Flexibility and Playful Learning as Strategies for a Transformative Pedagogy in Higher Education

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Synopsis

This essay explores how flexibility and playful learning address the current challenges in higher education, aligned with the principles of transformative pedagogy. This pedagogical approach views the university as an inclusive and adaptable space, where teaching aligns with students' realities and needs, promoting accessibility, engagement, and holistic development.

Flexibility enables students to manage their learning in a personalised manner, adapting to their individual paces, schedules, and environments (whether in-person or virtual), fostering autonomy and a better balance between personal and academic responsibilities. Playful learning, in turn, introduces methodologies that, through curiosity and enjoyment, enhance creativity, intrinsic motivation, and critical thinking. These approaches not only make the learning process relevant and enriching for students but also provide a more satisfying and motivating teaching experience for educators.

The intersection of flexibility, playful learning, and social justice offers a framework for transformative pedagogy that advances equity and nurtures critical citizenship. The essay includes practical examples of these methodologies in action, as well as a review of the weaknesses and challenges faced in their implementation within academic settings. Ultimately, it proposes a model of higher education that not only imparts knowledge but also equips both students and educators to become active, resilient agents in a dynamic global context.

Introduction

Innovative pedagogical approaches can present additional challenges for educators, particularly when they require new skills or adjustments to traditional teaching methods. This essay presents rigorous, yet accessible strategies aimed at enriching the educational process without adding unnecessary burdens. It seeks to restore focus on the act of teaching and learning, transforming education into a meaningful and rewarding experience for both educators and students.

The need for more adaptable educational models has become evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the limitations of traditional universities. The rigidity of these institutions has come under scrutiny, as restrictions and inequalities in access to remote learning have hindered equitable participation and student well-being (Eringfeld, 2021). This situation has created an opportunity — and even a demand — to evolve towards more flexible, forward-thinking institutions that can respond inclusively to social and technological changes (Van der Westhuizen & Hlatshwayo, 2023). In this context, the transition to emergency remote learning not only challenged the purpose of traditional university spaces but also underscored the need to reimagine the university as a more equitable and accessible environment for all (Noguera-Fructuoso & Valdivia-Vizarreta, 2022).

In addition to adapting to the post-pandemic context, universities are faced with the rise of emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, which are reshaping how knowledge is accessed and produced. These shifts require not only the adaptation of training but also critical reflection on the social and ethical implications of such technologies. Universities must play an active role in training professionals who are not only consumers of technology but also critical and responsible citizens capable of influencing technological development for the collective good.

Transformative pedagogy, defined as an educational approach that challenges oppressive structures and promotes social justice, is fundamental to addressing these challenges (Mezirow, 2018). Paulo Freire and bell hooks have been major proponents of this perspective. Freire conceives of education as a practice of

freedom, while hooks emphasises love and dialogue as tools for challenging oppressive structures (Roberts, 2022; Cappiali, 2024). This vision is also reflected in the ideas of John Dewey, who highlighted the importance of experience in learning, and Ivan Illich, who advocated for deschooling to democratise knowledge (Staring, 2018; Zaldivar, 2015). Although these ideas emerged in the 20th century, they remain highly relevant today, especially in the context of shaping technology to better serve human needs and offering educational experiences that foster critical thinking and engagement.

Contemporary thinkers such as L. A. Paul and John Quiggin (2020) highlight the transformative potential of higher education to provoke conceptual revolutions at the individual level, enabling students to critically re-evaluate their assumptions and beliefs. This transformative process goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge; it entails a fundamental shift in how students understand themselves and their critical engagement with society. Transformative education integrates cognitive and socio-emotional development. Through a four-dimensional model (context, relevance, actions, and outcomes), it guides the creation of profound educational experiences that promote peace and human rights.

Despite the decades-long discussion about the importance of active learning, many of these ideas are yet to materialise in practice. In numerous settings, education remains marked by a rigid curriculum and an economic approach that prioritises the transmission of measurable knowledge. This lack of flexibility prevents the implementation of a truly participatory education that connects with the community and the real world (Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2010). While emerging technologies offer new opportunities, they have also highlighted the limitations of traditional pedagogical approaches.

In this context, flexibility and playful learning emerge as fundamental strategies to overcome the limitations of conventional education. Flexibility allows for the teaching process to be adapted to each student's individual needs, ensuring they receive the appropriate support for their development. Playful learning, which uses play as a medium to foster learning, stimulates curiosity, creativity, and active participation, making students the protagonists of their own learning process (Leather et al., 2021). Flexibility and playful learning allow the process to be adapted to each student's interests, facilitating self-discovery and active engagement with contemporary challenges (Bolden et al., 2024).

Playful learning also transforms the teaching experience, making education a meaningful and fulfilling activity. This methodology fosters an atmosphere of trust

and well-being, aligned with bell hooks' pedagogy of love (1994), where both educators and students enjoy the educational process. In this way, teaching becomes an enriching experience for all involved.

To ensure a smooth transition between playful learning and flexible learning approaches, it is important to highlight that these methods should not be seen as independent strategies but rather as complementary approaches that enhance one another. While flexibility ensures that teaching adapts to the diverse needs of students, playful learning facilitates a dynamic environment that motivates and engages students. Together, these approaches provide a solid foundation for transformative pedagogy, where adapting to individual circumstances and creating enriching experiences combine to generate a meaningful and fulfilling educational process.

However, it is essential to delve into how these approaches can be implemented in practice. Recognising possible challenges, such as resistance to change among educators or resource limitations, is fundamental, as well as proposing gradual strategies that allow for the incremental and adaptable integration of flexibility and playful learning. These strategies could include the development of teacher training workshops focused on playful and flexible techniques, as well as creating support networks among educators to encourage the exchange of experiences.

The purpose of this essay is to explore flexibility and playful learning as pillars of transformative pedagogy in higher education. Strategies are presented to promote an adaptive, student-centred education capable of responding to challenges such as the post-pandemic context and the need for inclusivity and digitalisation as tools for equity, social justice, and emotional well-being in the classroom. The first section reviews the concepts of flexibility and playful learning, highlighting their relevance in a post-pandemic context and amidst rapid technological evolution. The second part analyses implementation methodologies and strategies, illustrated with practical examples demonstrating potential applications. The third section examines the challenges and limitations associated with these practices, along with proposals for gradual and sustainable integration. Finally, the essay reflects on how these approaches contribute to a more inclusive and adaptive higher education system, focused on student well-being and the development of critical citizenship.

Why the relevance from transformative pedagogy?

Transformative thinking, which views education as a struggle for freedom and humanisation, is essential to avoid ideals disconnected from reality (Baker-Doyle, 2021). Freire and hooks advocate for critical thinking that fosters dialogue and active participation (Jones, 2023), enabling individuals to act and transform their reality. These principles should guide the reconceptualisation of higher education towards a more inclusive and equitable institution.

It is crucial to promote methodologies that encourage open-minded attitudes and participatory dialogues, creating a more dynamic, playful, and flexible educational environment (Whitton, 2022). By emphasising creativity, collaboration, and democratic participation, playful learning and flexibility challenge rigid structures and promote an inclusive and adaptable setting.
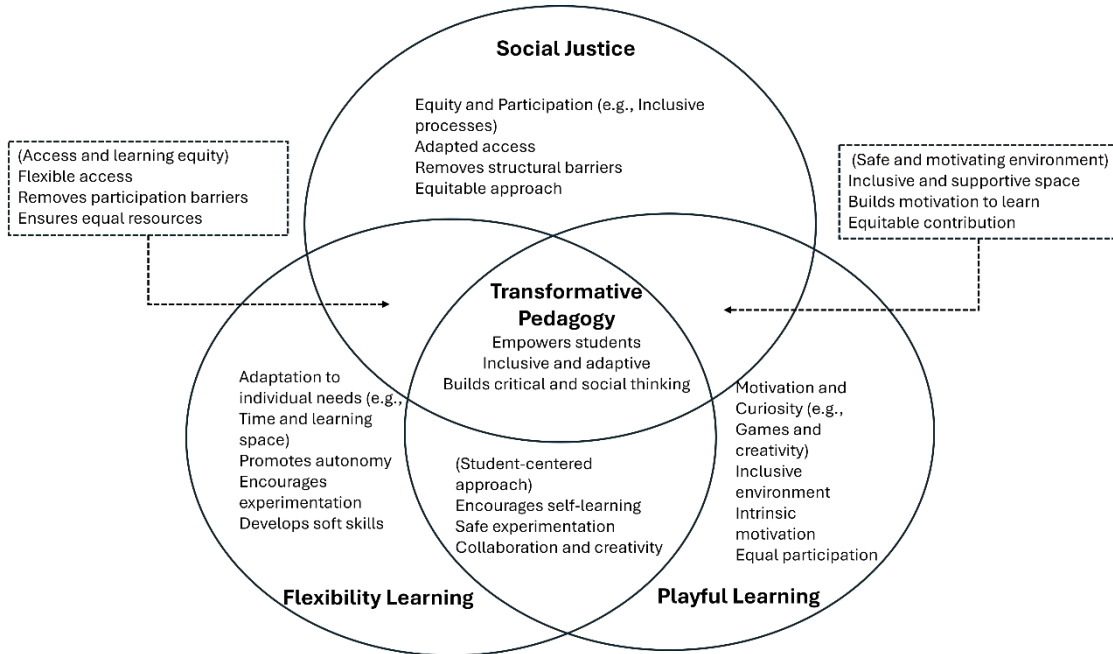
The ideas of Freire and hooks provide a foundation for reimagining the university as a space where curiosity, empathy, and cooperation are valued (Jones, 2023). Through flexibility and playful learning, a co-created educational process can be fostered, incorporating both conceptual diversity and a common language to transform higher education in an innovative and equitable way.

By linking flexibility and playful learning with social justice and equity, this essay offers a renewed perspective on how to reimagine higher education and its role in developing critical, resilient citizens capable of addressing the challenges of an ever-changing world.

Why Are These Approaches Crucial in Today's Education?

Both educational practices adopt interactive methods that fuel curiosity, promote discovery, and empower students, giving them agency over their own learning process (Baker-Doyle, 2021). The significance of flexibility and play in education lies in their ability to enable educators to develop adaptable approaches that meet the diverse needs of students and the dynamic nature of our contemporary world. Flexibility allows university faculty to tailor teaching methods to accommodate individual styles, paces, and interests. Playful learning, on the other hand, creates an immersive and enjoyable educational environment, fostering intrinsic motivation and enhancing student engagement.

Figure 1: Key Concepts and Interconnections in Transformative Pedagogy

Social Justice

Equity and Participation (e.g., Inclusive processes)
Adapted access
Removes structural barriers
Equitable approach

(Access and learning equity)
Flexible access
Removes participation barriers
Ensures equal resources

(Safe and motivating environment)
Inclusive and supportive space
Builds motivation to learn
Equitable contribution

Transformative Pedagogy
Empowers students
Inclusive and adaptive
Builds critical and social thinking

Adaptation to individual needs (e.g., Time and learning space)
Promotes autonomy
Encourages experimentation
Develops soft skills

(Student-centered approach)
Encourages self-learning
Safe experimentation
Collaboration and creativity

Motivation and Curiosity (e.g., Games and creativity)
Inclusive environment
Intrinsic motivation
Equal participation

Flexibility Learning

Playful Learning

This essay focuses on flexibility and playful learning as responses to the current challenges faced by universities, framed within the context of transformative pedagogy. Accordingly, figure 1 summarises and links the key concepts, illustrating their interconnections and demonstrating how the intersection of these elements, alongside social justice, contributes to the realisation of a transformative pedagogy.

By adopting flexibility and incorporating playful learning strategies, dynamic educational experiences are fostered that inspire lifelong learning and equip students with the skills and mindset required to succeed in an ever-evolving global environment. These outcomes serve as key indicators of educational effectiveness.

Playful Learning

Instructive and passive teaching methods are increasingly being replaced by more active, creative, and motivating approaches (Jensen et al., 2022; Jiménez-Olmedo et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2023). Playful learning emerges as a pedagogical strategy that can counterbalance the performance-focused, assessment-driven educational culture by fostering a safer and more experimental learning environment (Whitton, 2022). The concept of the "magic circle"—a protected space where learning is experienced as play, generating a trusting and liberating atmosphere conducive to immersion and student engagement—is central to this approach, creating spaces where students can explore and experiment without

fear of failure, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and active participation (Nørgård et al., 2017). Through playful pedagogies in higher education, the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios and encourage empowerment is strengthened (Blanes et al., 2016).

Playful learning is gaining traction in higher education due to its potential to foster open, intrinsically motivated, and joyful learning processes. Rather than merely incorporating playful activities, the design of playful learning entails attitudes, dialogues, and processes that permeate higher education (Holflod, 2022). Playful approaches explore new teaching strategies and learning methods (Boysen et al., 2022), including project- and challenge-based learning (Saad and Zainudin, 2022; Leijon et al., 2022), Design-Based Research (Holflod, 2022), and gamification (Wiggins, 2016), creating a more engaging and effective environment. Through play, students develop critical skills through failure, risk-taking, and experimentation, addressing contemporary educational issues (Whitton, 2022). Furthermore, it promotes a democratic co-learning environment in which both educators and students interact freely, enriching the educational experience and fostering inclusivity (Baker-Doyle, 2021).

Implementing playful approaches requires a playful attitude—a proactive and open disposition towards participation, exploration, and experimentation within the educational process. In this way, an atmosphere is fostered where students feel motivated to contribute, accept temporary rules, and experiment freely. This playful attitude facilitates the adoption of new ways of being and knowing in higher education, allowing students and teachers to transcend the conventional educational environment and explore it creatively and collaboratively (Nørgård et al., 2017).

Despite its limitations, such as the lack of specific objectives and appropriate pedagogical planning (Boysen et al., 2022), game-based learning offers a new paradigm in higher education (Jiménez-Olmedo et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2023). While assessment is necessary to evaluate learning, it can generate stress and undermine a secure environment. Nevertheless, playful learning enables the exploration of new possibilities, problem-solving, and the development of critical thinking in a safe environment free of negative consequences. Integrating these methodologies encourages creativity, experimentation, and critical reflection, transforming higher education into a more inclusive and meaningful process (Whitton, 2022).

Playful pedagogy highlights the importance of flexibility in teaching, allowing learning activities to be adaptable and personalised, which can be a powerful tool for enhancing student satisfaction and engagement. This perspective can be integrated with educational flexibility, providing a framework for students to manage their own learning more effectively and enjoy an educational environment that values both creativity and exploration (Nørgård et al., 2017).

Flexible Learning

Flexible learning is an educational methodology that grants students greater control over their learning process, adapting to their specific needs and circumstances. This flexibility is primarily feasible through the use of new technologies and is implemented in online or blended learning environments that combine in-person instruction with computer-mediated instruction. According to Müller and Mildenberger (2021), there is no significant difference in learning outcomes between students participating in blended learning environments and those receiving only in-person instruction. This suggests that blended learning can provide flexibility without compromising educational quality.

This approach encompasses various dimensions, including time, content, requirements, teaching, pedagogical approach, assessment, resources, support, guidance, and training objectives (Li and Wong, 2018). A key feature of flexible learning is time management, allowing students to decide when to start and finish their activities and the pace that best suits their learning needs. This is particularly beneficial for those with additional responsibilities, facilitating a better balance between their roles (Valdivia-Vizarreta and Noguera, 2022).

In flexible learning, content is offered in multiple formats—such as live video sessions, recorded videos, audio presentations, and texts—to cater to different learning styles and preferences. This diversification facilitates information access and enhances inclusivity (Valdivia-Vizarreta and Noguera, 2022). In terms of requirements, flexible learning enables participation without strict conditions, as long as students have basic digital skills and access to necessary technological resources. Teachers should provide additional support and supplementary resources for those with technological challenges (Amhag et al., 2019).

Flexible teaching employs diverse channels and learning environments, from in-person and synchronous teaching to asynchronous and fully online modes. This enables students to choose how and where to learn, adapting better to their personal circumstances. Educators have had to quickly learn and adapt to new

technologies and teaching methodologies, facing increased workloads and the need to be more creative (Hodges et al., 2020).

The pedagogical approach focuses on personalisation and adaptability, using methodologies such as project-based learning and group dynamics to make learning more interactive and meaningful. Simplifying materials and reducing workload are common strategies to facilitate effective learning (Tucker and Morris, 2011). Design-based learning is particularly relevant here, as it promotes problem-solving and the creation of innovative solutions through an iterative and collaborative process (Zhao et al., 2021). Flexible assessment diversifies assessment forms and uses digital tools to provide timely and personalised feedback. Online rubrics and quizzes enable a more equitable and transparent assessment process (Valdivia-Vizarreta and Noguera, 2022).

Resources and support are fundamental, including access to varied materials and continuous guidance from educators. Individual and group tutorials, as well as the use of forums and other communication channels, are essential to support students (Albó et al., 2020). Finally, the guidance and objectives of training in flexible learning must be clear and accessible, using digital platforms to keep students informed and manage activities and assessments.

Experiencing flexible education is an essential competency for university students, equipping them to meet the needs of a digitised society and a constantly evolving job market. Higher education must adapt to be accessible to a broader population, allowing students to reconcile their studies with work and personal responsibilities. Flexibility also enables students to progress at their own pace and access educational materials according to their individual needs and schedules (Müller and Mildenberger, 2021).

Perception of Flexibility and Play in Teaching and Learning: Pedagogical Benefits

The integration of flexibility and playful learning in higher education fosters active student participation while faculty guide the learning process, taking into account each student's unique styles and preferences. These methodologies allow students to become protagonists in their own educational journey, promoting a meaningful and enriching experience (table 1).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Flexible and Playful Learning Approaches in Higher Education

Aspect	Flexible Learning	Playful Learning
Main Objective	Adapts to individual student needs and schedules.	Engages students through curiosity, creativity, and enjoyment.
Learning Environment	Blended environments (in-person and online) or fully online settings.	Interactive and collaborative contexts that encompass various forms of games, including digital (online games, serious game, simulations) and physical (card or body-based games).
Student Role	Active participant with control over learning pace and style.	Active, engaged participant exploring concepts through various forms of play, including designing their own games as part of assigned tasks.
Educator Role	Facilitator, providing guidance and adaptable resources.	Guide and co-learner, fostering an inclusive, motivating environment that supports exploration, both through established games and student-created activities.
Key Benefits	Enhances accessibility, supports study-life balance, and promotes self-directed learning.	Fosters motivation, creativity, critical thinking, active participation, and the development of social and problem-solving skills.
Challenges	Requires access to technology and digital literacy; may lack social interaction.	Requires careful planning to balance play with academic rigour; may face resistance in higher education settings. Also presents challenges related to equity and social justice, as it is essential to ensure all students have equal access to necessary technologies (augmented reality, artificial intelligence, virtual reality), fostering an inclusive and participatory environment.

The pedagogical benefits of these methodologies include reduced stress and anxiety, improved knowledge retention, enhanced problem-solving skills, and the promotion of innovative, critical, and creative thinking (Koeners & Francis, 2020). Flexibility and playful learning allow educational methods to be adjusted to meet both individual and collective student needs. Through these approaches, students

feel more motivated and engaged (Gee, 2008), which facilitates more effective learning.

This is achieved through personalised teaching, the inclusion of playful elements, and the promotion of active learning. In this way, student engagement increases, knowledge retention becomes more effective, and students are better prepared to face an ever-changing world. Personalised teaching addresses the particular needs of each student, while playful elements make learning a fun and meaningful experience.

Practical Examples:

Project-Based Learning: Students choose projects aligned with their field of study, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. For instance, in a sustainability education class, they might develop a campaign to promote clothing reuse, investigating the environmental and social impacts of the textile industry and creating playful awareness activities.

Playful study design: This methodology integrates playful elements into the learning process, presenting content through games or playful activities that can be created by both teachers and students. In an introductory economics course, students develop and play board games created by their peers, focusing on managing investments, expenditures, and assets. Designing these games requires them to understand and translate economic concepts into a game format, fostering deep and collaborative learning. Subsequently, through playing and testing the games, students not only assess the entertainment value but also examine how effectively the economic concepts are applied, allowing everyone to revisit and reinforce theoretical content in a dynamic and practical manner.

Learning Through Play: Playful activities are used to explore complex concepts and improve problem-solving skills. In a music class, students might learn synthesiser techniques through a video game that simulates electronic music creation, challenging them to manipulate sounds and develop technical skills.

Evidence-Based Learning: Students undertake research projects based on scientific evidence. In a nursing course, they could analyse clinical cases through an escape room game, using data and scientific literature to support their diagnoses and treatment decisions while attempting to "escape" the scenario.

Cooperative Learning: Students collaborate in interdisciplinary teams to tackle complex challenges and generate innovative solutions. They might work on

sustainable urban design projects, drawing on expertise from fields such as architecture, engineering, social sciences, and education to develop inclusive and environmentally conscious proposals.

Simulations: Students participate in simulated scenarios that reflect real-world contexts to develop practical skills and informed decision-making. In a medical course, students can work with trained actors simulating patients who have experienced a car accident and are in shock. This allows them to practise auscultation protocols and appropriate emergency responses, enhancing their clinical experience and teamwork under pressure.

Personalised Learning: Students can tailor their learning process according to their interests, abilities, and individual pace. In a mathematics course, students complete missions in various formats of their choice. As they tackle challenges, they earn points and rewards. They can select from various activities to access assessments and receive personalised feedback.

Flexible Classroom Furniture: Learning environments are designed to be adaptable, facilitating collaboration and the exchange of ideas among students in group games, pair work, etc. For example, classrooms can be arranged to hold debates after transforming into a Photovoice exhibition room, encouraging movement, dialogue, and critical thinking in teams.

Temporal and Spatial Flexibility: Students have the freedom to organise their study time and choose where they wish to learn. They can access educational resources online from their digital devices anytime and in any location convenient to them, allowing them to adapt their learning to their schedules and personal commitments.

Common Challenges in Incorporating Flexibility and Play, and How to Overcome Them

Common challenges include resistance to change, resource limitations, and classroom management—whether in-person or virtual—in a more flexible environment. Overcoming these challenges requires creating spaces for sharing innovative and positive teaching practices, providing ongoing training on new methodologies, and demonstrating the benefits.

The methodologies discussed demand effective implementation, adequate resources and support, learning assessment, equity and accessibility, and classroom management. Addressing these challenges may require a holistic

approach involving staff training, commitment from all stakeholders, and careful planning to ensure the successful and sustainable implementation of these innovative methodologies.

Efficient resource management involves making the most of available resources and exploring cost-effective and sustainable solutions. For classroom management, setting clear expectations and involving students in decision-making is essential to maintain balance. At the organisational level, Lock et al. (2018) highlight the complexity and conflicting views at micro (classroom or practice), meso (programme), and macro (institution) levels, stressing how these tensions must be resolved collectively to support pedagogical and evaluative innovation in higher education.

In implementing playful pedagogy, several tensions arise. For example, there is a need to balance playful activities with rigorous academic readings and to address students' concerns about competitiveness and privacy when using gaming elements like avatars and leaderboards. Additionally, faculty must continuously negotiate course objectives and rules with students, adapting to varying dispositions towards play and learning (Lock et al., 2018).

Strategies for Incorporating Flexibility and Play in Professional and Daily Life

We propose the following strategies:

- Implement gamification concepts, including rewards, challenges, and healthy competition in daily activities.
- Maintain a balance between work and play by scheduling specific times for each.
- Introduce flexible work patterns to improve work-life balance.
- Emphasise teamwork and collaboration to foster a culture of cooperation.
- Recognise and reward achievements to promote a positive and playful environment.

Conclusion

Since the pandemic, studies such as those by Clifford et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of imagination and creativity in reimagining a university adapted to emerging challenges. Approaches that incorporate flexibility and play transform classroom dynamics and equip students with valuable tools for managing stress, promoting adaptive problem-solving, and developing critical thinking skills. A playful attitude supports internal resources that enable students to respond

effectively to a constantly evolving world, providing a foundation for both personal and academic growth in uncertain environments.

Given these advantages, teaching practices in higher education benefit from evolving to integrate such innovative methodologies, which promote continuous and meaningful learning. By adopting flexibility and playful learning as strategic elements, universities can become more responsive and adaptive institutions, capable of addressing current demands while preparing to navigate future developments. This shift is essential for ensuring that higher education remains accessible, relevant, equitable, and genuinely transformative.

Embracing these approaches offers educators the chance to enrich learning experiences and encourage students to be more creative, resilient, and engaged in their educational journey. The current digital revolution is reshaping transformative pedagogy by fostering digital inclusion and pedagogical flexibility across diverse cultural contexts (Bitar & Davidovich, 2024). Through collaborative efforts, higher education can be shaped into a system that prepares students for the practical challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Following a thorough analysis of flexible and playful learning approaches, new questions and avenues for exploration arise. These areas of inquiry—often overlooked in pedagogical studies—allow for refining and expanding the ideas presented here, providing a broader perspective on the integration of these approaches within the contemporary university model. Transformative pedagogy not only supports the proposed changes but also brings its own challenges in higher education implementation.

In discussions about playful and flexible learning in higher education, transformative pedagogy provides a framework that facilitates the adoption of new methodologies while highlighting complex implementation challenges. This perspective encourages the exploration of how transformative methodologies can be effectively embedded within the university setting to foster students' critical skills, address the digital shift, and consider the varied identities and needs of learners.

Javed (2024) notes that a student-centred approach, grounded in transformative pedagogy, uses digital technologies as a tool for continuous learning and for developing critical competencies essential in today's digital landscape. This suggests that flexible learning, supported by transformative strategies, can meet the growing need for adaptive and critical skills in fast-changing environments.

Additionally, Wyper (2020) underscores translanguaging as an inclusive strategy, facilitating equitable participation among linguistically diverse students. Such an approach fosters more inclusive learning and challenges universities to recognise and engage with the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students—an essential aspect of flexible and playful learning.

Furthermore, Gorbunova (2017) highlights the importance of interdisciplinary methodologies in fostering a sense of self that transcends academic boundaries and promotes global awareness. This perspective suggests that playful and flexible learning can serve as tools for exploring identity and self-awareness—key aspects of transformative pedagogy aimed at nurturing well-rounded individuals prepared to engage in a multicultural world.

These perspectives collectively encourage the examination of how playful and flexible learning can enhance student engagement and motivation while contributing to the development of critical, globally conscious individuals.

In summary, adopting flexibility and playful learning equips universities to respond to present needs while preparing for future challenges. These approaches are valuable tools for transforming higher education into an inclusive, adaptive process focused on the well-being of both students and faculty. Throughout this essay, we have examined how flexibility and play work together to create a meaningful and fulfilling educational environment, where social justice, equity, and the development of critical citizens are central objectives. This vision encourages ongoing reflection on the role of universities in supporting a just and resilient society.

Acknowledgements

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