

Building a playful learning community

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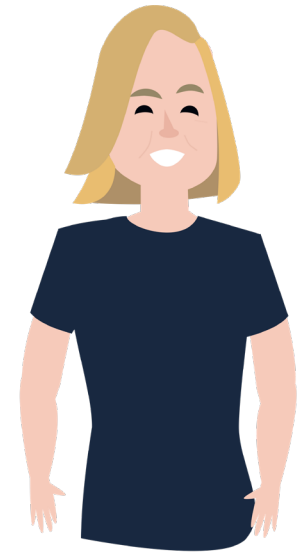
City, University of London

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@jsecker @squinsee @CityUniLEaD



Introduction to us....



Professor Susannah Quinsee, VP Digital and Student Experience, City, University of London

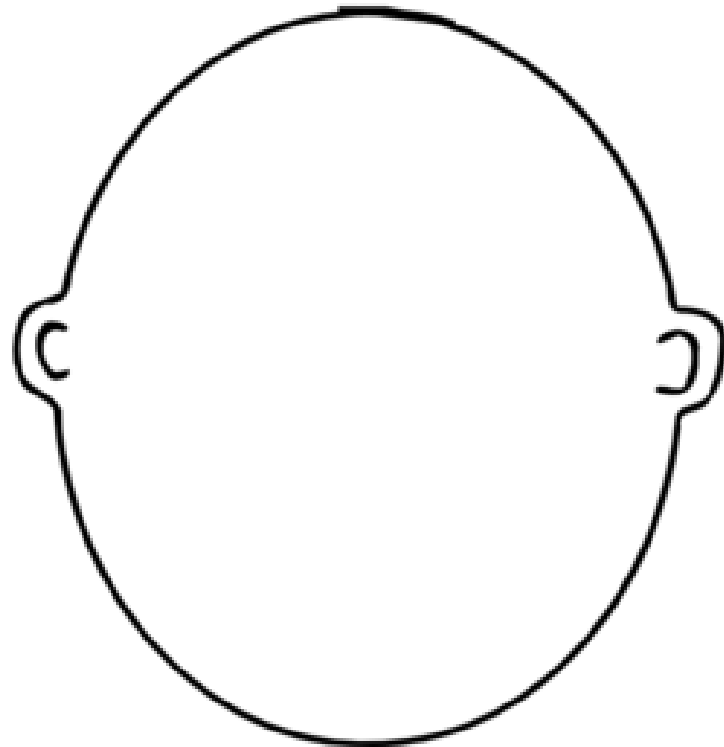
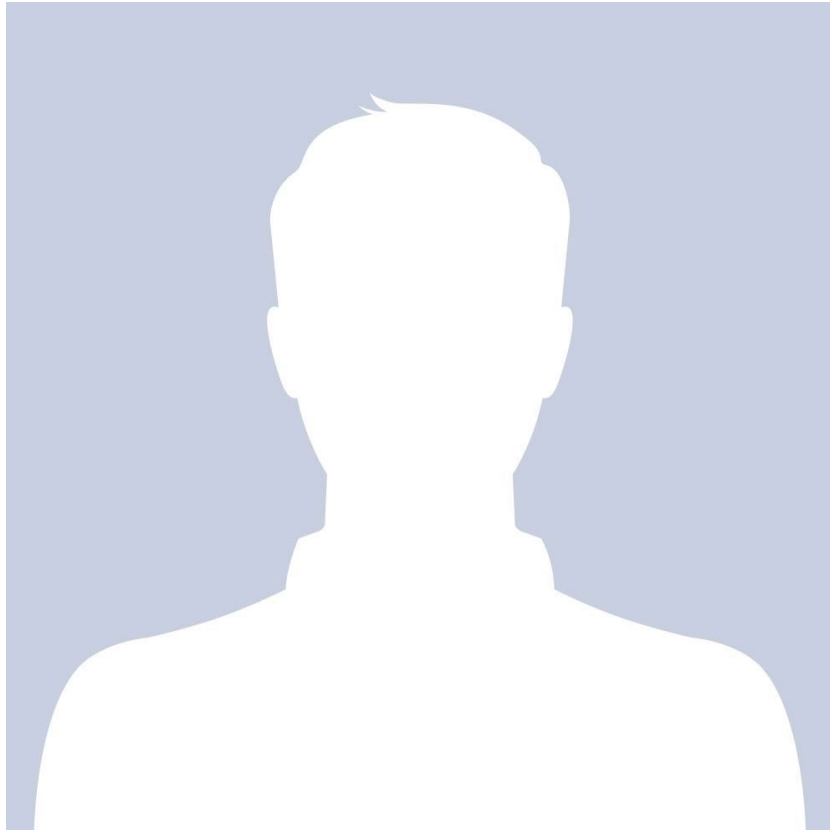
Dr Jane Secker, Senior Lecturer in Educational Development, City, University of London

What is a playful community?



Sgt Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Copyright Parody created by Chris Jones at University of Reading

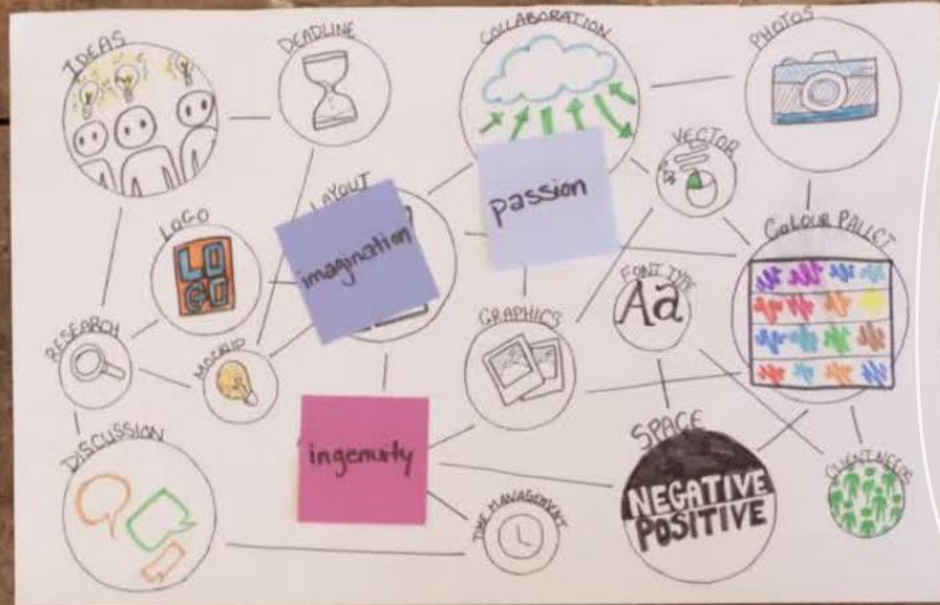
What does a playful learning community look like to you?



A collection of colorful wooden blocks in various shapes (T, L, and cross) scattered on a wooden surface. The blocks are in shades of purple, blue, green, orange, red, pink, yellow, grey, and light blue. They are arranged in a somewhat chaotic pattern, with some overlapping and others standing alone. The background is a light-colored wooden surface with a visible grain.

Our playful learning community at City

- Set up pre-covid and met a few times
- A mix of academic and professional services staff
- A mix of approaches from games to creative approaches
- A mix of disciplines
- Was disrupted by and shifted to teams



Our research aims

- Explore what playful learning means at City
- Consider how play has been used in relation to remote learning to engage students
- Consider what support and development is useful for staff engaging in playful learning techniques
- Develop more playful approaches to general university “business” such as committee meetings and other activities
- Explore the notion of “playful leadership” and how this could be developed at City.

Methodology

- 5 Focus groups, 1 interview (14 people)
- December 2022– March 2023
- Recorded on Teams
- Thematic analysis (still ongoing)



Some outline findings

- Definitions of play
- Rationale
- Benefits
- Challenges
- Support
- Evaluation
- Aspects of playful leadership





Definitions and rationale

Definitions

- Wariness of defining it as 'play'– often people used examples
- A full range of playful Whitton's *'tools, techniques and tactics'*
- For some it's all about games, for others it's about playful or creative approaches

Rationale

- To build student engagement / to motivate student learning
- To make dry subjects more accessible / digestible
- Lends itself to certain disciplines (e.g. performing arts)

Benefits and challenges

Benefits

Builds a community

Overcomes anxiety

Foster positive staff – student relationships


Gives students freedom to explore – encourages curiosity

Usually active learning so builds engagement in the task (flow?) / promotes deep learning

Builds valuable skills (team working, problem solving)

Challenges

- Needs to have a clear purpose – link to learning outcomes
- Perception that it's 'childish' and not acceptable (by other staff and by some students)
- Resource intensive / takes time to plan and execute properly
- Inclusivity / accessibility concerns



I teach difficult subject and students get very anxious and they get very worried. And so what I'm trying to do there is have a more playful approach with some of the activities that we do.

80% really like it and really get engaged, really enjoy themselves. I remember one of my colleagues said she confessed at the end of the day that she forgotten tweet her lunch. She was so into playing these games and doing these activities. She just lost track of time. Got so into the flow of the whole thing.

Support and evaluation

- Often playful champions are few and far between – need to create a culture of play
- Need to be given time and funding to create playful learning interventions and games
- Harder to demonstrate the value in play
- Need a sense that senior management value it (don't just tolerate it)
- Need for a community for like-minded people



So after the bridge building exercise, we get them to go away and write a one page reflection as a team. In there they worked what they learned, what they learned about each other, what the strengths they can see developing in their team are what any potential weaknesses they might have. And that's the point of what we're trying to get them to think about is does your team jail. So we just get them to do a little one page, it's their first proper written thing as a team and they have to sit and talk to each other and figure out who did what, how did it work. And that lets us see that.

Because you see people who are already doing it. And if especially if you see people for where it's worked, I think that's really helpful. I think the validity is a real issue. I you just reminded me I once I used to chair Learning Environment Committee and we once ran it as a very playful session. It was Valentine's Day. We had like Valentine's music and we had hearts and things on our slides that it's so did not go down well.

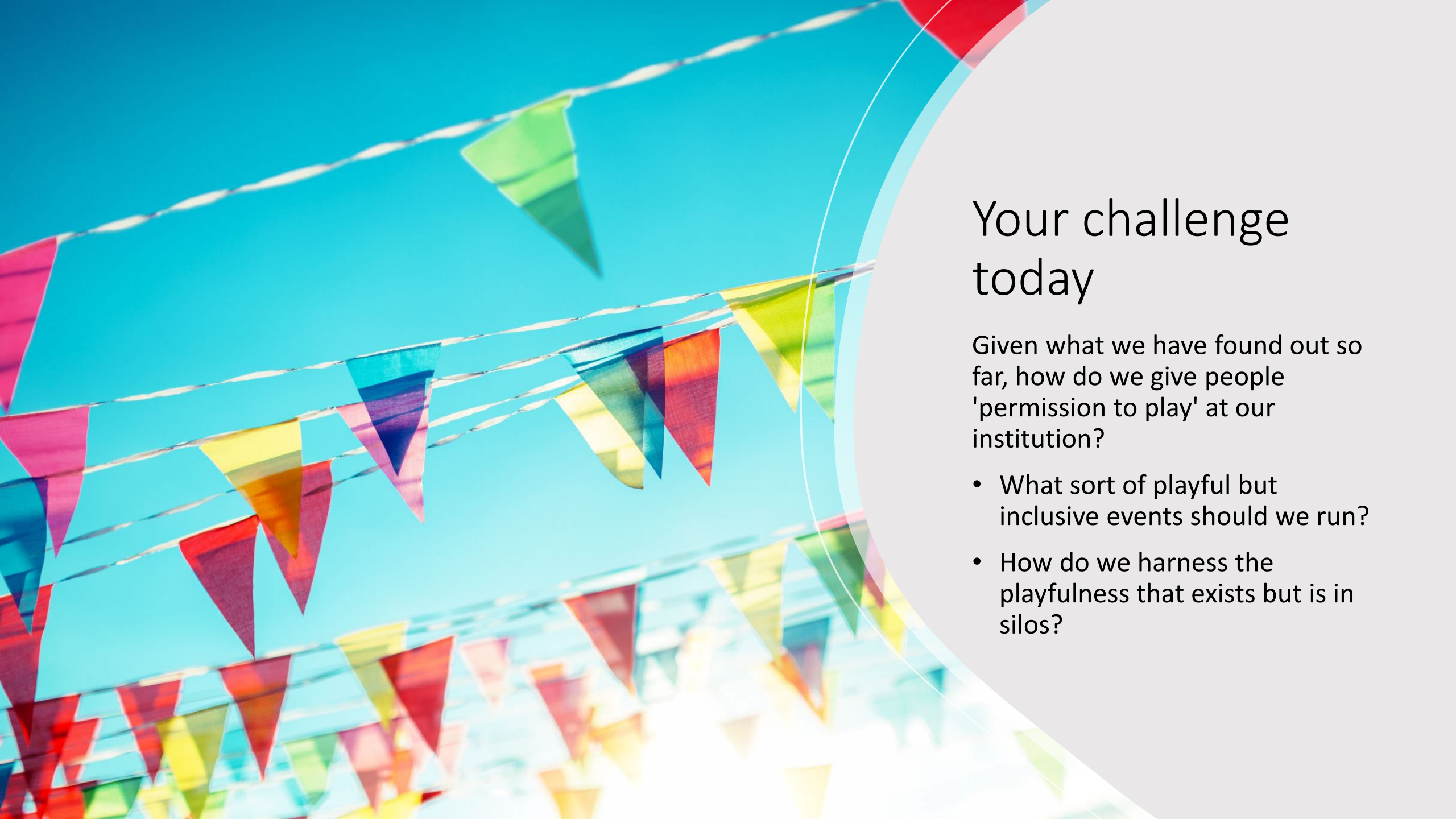
Playful leadership

- Caution around using play in other HE contexts
- Need for support from senior managers
- Some reported negative experiences of trying this in different contexts
- Need to change the view of what leaders **should** look like (the playful leader)
- A need for evidence of the value of play in learning



But how? How do you change perception? Because I think even with things like you don't look right to be a senior person or you don't look old enough or you're not wearing the right clothes or you know all of that can also then be brought into the whole. Well, this is not really how we do things because it's a different way of doing things. And I think it's the, how do you address the different and make it more the norm and what are the barriers against?





Your challenge today

Given what we have found out so far, how do we give people 'permission to play' at our institution?

- What sort of playful but inclusive events should we run?
- How do we harness the playfulness that exists but is in silos?

References

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