

- The Element of Play in Learning -

The Role of Synergetic Playful Environments in the Implementation of Open and Distance Learning

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"We live in a world of problems which can no longer be solved by the level of thinking that created them". **Albert Einstein**

For education to be more intrinsically engaging, play should be an integral part of the learning process. In today's terrain of unremittingly shifting realities, the necessity for lifelong learning and the rebuilding of a learning society is predominant. There has been a frenzy in research with a plethora of wise solutions and models as to **what** and **how** should be learned, but with very little relevance to learners motivation. **Why** do people engage in learning? Is extrinsic motivation enough to make people want to learn in depth? Can learners intrinsic concerns be integrated into the what and how models of a fixed linear/sequential curriculum, teacher/textbook, exam-centred education system, or should there be another way?

This paper is an attempt to examine the capacity of play in generating and facilitating self-searching and promoting self-compelled deep learning by looking into the history of play learning and reporting on the emerging possibilities of contemporary playful learning systems. The report draws on literature review of play theory and play related issues, and on participatory observation of existing playful learning environments conducted mostly on and over the Internet. It also draws heavily on the innovative and exceptional learning experience the writer have had participating in the MA in ODE courses offered at a distance by the Institute of Educational Technology of the OU/UK, and on the ten-year eye-opening teaching/learning experience with the blind.

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The Element of Play in Learning

"Where is the wisdom lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge lost in information?"
-- T. S. Eliot ("Choruses from the Rock")
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Since the fragmentation and division of study into the disciplines of the trivium and

quadrivium, education has traditionally been defined in physical terms. We go to school, a university implies a campus, educational programmes have, until recently, been delivered inside a classroom. In the recent history of education, modern schools and educational institutions have arguably been more the same than different since the sixteenth century regardless of national differences. Given the attributes regarding the definition of space and time, the structure of knowledge, approach to motivation, nature of evaluation and the shade of the teaching profession, which all orbit around the printed textbook, lecture delivery and sequential curriculum, there is little room left for **creativity** and **enjoyment** - corollaries of intrinsic motivation.

Living on the edge of a new millennium at the dawn of the information era, we are faced with the challenge of restructuring and transforming our education system so that global learning opportunities can be readily available to every human being on earth, including not only the traditional areas but also problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity (**Hesburgh, 1996**). Everyone learning means from birth to death. The first goal is that everyone learns, in all locations, at all ages, to the mastery level. **Lifelong learning** means that learning should be **affordable** and **enjoyable**. For people to learn they must find pleasure in learning (**Kinzie, 1990**), encouraging lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning in the Information Society has, indeed, been a major concern found in the heart of national and international policies (UNESCO Reports, EU Directives). From the utopian vision of the '70s as anticipated by **Faure (1972)** to the recent US relevant legislation, there have been various interpretations as to the attributes of the required system of provision in terms of quantity, quality and degrees of (open) access, many of which have come under criticism in the education world (**Falk, 1999**). Nevertheless, there appears to be general agreement on the utilisation of Distance Delivery and the New Technologies which are expected to facilitate any-place, any-time learning and the building of innovative, affordable and enjoyable learning environments.

Are there any tried models in the history of human culture which could render their paradigm in today's world conditions? We are going to look into one of them - the ancient hellenic model of **Polis as an autonomous, self-organised (autopoietic) learning system** [[Appendix 1](#)].

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The 'Learning Polis' Model (Makedon, 1995)

Ancient Greeks have not only inspired countless generations that followed them to match or surpass their learning, but also instituted a sophisticated system of education through play, from the cradle to the grave, that included, among other things, networks of mentors - who were not only unpaid, but considered it their honour to pay *themselves* for the pedagogical expenses of their proteges - expert itinerant teachers, an all-inclusive evaluation system based on contests, and the design of whole cities as veritable educational institutions.

In his voluminous work *Paideia: Ideals of Greek Culture*, which is a veritable treasure chest of excerpts and observations from ancient sources, **Jaeger (1944)** attributed the educational achievements of the Greeks to their "educative" culture. This model of **culture as education** of the ancients has been described in detail in *A History of Education in Antiquity*, a classic work by **Marrou (1956)**.

Marrou weaves together from original sources a substantive portrait of ancient Hellenic achievements which he attributes to:

- their widespread adoption of ideals of excellence;
- the institutionalisation of contests;
- the implementation of role-modelling on a massive scale;
- formation of strong mentoring networks that touched the lives of almost all young people;
- building of beautiful cities that served to educate; adults practising what they preached,

- thus educating by example;
- hiring expert teachers, or "sophists"; making all public functions free to the poor.

The city-states were literally built to educate. Complete with public theatre, stadium, parks, athletic centres, public baths, fountains, and statues, and combination marketplace-debate arena - the **agora**. There is strong historical evidence that all kinds of political, oratorical, and philosophical debates took place in the agora. In fact, a whole school of philosophy known as "**stoicism**" which later greatly influenced Roman law and institutions, originated inside just such an agora.

According to Marrou, the ancient Greeks attacked the issue of excellence from numerous angles, including not only internalising heroic ideals over several centuries, but also building their whole cities 'educationally', and manning their "urban ships" with networks of mentors and expert teachers. Marrou also mentioned the role that contests played in catapulting the young to excellence, whose legacy may be partly glimpsed today from our modern Olympic Games.

A heroic, agonistic spirit coupled with the "**golden rule**", which reminded the "**aristoi**" (=excellent) of the shortcomings of unbridled success, had been the cornerstone of this ancient model. "**Aein aristevin**", which means try always to be excellent, along with the equally popular saying "**Pan metron ariston**", or "all measured things are excellent" were keeping the balance between **synagonism** (syn = together) and **antagonism**, the two inseparable essential components of free fair play.

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The Play Attribute

Given the heroic or "aristocratic" spirit of ancient Greece, the young were not only encouraged "always to excel", but provided with corresponding play opportunities to do so. This explains why in ancient Greece, there were rarely any young social 'dropouts'. Since there was so much for them to do inside a playful world, they did not wish to leave it. On the contrary, we have the opposite phenomenon of the young in ancient Greece knocking 'down' on adult doors, so they may be allowed to play in their games, too (**Marrou, ibid.**).

Several theorists attributed the achievements of the ancient Greeks to their numerous opportunities for play and contests. In his classic work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, **Friedrich Schiller (1954)**, advanced a groundbreaking theory of play and excellence. Without play, wrote Schiller, in the sense not only of games, but also of the play of ideas and imagination, humans could not possibly advance to their highest potential. In his view, if the ancient Greeks reached such ethereal educational heights, it is because they played. The reason according to Schiller play is so educative is because it gives humans the necessary 'lightness' for generating creative pursuits. In play, humans balance the spiritual against the physical, thus neutralising the perniciously tyrannical effects of either. Through this 'neutralisation' of weighty passion and dictatorial reason, the mind is allowed to roam freely to new heights of creativity.


Schiller's view of play is echoed in the modern empirical investigations on the role of play in child development. Several psychologists, from **Vygotsky** to **Piaget**, consider play to be the child's 'language'. **Friedrich Froebel**, the founder of kindergarten, made play an integral part of a child's early education.

Now imagine how enthusiastic life must seem to a child who lives in a playful society, as did children in ancient Greece, where apparently there was an abundance of contests for almost everything. If play is children's language, then certainly ancient Greece spoke a language they could appreciate and understand. How much more inspired people must have been in a society, like ancient Greece, that put a high premium on contests of all types, from literary and artistic, to physical and mathematical, and had it integrated in its education system.

Johan Huizinga (1950) formalised the cultural impact of play activities in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. The terms "Homo Ludens" in Latin mean "Man the Player." His choice of words for a title contrasts with the traditional view of modern humans as "homo sapiens," or man the thinker, perhaps to underline the priority that Huizinga assigned to the play element in the genesis of civilisation. According to Huizinga, great 'cultural' achievements are based on the agonistic spirit, without which humans would be at best mediocre. As people compete for first place, they simultaneously force themselves to improve their skills, thus in the end reaching a higher plateau of educational achievement. Just as an impending athletic event forces athletes to prepare by intensifying their training, so are people striving to win finally achieve excellence. This is even more true when a whole culture adopts the agonistic spirit, instead of merely a few institutions within that culture. Values learned from contests, according to Huizinga, form the basis of organised living. These may include:

- playing by the rules;
- respecting the rights of others;
- appreciating the results of team or individual effort;
- and learning how to live on the basis of merit.

Learning to live on the basis of merit, one may advance the theory that because of their game-like psychology, the ancients learned early to appreciate law-abiding behaviour, while simultaneously detesting corrupt or unethical practices. In ancient Greece, there was comparatively little graft and corruption at the official. At the level of the people at large, one is surprised to find that in spite of often intense jealousies, people quickly rewarded those who were just or honest. Alternatively, they punished either through their laws, or stinging appellations, those who were mean or unfair. Witness, for instance, the appellations given to some of their leaders, such as, "Just Aristides"; or, alternatively, the castigating title "Diogenes (of Syracuse), the Tyrant" level (**Aristotle - Plato - Plutarch**).

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Attributes of a Playful Culture

In his book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, **Joseph Peiper (1963)** went even further in seemingly contradicting our modern 'work ethic' by advocating that leisure, rather than work, are the basis of 'culture'. By culture he meant primarily the additional artistic and educational achievements of humans as a result of their conscious effort to embellish their lives with art, or understand their world through study. Peiper would probably attribute the achievements of the ancient Greeks to their ability not only to avoid trivial pursuits, but also to organise their public resources so they don't have to work hard for the sake of working alone. For example, by building their cities so beautifully and well endowed with public facilities, and making public functions free to the poor, they made it easier for someone to live happily, if not 'aristocratically', with only a meagre source of income. Naturally, their publicly oriented city made it easier for its citizens to maintain a relatively happy lifestyle without 'back breaking work', which left them free to follow more satisfying or creative pursuits.

In fact, several of the most outstanding contributors to western civilisation were actually very poor even by third world standards, and yet somehow circumstances allowed them to excel, if not made them poor precisely because of their primary concern with their artistic, intellectual, or athletic improvement. For example, **Socrates** is known to have rarely worn shoes (or the corresponding sandals at the time), and not unlike India's **Mahatma Gandhi**, to walk around barely clad with a simple toga. **Diogenes**, another famous philosopher, lived in a big barrel, instead of the traditional house. **Archimedes**, the great inventor-scientist, died while drawing geometric shapes on the sand, instead of inside an elaborate laboratory or classroom. Instead of fleeing from an advancing Roman soldier that threatened to kill him, Archimedes begged him, instead, to... be careful not to destroy the mathematical circles that he had drawn on the sand: "Mi mou tous kiklous tarate!" ("Don't destroy my circles!"). Unfortunately, the Roman soldier did not quite understand him, and far from sparing his life, or, for that matter, his circles, he did kill him. This is in fact how Archimedes actually died. He is typical of people who achieved excellence in ancient times, who would rather sacrifice wealth, or even their

lives, at the altar of perfecting their art. This doesn't mean that ancient Greeks despised wealth, which they did not, but only that a relatively large number among them would as soon spend it as means to an excellent end, than accumulate it for its own sake.

The attitude of the ancient Greeks toward wealth may be seen from the fact that of all the people they admired or wrote about, there is barely any that we can say became famous because of his wealth. Instead of wealthy people, almost all the people we know, from Homer to Hercules to Pericles to Euripides and Phidias, were excellent at something, or had received first prize at some kind of contest, including artistic (such as Phidias), theatrical (such as Aeschylus), or oratorical (such as Demosthenes) contests, or shone through their politically just (Aristides), or militarily ingenious (Alexander) examples. Although there were undoubtedly many who wallowed in the accumulation of possessions, they did not represent the acknowledged ideal at the time, and must have been looked at askance or disapprovingly by their fellow humans (if not forced, as most rich people were, to pay for most of the city's public expenses).

People in ancient Greece did not consider wealth anything to be proud of, but merely to be expended for the benefit of the common good, which was usually co-extensive with one's city state. They considered humans who sought wealth or power for their own sake, as potential tyrants, to be shunned, stumped out, or hated, as the occasion may allow. In fact, this is one of the most salient points that distinguished the Greeks from the Persians. To the Greeks, the Persian love for luxury had a feeling of decadence and superficiality about it. Thus while the Greeks measured their worth primarily through their achievements, including their artistic and intellectual contributions, the Persians were very proud of their conquests.

Historically, this ancient Greek-Persian schism, although greatly simplified here, nevertheless may represent a perennial dichotomy in humans between a life of luxury, and a life of great achievements. It appears that our modern beliefs regarding wealth are considerably different from those of the ancient Greeks. We seemingly glorify wealth for its own sake, as opposed to promulgating it at best as a means to excellence. Few would deny that the prevailing ideology in the western world is that success is regarded to be primarily associated with material possessions. As such, we have given a new twist to the classical view of excellence, turning it upside down to mean something consumable that only wealth can guarantee. Given our popular orientation, one might doubt the sincerity of our educational announcements regarding excellence, or even criticise them as "excellent lip service."

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The Work Vs Play Conundrum, or The Problem of Entering Playful Mode

"..... Why is it that the best ideas (from adults) seem to be sparked from a fireside chat often with a glass of wine, or in a sports bar with a beer? Is it that we are truly so formalized and uncomfortable in our unnatural corporate environments that we all but squelch our creative juices? We force ourselves into conference rooms to meet for hours on end, yet still require training courses on how to hold effective business meetings!

Yet I cannot tell you how many times the meeting has ended and the group, instead of adjourning and returning to their "real work", has formed smaller discussion groups in the hallway or the restroom or the breakroom and has continued the discussion of import, often to make increasingly more progress than was ever achieved in the formal conference room setting. Go figure! Is there some link to allowing adults to feel more relaxed in their pursuit of answers, or to even achieve a sense of playfulness among themselves before the real progress is made??!!" [[Appendix2](#)]

In cultures with a strong "work ethic", where the worth of the individual is usually identified with the kind of wealth-producing activity that he or she is engaged in, people may feel psychologically worthless if they are not always busying themselves with something, even if it means doing something totally boring or mechanical. **Max Weber's** analysis of Protestantism in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* suggests that even religion may have a role to play in so shaping people's personalities, as to feel almost guilty for not working. According to Christian ethics, especially the Protestant puritanical version that shaped the

early colonial experience in North America, work is "blessed" because by keeping people busy, it draws people's attention away from "evil thoughts or pursuits," including those of **worldly joy** and **pleasure** that are usually associated with "sin."


Highly indicative of this moral attitude is the fact that the first education law in colonial North America was called the "Old Deluder Satan Act" (1647) because its purpose was to defeat Satan's attempts to keep men, through an inability to read, from the knowledge of the Scriptures. Furthermore, the stories and poems in the two books that appeared in 1836 - the *First* and *Second* in the series of McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers* - which were to succeed the first American "basic textbook" *The New England Primer* (1690), pressed for the moral virtues and had countless children memorising such admonitions as "Work while you work, play while you play. One thing each time, that is the way."

Seemingly, such changes in work ethics have brought about the separation of play from work with the intention of eliminating the former and, because playfulness can not possibly be eliminated as research in the field of biosemiotics strongly advocates (***Autopoiesis*** **Maturana & Varela, 1980 - Bruner, 1997**), have resulted in the separation of fun from play and the substitution of the latter (whole) by the former (its part). Fun - representing the 'purposeless' - can only be had at specific times and occasions and it is clearly and severely prohibited from all other activities and environments. The familiar software screens enabling one to hide computer games from the boss indicates, on the one hand, the extent humans are willing to go in search of playing opportunities - having fun despite the threat of being sacked - and, also, how play can be taken away from learning needs - having fun to just be able to get away from it all.

This artificial, multileveled separation of play from praxis (work) and thought, as a result of the debasement of the importance of play in culture, clearly influences learning theory and educational design. Learning theory has become synonymous in many educational contexts with a theory of child development. In these contexts, play is conceptualized as a developmental aid or catalyst in achieving some advanced cognitive stage in which play is less useful. Within this developmental framework, play is best understood as a means to an end and is well defined only as regards its efficacy in achieving that end, which, for one, severely limits research capabilities into the phenomena of play. Moreover, even when its educative value is recognized, play is often assigned a secondary role vis-a-vis work and science, often defined 'play as work' (**Makedon, 1991**).

The results of such dichotomy can certainly be found in the design of computer games and simulations, and in the way these are selected and utilized in educational settings. Educational criteria seem to define game and simulation value in terms of "reasoned action in the context of the real world" (**Law-Yone, 1996**), objectively verifiable (and compact) algorithmic format - definitive set of game rules - and definitive game end. Naturally, this excludes **recursive design** which allows the player to explore different levels, or even re-write the rules and, in effect, redesign the game during play. Moreover, educational games and simulations are not to encourage **repetitive play** and are frequently played only once.

Consequently, while the use of play as an instructional tool or strategy is restricted to the early grades with decreasing interest among teachers and parents in middle and secondary schools, not surprisingly, the use of games and simulations (of the true algorithmic type) is often embraced in other educational settings, such as corporate and military training environments (**Reiber, 1996**).

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Playful Synergetic Learning Environments for ODL (PSYLES)

"[People] should be able to meet around a [problem chosen and defined by their own initiative. Creative, exploratory learning requires peers currently puzzled about the same terms or problems.... The most

radical alternative to school would be a network or service which gave each man the same opportunity to share his current concern with others motivated by the same concern"

(Illich, 1970).

How do you think this subject/topic delivery will help you with your work/study in the future? " The game-yes, made a subject I had never found terribly easy more accessible."

(Learner's Response - Fraser et al, 1998)

It is now that we finally have the tools to implement and realise the vision that Ivan Illich formed of the active, exploratory and collaborative learner experience. Open, networked interactive learning environments, where people can learn at a distance in synchronous or asynchronous manner, explore content, make use of the inherent interactivity of hypermedia, learn playfully through synergy and have their learning evaluated through contests rather than testing, can now become a reality.

The research of the MENO (IET-OU/UK) team into **narrative structure** (Laurillard et al, 1994), and the experimental software (*Art Explorer, Evolution, MENO etc.*) produced in play with the linear and non-linear presentation of learning material in multimedia design, gives a hint as to the motivation and in depth uncovering that can be achieved if those designs were networked.


Individual learners, following their learning preferences, could exploit the inherent capacity of hypermedia to support both structured/linear and highly exploratory learning attitudes without losing grip with the narrative 'red line', while plunging into Computer Mediated Synergy (CMS) either by actively participating in, or by observing ('lurking') the discussion generated by peer/tutor/mentor mind-searching, idea-sharing synchronous or asynchronous contributions.

The Internet, and the World Wide Web in particular, is all an educator needs for recreating the Learning Polis Environment and facilitating the construction of knowledge. In the words of Mitchel Resnick at MIT:

"The Internet acts as a type of Rorschach test for educational philosophy. When some people look at the Internet, they see it as a new way to deliver instruction. When other people look at it, they see a huge database for learners to explore. When I look at the Internet, I see a new medium for construction, a new opportunity for learners to discuss, share, and collaborate on constructions."

(Resnick, 1996)

Play can serve as a benchmark for evaluating interactive learning environments - those that evoke it deserve special recognition and consideration as PSYLEs.

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Design Artifacts

Motivational research has offered the following characteristics common to all intrinsically motivating learning environments: challenge, curiosity, fantasy, and control (Lepper et al, 1996). **Situational Simulations** and **Games** represent the instructional artifacts most closely matching these characteristics. The architecture of PSYLEs is of equal importance to the one assigned to content and tools, ideally resembling **Third Places** (Oldenburg, 1989) where people can meet and feel at ease.

MUDs and **MOOs** are places for self-directed learning, learning that blends work and play, that often looks chaotic but that is uniquely effective. The world of MUD/MOO can be continuously constructed and reconstructed by its inhabitants. A MUD/MOO is a text-based, networked, virtual reality environment with hypermedia capabilities. Such a text-based virtual environment can provide both a shared place (the virtual world), and a shared set of activities (exploring and extending the virtual world).

For example, the basic structure of the MediaMOO - <telnet://mediamoo.media.mit.edu:8888/> - is a representation of the MIT Media Lab. Users connect in the LEGO Closet, and then step out into the E&L (Epistemology and Learning research group) Garden (Bruckman and Resnick,

1995).

Microworlds - One design artifact consistent with play is the constructivist idea of a microworld (**Papert, 1981; Rieber, 1992**). A microworld is a small, but complete, version of some domain of interest. People do not merely study a domain in a microworld, they "live" the domain, similar to the idea that the best way to learn Spanish is to go and live in Spain.


Microworlds have two important characteristics that may not be present in a simulation. First, a microworld presents the learner with the "simplest case" of the domain, even though the learner would usually be given the means to reshape the microworld to explore increasingly more sophisticated and complex ideas. Second, a microworld must match the learner's cognitive and affective state (**Rieber, 1996, 1998**).

Simulations offer a direct link to the subject matter or content. They are what Howard Gardner calls entry points to topics which are crucial if one wants to think scientifically, historically or aesthetically (**Gardner, 1997**).

Situational Simulations are more of a theatre stage where participants perform on a script depicting a situation in a given domain. Simulation scripts (scenarios) create a situational context in which learners are engaged in synergetic problem-solving and conclude with the construction of their collective and individual presentations using Web and other resources and means of their choice. These presentations are assessed in contests and become part of individual portfolios.

Simulations and **games** are also associated with learning by designing or building. Research suggests that strategies involving "learning by designing" (**Perkins, 1986**) or "learning by building" (**Harel & Papert, 1991**) are excellent ways for people to explore a domain in rich and meaningful ways. The design process provides students with a relevant context for adapting content for a useful purpose (**Kafai, 1994**). This is similar to the phenomenon that the people who learn the most from instructional design projects are not the end users, but the designers and developers themselves (**Jonassen, 1994**).

Games offer many advantages to microworld designers by having the potential to meet most, if not all, of the characteristics of intrinsic motivation, and can serve as preparatory or practice material. Games can be designed for both children and adults with clear and simple goals but with uncertain outcomes. Challenge can be increased or decreased by the learner to keep the challenge of the task optimal. Games can also be designed with layers of complexity, a common element to many commercial computer entertainment games. Feedback can also easily be provided in order for the learner to quickly evaluate their progress against the established game goal. This feedback can take many forms, such as textual, visual, and aural. Feedback is a very important component in giving the user information about whether or not their intended actions resulted in the expected outcomes (**Norman, 1988, 1993**).

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Learning at PSYLEs

PSYLEs can serve as learning community environments for people of any age, sex and educational, professional and social background who want to:

- have enjoyment in learning;
- organise and enhance their communication and decision-making skills
- search and utilise online resource material
- work in company with like-minded peers with whom they can discuss key issues, collaborate in the production of collective assignments and take part in contests of excellence
- construct and publish their own portfolio related to the learning experience and to their personal advancements
- gain accreditation for their past and current knowledge and understanding.

The teaching / learning and administrative approaches utilise social constructivism as an underlying philosophy or way of seeing the world in the direction of substantive human values: aesthetic creativity, social solidarity and democratic discourse.

In order to make the administration of the system tractable, to enhance student motivation through group activity and to express a commitment to a collectivist philosophy, the course teaching/learning model (figure 1) is based on the system environment suggested by **Paulsen (1998)**, where:

There are three basic components inherent in the establishment of [a relationship for learning between an educational agent and a learner]: organising people for learning, helping the participants to learn, and selecting from the multitude of devices available ... to facilitate the operation of the first two. These three components are identified as methods, techniques, and devices.

(Verner 1964, 35)

Learners are central in this model. At their disposal are the interactive environment (asynchronous / synchronous), learning resources, the course content, and the teacher. To facilitate learning, the teachers have at their disposal teaching methods, teaching techniques, and teaching devices.

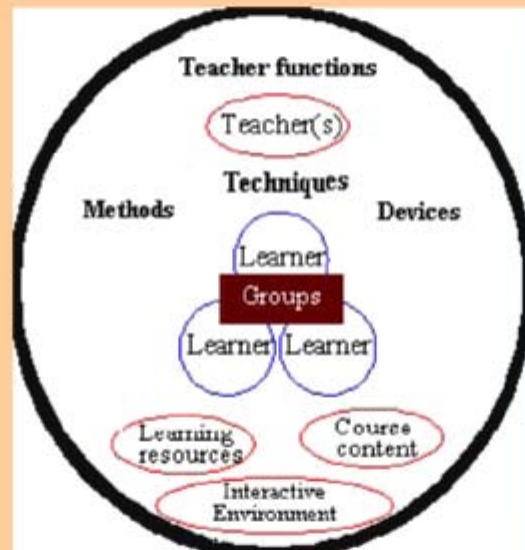


Figure 1. Model of course teaching / learning system (adapted from Paulsen, 1998)

It is intended to "keep the human role in teaching by linking 'real' people with students through telecommunications, and giving them the tools to access, reconstruct and create knowledge". (**Bates, 1998**)

The environment interface will be providing initial instructions and navigation through links leading to all the online components, i.e. Simulation and Game Area, Resource Centre, Agora Listserv and e-Chat Area, Contest Area, Support Centre.

Participants could engage in scenario resolving activities related to simulation scripts which would involve, among other learning products described in the Content and Structure section, the making of HTML documents. A sample, hybrid simulation script may serve to elaborate on this.

Sample Scenario

You are taking part in a three-week online debate on whether physically disabled individuals should be allowed to participate in a online Journalism & Mass Media course.

The course has been running for the last two years and is part of a three-year programme leading to the Ministry of Education approved National Certificate in Journalism.

The programme providers are willing to examine the possibilities of making the course accessible and they have formed a committee for that purpose.

You are members of this committee. Your collective written recommendations are expected to reach the course team by the end of the third week.

Recommended Steps:

Step 1

Introduce yourself, get to know the people you are going to work with and become familiar with the environment of the online debate.

Step 2

1. Find out more about the particular course, accessibility issues and similar accessibility cases

2. Write your initial thoughts as a document under your own folder

Online resources:

Course outline including sample course material, description of activities and assessment criteria;

Information on enabling technology; description of devices, software and techniques; case studies

Links to accessibility policies and their implementations

Ask the experts (Chat or mailing list sessions)

Step 3

Discussion

The course team needs the committee's recommendations by the end of this week. Please use the mailing lists called "GR1 discussion", "GR2 discussion" and "GR3 discussion" to negotiate with each other within your groups and arrive at a collectively decided and constructed document which should be posted in your Group's folder.

You are encouraged to read the discussions in other groups, but you cannot write messages in any other discussion but your own - you can always communicate with other group members in the Plenary Conference.

Step 4

Debriefing - Future plans

What is the impression of the learning value of this concept?

What do you think of the technical interface?

What are the thematics you are further interested in? (A list of Thematics to choose from) .

Assessment will be integrated into the learning process and assess overall performance and outcomes in such a way that would not constitute a conflicting practice within the constructivist environment.

Learners would be assessed on a pass/fail basis and there would be a public Hall of Fame for those who excel. Merit would be given to those who actively participate in the process and their deliverables are approved by the final Contest judges.

Participants would be required to compose a final presentation which would be part of the assessment procedure where they would be reporting on their course experiences, using any

and all electronic publishing media (hypertext, Graphics, Audio etc.). This would be part of their individual portfolio to be developed and maintained during their participation in the PSYLEs Programme and it would be placed in the learner's Web page on the PSYLEs public site.

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Learner Support

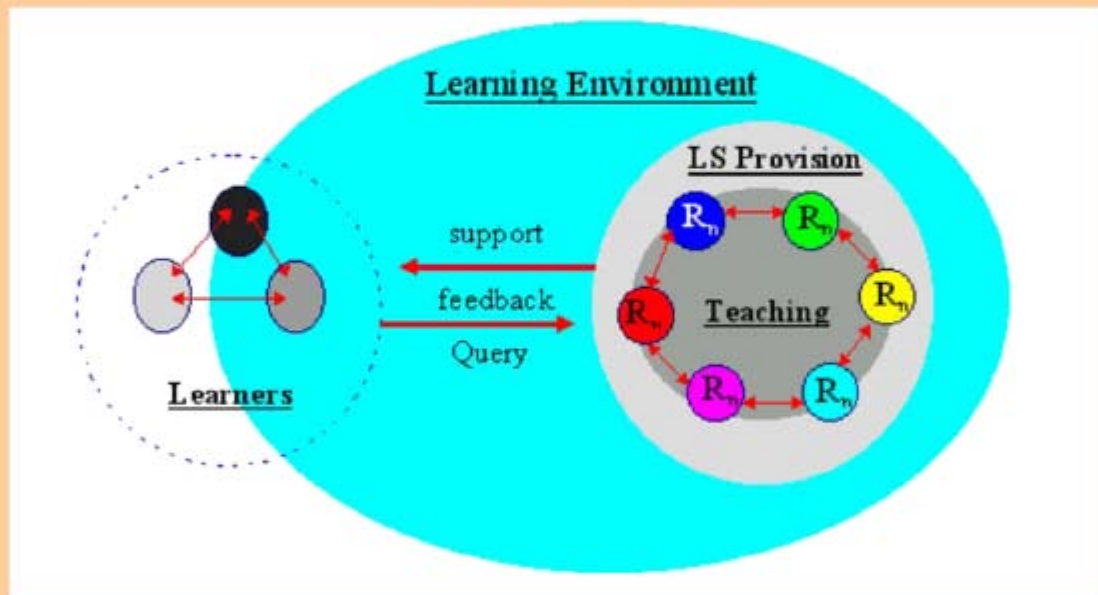


Figure 1. Basic structure and flow diagram of the Learner Support System in the overall (individual/institutional) learning environment.

The system for Learner Support constitutes a **dynamic model** which deals with relationships that vary with time. It should be capable of functioning at the moment a learner or potential learner starts **querying** any of the overall learning system components ([Reid, 1995](#)). It should also play a key role, as an interoperable networked mechanism, in **systemic interactions** (outreach programmes) outside the boundaries of its learning system ([Fig 1](#)). Hence, its structure must ensure **interoperability** between its elements, with system components and with other systems, which calls for an **open and transparent** status.

Central to the system's structure is **teaching**. In the words of [Jay Reid \(ibid. p 269\)](#) "Learning support *is* as important as teaching; it *is* teaching; it is central to all we do as professionals". The PSYLEs LSS structure depicts the 'new', yet to be accomplished, role of teacher as facilitator ([Freire's animateur](#)), on the concept of moving from teachers to mentors described by [Mandell & Herman \(1996\)](#). As [Figure 1](#) suggests, the Learner Support System is conceived as Teaching with an aura. Humanity-old elements of good teaching, which ensure Open-Access to learning and thus knowledge, are contained in this aura. On the convergence of those 'new' elements and the conventional elements of contemporary teaching is where Supporting Roles are defined and their content informed.

Staff training in learner-centred pedagogy is considered to be the basic support requirement in this area. Lack of such training might mean that the need for learner support is not appreciated ([Lewis, 1998](#) ; [Hawkrigde, 1998](#)). Several schemes may be adopted including Staff Simulation, Experts Involvement, Previous Students as Online Consultants, Online Teaching-team Meetings ([Karaliotas, 1999](#)). For system **evaluation and quality assurance**, the adaptable and eclectic strategy of Illuminative Evaluation could be adopted ([Parlett & Hamilton, 1977](#)).

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Conclusion

Contemporary society and educational discourse considers human learning to be a non-playful process as people have come to accept that gaining knowledge can only be the result of hard labour. Contrary to this dominant learned culture of great effort and toil in learning, playfulness and enjoyment can and should be an integral part of the learning process.


Has it always been like this? Have humans always regarded learning as 'hard serious work', a painful and unpleasant process with only momentary - when set objectives are accomplished - beams of pleasure and intrinsic satisfaction, as there is, indeed, more and more to be learned? Ancient cultures, hellenic cities as learning environments, aboriginal Dreamtime suggest that there have been models practising the opposite which could be utilised on our global quest for excellence.

Is this realisable in the Information era?

Open and distance learning opportunities appearing globally in ever increasing quantity and improving quality could seemingly match this rudimental societal need. Learning environments, without 'walls' and with the inherent, unique capacity for media integration and on-the-fly amendable designing, can now be afforded through new technologies. These can be the home for playful synergetic learning, the Third Places where people can find the synergy and the tools to empower themselves and transcend.

Classical Humanism, with its holistic approach to knowledge and the claim that education is to develop human intellectual, spiritual, and physical powers for the enrichment of life, revived in the praxis of Vittorino da Feltre (**Casa Giocosa = Happy House**), Johann Amos Comenius ('**Orbis Pictus**'), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (**School for Real Children**), Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (**Kindergarten**), Maria Montessori (**Educating the Ineducable - Case dei Bambini**), in the theory and practice of Ivan Illich, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and the ongoing endeavours of Seumour Papert (**Microwords**), Mitchel Resnick (**Constructionist Environments - Manipulative Objects**), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ('**Flow**'), Georgi Lozanov ('**Suggestopedia**'), Alexander Makedon (**Radical Perspectivism**), to mention but a few, points to the directions which educators and decision makers need to take for realising this inspiring educational model.

The discussion in this paper has been aimed primarily at open and distance education design and implementation issues. However, it is impossible and undesirable to separate these issues from the philosophical assertions on which they rest. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that learning CAN be playful, that play is learning and, as such, is an inseparable part of human learning, in adults as well as children. Play, if seriously recognised and embedded into social discourse as a driving force to excellence, coupled with the new strengths of Open and Distance learning transactions, can regain its rightful place in the learning culture and become the protagonist in informing the much desired Learning Society.

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Appendix

1. The ancient Hellenic polis = city.

The etymology of the term "politics" is derived from the Hellenic polis; and politis, which means citizen, or an inhabitant of polis. Hence politics = the administration of the polis (= city). Now since in ancient Ellas most states were actually independent cities (or "city-states"), politics over the centuries came to refer to the administration of not only cities, but also whole states, including the citizenry. Hence politics = the administration of the state.

2. Subject: Adults in a PLAY Mode

Date: Wed, 4 Aug 1999 09:20:02 -0400

From: teresa.lavoie@WACHOVIA.COM

Reply-To: Instructional Technology Forum <ITFORUM@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU>

To: ITFORUM@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU

I would be remiss if my first communication to this forum did not include a THANK YOU for allowing me to learn from lurking. I have been actively reading the entries of many fascinating experts in the field for over a year, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so. I graduated from Georgia State University in Dec '98 with a Master of Science in Instructional Technology and work in a bank as an Instructional Designer.

Now, for my own wanderings, I have been reflecting on the comments regarding the pursuit of fun in learning and wonder about the tie-in to an Innovative Workshop Series we are currently pursuing at "the bank". We are openly exploring the creativity gains that result from a less structured, more relaxed and encouraging of reflection and "blue-sky time" environment. Why is it that the best ideas (from adults) seem to be sparked from a fireside chat often with a glass of wine, or in a sports bar with a beer? Is it that we are truly so formalized and uncomfortable in our unnatural corporate environments that we all but squelch our creative juices? We force ourselves into conference rooms to meet for hours on end, yet still require training courses on how to hold effective business meetings! Yet I cannot tell you how many times the meeting has ended and the group, instead of adjourning and returning to their "real work", has formed smaller discussion groups in the hallway or the restroom or the breakroom and has continued the discussion of import, often to make increasingly more progress than was ever achieved in the formal conference room setting. Go figure! Is there some link to allowing adults to feel more relaxed in their pursuit of answers, or to even achieve a sense of playfulness among themselves before the real progress is made??!!

