

Playfulness and Innovation With John Seely Brown

**Bedley Brothers Interview
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MR. TIM BEDLEY: On today's show we're going to be talking about being playful and how that relates to education and radical innovation.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: We cannot be more thrilled to have someone that I look up to as a thought leader in education. We have with us the Chief of Confusion, JSB, John Seely Brown. Thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show today.

MR. BROWN: My pleasure to be here.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Would you start us off? I know you have a real tendency to think about play and its dynamics not only within the classroom but also within all learning. So can you talk about your perspective on play and its importance in learning?

MR. BROWN: Well philosophers and educators have for some time, starting with Maria Montessori or even before that, deeply understood the role of play in bolstering the imagination. A lot of us were educated through those systems. Some of the most famous and successful people today came up through educational systems that valued play, although the press doesn't seem to know that.

What I find today is that the power of play and the power of imagination are more important than ever. We tend to focus on creativity, but I think we should be focusing on imagination and the ability to imagine 'What if?' Different from the linear progression that characterized the last hundred or so years, change is now happening at an exponential rate. Today we can break out of that linear progression and leap forward in almost unimaginable ways. So, the whole catch is how do we get students to think about 'What if?' or 'Why not?' In fact, kids as they enter school are filled with those kinds of questions and they drive most teachers crazy because they often ask questions like, 'Why? Why is the sky blue? Why isn't it red? Why not?'

Well, it is red sometimes. If you are the teacher and feel like you always have to be in control and always be the authority, these questions can be difficult since they're incredibly technically deep and don't have simple answers. But you have to be willing to stay with a kid and say, 'Okay let's play with this problem. Let's try to figure it out together. What are the resources we have at our disposal?'

In fact, I think coupled with play is the notion of a technical term used by Claude Levi-Strauss called 'bricolage.' It says, 'How do I use whatever I have around me to make progress in solving the problem? If I don't have the perfect tool to do this or the perfect book to answer this, how would I find a resource lying around that can be repurposed to help me progress on the task?' Phrased a different way, bricolage requires using what is 'ready at hand.' How do you look at what's around - what's ready at hand - and how do you use that to solve the task? This skill is actually part of what makes an entrepreneurial learner.

I do not mean it makes an entrepreneur. I mean an entrepreneurial learner. An entrepreneurial learner is someone who has an insatiable curiosity about the world around them, goes on quests all the time and can craft their own pathway through experiences. So it all comes back to play. Play gives you the rules of the game and within that space you have to feel free to do completely new things. You have to figure out how to push the boundaries. It helps you figure out what's permissible, what isn't and what surprising moves you can make that you don't know the consequences of quite yet. That ability to handle the unknown is a key part of play.

Now if you take folks of my age and hand them a new technical device they'll likely ask for a manual. Give that same task to a 10-year-old and they'd never think about asking for a manual. They would push things around and try things out in order to figure out what the 'game' really is, so to speak.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Right.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: JSB can you define for us what you're seeing as play and what is not play?

MR. BROWN: I think 'not play' is what mostly happens in the classroom, quite honestly. Basically 'not play' is going after very precise problems or careful reading assignments that are formulaic and have well-defined answers and those answers are often known by the school system or the teaching system.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Is there a place for that?

MR. BROWN: At certain ages probably. I mean the real question is what skills do you pick up? And I like to think about three things we have at stake here. We have knowledge, we have skills and we have dispositions. Okay well knowledge is what gets delivered to you either by the teacher or by pulling it off the net.

Skills you tend to pick up through apprenticeship. It can be skills where you are apprenticed by a coach in real play or by peers in doing things, but it's always involved in action. And a good coach or a good mentor is fantastically important. Most of what you guys do as great teachers is a form of mentorship. You can listen and see what a student doesn't quite yet see and can set up a micro-epiphany for that kid at the right moment.

Then I think dispositions really have to do with creating a questing disposition. How do I think about what's around the corner? How do I explore that on my own? And that often comes up most in play. But dispositions are cultivated. You don't teach a disposition. You cultivate a disposition. The social space of the classroom, the social space of the playground or a field trip - this is where dispositions start to get cultivated.

We tend to test for knowledge and regurgitation. Sometimes we look at skills but those are usually formulaic skills. Almost never do you give a student a problem that they don't know how to do and watch how they work with that. Cultivating

dispositions is the real essence of what happens in social and physical spaces. I think it's obvious that mentorship plays a role in both skills and cultivation, but don't forget about peer mentorship.

Why was the one-room schoolhouse so powerful one hundred years ago? It's because the teacher became an orchestrator. The teacher would orchestrate groups of kids to learn from each other. Students would learn something and then the teacher would ask them to turn around and teach other kids what they learned. Then those kids would turn around and teach others what they learned and so on. That ability to be on both sides of the equation - both a mentor and a mentee - is a powerful learning tool. Yet, we don't take peer mentorship seriously enough.

In fact there's an irony related to peer mentorship and play that I enjoy talking about with usually top level, seasoned corporate executives when I'm trying to get them to see something and they start getting more and more frustrated. I say, 'Okay stop. Here's what I'm going to do. Go home tonight and, hopefully you have a teenager, pose that question to your teenager and come in back tomorrow and tell me what came from that conversation.' And they come in the next day and say, 'Oh my gosh I had no idea. My son didn't know the answer, but that didn't phase him one iota.' In some sense they begin to move into the meta-platform of play: playing with an idea.

Think of a poet. How do you form the perfect phrase? That's a form of play. It's not the play of the playground, but it's the play of an idea-space. Teachers say, 'Well, getting kids interested in poetry is impossible.' I say, 'What about rap music?' Rap musicians have a fantastic attunement for what phrases turn and for what phrases evoke. So in the formation of lyrics, they're constantly looking at the moves they can make within the phrase that will evoke other things. That's being playful as well.

I watch the surfers out here - I'm in Maui at the moment - and their willingness to be on the edge of a wave and play with that wave; it's a conversation with the wave. They're having a conversation with matter - matter in motion. That's the type of playfulness we need to instill in our students so that they can navigate this world of exponential change.

So learning how to have a conversation with the kids around you or with a problem space or with a task or a piece of poetry - this is all really being playful. There's no formula. It's not formulaic. It's not necessarily clear that there is an answer. In poetry don't tell me that there is an answer but rather tell me how it feels. Am I moving into that idea-space or not? And that's what's so beautiful.

If I give a kid a math problem in school there is an answer. Is it right? You never ask if a poem is right. What I'm getting at is how do you play with the ill-defined? How do you have conversations with the things around you, not just people?

So I watch skateboarders. They're having a conversation with the skateboard. They may not see it that way, although I do know some really good surfers out there who, if I asked them, know that they're playing with the wave. They're reading it in their body and in their mind. It's a very rich act of imagination that comes from this deep ability to listen and have a conversation in action. It is not only knowing an action, but also imagining and learning an action.

That's where it really is. I'm fond of saying that if I can create the stage for a kid to have an epiphany, that epiphany will stay with him or her for life.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Well, I think teachers would describe that epiphany moment as maybe an 'aha moment.' A common phrase you'll find among teachers is, 'I love that "aha moment" from a student,' and it really is those mini-epiphanies that kids can have within the classroom structure that make a big impact.

MR. BROWN: Absolutely, that's the magic moment. One of the things we have to ask, because we have teachers who love creating the 'aha moments,' is how then do they approach training kids to do standardized testing? Those are two antithetical worlds. Alright then, let's create a test on 'aha moments.'

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Tim did you want to ask a question? I know you had something that you wanted to ask JSB.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Yes, can you talk to us a little bit about – in light of your philosophy on education – what you see that we need to start doing in our colleges to incorporate play and imagination? When I went to school it was all about listen to the teacher talk, take notes, study, write a paper, take a test, and regurgitate the information.

I'm not sure if classrooms have changed that much in colleges today but how should they change?

MR. BROWN: Well first of all a micro-start down that path is something called flipped instruction. Flipped instruction is where the kids do the reading, watch the videos, and consume other content outside of the classroom. Then they come into the class to collaboratively solve problems. I think that's a useful but micro-step.

A bigger step relates to a talk I gave last week during the Provost Retreat at USC. And one of the things I proposed is related to class structure. You tend to have lectures and then you have labs or studios afterwards that put into action what you just learned. What about reversing the whole thing? Can we turn the system inside out to basically engage – as John Dewey would have said – in exploring something collectively or as a team and then seeing what happens when we get stuck?

What happens is you start pulling in information. You start asking other people around you and you begin to play. By inverting the entire system you have the opportunity to get stuck and see where you begin pull things into action.

In fact, as a thought experiment, what happens if we turn the entire university inside out? Then basically everyone would be engaged in research - students along with the faculty - so it becomes an apprenticeship model.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Yeah.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Students would get lost and then, with the help of mentors, be able to go out and find their way. How do they craft their own pathway? Crafting your pathway through a set of resources on your own surely prepares you to survive - maybe even thrive - in a world where skills have a shorter half-life.

Most skills today have about a five-year half-life. When I grew up I could be pretty sure that my original skills would probably have a 30 or 40-year half-life. Today's students are going to be faced with the unknown almost all the time and that's again one of the reasons why learning to play with the system is so important. It helps you figure out what to do when you don't know.

That's what our students need to be learning today in order to feel comfortable in this new learning environment. They need to know how to be creative in finding new resources and how to look around the corner, but also how to look around in general for ways to re-use or repurpose - going back to Levi-Strauss' bricolage - in ways that they might never have thought of.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Wow, gosh I hate to stop this conversation right now. We are running out of time. Tim, do you want to ask any last thing? I am blown away right now. It's just amazing to hear you share your thoughts about these things.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: It's too much to absorb. So much to think about. Yeah, it's great stuff.

MR. BROWN: Well, I'm honored by you guys because you are really trying to reinvent what the classroom could be. In fact you are preparing your 10 and 12-year-olds to thrive in a world of exponential change.

You're not preparing them to thrive in a steady state world that's always in equilibrium, but rather a world where there are disruptions continuously left, right and sideways and how to feel comfortable with not having to reach for a manual to figure out how to operate the newest device.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Well I can't thank you enough for taking some time away from Maui to talk with us and we really appreciate this. I know you have a book with Doug Thomas called *The New Culture of Learning*. Does that go into more depth with some of the things you were sharing here today?

MR. BROWN: Well it does. In fact, the title of the book is a little bit of a pun on culture, because what we mean by the new 'culture' of learning is the culture of a petri dish.

Doug and I think of the classroom as being a petri dish; a safe space with boundaries filled with rich nutrients where cross-pollination of things are meant to happen and to be explored. Our ideal is to think about the classroom as a petri dish. That's the metaphor.

Now when most people read the book and only read it once, they don't really get that. I mean we do state it, but that doesn't mean they get it. But that's the spirit we're getting at throughout that entire book.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: That's brilliant. And that's what I think Tim and I try to live out in our classrooms.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Well my classroom is like a petri dish because it has a lot of germs in it I think but...

MR. BROWN: (chuckles) Hey, there are a lot of germs that are good. Don't overlook that.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: (chuckles) Alright.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Well where should people connect with you?

MR. BROWN: Well the best site that goes into some of the stuff on things like imagination is the site of our book, which is www.newcultureoflearning.com.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Perfect.

MR. BROWN: And it's a very easy book to read. I mean it's deceptively easy. Many people end up reading it more than once because you read it the first time and you get the frame, kind of like what happens listening to our talk right now. But once you get the frame completely, then you go back and read it again and you start seeing how little pieces fit together in that frame.

So this ability to build new frames, to unlearn old frames and build new frames, is why I think we need to do much more with play for kids at all ages because the purpose of play is to construct the frame. They've got to be willing to fail, willing to mess around, and willing to have things not work out right away. They've got to be willing to tinker, tinker, tinker, tinker and pretty soon they start to make sense of the world. Now we all grew up that way but the trouble is in today's age those frames may need to be reframed every 10 years.

And so we've got to not only learn how to learn, we may also have to learn how to unlearn or how to construct new frames. And that you do through play.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Wow.

MR. BROWN: So I think that the most fundamental property of our civilization going forward is knowing how to reframe. And that ability to reframe comes from certain deep notions of play and one of the best books on this is called *Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga. It comes from the Latin term 'man as player' or 'human as player.'

I think we need to recognize that schools have been built around Homo Sapiens – man as knower - and then we modified that with John Dewey and others to add Homo Faber - man as maker. Now what we're trying to bring in is the realization that no, it's a triad: Homo Sapiens, Homo Faber, and Homo Ludens, man as player. In a world of constant change, imagination and play are what enable you to reframe.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Good stuff.

MR. BROWN: Okay?

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: So powerful.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Great. Alright.

MR. SCOTT BEDLEY: Gosh I'm blown away. Thank you again so much and hopefully we can beg and bug you enough to get you back on sometime to talk more because it's truly an honor to talk to you, someone that Tim and I and I know a tremendous number of teachers respect for your forward thinking on education that's also reflective. So thank you again for coming on today.

MR. BROWN: Okay good. It's my pleasure. Thank you.

MR. TIM BEDLEY: Thank you.