

"This was no time for fun.
This was no time for games.
There was work to be done."
Dr. Seuss.

CHAPTER 6: SERIOUS BUSINESS - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Chapter introduction

From the start of this research, I have taken the position that play is, ironically, both ubiquitously present and, at the same time, under-studied and under-valued. Despite the trivialisation of play, it ironically permeates the workplace amidst a work-ethic that seems to banish it. It pops up in unexpected places.

This research therefore represents my own attempt to elevate play and play-based methods to the spotlight of my own practice as a facilitator, against the larger backdrop of an impending wellness crisis and societal decay. Something in work, the way we do it, is not working. And something nutritious is at play in play, if we allow it. At the same time, this research was approached in such a way as to present an exploration of play at work, not only as research domain, but also as method; i.e., the research process, representing *work*, was approached *playfully* through autoethnography. I want to use this chapter to briefly reflect on the main outcomes, contributions and recommendations that have emerged. But before I start, allow me to latch onto that overarching metaphor of exploration, hiking and mountains, one last time.

2. The joy is in the journey

In one of my hiking experiences in the Drakensberg, a couple of years ago, we hiked up Grey's Pass close to Monk's Cowl. We hiked up into the middle-berg area during the morning and then started the climb up to the escarpment through this infamous pass – a one kilometre ascension spread over two kilometres in length. As an amateur hiker, this was one of the most difficult physical challenges I had attempted up to that point. During the morning, we covered about 18 kilometres in 7

hours. That afternoon, it took us the same amount of time to hike the one-kilometre ascension. The climb was characterised by sweating, aching, temptations to quit, and wanting to cry. When we reached the top, we took off our backpacks with the last bit of energy we had left and collapsed onto the ground. As a prize, we received what was probably the most beautiful sunset we have ever seen, peeking over the horizon.

The next moment, the sound of a helicopter interrupted our quiet awe. It landed about 100 metres from us. A guy in a tuxedo climbed out with his female companion, who wore a stylish evening gown. Unaware of the scene behind them, they ignorantly sipped their champagne and appreciated the sunset with us. We joked often afterwards that, if any of us had any energy left to pick up our arms, we would have thrown rocks at them. In my own disempowered state, I settled for the consoling rationalisation that this couple simply were not looking at the same sunset we were looking at. While they were looking at it through their eyes, we looked at it through the taste of blood in our throats, the dust in our nostrils, the sweat in our eyes and the ache in our limbs. Hiking up the mountain changes the sunset. We loved it. We would return, and we did, year after year.

Hiking up the Drakensberg incorporates the rough and beauty of gruelling challenges and of natural wonder. It offers as the reward spectacular views and immense feelings of accomplishment. Despite being hard work, no one who hikes up a mountain would look at it as work per se. Rather, we call it play. Although it requires a tremendous amount of mental, emotional and physical prowess and effort, enthusiasts flock to it voluntarily and return season after season, year after year. And when you arrive at the end, you know that it was not just about the destination. Otherwise a helicopter ride would do. No. It is also about the joys that get discovered in the journey.

As I complete this journey, as we arrive back at the bottom after visiting the top, I can feel I didn't take a helicopter ride. Qualitative research is about more than the snapshot of the sunset. It is about the experience. Similarly, play is about more than productive ends. It is intrinsic and autotelic. As I look down the path, the pit stops, the views, the connections with fellow hikers as well as the lessons learned, it all seems worth it. In this final piece, let us huddle around the campfire, reminisce,

highlight and soak in the recollections before we, so to speak, pack up our toys and all go home.

3. Where we started

Chapter 1 argued that a significant research opportunity exists for studying play at work. Our workplaces are, in many respects, still dominated by scientific management paradigms that simply do not want to flirt with the whims of children, poets, artists or the lazy. Yet, we see examples of play, ranging from “ropes courses, office birthday parties, initiation rituals, casual Fridays” (Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009, p.88) to play-infused approaches to product development, training, strategy development, stress management and creativity (Kirsten, 2008; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Perhaps we are seeing a persistent attempt from adults to reclaim their inner child (Abrams, 1990; Papadima, 2006) – adults embracing the informal, unconditional, silly, spontaneous and playful. If there is anything that testifies to the vibrant and resilient nature of play, it is this.

Contrary to the dominance of Taylorist ideals to produce perfect robotic efficiency, and in opposition to the work ethic with its distaste for fun (Berger, 2009), suppressing play has been as ineffective as plugging a leaking oil well. The study of workplace play and play-methods in organisations can therefore be seen as a simple acknowledgement of its ubiquitous and inextinguishable presence, on the one hand. On the other, giving it earnest attention could also represent the much-needed attempt for science to catch up with practice.

Aside from play offering a huge untapped research opportunity and challenge, the rationale for this research was also built around the unquestionable and burning issue of employee wellness and work-related well-being. Furthermore, broadened ethics that encourage organisations to see their responsibilities beyond that of profit, newer generations with double-edged swords of relevant skills and different expectations, as well as a sustainability imperative, have all contributed to the need for organisations to take the well-being of their employees seriously. It is in this context that play and play-based methods were explored in within pedagogical settings of facilitated workshops.

Chapter 2 explored the methodology I adopted in exploring play at work, namely autoethnography, and presents this as principled and disciplined decision (Sparkes, 2002). In addition to field practicalities, such as being a full member of the researcher setting, I strongly leaned on established trends in qualitative research that demonstrate, firstly, a greater acceptance of research that has intimate proximity between researcher and phenomenon, and secondly, a growing awareness that the form in which research is represented is not neutral to the research findings (Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2002), but influences, interacts with and mediates it.

I therefore argued that, in order to harmonise the methodology with the research domain, an approach that embraces qualities of play, such as imaginative, sensory, emotive, and colourful, was necessary in order to enhance the results of this research. Autoethnography, as a research approach that relies heavily on the experience of the researcher and encourages reflexivity, offers an ideal match. However, in heeding the cautions in terms of legitimacy and credibility (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008), I went further than studying purely myself by including the experiences of co-facilitators and participants in workshops. The data from my fieldwork, interviews and writing, are contained in chapters four and five, while more details are provided in the annexures.

4. Where we arrived

How does play promote work-related well-being? This was the question that I started this research off on. The idea of “play at work” has been playfully adopted to examine two vantage points for further exploration. The first concerned exploring play and play-based methods as they occur in workshop contexts. This was critically evaluated and compared to standing play theory, and resulted in a preliminary taxonomy that has been useful in reflecting on the intra- and interpersonal processes involved in play. The second angle involved a deeper exploration of the experiences of players, including the benefits and reservations regarding play. This was critically compared to standing concepts encountered in Positive Psychology in order to highlight the definite links between play and well-being and to argue that play does indeed relate to our work-related well-being in significant ways.

4.1. Play and play-based methods

The corporate playgrounds, i.e., settings in our workplaces where play is sanctioned, lean strongly on motives related to either learning (e.g., experiential learning) or creativity (e.g., creative thinking, problem-solving, creative strategy planning). Aside from scholars in creativity and learning, it was demonstrated from literature that organisational scholars from a variety of disciplines, including wellness, have more recently joined in. The play-based methods encountered in this study were limited to methods conducive to workshop contexts. These methods all lean heavily on the symbolic, associative and imaginative qualities of play (Anchor, 1978). Although most play theorists define play as autotelic (Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009), or as an end in itself, the way in which methods are used in workshop contexts are often justified as being tools for creativity, learning, dialogue or problem solving. These methods therefore draw into question the accepted idea that play is essentially non-productive, and together with Kane (2005), argue for new conceptions of play.

The three primary methods explored included ice-breakers and training games, narrative and metaphor, expressive arts play, and physical/body play. These categories are reflected in other classification schemes (Caillois, 1961; Sutton-Smith, 2001) and have also been described as play therapy mediums (Nel, 2006). A large category of play, not linked to these specific methods and termed playful behaviours (e.g., humour, joking, teasing, inquisitiveness, playful language, imaginative ideas), is seen to run across play-based methods and also to influence the overall climate in which play is experienced.

The exploration of these play-based methods proposes a preliminary taxonomy that includes interactive vs. solitary, competitive vs. cooperative, motor-sensory vs. cognitive-mind, participative vs. vicarious and rule-bound vs. improvisational. Although none of the play-based methods can be described precisely by these ideas, such a taxonomy attempts to provide a perspective to think and talk about play-based methods that could assist in further research and academic collaboration. I argue that a greater sensitivity to the differences in method allows for a more conscious and transparent approach to its application and consequently, a greater opportunity to reflect, learn and improve our overall practise.

Although play-based methods as well as play's link to well-being leans strongly towards play therapy, this research supports the position of Wood (2008), that emphasised that play has everyday therapeutic value. Play therapy makes play serious and, in certain contexts, calling it therapy is unhelpful. An argument for de-professionalising it is therefore offered with the intent to make it accessible, collaborative and emergent.

4.2. Experiences in play and work-related well-being

From the more objective, external use of play methods, the research extended into the more subjective experiences of play and work-related well-being. This link was operationalised by bringing positive psychological concepts into the inquiry, and by investigating how people's experience of play related to those concepts. The following is a summary of the themes that were addressed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Play as fun. Firstly, play is universally expressed as a fun, light, enjoyable and satisfying experience. This is then related to the positive affectivity which is often encountered in Positive Psychology (Watson, 2002). The effects of the fun and enjoyment found in play ranges from psychological, social as well as biological benefits. Frederickson's (2002) broaden-and-build theory was specifically touched on to understand how positive affectivity relates to well-being and optimal functioning. The fun and light emotive quality in play is probably one of the most consistent themes across the literature as well as the reports from research subjects in this study.

Play as mind-body integration. Secondly, in play we experience a greater synthesis of mind, body and soul (Legerstee, 2007). Participants confirmed that play leads to different ways of thinking and being. Some of the common expressions participants gave that relate to this was left-brain and right-brain synthesis (from work in creativity (Springer & Deutsch, 2001)), as well as stopping and smelling the flowers (an emphasis on sensory and tactile experiences). As people, we don't only relate from thought to thought, but also from touch to touch. By playing, we deliberately draw on the sensory and tactile, and find ourselves relating to both ourselves as well as others in new ways.

Play as authenticity. Thirdly, play is experienced as authenticity, another concept that often surfaces in Positive Psychology (Lopez, 2009; Seligman, 2002). We can be ourselves when we play. We drop our guards, we let down our hair, we allow for spontaneity, and move past the façades. The experience of authenticity is also framed in this research as a recovering of our inner-child (Bradshaw, 1991). By invoking the metaphor of child, we connect to innocence, spontaneity, honesty, lack of pretension and curiosity. Authenticity is also an experience that reflects a synchronisation of our internal and external realities (Palmer, 2004). Such an experience also leads to greater degrees of self-acceptance, ownership and responsibility.

Play as community. Fourthly, play is a significant interpersonal experience and much of the benefit of play can be related to its interpersonal nature. This theme follows closely on the idea of authenticity. When I see you, and you see me, and this is accompanied by playful appreciation and enjoyment, a sense of belonging is significantly heightened and relationships are strengthened. As was demonstrated, play therefore promotes group cohesion, bonding and friendship. Positive relationships are also highlighted in Positive Psychology as a significant source of well-being (Simon, Judge, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2010).

Play as stress-relief and resilience. Finally, play is experienced as a de-stressor. More than that, play allows us to disengage a challenge or stressor in order to re-engage it with renewed perspective, focus and energy. This idea stretches across the other themes, but is also a unique experience in itself. When we play, we forget about our worries. We relax, we unwind, and in the process, we build up the necessary physical, emotional and mental resources to address our problems with a renewed sense of vigour and perspective. Laughter, physical activity, sensory stimulation, and social interaction, the other themes mentioned above, are also frequently cited as good coping mechanisms within the domain of Positive Psychology (Carr, 2004). In Chapter 4, ideas such as rejuvenation, relating, and reframing were specifically explored as ways to counter symptoms of burnout and disengagement.

Aside from the above-mentioned themes, numerous other benefits were also revealed through the research process but have not been treated in more detail because of scope and emphasis. These included, for example, play as learning, play as creative expression, play as problem-solving and play as subversion. Although participants

did report on these experiences of play, its relationship to well-being requires more footwork and speculation, and can be seen through the themes listed above.

This study has also revealed that play has numerous possible downsides. Play can lead to negative coping mechanisms, such as avoidance. Play can also include experiences of bullying and embarrassment, and there's a fine line between "fun with" and "fun of." While briefly touching on these aspects, this research rather focussed on positive expressions of play. This sheds light on positioning play, or creating the necessary conditions for play, which include participative safety, and secondly, the need for structure and purpose. The former deals with the fears and anxiety of participants to lose face or expose inadequacies. The need for structure reflects the desire of players to understand the boundaries of play, and to overcome intellectual or emotional objections.

5. Shortcomings and recommendations for further study

In starting a research topic on play and work, I first discovered a severe lack of literature in the field of Industrial Psychology. After I opened up the scope to include authors from other social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology, the contrary became true and the breadth and diversity of information became overwhelming. As a result, much of the work included in Chapter 3, and followed through in Chapters 4 and 5, became lengthy and somewhat eclectic. Having a stronger focus with the luxury of leaning on very specific theories not only would have been easier, but would also have made it more poignant and impactful. This limitation of the current study also relates to one of its strengths. I believe I managed to navigate a vast territory, to explore these practically and to develop theoretical links for further inquiry. Every trail starts with the first few people who need to hack at the undergrowth. Where qualitative research is often known for its depth, this research's strength lies in exploring a fairly large area, and in hopefully providing a few footpaths for others to follow in with more specific and in-depth study.

Two more ghosts have haunted me about this research. Firstly, my own experiences and opportunity to study play have been in workshop contexts and through the play-based methods explored. The same is true for others who have studied play in organisational settings (Kirsten, 2008; Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009).

However, the real value of play, I believe, will be significantly amplified if it makes its way out of a demarcated playground of workshops, and starts fermenting in the soil of everyday organisational life. Studying play and playfulness in normal work contexts remains therefore a significant opportunity, untapped by this research. This also highlights the need for more ethnographic and autoethnographic studies in organisations, as observed by Boyle and Parry (2007).

The second ghost is that, in the South African context, topics that involve higher-order needs such as self-fulfilment, self-actualisation, job satisfaction, purpose in work as well as play and playfulness at work, come perhaps as a distant second to the more pressing need of physical and emotional sustenance and security. By the mere virtue that this study focused on work with senior management teams, the attitudes of those living on the breadline were not addressed. In a country with such a large degree of unemployment, it casts a shadow over research like this and certain questions remain unexplored. For example, are team-building, quadbikes, a retreat to the Victoria Falls, helicopter rides, and more, not perhaps over-indulgent? Or perhaps, do people who battle to find a stable job and to put bread on the table also have an expectation of play at work? As researchers in South Africa, we must be careful to not study only topics that benefit the comfortably-off. At the same time, I think the kinds of play-based methods in this study were both economic and accessible to people from a variety of cultures (Keim, 2003). Using the language of play to bridge cultural gaps has been noted in developments studies, and this in itself reveals a large area worth exploring.

Other opportunities for further study include delving deeper into specific play methods, and exploring how classic conceptions across these methods agree or differ. The taxonomy offered could perhaps help to understand these methods more fully and to explore how different experiences are combined and sequenced through play-based methods. Furthermore, deeper dives into any of the five themes mentioned in this research are also recommended. Although humour has been studied extensively, topics such as authenticity and mind-body integration and their relation to work-related well-being are still largely unexplored. There is also an opportunity to relate play to theoretical constructs such as work engagement, organisational climate and burnout more specifically and directly. Specifically relating play to these well-

developed theories is another potential goldmine for combining it with current work and for quantifying its impact.

6. Writing autoethnography

Autoethnography, as a postmodern approach, represents not only an opportunity to write about phenomena, but also to interact with, create and play with phenomena. It holds that the world is not just outside of us, in need of being discovered, but is also inside of us, in need of being created. This work has therefore not stood on the sidelines and observed play from a distance. It became involved and got its hands dirty. Autoethnography, as many scholars note, is therefore not innocent and neutral to the phenomenon being studied. It is active, emotive, pedagogical and political (Denzin, 2006; Richardson, 2000).

My own experience in writing autoethnographically, as explored in Chapter 5, has been varied. It was difficult, uncertain and painful at times. However, it has also been fulfilling and insightful. It taught me a lot about my own story of play and work. Where I started off feeling that I didn't have a story to tell, I now look back and feel astounded at how much I have learned about myself, my relationship to work and my relationship to play. The study has helped me to think critically about my ability, and inability, to work playfully. In attempting to write playfully about the subject of play, I have seen how easy it is to strip play of any joy and satisfaction. I have also rediscovered how work in itself, without play, can be fulfilling and meaningful. This research is therefore not about trumping work and elevating play. There is a work-ethic that is good and deserving of celebration in conjunction with the predominant emphasis of a play-ethic found in this dissertation. It is not or, but and.

One of the objectives of this research has been to offer the reader something that is accessible – something that evokes, intrigues and invites readers to reflect on their own relationship to play and work. The feedback that I received from colleagues, friends and family who have participated in this process, either explicitly or by cheering me along and reading snippets of the text, or just participating in conversation, has all been affirmative. We all walked away enriched. The same is true for people that participated in the study who reported that, to merely reflect on play at work explicitly, has been enlightening, refreshing and rejuvenating.

The need for research to be beneficial, both in the process of doing research, the process of writing research and the process of reading it, has therefore been an interesting insight that this work underscores.

7. Concluding thoughts

As I type this, I'm sitting at a local coffee shop in full view of a play garden with swings, climbing ropes, ships, barrels and more. The children that run up and down here, do so in complete and utter unawareness of the role that play plays in their development. They don't care. They don't play because it is important. They play because it is instinct.

Wood (2008) reflects a sentiment found among almost all the play scholars I have encountered: "Play is indeed a very serious business" (p. 119). In a final note, despite echoing these calls to take play seriously throughout the pages of this dissertation, let us consider the opposite. Why is it that the only way in which we can get ourselves to pay attention to anything is to bolster its importance and seriousness? Highly acclaimed physicist Richard Feynman (1985) discovered the opposite and interestingly observes the following in respect of the process of developing his Nobel prize-winning theories:

I used to do whatever I felt like doing—it didn't have to do with whether it was important for the development of nuclear physics, but whether it was interesting and amusing to play with... So I got this new attitude. Now that I am burned out... I'm going to *play* with physics, whenever I want to, without worrying about any importance whatsoever...just doing it for the fun of it. And before I knew it... I was 'playing'—working really—and with the same old problem that I loved so much... It was effortless. It was easy to play with these things. It was like uncorking a bottle. There was no importance to what I was doing, but ultimately there was. The diagrams and the whole business that I got the Nobel prize for came from that piddling around with the wobbling plate. (as cited in L. McMahon, 2009, p. 23)

My dissertation has illustrated the profound effect play can have on our well-being. Play leads to positive emotion; it runs through our minds, hearts and bodies in ways that synthesise and integrate us; it helps us to speak our names authentically; it promotes camaraderie, compassion and friendship and, in all these matters, gives us

good ways to cope with the burdens and stressors of life. Yes, play is important. But that is not why we play. Perhaps we play because it is unimportant. We throw off the seriousness, the consequence, and the rules of right and wrong. And herein lies the paradox. Play is serious, precisely because it is not. Its unimportance is important. The more important we make it, the more we burden it with obligation, duty and seriousness, the more we kill it. Although offered in the context of children's play, let us find application for the advice from House (2008):

Play is most decidedly not some kind of utilitarian 'thing' that adults or teachers can, or should, mechanistically manipulate, specify or control; and those caught up in what is sometimes called a 'modernist' mind-set (which politicians and policy-makers almost invariably seem to be) arguably do a kind of 'violence' to what play means in their attempts to harness it to anxiety-driven, 'adult-centric' agendas centred around 'learning goals' and the like. Play is, indeed, very far from being 'sorted' and, paradoxically, perhaps we should be actively celebrating that. (p. 108)

In a celebration of everything about this work that is not yet sorted, I want to pause the exploration for now. Perhaps it is time for another mountain, another rock-pond and another summit. And on a very non-serious note, it is time to stop. And it is time to play.