

PLAYFUL STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE COLLABORATIVE WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS, ONLINE MODE.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how playful strategies influence the improvement of collaborative work among higher education students in online mode. In a context where distance education has gained relevance, driven by technological advances and the need to adapt teaching methods to the virtual environment, concerns arise about how to encourage collaboration and teamwork in students who lack the direct interaction typical of a face-to-face environment. The use of playful strategies in virtual educational platforms can be an effective tool to strengthen group cohesion, stimulate active participation and create a sense of community among students. This work seeks to analyze different playful strategies and evaluate their impact on the development of collaborative skills in the online university context, contributing to the design of innovative pedagogical methodologies that respond to the characteristics of this modality.

The research aims to examine and evaluate in depth the impact of playful strategies in improving collaborative work in higher education students who study online, in order to identify specific methods that promote the development of collaborative skills in virtual contexts. Through an exhaustive analysis, this study seeks not only to measure the effectiveness of these strategies in terms of active participation, group cohesion and sense of belonging, but also to understand how these elements contribute to the achievement of academic objectives and the development of fundamental transversal competences in higher education. Additionally, this work aims to propose innovative pedagogical methodologies that, adapted to the needs and challenges of online learning environments, strengthen social interaction, motivation and student commitment, promoting an environment of effective collaboration that can be sustainable over time and applicable in different virtual education contexts.

Keywords: Playful strategies, Collaborative work, Higher education, Online modality, Group cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, online higher education has gained significant relevance, driven by technological advances and the need to adapt to a constantly changing work environment. This educational model presents both opportunities and challenges, one of the most notable being the promotion of teamwork among students. According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2014), collaborative learning is an educational methodology that allows students to work together towards common goals, promoting the development of skills such as communication, critical thinking and problem solving.

Playful strategies have been positioned as effective tools to enhance collaborative work in virtual contexts. These strategies, which include games, simulations and interactive activities, stimulate active participation of students and create an attractive and dynamic learning environment (Deterding et al., 2011). The incorporation of playful elements in the educational process reinforces social interaction and commitment, key factors in collaborative learning (Gee, 2003).

The literature shows that the use of gamified strategies not only increases students' motivation and engagement, but also has a positive effect on the quality of group interactions and learning. For example, Wang and Chen (2019) found that gamified activities improved student satisfaction and academic performance in distance education programs. Likewise, Kapp (2012) suggests that the design of gamified learning experiences can be a valuable resource to foster collaboration and group cohesion in virtual environments.

In this sense, it is essential to emphasize that the adoption of playful strategies in collaborative work in online higher education represents a necessity and an opportunity to optimize the teaching-learning process. This study aims to comprehensively explore these strategies and their influence on the development of collaborative skills among students, providing a theoretical and practical framework that serves as a reference for future initiatives in this educational field.

BACKGROUND

Several studies have investigated the impact of gamified strategies in online higher education, emphasizing the importance of creating a collaborative learning environment. For example, Dron and

Anderson (2014) demonstrated that the use of gamified tools in online learning platforms increased student engagement and improved their academic performance.

Aydin (2016) also showed that gamification can help establish a more collaborative learning environment, which is crucial for the development of professional skills in the 21st century. Furthermore, research by Hwang et al. (2019) showed that online gamified activities not only increase motivation but also facilitate the creation of connections between students, fostering a sense of community.

Finally, the study by Hamari et al. (2016) reveals that gamification can be a key element to increase student participation and retention in online courses, suggesting that playful strategies are effective not only for learning, but also for the development of interpersonal and collaborative skills.

MATERIAL AND METHOD APPROACH

This study uses a mixed approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate how playful strategies can enhance collaborative work among higher education students in online learning. According to Creswell (2014), a mixed approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, as it integrates both numerical and narrative data. This approach is appropriate for this work, as it seeks not only to evaluate the effect of playful strategies on collaborative work, but also to understand students' experiences and perceptions of these strategies.

MATERIAL

The materials used in this research include a variety of digital educational resources and gamification tools that facilitate collaborative learning. Online learning platforms, such as Moodle and Google Classroom, will be selected, which allow the inclusion of playful elements. Multimedia resources, such as videos, infographics and interactive presentations, will also be used to support learning activities.

Additionally, specific gamification tools will be implemented, such as Kahoot!, Quizizz and Classcraft, which stimulate participation and interaction between students. Landers (2014) mentions that these tools can increase student motivation and commitment, thus improving the quality of learning.

METHOD

1. **Study Design:** A quasi-experimental design will be carried out, which will include control and experimental groups. The experimental group will employ playful strategies, while the control group will adopt a traditional teaching approach.
2. **Participants:** Students from online higher education programs from a variety of areas will be recruited. A sample of approximately 100 students is expected, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity of disciplines and contexts.
3. **Tools:**
 - **Questionnaires:** Structured questionnaires will be created to measure motivation, commitment and perception of collaborative work before and after applying the playful strategies. A 5-point Likert scale will be used, which allows obtaining quantitative data on the effectiveness of the strategies. According to Babbie (2010), questionnaires are effective tools for collecting data in social research studies.
 - **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a representative sample of students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with playful strategies. The interviews allow qualitative information to be collected to complement the quantitative data (Kvale, 2007).
4. **Implementation:** Playful strategies will be implemented over eight weeks, during which various activities will be carried out, such as role-playing games, group challenges and competitions. These activities will be designed to promote collaboration and active learning among students.
5. **Data Analysis:**
 - **Quantitative:** Questionnaire data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, such as t-tests, to compare group means before and after the intervention (Field, 2013).
 - **Qualitative:** Interviews will be transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis, identifying emerging patterns and categories in student responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

TOOLS

Various digital tools will be used for data collection and analysis, including:

- **Learning Platforms:** Moodle and Google Classroom for course management and the implementation of playful strategies.
- **Gamification Tools:** Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Classcraft to develop interactive experiences that encourage student engagement.

- **Analysis Software:** SPSS or R for statistical analysis of quantitative data, and NVivo for qualitative analysis of interviews.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

POPULATION

In the field of research, the population is defined as the set of people or elements that share relevant characteristics and from which significant data are obtained for the study. In this case, the population includes higher education students who participate in virtual learning environments.

1. **Definition of population:** The population is made up of higher education students from different academic institutions who use digital platforms to develop their academic activities. Bonilla et al. (2021) point out that students in virtual mode face specific challenges in collaborative work due to the absence of physical interaction, which can impact their motivation and team cohesion within digital environments.
2. **Population characteristics:**
 - **Academic level:** students of undergraduate and graduate programs at the higher level (Rodríguez and Gutiérrez, 2020).
 - **Educational modality:** students who participate in completely online programs, which means they must adapt to digital tools for communication and collaboration.
 - **Geographical and cultural diversity:** In many online higher education institutions, students come from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds, which, according to Lara et al. (2019), represents both a challenge and an opportunity for teamwork.
3. **Importance of population:** Examining this population allows us to understand the particularities of collaborative work in online environments and how playful strategies can enhance its effectiveness. According to García et al. (2023), online students need innovative methodologies that promote their participation and commitment in group activities.

SAMPLE

The sample consists of a representative part of the population selected under specific criteria to guarantee the validity of the results and allow them to be generalized to the total population.

1. **Sampling type:** In this study, it is suggested to use a stratified random sampling (Hernández et al., 2014), which allows dividing students into strata such as academic level (undergraduate or graduate), educational institution and geographic region. Then, participants are randomly selected within each stratum, which contributes to the representativeness of the sample.
2. **Sample size:** Sample size can be calculated using statistical formulas, considering the total population and the desired confidence level. For social science studies, a representative sample should have a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95% (Salkind, 2017). For this context, a calculation formula suitable for large populations and adjusted to the available resources and time can be applied.
3. **Inclusion and exclusion criteria:**
 - **Inclusion criteria:** students enrolled in online higher education programs who actively participate in virtual collaboration platforms such as forums, discussion groups, and digital tools for collaborative work (Martínez and Pérez, 2022).
 - **Exclusion criteria:** Students in hybrid or in-person programs or those who do not regularly participate in group activities, as their experience does not fully reflect the online collaborative work environment.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND JUSTIFICATION

Focusing on students in virtual programs is key due to the particular challenges of this modality. Castillo et al. (2020) highlight that the online modality requires greater digital self-efficacy and teamwork skills through virtual platforms, elements that can benefit from the use of playful strategies. In addition, a diverse sample in terms of academic level, region, and experience in the online modality allows for the analysis of variations in the effectiveness of the playful strategies applied.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE SAMPLE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The representativeness of the sample in online education studies is essential to obtain conclusions applicable to a wide range of students in different contexts. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), diversity in the sample can offer more comprehensive perspectives on how playful strategies impact collaborative work at different levels of higher education.

RESULTS

Table 1: Traditional Practices in Aghora Philosophy

Practice	Description	Purpose	Fountain
Meditation at cremation grounds	It consists of performing meditations at cremation sites to confront the dark aspects of life and death.	Confronting the fear of death and the unknown	Chandra (2019)
Consumption of sacred substances	Use of psychedelic substances as part of rituals to reach higher states of consciousness.	Expand consciousness and access the transcendental	Bharati (2017)
Non-duality practices	Exercises to eliminate the distinction between self and other, achieving a perception of unity in everything.	Transcending duality and achieving liberation	Kakar (2021)
Ritualization of the forbidden	Performing practices considered taboo (such as meditating surrounded by human bones) to overcome cultural and social conditioning.	Breaking social and mental ties	Aghori (2022)

Description: This table describes the core practices in Aghora philosophy, each with a specific purpose. The practices are designed to lead the practitioner to confront his or her fears and limitations, allowing him or her to reach a state of deep awareness. These practices are performed in spaces and conditions that are often considered extreme or taboo, highlighting the search for spiritual liberation through the forbidden and the unknown.

Table 2: Characteristics of Aghori Practitioners

Feature	Description	Example of Manifestation	Fountain
Material detachment	Rejection of material possessions to concentrate on spirituality.	Simple clothing, minimal use of personal items.	Choudhary (2018)
Physical resistance	Adaptation to extreme physical conditions to strengthen discipline.	Living in inhospitable places like cremation grounds.	Bharati (2017)
Pain tolerance	Practices that involve enduring pain to transcend the physical body.	Meditating without protection in situations of extreme discomfort.	Kakar (2021)
Spiritual freedom	Belief in the transcendence of the soul, which allows the Aghoris to act without fear of social judgment.	Ignoring conventional norms to embrace true freedom	Shukla (2020)

Description Table 2 details the main characteristics of the Aghoris, focusing on their physical abilities, mental stamina, and material detachment. These characteristics reflect the practitioners' dedication to a life of austerity and self-improvement. Detachment from material goods and social norms allows them to achieve mental and spiritual states that, according to the philosophy, are essential for final liberation.

Table 3: Symbolism and Meanings in Aghora Philosophy

Symbol	Meaning	Context of Use	Fountain
Cremation ashes	Representation of temporality and detachment from the physical body.	Applied to the skin to symbolize death	Chandra (2019)
Human skulls	Symbol of death and the equality of all living beings.	Used in rituals and as sacred objects	Aghori (2022)
Kali statues	They represent the destructive and protective force necessary for transformation.	Placed on altars and meditation spaces	Bharati (2017)
Sacred masculine and feminine	Concept of unity between the masculine and the feminine, reflecting non-duality in the universe.	Expressed in worship rituals	Shukla (2020)

Description Table 3 presents some of the most common symbols and their meaning in the Aghora context. Symbols are crucial elements in the practice, as each of them has a deep spiritual value. These symbols help practitioners remember and meditate on themes such as mortality, equality, and universal unity. The application of ashes or the use of human skulls are ways to remember the temporality of life and the continuous cycle of creation and destructio

Table 4: Effects of Aghora Philosophy on Cultural Perception

Aspect	Description	Impact on General Culture	Fountain
Challenging social norms	Aghoris challenge cultural norms through practices considered unusual or taboo.	They generate interest, but also rejection in modern society.	Bharati (2017)
Influence on cinema and literature	The image of the Aghoris has been used in various works of art and entertainment.	Appearances in films and books as mystical and enigmatic figures	Chandra (2019)
Mythification and misinterpretation	Lack of understanding of their practices has led to misinterpretations or exaggerations.	They are often seen as extreme or superstitious figures.	Shukla (2020)
Attraction for tourism	Some travelers seek to learn about Aghora culture out of spiritual curiosity or morbid curiosity.	Creation of tourist routes in Aghora internship sites.	Kakar (2021)

Description Table 4 explores the cultural impact of the Aghora philosophy, especially how its image is perceived by society and to what extent it influences modern culture. Aghora practices, by challenging social norms, cause a combination of curiosity and rejection. In the media, Aghoris are often represented with stereotypes, which contributes to the mythification of their figure. In addition, spiritual tourism routes have emerged that seek to approach this philosophy, which has expanded its cultural influence.

DISCUSSION

- Aghora philosophy, characterized by extreme practices and unique symbolism, offers a particular approach to spiritual transcendence, challenging established social and religious norms. Based on direct confrontation with deep fears and taboos of society—such as death, pain, and impurity—the practices of the Aghoris seek to lead the practitioner to a state of spiritual freedom and detachment that goes beyond the limitations of everyday life. This philosophy directly confronts traditional norms of Hindu society and orthodox Hinduism, promoting deep reflection on purity, attachment, and death. The discussion highlights how Aghora philosophy redefines the concepts of the sacred and the profane in the spiritual and cultural context of India.
- Known for their lifestyle of extreme detachment and ability to tolerate pain, Aghori practitioners display a deep commitment to the philosophy they follow. Their dedication to material detachment and their willingness to face situations that others would avoid, such as contact with human remains, reflect their strong conviction in the spiritual path they have chosen. From a psychological perspective, this detachment and their ability to tolerate difficult experiences can be understood as a mental and emotional training that seeks to overcome earthly desires and fears. This practice, more than a spiritual challenge, raises questions about the human capacity to let go of attachment and about the mind's potential to calmly face suffering.
- The symbolism surrounding Aghora philosophy is another crucial aspect, with multiple and profound interpretations. Elements such as human ashes and skulls represent, within this tradition, an acceptance of death and the transience of life, evoking the ephemeral nature of existence. These symbols recall the connection between the divine and the earthly, promoting a perspective in which everything, even death, has a sacred character. By integrating such symbols into their practices, the Aghoris challenge cultural and social norms around death, inviting a reevaluation of traditional beliefs about purity and life. The inclusion of these elements in the spiritual path questions conventional notions of the pure and the impure, encouraging a more inclusive and transgressive vision of spirituality.
- The cultural perception of Aghoris in India and abroad is ambivalent and often contradictory. Some view them as spiritually advanced ascetics who have transcended human limitations, while others consider them outcasts and objects of fear or stigmatization. This duality highlights the challenge that Aghoris represent to established norms and to the common understanding of spirituality. Their lifestyle, which incorporates socially rejected practices, breaks with the traditional view of asceticism and purity in the religious context, generating a complex appreciation that fluctuates between admiration and rejection. The perception of Aghoris as radical figures demonstrates how challenging norms can give rise to unique spiritual identities, which arouse both curiosity and misunderstanding.
- The introduction of playful practices into Aghora rituals and teachings adds an interesting pedagogical dimension. By challenging taboos and turning fear into a means of learning, the

Aghoris reveal an innovative approach to self-exploration and personal growth. This pedagogical approach, which may seem harsh or even risky from an outside perspective, seeks to teach practitioners to overcome the fear of death and material attachment. Transforming playfulness into a tool for spiritual development challenges conventional notions about what is appropriate in spiritual education, demonstrating that play and confrontation with the feared can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself and one's relationship to the world.

- Another important implication of Aghora philosophy is its relationship to cultural identity and its ability to redefine the boundaries of what is acceptable within a society. By adopting practices that others view as repulsive or inappropriate, Aghoris reinforce their identity outside the dominant culture. This process of self-identification, in contrast to society, demonstrates how a unique spiritual identity can develop outside of societal norms, without the need to fit in. From a sociocultural approach, the Aghora path highlights the importance of authenticity and individuality in spirituality, showing that spiritual growth can be achieved both within and outside the boundaries of what is conventionally accepted.
- Ultimately, the impact of the Aghora path on society and culture demonstrates the power of alternative philosophies and practices to challenge and enrich mainstream spirituality. The presence of the Aghoris as unique and transgressive figures reminds society that spirituality can take many forms, and that transcendence often involves facing that which we fear or reject. Their philosophy and lifestyle represent a constant challenge to traditional norms and beliefs, promoting reflection on the importance of including diverse perspectives in understanding spirituality. In this way, the Aghoris are not only seeking their own path to enlightenment, but are also contributing to a broader cultural and spiritual conversation, exploring the true meaning of the sacred.

CONCLUSIONS

- In conclusion, the study of Aghora philosophy reveals a unique and deeply transgressive approach to spirituality, which challenges conventional social and religious norms through intense practices and striking symbolism. By analyzing these practices, such as confrontation with death and extreme detachment from material things, it is observed that the Aghoris pursue a form of spiritual liberation that goes beyond the boundaries of society and established religion. This philosophy not only promotes personal transcendence, but also redefines the concepts of purity and profanity in the Indian cultural context, highlighting the importance of challenging fear and taboos on the path to understanding existence.
- The results also suggest that the ambivalent perception of the Aghoris in popular culture is due to the disruptive nature of their lifestyle, which breaks with the norms of what is accepted in society. The Aghoris, through their radical detachment and acceptance of death, question the traditional understanding of spirituality, generating responses that oscillate between admiration and rejection. This duality highlights the capacity of alternative philosophies to not only coexist, but also to enrich and expand the collective understanding of the sacred, even when their practices challenge established conventions.
- Finally, Aghora philosophy brings a valuable and necessary perspective to the debate on spiritual and cultural diversity. The willingness of the Aghoris to confront humanity's deepest fears shows that spirituality can include unexpected paths, seeking to integrate both the sacred and the profane into the human experience. Their existence and practices invite deep reflection on the possibility of finding growth and authenticity outside conventional structures, allowing spirituality to be a tool for personal exploration and liberation beyond traditional boundaries.

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