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Playful and Compassionate Approaches for Culturally Responsive Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Learning often involves navigating uncomfortable conversations, within ourselves and with others. As educators, we strive to create spaces that invite and support students in their journeys of emotional and cognitive risk taking and expansion using compassion and playful learning. Often, this work is resisted by colleagues and administrators who mistake the informal and caring tone of such approaches for lack of rigor. Viewing ourselves as playful academics (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021), reminds us that our work is part of an emerging community of faculty and researchers in higher education who are committed to teaching in playful ways. In our education courses, we, the authors, combined principles of Compassionate Integrity and playful learning to build learning experiences that encourage building bridges across cultural differences. Both play and the practices of Compassionate Integrity Training recognize that concrete and somatic experiences can pave the way to identify and make sense of more abstract cognitive and affective experiences. We use this understanding to organize this article, starting with descriptions of two examples from our practice (the concrete), one emphasizes compassion, the other playful approaches to learning. Next, we unpack these experiences through a conversation with literature. Then we explore how the experiences from our education courses could be useful to educators in other spaces. We conclude the article with wonderings about broader connections between play and compassion.

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging…our data banks and dead ideas…behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it." (Roy, 2020)

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In the spring of 2020, the world was hit with several pandemics. First, there was the unprecedented spread of COVID-19. Then there was social and civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd. These occurrences surfaced other long-term pandemics such as inequities in healthcare, housing, education, and infrastructure. Educational institutions across the globe quickly transitioned into emergency or remote teaching and learning as they shut down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Political activists who were angered by a summer of Black Lives Matters protests took to social media and effectively organized calls for educators to stop teaching about issues such as power, oppression, the history of slavery, and race and racism. These issues were not simply news stories for us, but the lived experiences of many students at our university, a Hispanic and Minority serving institution.

In this context we, two university professors in a college of education, began to design our courses for the 2020-21 academic year, two of which promised to involve complicated conversations about social justice and inequities. As we experimented with new ways to frame our classes, we found ourselves joining the growing ranks of "playful academics" at institutions of higher education worldwide, teaching with "playful curiosity, playful creativity, and playful communality" (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021, p. 2).

Sandy designed a new doctoral course for summer 2021, The Compassionate Researcher, after seeing a need to ground qualitative research using compassion. Deepti was assigned to teach an undergraduate course in fall 2020 called Culturally Responsive Teaching, which colleagues warned could trigger some students' negative emotions, such as anger, shame, and misunderstanding. Deepti's response was to call on compassion and play in her course design.

At first, our shared interest in applying understandings from a compassion training we had attended brought us together. Eventually, we discovered that we both use playful learning, brought over from our previous years as elementary and middle school teachers. Throughout the school year, we exchanged ideas and experiences in applying Compassionate Integrity practices with our students and soon began to see that the playful practices we used in our teaching also contributed to the climate of compassion we were trying to create and sustain.

At the outset, our intent was simply to support our students and ourselves through what was likely to be a challenging semester as we returned from online instruction and delved into controversial topics. In addition to developing a positive social-emotional learning environment, our curricular goals for students included learning compassion skills and practices such as tracking and grounding, reflection, engaging in dialogue with people from different backgrounds and who held different opinions, strengthening listening skills, and discovering one's own biases, assumptions, and gaps in knowledge, skills, and understanding. In Sandy's class, the expectation was that doctoral students would apply these emerging skills and mindsets in their

research. In Deepti's class, students were learning skills and mindsets to become culturally responsive teachers of primary and secondary students. We soon saw that the combination of play and compassion was powerful and by the end of the semester, we began to wonder if we had found something worth sharing with colleagues who engage in innovative, playful, and compassionate pedagogies. Thus we decided to further investigate our own teaching.

Participants and Data Collection

Sandy is a veteran Latina scholar and at the time served as faculty in the Graduate Studies department of our education school. She had also recently become a Compassionate Integrity Training (CIT) facilitator. CIT is a training program from the Center for Compassion, Integrity, and Secular Ethics (CCISE) at Life University in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. CIT uses a resiliency-informed, neuroscience-based curriculum that helps participants cultivate human values as skills, so that all people may flourish within a healthy environment. Among the skills learned are calming body and mind, ethical mindfulness, emotional awareness, self-compassion, impartiality and common humanity, forgiveness and gratitude, empathic concern, compassion, appreciating interdependence, and engaging systems with discernment (Center for Compassion, Integrity and Secular Ethics, n.d.)**.** In the summer of 2020, Sandy helped create a 15-week online training for the first CIT cohort of educators.

Deepti, an Asian-American scholar and a then-junior faculty member in the Teacher Education Department, joined the new CIT educator cohort, drawn by her interest in Nel Noddings' ethics of care theory (2005, 2012). We both are former K-12 teachers who value democratic teaching, high levels of student participation, and experiential learning and have used playful learning throughout our teaching careers. In addition, Deepti's research focuses on young children's play.

Sandy's class consisted of 21 adult learners (ages 28-55 years) enrolled in an elective course, The Compassionate Researcher, during the summer of 2021. All students were doctoral students in the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program. Fifteen of the students identified as female and six students identified as male. Culturally, five students identified as international students, seven students identified as Latina, one male identified as Latino, two males identified as Black, and six students identified as White.

Deepti's 22 upper-level undergraduate students were from two sections of the same course, Culturally Responsive Teaching, which is part of the professional development sequence in the teacher education program. Of the group, 14 self-identified as female and eight as male. In terms of race and ethnicity, 12 self-

reported as Hispanic, eight as White, one as Black, and one as biracial (Black and Hispanic). All but one were traditional students, while one was a parent. There were no international students in this group.

We individually jotted notes from our own observations, during and after class. We also wrote reflections on our teaching experiments (our own form of play), which we discussed with each other in frequent conversations throughout and beyond the academic year. This afforded us opportunities to refine our teaching as needed during the semesters, and to continue to reflect on it afterwards. In terms of both CIT and playful learning, we observed and sought feedback from students through class assignments about their experiences with specific activities to understand how well they supported student learning of skills and dispositions relevant to our courses.

Through thorough examination of this qualitative data, which occurred after each semester ended, we compared examples of activities, students' responses, conversations, and our own thought processes and wonderings about our pedagogical choices. We found that our collaboration helped us to maintain reflexivity and acknowledge our own biases, assumptions, and subjectivity.

Instances of compassion and play in our classrooms

Our students engaged in role play, games, interviewing, and creative and arts-based work, such as learning to do an Indian folk dance and making compassion circles, that were culturally connected to students' identities. We used various strategies and activities to build skills and to create open and safe environments where mistakes, questions, disagreement, and learning were expected. Our approaches can be understood as playful learning using Holflod's (2022) idea of "relational perspectives," which is described as "inspired by play activities such as role-playing, communicative play, and object-based play, but...directed towards establishing and sustaining interpersonal relations and relational pedagogies" (p. 82). The following section uses the authors' reflective writings to describe a vignette from Sandy's class that highlights compassion and another from Deepti's that emphasizes playful learning.

Disrupting the disruptor: Compassion in Sandy's graduate research course

"Like what is happening right now with CRT [critical race theory]. I hate that it exists. For those of us, like me, mentioning that I am against CRT makes me a racist." With a red face, the scowl on Bruce's face said it all. I had heard from other colleagues that he often disrupted classes with such statements. They shared that his outbursts often traumatized his peers. I was about to chime in. "Why are you so angry?"

"What have we learned in this class so far?" said another voice in the Zoom room.

Bruce responded, "I'm a history person and what is being taught because of CRT is just wrong. It should be banned. I shouldn't be made to feel bad for being a white male. Always the bad guy, the white guy."

"I don't think anyone here is making you feel bad for being you," stated Michelle.

"I had a professor tell me I am racist, just because I voiced this in another class. I won't name any names, but I hope I never have that professor for another class," snapped Bruce.

For the first time I was experiencing these outbursts from Bruce. I had him in another class where he did not have outbursts and we discussed topics related to nationalism, essentialism, social reconstructionism, and other educational philosophies. Race, the hidden curriculum, social justice education, and more were discussed in that course. Why now? I looked at Bruce on camera. His face was now a bright red and I could tell he was going to have another outburst. I took a deep breath and before I could say anything, Robin said, "Do you even know what critical race theory is?" Aww, the question I was about to ask. For most of my life, dealing with students who are resistant to learning when it comes to controversial or hot topics, it turns out they have no or very little knowledge about these topics. They would never admit to it and instead would continue to participate in a power play game, where they tried to gain power over me and silence me.

This was week three of the Compassionate Researcher class. Looking at how to humanize the research process with compassion was the main focus of this course. We were learning how to be compassionate with not only the people who were part of our study, especially when engaging and interacting with participants who were culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically different from us, but also how to practice self-compassion as a researcher. By this week, students had already learned about self-cultivation, which covers how one relates to oneself and the knowledge and skills related to the inner life of the individual. This begins with the ability to self-regulate one's body and emotions, and then moves on to include self-compassion and inner qualities like courage, fortitude, forbearance, and the identification of one's values. On this day, we were just starting the series on relating to others, which covers how one relates to others constructively and in a way that promotes one's own and others' well-being. Built on the foundation of self-regulation and restraint from harming others, this involves strengthening the prosocial skills of forgiveness, gratitude, impartiality, empathy and compassion.

Bruce responded, "CRT means you are racist, right?"

In a calming voice, Michelle said, "No, that is not what it means." The rest of the students were focused on the dialogue that was occurring right in front of us, with worried looks on every face. Michelle continued, "First, do me a favor and go to your resilient zone. Remember how to use your resourcing? Do you see your

resource?"

"Yes, I see mine and it is bringing me to a state of well-being, safety, and security," said Bruce. You could visually see Bruce come to a better place, the redness started to fade and the scowled look was now one of interest.

Michelle continued, "Well, first of all CRT is embedded in legal studies but has also been used in educational studies. It is an older theory that started in the 70s. The underlying premise of CRT is that race is a social construct, and that racism is embedded in institutions, legal systems, and policies. It does not address individual bias, prejudice, and racism." Silence. We awaited a response.

"Oh, so it doesn't mean I am a racist?" Bruce inquired.

"Not by the very definition of CRT," responded Michelle.

It was as if we all just learned that a hurricane changed its path and will not come towards us after all. The sign of relief was evident on everyone's faces on the Zoom screen. It was at this time, I decided to speak, "Bruce, I can give you a list of resources about CRT if you would like to learn more about it." Others chimed in, "Can you send them to me, too?" This was meant to be a class where students were just starting to learn about how one relates to others constructively and in a way that promotes one's own and others' well-being; instead, they pulled it off without me. I was witnessing compassion in action. Michelle knew when and how to intervene compassionately. Bruce knew how to go to his resilience zone and find his resource(s) to help him feel safe. The body language was undeniable not only with Bruce, but with all the students – even in a Zoom room.

It was evident that students were practicing these skills in their personal lives to become not only compassionate researchers, but also compassionate human beings. For the rest of the course, there were no more outbursts and students sustained the compassionate classroom, even on Zoom. I was grateful that students took the course to heart and began to value compassion as a skill that is critical in today's world, especially when it comes to doing research with people of diverse backgrounds.

Dancing with dandiya raas: Playful learning in Deepti's teacher education class

"I think I've been so focused on my own religion that I haven't taken much time to learn about other faiths. As a teacher, I think I should do that." Amber surprised me as she offered this reflective insight about five weeks into the semester. In prior weeks, she often resisted insights from course readings and classmates' remarks about topics such as implicit bias or systemic racism. In an undergraduate course about Culturally Responsive Teaching, such discomfort was to be expected and such growth to be hoped for.

That day's 1.5 hour class had begun with most of the 22 students distracted and stressed by a demanding data analysis assignment for the class after mine. Furthermore, two sections of students were meeting jointly due to the upcoming data analysis lesson. At the start of my class, they chose to sit separately by section, and within that by their disciplinary focus (Music Ed, History, Kinesiology, etc.).

My teaching plan was to use a playful way to explore the Hindu festival of *Navratri* through *dandiya raas* (a style of folk dancing from my native state of Gujarat) to demonstrate how cross-cultural learning can look in their future classrooms. When I walked into the room and saw students anxiously huddling around their laptops, I decided to shorten my introductory remarks and jumped straight to the physical activity. The decision was inspired partly by my CIT course, in which we learned to address the mind and emotions by first recognizing, acknowledging, and addressing the responses of the body. The decision also drew on my years in early childhood education, through which I knew that sometimes we just needed to play away the stress before we could learn again. I invited all the students to an empty space at the front of the room and asked everyone to choose a dancing partner, with me completing the last pair.

As I walked around handing out pairs of dandiya (wooden sticks) to the students and demonstrated the five basic steps of the dance, everyone became fully engaged in learning the new dance and trying to connect with their partner's sticks on beat. Their initially stiff movements gradually melted into the unfamiliar melodies of *garba* songs. After several rounds at increasing speeds, they were ready for the more complex step of making lines and changing partners. Their hesitant footbeats gave way to a steady, rhythmic meeting of the dandiya, with feet and bodies keeping time to the beat, eyes anticipating the move to the next dance partner. Instead of awkward glances and apologies, laughter began to follow a missed step or wrong turn, while classmates nudged each other in the right direction.

Soon, everyone put away their dandiya and headed to small groups to reflect on the experience, their curiosity about the dance and its related religious customs and meaning provided a segue into the guiding questions I had prepared for the day:

How do we learn about different cultures in meaningful ways?

As a classroom teacher, how can I learn about my students and their backgrounds?

How do we facilitate our students' learning about each other's cultures with respect and with care?

How do we facilitate our students valuing diverse cultures?

At the end of my mini lesson about Navratri and some basic ideas of Hinduism, I assigned students to small groups (each group had members from both course sections) and provided a wide variety of questions to guide their reflections. While they talked, one group member took notes. I began by asking them to describe

their feelings about participating in dandiya raas at the outset and then by the end. Then they discussed the effects of this playful experience on their emotional and cognitive engagement with the day's learning. As they shared out with the whole class, many expressed feeling confused and a little anxious at first about trying an unfamiliar activity, but they consistently agreed that it erased their earlier preoccupation with the data analysis assignment because they were concentrating to learn the steps and eventually had fun. Several said they felt more comfortable asking questions about Navratri and its related traditions after taking part in one. All of them said the experience was an enjoyable and memorable introduction to a new culture. I also asked them to reflect individually and in small groups about how the dance supported (or not) their affective responses (internal and interpersonal engagement) and cognitive learning.

Amber, who often remained silent during whole group conversations about diverse populations, pointed out similarities between her own Catholic faith traditions and some tenets of Hinduism (such as belief in the power of religious rituals and important roles for music). I also noticed that at the end of class, students continued to mingle in their (mixed) small groups rather than returning to their segregated (different sections) seats from the start of class.

Later, as I read the notes from their group discussions, I observed consistent patterns from students reporting four themes (students' written remarks from group conversations are in parentheses):

- Curiosity about a culture that initially seemed foreign to them ("I want to know about other [Hindu] stories and traditions.")
- Interest in their own culture ("I wonder what dances are part of my culture.")
- Learning about each other ("Some of us have no rhythm, but we'll try something for the sake of curiosity.")
- Learning about themselves ("I liked learning through dancing. Everyone felt awkward together, and that made it easier to laugh when I felt uneasy.")

Making sense of what we observed

In our immediate notes after our classes, we each appreciated the unexpected moments of growth that were visible in these examples. Our insights deepened through reflection, reading, and mutual discussion. In this section, we unpack our understandings of compassion and play in our teaching using scholarship alongside examples from our classrooms.

Compassion

Compassion is often misunderstood. For some, the term means to feel sorry for someone, or even carries connotations of weakness (being a doormat or a pushover). However, the correct meaning of compassion is:

> the wish to alleviate the suffering of another. Compassion consists of noticing suffering, having empathic concern, and feeling a sense of agency. It does not mean simply giving others what they want but recognizing on a deeper level what they need (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017 p. 136).

More specifically, when one practices compassion they are approaching it from a resiliency and trauma-informed perspective of what happened to x, y, and z, versus what's wrong with x, y, and z (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017). There is a difference between the two. However, "What's wrong with him/her" is often used when dealing with challenges. This is one of many reasons why we need more compassion in the world, especially when it comes to teaching and learning.

In classrooms where faculty integrate compassion skills, there is an intricate connectedness when it comes to teaching. Teaching with compassion requires one to view the world as interdependent, because existence means being 'in relationship'. In difficult and challenging times like teaching and learning during a pandemic, with compassion faculty and students are able to collaboratively create meaningful learning experiences, obtain deep knowledge of these skills, and apply what they have learned in authentic contexts (Lipka, 2019). During this time, students develop a trusting relationship with the faculty, with their peers, and with the content. Utilizing compassion helps us teach the whole person, including mind, body, and spirit. Compassion skills allow faculty to get to a place where both faculty and students share their holistic selves, where vulnerability is welcomed, and where one can be their authentic selves. (Schacter et al., 2021).

The compassionate integrity approach overlaps with some of Noddings' (2012) ideas about relational care in teaching. As a care theorist, Noddings (2005) redefines care from being an innate value or trait, which used an approach defining someone as is either caring or not, to a skills-based approach that describes care as learnable, teachable, and requiring practice and reflection. Similarly, compassionate integrity redefines compassion from an innate quality of a person to a set of skills that can be learned, taught, and honed with practice and reflection. Both approaches also emphasize the need for action; intent is not enough. On the other hand, care theory (including relational care) focuses on the caring relationship between two entities (cared-for and carer). Compassionate integrity begins with compassion for self, then expands it to compassion with others, and finally to developing compassionate systems and organizations. A deeper exploration of the commonalities and differences between the two approaches is beyond the scope of this paper, but we see them as complementary approaches that are critical to holistic teaching and learning in all classrooms, including higher education.

Compassion and compassion-based programs are many and varied. Our focus is on using the specific approaches and skills that comprise Compassionate Integrity Training from Life University, which is a new initiative launched worldwide around 2017. It came to San Antonio, Texas, USA (our city) in 2018 with the initial participants being city officials. In 2020, as part of an effort to begin teaching students about compassion, the initiative expanded with the aforementioned cohort including preschool through post-graduate educators.

Research about the use of CIT is just beginning, with little study about its use in educational settings. Four studies address CIT in correctional facilities and prisons (including in educational programs), and one article focuses on social-emotional learning in schools[*]. We found no research articles that explore CIT in higher education spaces and offer ours as a starting point in this field. We are grateful for the CIT grant that supported our experimentation with combining play and compassion in our teaching.

In our teaching, each of us identified specific skills to include from CIT and used practices such as reflection, guided contemplation, videos, and hands-on activities to invite students to explore the concepts and their meaning for their personal growth and in light of the curriculum topics. For instance, the example about Bruce highlights skills relating to compassion with others, as several students responded to his frustration rather than to his strident tone and words. This, combined with Bruce's open response, points to the emergence of a compassionate classroom community (moving toward the systems level). In Amber's reflective remarks about starting to make a connection between Hindu and Catholic traditions, we see a step towards understanding the idea of common humanity (basic commonalities that humans share across cultures). The playful learning that supported these examples of budding compassion is discussed in the next section.

Play

By the end of 2020, even cursory glances through the *Teaching* newsletter of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Supiano, 2020) revealed that higher education faculty were struggling with student motivation and engagement, quality of instruction, and social-emotional distress among students and faculty. Playful approaches to teaching and learning offer authentic ways for students to understand the relevance of what

[*] See a list of relevant studies here: http://www.compassion.life.edu/research/

they learn and to do so in a less stressful (even joyful) environment that encourages healthy emotional and intellectual habits such as risk-taking, divergent thinking, openness to new ideas, and having fun (Bell, 2017; Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård, 2021; Nørgård & Moseley, 2021; Oxtoby, 2018; Wallin et al., 2021). Playful learning and teaching can also contribute to at least small benefits in terms of physical well-being by getting students out of chairs and off their screens for short intervals. In spite of increasing research about the value of play for adults, in the world of higher education, playful learning and teaching remain controversial, often raising concerns about rigor, effective use of time, and how fun can be part of serious learning (Andrade-Guirguis, 2020; Carnes, 2015; Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022; Nørgård, 2021; Oxtoby, 2018). As Nørgård (2021) notes, there exists an inherent tension between play and education or learning.

We see play, for children and adults, as an activity undertaken for fun with an element of make-believe or operating in its own specially-defined space, with rules that are accepted by all the players (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In play, the outcome is less of a motivating factor to continue playing than is the activity itself (Brown, 2009). In short, players keep playing because it is fun, or at least, highly engaging, not due to any external reasons or outcomes.

This is the root of the tension, for play is about the process, while education and learning have outcomes that students (and faculty) must meet (Nørgård, 2021). When faculty opt to cultivate playfulness in their courses – through the environment, the choices of materials, and ways of engagement with the content and among the participants – elements of play (minus the unstructured and free nature of play) can transform the course into playful learning (Nørgård, 2021). In the context of learning and teaching, playful learning uses highly engaging activities that invite risk-taking (emotional, cognitive, or physical) (Rempel, 2022). While engaging in playful activity, students are also learning or applying content knowledge and deepening their understanding (Boysen et al., 2022). Furthermore, in our experience, to reap the maximum benefits of playful learning activities, reflection is critical. Otherwise, students are apt to remain unaware of what they learned and perhaps focus only on what they did.

Playful learning in higher education is an emerging field of research, which seems to be gaining strength since the pandemic (Forbes & Thomas, 2022; Nørgård, 2021; Nørgård & Moseley, 2021; Whitton, 2018). At our own university, we have learned of faculty in many disciplines who use elements of playful learning in their courses (such as Accounting/ Business, Biology, English, History, Kinesiology, Mathematics, Nursing, Optometry, and Pharmacy). In education and teacher education, in particular, research, literature reviews and books point to increased efforts to describe, disseminate, and deepen the work of this area of practice and research (such as Boysen et al., 2022; Guirguis & Longley, 2022; Holflod, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Loizou & Trawick-Smith, 2022; Maron-Puntarelli, 2022; Nell & Drew, 2013). Our work contributes to the growing body

of research about playful learning in higher education by offering practitioners' perspectives, and by adding a connection with compassion as an approach to teaching.

Walsh (2019) outlines seven ways that facilitators give adults "permission to play" (p. 1) to overcome resistance to play, of which two were most visible in Deepti's dandiya raas activity. First, while play is typically considered to be a voluntary activity, play among adults is often characterized by involuntary engagement (at least at first). In their reflections, some students referred to feeling uncomfortable at first when trying the dandiya raas, and then later enjoying it. Walsh describes how some play enablers "forced" play by "launching straight into play activities" (p. 6). This was certainly the case in Deepti's class as she launched directly into the dandiya raas by distributing sticks to all the students. The power imbalance between instructor and student all but guaranteed that all students would participate. Secondly, the same positionalities also created a safe space for students to engage in this playful learning, as the faculty member granted authority, and also drew on research to explain to students the value of play to learning (Walsh, 2019, p. 7) thereby invoking its educational value and justifying play in this learning space.

Further reflection and readings revealed connections to Vygotsky's (1978) idea that in play, a child can do what they could not do otherwise. Were Amber's self-discovery and the scenario with Bruce and his classmates examples of these effects of playful learning? In applying Vygotsky's play theory to adults, Holzman (2017) explains, "We all have the capacity to play as children do, to do what we do not yet know how to do, to be who we are and other than who we are at the same time," (p. 94).

Another example of playful teaching that we used consistently was flexibility when we prioritized students' needs and interests above our syllabus plans to follow their lead. Maron-Puntarelli (2022) explains that "emergent curriculum mirrors the spontaneity of play" (p. 35), which is evident in both of our vignettes. Sandy allowed the conversation among students to unfold organically after Bruce's heated reaction to the topic of CRT. In Deepti's class, she changed her teaching plan for the day in response to the students' preoccupation with their data analysis assignment. As we continued our conversations over time, we began to discover a strong connection between compassion and play and decided to explore it.

Playful activities in the classroom can contribute to creating a psychologically safe space where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking risks (Jørgensen et al., 2023; Whitton, 2018). The interaction among the students is an example of such a space co-created by all the participants– professor and students– where we see trusting relationships. Bruce took a risk when he shared his thoughts about CRT; Amber did so in expressing her vulnerability as someone who had not thought beyond her own religious beliefs. In the case of the older students, Bruce's peers chose to interact with him in ways that lead to critical reflection without Sandy's intervention. The students reached for playful learning (spontaneity and flexibility) and called on

their safe space (Boysen, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Nørgård, 2021) on their own and thus enhanced the overall learning experience while using compassion with each other.

Integrating compassion and play in our teaching

We believe it is not surprising for compassion practices to be playful because playfulness is part of our authentic and holistic selves, as is compassion. In many cases adult learners may not know this, until they find out that playfulness and compassion align with each other and provide opportunities for practice, reflection, dialogue, laughter, and community building.

Compassion practices can be playful.

Our description of playful learning includes learning activities and environments that are fun, occur in the special play space (or environment), have rules that are accepted by all the players, and are intrinsically motivating so that students want to remain engaged.

Sandy's Compassionate Researcher class was an elective class offered for doctoral students who were about to start their dissertation research journeys. Stressing the importance of doing research "with" and not "to," this course looked at the components of the research process through a compassionate and humanizing lens. A skill we focused on was Impartiality and Common Humanity, in other words, how we relate to others and how we desire others to relate to us, because it is important for researchers to recognize that despite our differences, we share a common humanity with our participants. To practice this skill, students participated in a playful activity where they repeatedly asked a peer, "Who are you? (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017). The peer responded with different facets of their identities. After a few minutes, they would change partners and repeat, trying not to repeat descriptors already used. The learning goal was to emphasize the diversity of humanity and how we see ourselves and others. As the game continued and students found it challenging to use unique descriptors, they laughed and giggled. Rather than watching from the periphery, students naturally put themselves into the play situation as they embraced the rules of the game and began to have fun (Walsh, 2019). Although this can be seen as students being forced to play because it was part of the class (Walsh, 2019), it was the students who helped to make the activity playful by abiding by the rules (trying not to repeat words) and remaining actively engaged as they continued to play (Holmes & Hart, 2022).

Another playful activity in the course highlighted the intrinsic motivation and playful learning environment aspects of play. Students were asked to create a Circle of Compassion collage using digital tools of their choice to create a visual representation of who they would include in their circles of compassion. This assignment invited them to apply the concepts of interdependence, impartiality, and humanity and reflect on the different

components of their lives. Jørgensen and their co-authors (2023) describe the contributions that space and materiality offer to playful learning in higher education. The students of this class recognized it as a safe space (as evident in the earlier examples of Bruce and his peers, as well as the *Who Are You?* game). Their free choice in selecting digital tools as well as the open-ended nature of the assignment invited playful and creative expressions as they created their personal circles of compassion. When Sandy created her own circle, she gave implicit permission for students to be playful (Walsh, 2019). Students responded with joy and openness (Holmes & Hart, 2022), not only in their creations, but as they continued their conversations in online discussion boards. The student projects included connections to their cultural identities, family members and friends, but also political figures, which led to students asking one another to understand why the public figure was in their circle. This series of conversations made visible our emerging community of love, respect, and trust, in which deep learning flourished.

Playful practices can be compassionate.

Compassionate Integrity Training uses a three-pronged approach: compassion in the context of self, others, and systems and institutions (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017). Furthermore, the CIT model presents compassion as enacted (not simply intent) and learnable. Through playful learning, students can engage in affective and cognitive exploration and expression in embodied ways. Viewed through the lens of compassion with self, they discover, embrace, and share uncomfortable aspects of themselves including vulnerabilities, beliefs, and patterns of thinking and doing.

In terms of compassion with others, the second aspect of CIT, play is explicitly social when it involves interaction with others, as play in classroom settings often does. Such playful learning situations address the question of compassion that asks, how do you engage with others different from you?

Finally, there is the third aspect in CIT of community– or compassion that involves systems and institutions. Play involves players in its own world or play space, and those spaces can be compassionate whether the play is competitive or collaborative. Furthermore, reflection, which we used to debrief the playful learning experience, contributes to understanding compassion within a certain space (whether the classroom community or beyond).

In Deepti’s example from the Culturally Responsive Teaching course, teacher education students were able to build their skills in compassion with self through dancing. Specifically, compassion with self begins with calming our body and mind and using physical experiences for grounding or returning to our resilience zone (Ozawa-deSilva & Karlin, 2017). Compassion training draws on the importance of self-awareness and self-regulation to support ethical decision-making. In education, lowering the affective filter to make room for

learning is an old idea that is being revisited with new proof from neuroimaging (Willis, 2007). Deepti observed changes in students' behaviors as their stress decreased and attention to the topic of learning increased throughout the class. Students also reported that they were initially preoccupied with the difficult data assignment for another class and soon became engrossed in the fun and challenging work of learning a new dance. By inviting students to engage in a novel and somewhat complex playful physical activity, Deepti helped them lower their stress response (anxiety about an upcoming assignment), thus creating a more supportive space for further learning.

The second set of compassion skills involves compassion with others, and specifically those different from oneself. While the goal is to value and help those beyond our in-group, an important starting point is becoming more aware of and caring about them. At the start of the class, students from two different sections sat separately. They were divided by their disciplines. Preservice teachers of the academic subjects history, math, science, and English were in one section, while those who intended to teach music, physical education, theater, and art were in another section. Although the separate sections were made purely to accommodate their different schedules, an unintended effect was to draw a line of division that is often visible in K-12 schools between “content” teachers and “specials” teachers. This was reflected when students chose dancing partners from their own sections at the start. However, as the dance became more complex, they continually changed partners and hence by the end had become much more comfortable interacting across lines of difference. This was evident in their small group reflective discussions after the dance, for which Deepti had intentionally created mixed grouping across the two sections. Playful social interaction helped lay the foundation for this compassion skill of connecting with others one on one, helping us see people as individuals rather than as members of a group (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017). For a class about culturally responsive teaching, this type of compassion-building play is invaluable.

The third compassion skill addresses compassion in systemic or institutional contexts, of which a key skill is recognizing and appreciating interdependence. In American higher education classrooms, the focus is typically on individual achievement, which tends to devalue learning from others, including others' belief systems. Appreciating interdependence also means recognizing that our decisions may have unintended consequences for others (Ozawa-de Silva & Karlin, 2017). In the Navratri lesson, after students had participated in the dandiya raas and Deepti presented a brief lesson about Navratri and Hinduism, she used reflection questions to help students develop their metacognition about their learning experiences. In small groups and then with the whole class, students thought together about their affect and cognitive engagement with the learning activities and with each other. Debriefing the activity served to uncover instructional decision-making (Deepti's choices) and the impacts those decisions had on students' learning. During the

whole group discussion, several students noted that the dancing increased their curiosity and interest. Some said their initial nervousness about learning a new dance was lessened when they saw others making mistakes and laughing, which made risk-taking to learn feel acceptable. Many also said they felt more comfortable asking questions about Hinduism without fear of causing offense or "looking dumb" because the dance and laughter had created a safe community. Thus, a playful approach helped students by reframing the formal (and sometimes forbidding) institutional space of a university lecture hall into a more inviting compassionate space for intercultural exploration and conversation.

The value of integrating compassion and play for higher education

For both of us, it was important to design the courses using compassion and play during a global pandemic and social/civil unrest, a time when all were struggling to make sense of our "new" way of living and working. We saw students break out of their shells, smiling, laughing, and joking with each other in a time where these behaviors were not overtly present. Research shows that playfulness helps one cope with stress and can help students achieve emotional joy (Holmes & Hart, 2022). Giving undergraduate and doctoral students permission to play went against behavior they typically feel is expected (Wallin et al., 2021; Walsh, 2019). These classroom environments were student-centered, not teacher-controlled, which not only allowed for greater student agency but also honored the voluntary or self-selected characteristic of play (Holflod, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Whitton, 2018).

In terms of compassion, students learned several skills to help them practice and apply compassion within themselves, with their peers, and when they work with other human beings in their professional, personal, and research lives. Humanizing the research process is critical and students in Sandy's class came away with skills to do just this, in addition to memories of a community that embraced their authenticity. In Deepti's class, students learned to engage with unfamiliar peers and topics in authentic and meaningful learning that was joyful, as well. All of this occurred in contexts that not only retained high expectations for academic growth and participation, but also foregrounded nuanced and complex learning.

Students in these classes experienced transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning occurs as a result of perspective transformation. In our cases, students experienced transformations in their own understandings of themselves and their belief systems. By creating disorienting dilemmas as ways to promote transformation, we consistently asked students to reflect critically upon their assumptions and belief systems, ultimately changing their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997) regarding research (Sandy) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Deepti). We facilitated numerous opportunities for practice and reflection individually, with peers in small and whole group situations, with us, and through oral and written

conversation. Furthermore, we used traditional academic assignments but supported them with embodied experiences to learn and to express learning.

We invite higher education faculty in all disciplines, including professional certification programs, to combine compassion and play to frame their teaching. To begin with, instructors can consider adding one assignment that incorporates these approaches. Holmes and Hart (2022) in their study connecting play and emotional intelligence found that, "Engaging in fun and having a good time was a playfulness component and temperamental disposition that helps one perceive, manage, and utilize emotions as well as manage the emotions of social others" (p. 35). The broad definition of play invites considerable creativity and variability in terms of instructional design and makes room for other qualities that promote "persistence in the face of adversity" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 231).

Play as compassion?

Considering that institutions of higher education have begun to prioritize mental wellness and equity, we propose that play is a way to express compassion in teaching. With play we are able to call in our students, model compassion and playfulness, and give permission to be silly, laugh, giggle, joke, and make mistakes with one another – all while promoting learning and understanding. A surprising outcome (for us) of our students' experiences aligns with the research related to one's level of emotional intelligence. According to Goleman (as cited in Holmes & Hart, 2022):

> the five main components to one's emotional intelligence are: 1) self-awareness -evaluating and expressing emotions in oneself and others, 2) regulating these emotions in both oneself and others, 3) using internal motivation to plan and achieve certain tasks, 4) understanding and expressing empathy, and 5) possessing social skills (p. 29).

The informal and structured feedback we received from our students indicated that they experienced all of these components. We believe that this occurred because of the topics we covered in our courses and because we provided an environment where play was encouraged; something not typical in our higher education institution. Maynard et al. (2022) suggest that if we want to help adults experience meaningful connections with others and help reduce stress, anxiety, and disconnection it is critical to provide opportunities for them to engage in regular play, especially in higher education.

Limitations and future work

When we undertook the work of reframing our courses, we were overwhelmed by the need to address our students' (and our own) social-emotional needs while learning about challenging topics in the stressful

political environment of our state. It was only later that we began to consider our experiment as worthy of scholarly study. We are grateful for our habits of inviting regular student feedback, reflective journaling and collaboration that made it possible for us to examine our teaching. Thus, like many other faculty, we embarked on this work through the lens of practitioners. We agree with other researchers of playful learning in higher education (Boysen, 2022; Holflud, 2022; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Nørgård, 2021; Whitton, 2018) who call for more scholarly study in this area, especially in the discipline of education.

An important barrier that higher education faculty encounter when analyzing and reflecting on their use of playful learning is time. Often, it is institutions that prioritize faculty teaching above research where faculty engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning and experiment with innovative pedagogies such as playful learning. Using creative methods and establishing the learning environments that support them can require significant time and resources. However, with the heavy teaching loads at such institutions, faculty are left with little time to pursue research, and may even have less access to the range and depth of scholarly publications than their counterparts at research-based institutions. Therefore, we also recognize the important roles of an open, supportive community for this work (and its contributors) to flourish. The individual publications, this journal, and conferences devoted to playful learning in higher education not only serve to build scholarly understandings and interest, but also provide motivation and encouragement to higher education faculty who may feel isolated in their work.

In her highly circulated and provocative essay "The Pandemic is a Portal," writer activist Arundhati Roy (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic "suddenly illuminated hidden things", referring to rafts of socioeconomic inequities. She urged us to reimagine the future, not simply recreate or repair the past. We argue that compassion and play jointly belong front and center in a reimagined landscape of higher education.

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