Dialogic montage: Reflecting on playful practice in higher education

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A B S T R A C T

In our advocation for playful and creative practice, we engage in collaborative writing as a method of inquiry. In this paper we have extended that practice, conducting a collage conversation between the three of us reflecting on playful practice in academia through visual means, and using this paper as a meta-reflection on the value of collaborative practice and writing to promote a culture of research for academics primarily engaged in teaching. As we are located on different continents, the conversation unfolded synchronously and asynchronously: with us sending images of our thinking and responses back and forth. This shared playful and visual conversation has been captured for this article and supplemented with case study examples of how we utilised such playful practice with our student and staff learners. We argue that playful practice is even more important in these lean and mean times as it enables an honest but suitably supercomplex dialogue about learning, teaching and research that recognises education's human element. Playful practice is inclusive and empowering: it strengthens the individual while at the same time enabling connection - with peers and the larger social and academic context.

Introduction

Dialogue and the dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) are vital parts of our professional practice and of our research focusing on the exploration of emancipatory and empowering learning and teaching approaches (Dewey, 1938; Gillies, 2005; Freire, 1972; Holt, 1976; hooks, 1994; Illich, 1971; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Shor, 1980). In the UK, we work in a post-92 inner city university with a widening participation brief and an education for social justice framework. In Calgary, we believe in experiential learning and community engagement to seek and share answers to our most challenging problems in a cross-disciplinary way. Together, we regularly engage in collaborative writing as a method of enquiry (Gale & Bowstead, 2013; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) exploring our praxes through emergent and exploratory writing conducted synchronously and asynchronously. Initially,

this occurred when we worked in the same institution but in separate departments, and it continues now as we work on different continents. We have always believed and invested in collaboration - knowing that it enriches our work. The whole always becomes greater than the sum of the parts when we - when anyone - works in this way (Nummenmaa et al., 2015).

A key focus of our work has been the emancipatory potential of creativity and play in education (Sinfield, Burns & Abegglen, 2019). Play and creativity enable so much more than a 'traditional', transmissive lecture. Play is disruptive and transgressive - it can transcend the normative and challenge notions of teaching and learning transmitted from birth. Thus, play can liberate especially those traditionally unwelcome in higher education such that even within formal academic settings, they might define their learning differently and become academic more on their own terms.

> [Play] is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow. (Huizinga, 2002, p. 132).

We argue that playful, visual and multimodal practice is more important in these lean, mean and physically distanced times because it enables an honest and open dialogue about learning, teaching and research that recognises education's human element. Playful practice is inclusive and empowering: it strengthens the individual while at the same time enabling connection and co-creation. "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54).

When we theorise and conceptualise play, we include the power of the symbolic: playfulness as a mindset (Stenros, 2015). This enables us to recognize play in contexts that are not explicitly marked as play or set up for play. For example, playing with images, text and sound are part of the repertoire that we use when working with our undergraduate students, and staff-as-students. This paper hopefully reflects and illustrates that: play as a subjective experience and as a transgressive activity.

Collages

To begin our visual and playful conversation about play and creativity in education, we would like to briefly highlight why we have chosen collages as our means for this 'dialogic montage' discussion. Collages are assemblages made by sticking or gluing (French: coller: paste, stick, glue) juxtaposing images or materials together to create new images and fresh meanings, a composition of sorts (Merriam Webster, n.d.). There are different approaches to collage-making. One is to assume quite a conscious response on the part of the 'maker'. This positions the maker as quite in control of the 'message' that they want to convey. In this instance, the maker could be seen as actively choosing and placing images to construct their collage, producing meaning

almost in the way a writer is believed to produce a message-bearing text. However, our approach owes more to the Surrealist movement and the notion of allowing the unconscious to speak to us. Here, the maker seeks images from various sources and positions them on the page in a way that 'speaks' to them subliminally - often in response to a question or challenge held in the mind. Meaning emerges as the maker works with and reflects on the image produced. In advocating this approach, we are drawing particularly on the DaDaists (viz. MoMaLearning, n.d., para. 2):

> In their attack on rationality, Dada artists embraced chance, accident, and improvisation. Such forces figured prominently in their creation of collages, assemblages, and photomontages—and subverted elements that had long defined artistic practice, like craft, control, and intentionality.

Both views of collage-making have value - and if using collage in your own practice, we would suggest that you outline both approaches and allow your participants to adopt whichever mode they feel more comfortable with. At the same time, our view of collage-making allows us to also contest deep rooted notions of the writerly process, which we have criticized before (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2019), and which we discuss more below. It also acts as a 'live' metaphor for our research practice, where we engage in emergent, exploratory collaborative writing as a method of inquiry - the reflective, writerly practice of researching and theorising.

The conversation

We wanted this visual conversation to constitute a creative hermeneutic space for us, for we find ourselves like most academics too busy to think, too busy to play. This is a recurrent motif in a micro-managed higher education where every second counts and every minute is monitored - even more so in these Covid/post-Covid times (Ahmad, 2020, March 27). Thus, we wanted to create for ourselves a much-needed space for being and being with (Nancy, 2000) - where we expected that playful visual discussion to generate new insights into our collaborative learning, teaching and research practice. To start our conversation, we asked Tom, module leader of Facilitating Student Learning (FSL) of the PGCert course at LondonMet to reflect on that module, its underlying philosophy and what he hopes it achieves both for the staff participants and consequently for their own students. Tom created a 'physical' collage which he shared with us online - and we produced our own in response - which led to an active exchange between the three of us.

We hope that you spend some time with our collages – or, more precise, the pictures of our collages - and look at them carefully - before you read on to see our discussion on the benefits of playful practice - and of playful research. You may note that Tom's collages are slightly different to the ones made by Sandra A and Sandra S as he has used and reused the same images to create three different collages (the images used are only fixed in the photographs he took). This 'hybrid play' (De Souza e Silva & Glover-Rijkse, 2020) utilised by Tom adds to the complexity of our conversation, generating additional meanings and understandings - a new mixture.

And so it begins…
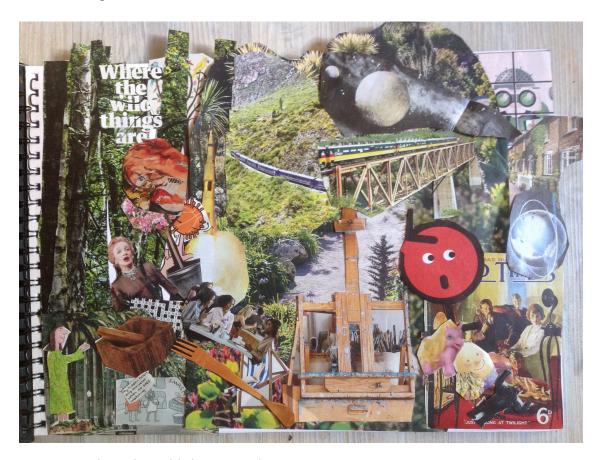

Figure 1: 'Where the wild things are' by Tom B.

Figure 2: 'And where they are not' by Sandra S.

Figure 3: 'Hoch hinaus' by Sandra A.

Figure 4: 'Co-creation and collaborative writing' by Sandra S.

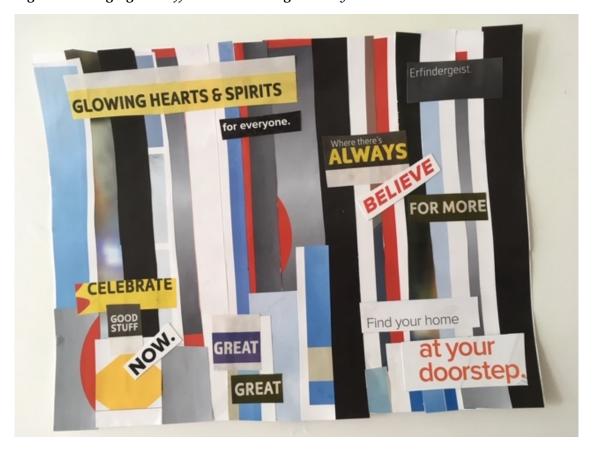*Figure 5: 'Bringing the different worlds together' by Tom B.*

Figure 6: 'Glowing hearts & spirits' by Sandra A.

Figure 7: 'Empowered' by Tom B.

Collages in practice

While the content of our visual discussion is open to interpretation, the process of creatively 'making', openly 'sharing' and attentively 'looking' is definitely worth pursuing. When working with students and academic staff, we typically engage in collage work in the very first week of our modules. In our staff-facing FSL module (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2020), we ask all our participants, mainly lecturers but also those in the student supporting professions, to make a collage that represents themselves as a person or as a tutor (which may or may not be the same thing). This 'embodied doing' (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984) creates space for creative reflection (Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983) - facilitated and mediated by the images (Palus & Drath, 2001). Once the collages are made, we ask people to pair up to discuss them and their works' various meanings - with the 'maker' first listening to what the other can 'see' in the collage. This acts as a spur to a 'rich' discussion on education and their roles within HE, before they swap. In FSL, the follow up to this activity is that for 'homework', we ask participants to either develop the collage self-portrait or to 'make' a 3D representation of a 'typical' student to bring back to the second workshop. In that second workshop, we hold an exhibition of the self and student makes - and this leads into small group production, using clean recyclables, of a representation of either a typical or an idealised HE system or university. By the end of the second session therefore, our staff participants have visually and dynamically explored the self, the student and the institution - and engaged in embodied thinking to produce creative ways of bringing these humanely together. We have also demonstrated

active ways of teaching and learning - very different from the traditional lecture format. The programme itself continues by harnessing movement to facilitate thinking (viz. Newell & Kleiman, 2012), collaborative reading of text with scrolls (Abegglen, Burns, Middlebrook & Sinfield, 2019), thinking through song, and free writing (Elbow, 1998) - as different ways of continuing to explore emancipatory practice together in creative, embodied ways.

Collages and academic writing

As well as valuing collage-making as playful practice with its own value in ludic classrooms, we harness collage-making as a useful way into academic writing (Burns, Sinfield & Abegglen, 2018a). When used as a pre-writing activity with undergraduates, the making of an exploratory collage takes away the pressure students often feel when faced with an assignment question. That is, that they ought to know the answer and they should immediately be able to write perfectly formed paragraphs. The production of a collage can reveal that answering a question means exploring themes and ideas experimentally and playfully. The collage process makes visible how different themes or ideas are connected. It allows students to see 'the bigger picture', make connections between the question that they are answering, the themes and topics covered in class and the learning outcomes they must meet to successfully complete the assignment.

We often start this process by asking students to make a collage on their first assignment. The purpose is to let their unconscious work through image selection and placement to help them explore the question set and see where that leads. This can be followed up in several different ways: students can write what they 'see' (literally) in their collages - and then explain why and how that 'answers' the question. They could work in pairs and, as with the introductory exercise described above, the non-maker first says what they discover in their partner's collage. Discussion helps participants 'unpack' what they have made and explore what emerges - what is worth keeping, what could be rejected, and what needs to be developed further. This, in an embodied way, helps students inhabit the sort of iterative writing that we as academics regularly engage in. Many of the students we have worked with that moved on to become successful in their degrees, reported back that it was the various 'write to learn' activities that we engaged in with them that enabled them to see writing as a process that allowed them to think through ideas more powerfully - a far cry from a mechanical focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Thus, we recommend that academic staff help students 'write to learn', in much the same way as they engage in the 'emergent' collage process. That is, that their students start writing before their thinking has settled. This gives them permission to play with the ideas that they are engaging with - rather than just repeating arguments or writing the answer that they believe that the tutor wants to hear (Holt, 1976). Through that they experience for themselves that writing is a thinking process - developing from initial ideas and relatively unformed and unpolished notes to a piece of text with an argument:

I call this process a loop because it takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, the voyage out, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space - allow yourself, that is, to ignore or even forget exactly what your topic is. For the second half, the voyage home, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced during the voyage out (Elbow, 1998, p. 60).

Collage as qualitative tool

Additionally, we have used collages to introduce students to academic research - in the first year of their studies, in the first few weeks of their course. To initiate the process, we asked our students to make a collage reflecting on their first few weeks of university: What has it felt like? What surprised you? What has caused you to think twice? We then asked students to reflect on their own collages: What can you see in your collage? What does this tell you about your experiences over the first few weeks here? Obviously, this is useful reflective practice (Schön, 1983) which could also be used to seed reflective writing; when used to seed first year, creative qualitative research, we ask students to use the collages to surface some aspect of university learning, teaching or assessment that is of interest to them. Thus, for the students, these collages become the method of their own small-scale auto-ethnographic pilot study, revealing back to them via a Creative Analytical Process (CAP) (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) something that they would like to research further.

In our teaching, we continue our support for creative qualitative methods, by steering our students away from questionnaires (and their implication, when badly done, of a controlled, convergent process) and urging them to undertake their research utilising less controlled and more actively divergent methods (viz. University of Brighton, n.d.). Whilst we want the students to be engaged and have fun whilst they conduct their research, this is also serious business, constituting a 'real' invitation into an educationally or socially relevant topic. In our case, each student had to produce a formal research proposal to initiate their study - and they had to write up a formal report once they had collected and analysed their data. To support the former, we scaffold academic reading in class, via the more discursive and open practice of collaborative reading of textscrolls (Abegglen, Burns, Middlebrook & Sinfield, 2019) and sharing out the reading that would go to produce a literature review. To develop the latter, we engage in further CAP practice, 'reading' artefacts made by other students and discussing discoveries made. We also engage across many sessions in the sort of textual analysis that is undertaken by literature, film and television studies students - reading images, short films, poetry and prose - such that they can analyse the creative data that they have gathered with confidence.

'Creative' writing as a method of learning and teaching - and inquiry

To sum up, for us, collage-making is so much more than an artistic activity. It is a creative, embodied process that enables discovery and discussion of ideas and topics. Given the relatively restrictive nature of pre-tertiary education in the UK and elsewhere (viz. Robinson, 2006), we believe that this playful practice is necessary to

'de-school' (Illich, 1971) our academic staff and students; where the emergent, divergent, exploratory nature of the playful practice moves them from a place of unsafe certainty to a place of safe uncertainty (Mason, 1993). This acts as an empowering introduction to academic writing - and even research. It is the underlying 'playfulness' that makes collages so useful. While play in higher education is often seen as something that is either confined to particular subject areas (the Arts) or should be done outside the core curriculum, an add-on, we have adopted it as fundamental, emancipatory practice that reveals in embodied ways that education is socially constructed, rather than fixed and found - and that our participants are active learners, explorers with agency. As James and Nerantzi, in the introduction to The Power of Play in Higher Education, write '...academics, researchers, students and managers can all benefit from play. In its limitless forms, it is a means of freeing up thinking, opening new channels, confronting obstacles and reframing persistent challenges' (2019, p. xlv).

So, we recommend you engage in collage-making with your learners - generally, for essay writing or for research. Get playful - and play:

Bring in magazines, scissors, glue and paper.

Put up the assignment question (and the learning outcomes) that you wish your learners to address.

Ask learners to reflect on the question and produce a collage that answers the question for them - individually, in pairs or small groups.

Remind learners to review the learning outcomes, making sure that they are addressed also.

Invite learners to share their collages explaining what it shows and why it answers the question. Alternatively, a group can show their collage to another - which says what it sees in the picture - whilst the first group engages in 'active listening'. The first group then responds - and a productive dialogue can ensue.

Ask learners to 'write to' their collage to see what essay ideas emerge.

Ask learners to reflect for themselves how useful the collage-process has been.

Conclusion

We, the authors of this paper, have used play and creativity in our own teaching practice (Burns, Sinfield & Abegglen, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e) - and we harnessed the visual (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2018; Burns, Griffiths, Myhre & Sinfield, 2017), including in our research (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2019). We have also reflected on empowering pedagogies and inclusive curricula, especially their value for widening participation students (students that are mature, have work and/or care responsibilities and often have limited resources in regard to time and money) (Abegglen, Burns, Maier & Sinfield, 2020a; Abegglen, Burns, Maier & Sinfield, 2020b). In this paper, we have deepened this reflection through a collage discussion between the three

of us about our approach to staff development and undergraduate teaching - and also educational research: collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Gale & Bowstead, 2013; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

As we are now located on different continents, Europe and North America, the conversation has unfolded synchronously and asynchronously, communicating visually and verbally with each other, sending images of our collages and words back and forth. Whilst superficially playful in appearance, such practices harnessed in pedagogy, better prepare our learners – academic staff and students - for agentic study and powerful action in the world. The emergent, divergent and exploratory nature of the collage process - and the following collage-enabled conversation - models a more super-complex and heutagogic education process and practice – one that brings together ideas and people (Nummenmaa et al,, 2015).

This shared playful and visual conversation has illustrated the case study examples of how we utilised such practice with our student and staff learners - and in our own collaborative research practice (Figure 1). We argue that playful practice is even more important in these lean and mean times (Figure 2) where people work mainly from home (Figure 3) as it enables authentic and honest, dialogic learning, teaching and research that recognise the human element. Playful teaching and research practice are inclusive and empowering (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7): they strengthen the individual while at the same time enabling connection - with peers and the larger social and academic context.

On a final note

With our own commitment to education for social justice, much of the focus of our teaching, research and writing has been to uncover, discover and propose teaching, learning and assessment practices designed to develop ownership and agency in all students - and that we harness particularly as emancipatory practice for those typically excluded from or denied a voice within academia. Despite our physical dislocation, we still engage in that collaborative writing/research, seeking new ways to work and write together, and this paper emerges from that. It was a way to have a creative, emergent conversation about our practice, now and in the past - a sort of 'working out loud' (Stepper, 2020): to shed new light on different, more empowering ways of creative practice and creative research.

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