

Beyond Cognitive Knowing: Embodied Playful Pedagogies in South African Creative Arts Teacher Education

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Playful pedagogies hold transformative power to reimagine higher education teaching and learning. They can shift classrooms from sites of passive knowledge transmission to vibrant spaces of creative engagement and embodied ways of knowing. In South Africa, playful pedagogy often remains under-utilized, and under-theorized, yet it offers valuable pedagogical benefits for teaching and learning for the diverse, under-resourced, and complex classroom realities. As an under-explored phenomenon in South Africa, within teacher education contexts, preservice teachers may benefit from adopting playful pedagogies to enrich their practice teaching experiences and professional years. This self-study addressed this gap by examining how playful pedagogical approaches can transform preservice Creative Arts teachers' experiences of playful pedagogies, extending beyond cognitive understanding.

The research was situated within a third-year Creative Arts Education methods course, the second of three method courses designed to develop pedagogical competence among the registered preservice teachers. Building on the prior foundations established in the first course on teacher identity, this course taught *about* and *through* playful pedagogies. The conceptual framework interweaves two complementary theoretical lenses. Firstly, the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) emphasized process-driven, imaginative approaches to teaching and learning. Secondly, the humanizing pedagogy centered on students' lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and relational ways of knowing. Together, these frameworks enabled the exploration of how preservice teachers shift from understanding playful pedagogy as an abstract educational teaching approach to embracing it as an embodied, pedagogical approach rooted in practical and relative methods.

Data was generated through the completion of three formative tasks (by students) and student-course evaluation reports. These formative tasks included: students' short written play memories generated through guided visualization exercises; finger-painted memory expressions, and a video-recorded group practical assessment. Analyzed thematically, three significant findings emerged. The first was how affective memory-work created emotional bridges between personal experience and pedagogical theory. The second was how haptic engagements with finger painting deepen cognitive understanding through experiential learning, layered with a sensory, embodied way of knowing. The third was how practical activities enabled students to translate their embodied understanding into feasible teaching strategies that can be modeled practices for their own future classrooms.

This research also offered multi-layered implications. As a teacher-researcher, I discovered how the integration of embodied playful pedagogies can create a safe learning environment for preservice teachers inexperienced with this approach. This implication is a call to explore how I can integrate this approach into the other modules I teach. For the course curriculum, the findings affirmed the necessity of embedding embodied, practical activities within theoretical content. For preservice teachers, this approach has proven to positively shape emerging teacher identities as critically reflective, playful professionals who may further extend and integrate playful pedagogies in their practice teaching and novice professional years. This study challenges traditional academia. This has been achieved by demonstrating how embodied and experiential learning moves pre-service teachers beyond cognitive, abstract learning experiences toward humanizing, playful pedagogical practices. These may foster creativity, agency, and relational ways of knowing which are essential for transformative teaching in the South African education context.

Keywords: Playful pedagogies, Teacher Education, South Africa, Creative Arts, Self-Study