

Book Review / Compte rendu

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Freedom to Play: A Ludic Language Pedagogy Primer by Jonathan deHaan and James York
Peter Lang Publishing, 2025, 632 pages, Paperback. ISBN: 9781636675961

Freedom to Play: A Ludic Language Pedagogy Primer has the scope of bridging theory, research, and teaching, while introducing the Ludic Language Pedagogy (LLP) framing device for teaching language and literacies. It promotes both games and play within the LLP framework to foster gratifying teaching, learning, and research based on a theoretical foundation of progressive education. The authors use Bogost's (2016) definition of play as acting within a constrained system in a gratifying manner. Notably, LLP is positioned as appropriate for teaching adults and children, with the authors having extensive experience using it at the university level. Additionally, they founded an LLP-focused journal and Community of Practice. Ultimately, the book is a mix of manifesto, guidebook, teaching and research exemplar, cheerleader, and professional development artifact. At its best, the book effectively bridges progressive theory and classroom implementation, though its narrowed emphasis on language underplays the role and scope of literacies in practice.

For the authors, the LLP framework has three key elements. The *ludic* ingredient includes games and playfulness in a supportive space. The *language* ingredient focuses on language and literacies. The *pedagogy* ingredient considers methods, materials, and mediation. Readers are encouraged to use this framework to teach in a way that pushes against constraints to transform teaching, learning, and even society. The authors consistently connect the

framework to a progressive education anchor point. Without this, the gratifying aspect of the playful approach might ring hollow. Teachers interested in applying LLP would do well to remember this connection between framework and progressive theoretical anchoring, lest their teaching overlook the active, participatory, and transformative elements.

The authors urge educators to begin by understanding contextual constraints, playing within them, and pushing for inquiry-driven education that nurtures human growth, creativity, and development. This is contrasted against factory models of education (Schneider & Hutt, 2023) that focus on knowledge transmission, testing, metrics, efficiency, passivity, or conformity. Further, the authors are opposed to 'chocolate-covered-broccoli' approaches (Bruckman, 1999) in game-related teaching. This includes gamification masking transmission, disconnected pedagogical uses of games, empty hype about games failing to support meaningful learning, and isolated cognitivist approaches. Their position on differences in pedagogy and materials builds upon the explorations of Filsecker and Bündgens-Kosten (2012) as well as Sykes and Reinhardt (2013), both of which survey the range of pedagogies used in language teaching and learning contexts using games. Importantly, the LLP framing of games is consistent with their broader progressive foundation and provides examples of classroom use.

Generally, the authors present a compelling case against blindly accepting institutional constraints such as a hyperfocus on grading and the promotion of a focus on efficiency that fosters the passive acquisition of content. However, the book's focus on language as a core framework label risks understating the importance of literacies—both in the book and in the LLP framework itself. As a label, language is too narrow for its task, a point borne out by the prominent role literacies play across the classroom examples. This is not a minor concern as it obscures the full pedagogical scope of the approach, with the key implication that LLP is not simply about teaching language. Rather, a thoughtful consideration of literacies—if not multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015)—is implied and required. Ultimately, the diminished position of literacies and initial manner of introduction blur the full extent of the framework's aims. Teachers considering the LLP framework and this book should understand that, in practice, teaching with LLP often necessitates attending to language and literacies.

The tone of the book is decidedly playful and non-academic. However, the work is firmly grounded in research, thorough analysis, and rigorous explication. The tone is intentional and in keeping with the ludic theme. While I found it to be refreshing, some readers may find this distracting. Another noteworthy point is the active and playful reading experience. A variety of activities, prompts, and invitations to play are spread throughout the text. Again, the book walks the talk, though readers craving a standard treatment may be disappointed. Finally, though the book is over 600 pages long, its chapters are focused and purposeful.

Considering the wider field of scholarship focused on games and education, this book builds on Zimmerman's call for play in the Ludic Century (2014) through pedagogical application in language and literacy contexts. In comparison with Jonathon Reinhardt's *Gameful Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning* (2019), *Freedom to Play* offers more in the way of applied examples of classroom practice. Further, the clear progressive stance of LLP's framework stands in contrast to Reinhardt's research- and principle-focused position, which

prioritizes coherent instructional design. In fact, deHaan and York's progressive zeal is on full display when they invoke McNutt's (2018) refrain of, "teach to get fired." Moreover, the book expressly stands in strong opposition to a Ludic Pedagogy framework put forward by Lauricella and Edmunds (2022), who promote using fun and gamification as surface-level or embedded additions to standard higher education content and contexts. Conversely, deHaan and York encourage teachers to join them in making a radical pedagogical change that affects all aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment.

It is difficult to overestimate this text's contribution for teachers and researchers interested in teaching language and literacies with games. It shows teachers it can be done in a progressive and principled manner, explains how and why, and gives advice on how to adapt LLP to a given context. This is where the manifesto transforms into a guidebook, which makes this book useful and relevant for teachers and researchers interested in this topic. It is also of likely general interest to educators and academics exploring progressive pedagogies or media literacy around games. The book does not focus on Canadian contexts, but it does offer sorely needed practical guidance grounded in theory, research, and hard-won experience. If anything, this creates an opportunity to extend LLP research in the Canadian context.

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