises an important question: What if some of the qualities removed from education are precisely the ones that drive creativity and innovation?

Playfulness is not the opposite of seriousness

A common misconception is that playfulness opposes serious work. In reality, the two can coexist productively. Playfulness is not merely about games or entertainment.

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How to cite this article:

Pandit, S. (2026). Beyond fun and games: Understanding playfulness as a driver of innovation in higher education. *InSight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 3(6), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22142090>

It is a cognitive orientation involving the willingness to explore possibilities, challenge assumptions, experiment with alternatives, and approach problems flexibly. Playful learners ask not only “What is the correct answer?” but also “What other possibilities exist?” and “What if we tried a different approach?” Such questions often spark innovation. Playfulness should thus be viewed as a complementary mode of thinking that expands creative potential rather than a distraction from rigorous learning.

Why innovation needs play

Innovation seldom arises from rigid, linear thinking. It thrives when individuals feel free to explore unconventional possibilities without immediate pressure for correctness.

Playfulness supports innovation through:

1. **Freedom from premature judgment:** Allowing unconventional ideas to be explored before critical evaluation.
2. **Cognitive flexibility:** Encouraging multiple perspectives and alternative solutions.
3. **Exploration without fear:** Reducing the perceived cost of failure and promoting risk-taking.
4. **Unusual combinations:** Facilitating connections between seemingly unrelated concepts.

These elements create fertile conditions for creative discovery.

The hidden cost of educational seriousness

Modern education rightly values discipline, expertise, and efficiency. However, an excessive focus on seriousness can produce unintended consequences. Students may become less willing to propose unconventional ideas, challenge assumptions, experiment with uncertain solutions, or pursue imaginative questions without immediate practical value.

Over time, intellectual caution can replace curiosity. While students gain substantial knowledge, they may lose confidence in navigating uncertainty — a critical skill for innovation.

Innovation has always been playful

History demonstrates that playful thinking frequently underlies major breakthroughs. Scientists use thought experiments, engineers engage in prototyping, and entrepreneurs test unconventional ideas. Innovative organizations routinely employ playful brainstorming, improvisation, and rapid experimentation — not for amusement, but for serious discovery.

Playfulness is not peripheral to innovation; it is one of its enabling conditions.

A playfulness–innovation perspective

This paper proposes that playfulness contributes to innovation through three interconnected mechanisms: increasing cognitive flexibility, reducing psychological barriers (such as fear of failure and criticism), and promoting active exploration.

The relationship between playfulness and innovation may be understood as a progressive process. Playfulness encourages exploration, which exposes individuals to diverse ideas and experiences. These experiences increase the likelihood of forming novel connections between concepts, leading to creative insights that may ultimately result in innovation. Figure 1 presents the proposed Playfulness–Innovation Model. Playfulness thus acts as a catalyst, creating conditions that make innovative thinking more probable.

Figure 1. Playfulness as a Driver of Innovation

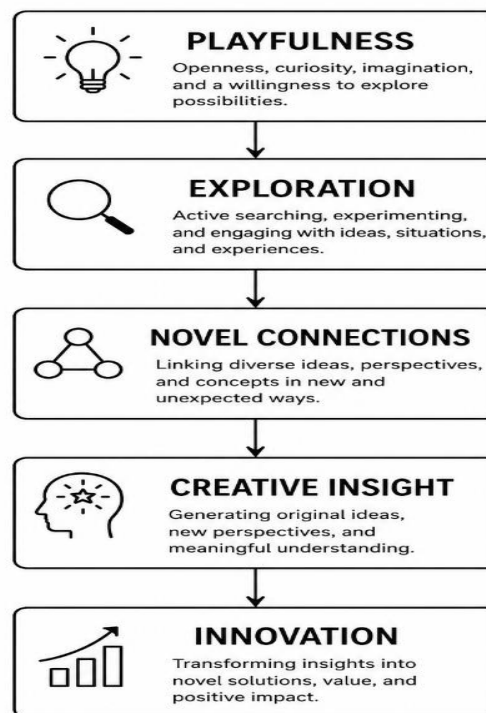


Figure interpretation

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed relationship between playfulness and innovation. Playfulness encourages individuals to explore ideas, situations, and possibilities without immediate concern for correctness or evaluation. Through exploration, learners encounter diverse experiences and perspectives that facilitate novel connections between concepts. These connections may generate creative insights, which can ultimately lead to innovation. The model suggests that playfulness functions as an enabling condition for innovation by creating an environment that supports exploration, flexibility, and imaginative thinking.

Reintroducing play into higher education

Reintroducing playfulness does not mean reducing academic rigor. Instead, educators can integrate it through:

1. **Open-ended challenges:** Encouraging exploration of multiple solutions.
2. **Improvisational activities:** Building adaptability and creative confidence.
3. **Rapid prototyping:** Allowing testing of incomplete ideas.
4. **Scenario building:** Fostering possibility thinking.
5. **Interdisciplinary exploration:** Facilitating novel idea combinations.

These approaches maintain rigour while creating space for creative discovery.

Conclusion

Playfulness is often dismissed as a childhood trait with little relevance to higher education. This paper argues the opposite: playfulness is a powerful driver of creativity and innovation. By rediscovering playful mindsets — exploration, flexibility, and openness to possibility — higher education can better prepare students for an uncertain and complex future.

The question is no longer whether students should acquire serious knowledge, but whether they can retain the freedom to play with that knowledge in pursuit of innovation.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all the researchers, academicians, and scholars whose published works have provided valuable theoretical insights and guidance for this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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