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A dialog on reclaiming higher education as a space for play

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A B S T R A C T

This work is the result of a collaboration between students and a teacher. Based on many hours of recorded dialogs and grounded in both our individual experiences from higher education and our shared experience in the interdisciplinary project course, we approach play in its broadest sense as an activity that combines exploration, discovery, experimentation, creation and reflection. Using the recorded dialogs as a starting point, we, collaboratively and in partnership, transformed the raw material into a coherent research narrative in which we explore why it is important to reclaim higher education as a space where students and teachers can play with ideas, what pedagogical approaches and positions are needed to create this space, and how a focus on efficiency and assessment threatens play in higher education settings. Keeping our work in the dialog format, we preserve the nature of this research and communicate the different voices.

Preface

One of the peculiarities in higher education research with respect to the published literature is the relative absence of students as contributors. While students might be informants in empirical research projects, they are rarely producers of (Neary & Winn, 2009) or collaborative partners in research (Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem, & Leathwick, 2018) with participatory research traditions as a welcomed exception (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

In contrast, this work is the result of a collaboration between an associate professor in university pedagogy, one student in psychology, one in mathematical science and physics, and one in sociology. Captured in many hours

of recorded dialogs and grounded in both our individual experiences from higher education and our shared experience in the interdisciplinary project course "Environments for Learning" (Wallin, 2020b; Wallin & Aarsand, 2019), we explore the notion of play in higher education. We approach play here with Huizinga's (1938) work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* in mind that proposes that play is central to the generation of culture and that play gives meaning to life. In this broad understanding of play, we see it as an activity that combines exploration, discovery, experimentation, creation and reflection (Aras, 2016). It is based on curiosity, freedom of choice, personal enjoyment and an emphasis on the process. An open-ended activity that is meaningful in itself. By exploring new, more playful ways to work together on questions relating to higher education, we consider play in the process, content, and format of our work.

After recording and transcribing the dialogs, we alternated between individual naïve reading and collaboratively working on a structural analysis (Figure 1). Through this process, we identified a number of themes within the dialogs and subsequently used these themes to reorganize the entire raw material. In the next step, we grouped, cleaned, simplified and condensed the verbatim material, in order to create a more comprehensive narrative within each theme before working on the transition between sections. Finally, the material was translated from Norwegian to English and a short introduction section was added.

In other words, using the recorded dialogs as a starting point, we, collaboratively and in partnership, transformed the raw material into a coherent research narrative in which we explore why it is important to reclaim higher education as a space where students and teachers can play with ideas, what pedagogical approaches and positions are needed to create this space, and how a focus on efficiency and assessment threatens play in higher education settings. Following the example of Ira Shor's and Paulo Freire's talking book *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (1987), we preserve the nature of this research and communicate the different voices by remaining in the dialog format.

Figure 1: Collaboratively working with the analysis of the original dialogs.

Introduction

Patric: I'm really happy that you three agreed to be part of this work and to explore play in higher education together with me. Before we start, I think it might be good if we briefly introduce ourselves. My name is Patric

Wallin, I'm 35 years old and work as an Associate Professor at the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning. More than twelve years ago, I started as a first-year mechanical engineering student at Leibniz University, Hannover. Later, I was granted a Master's degree in biomedical engineering in Gothenburg before starting my PhD – initially in Bioscience and after a while focusing more and more on Engineering Education Research. Afterwards, I moved into researching university pedagogy and higher education more generally. One thing that has always driven me is my curiosity – to learn new things and challenge traditional boundaries – for me there has always been a lot of trial and error and all the myriad experiences have been very valuable to me. Kristi what about you?

Kristi: My name is Kristi Larsen Mariussen and I'm 24 years old. I've been a student at NTNU for almost five years. I'm in my fourth year of the Professional Education Program in Psychology. Before I started, I took a one-year program in psychology. I have chosen psychology because I've always been curious about other people. I'm interested in how people behave, think, and feel, and I'm also very curious about myself. Once I had decided, there was no way back. I had to take the one-year program to see if I would be admitted into the professional program afterwards.

Håkon: My name is Håkon Mogstad. I'm 23 years old and in my fifth year of the Master of Sciences in Physics and Mathematics program. I'm taking a specialization called Biophysics and Medical Technology, a discipline I had envisioned before I started studying. Still, it was a bit of coincidence that I started in this specific study program because I had many different interests. I had natural science as a major in high school, but I really liked the social sciences as well. At the same time, I have always been fascinated by technology. Applied physics and mathematics underpin all technological development and I wanted to explore this further.

Maud: I'm Maud Sønderaal, 24 years old, and in my last year of a Master's degree in Sociology. I'm interested in society and politics, and that's why I find it interesting to explore how society works and how it's organized. This is a little bit in contrast to what Kristi said about her interest in psychology with a focus on people's feelings and inner thoughts – I want to learn and explore more about how society as an institution affects people's actions, and for me personally I find universities as organizations very interesting, which is why I'm here.

Patric: We met and got to know each other in the course "Environments for Learning" that I taught during the spring. The course lies under the Experts in Teamwork umbrella – often referred to as EiT. All Master's level students (around 2700 in 2019) from all professions and disciplines at NTNU are required to take one course under the EiT umbrella. Each course has around 25–30 students who work on group projects under the overarching theme of the course, as well as reflect on working in interdisciplinary teams and underlying group dynamics. After the course, we continued to work together on this project about play in higher education. Maybe we should say a little about how we worked and our experiences from this collaboration.

Reflections on methodology

Maud: I think this has both been very nice and interesting. It's almost been like continuing the collaboration from EiT. Our work, and particularly the way we work together, has given me a lot of insights into how important relationships, play, and creativity are at university. I feel like I've learnt a lot through our discussions which I will cherish and take with me further. It has also been a totally new way for me to work on an article. It was interesting how the five sessions that we recorded evolved and how our discussions were built on each other's perspectives. This was an interesting process where we ended up with more than six hours of recorded conversations. After transcribing all the material, we had to cut down over a hundred pages of conversation, which has been demanding, but I also think that I learned a lot from the process. It was a totally new and playful way to work with a text.

Kristi: For me it was also the first time working in this way and I definitely recommend it. I think the analysis session that we had together at your place Patric was very interesting. We produced this huge map of different topics that emerged from our collective analysis of the transcripts and it was very interesting to see how our different perspectives and takes on the material all came together. Yes, we have played with conversations, and taken the time to explore each other's statements, experiences, and knowledge. I haven't experienced this kind of intense engagement with topics and material before in my work or my studies. This has been so different from what I usually do.

Håkon: I agree, this has been very different from what I normally do in my study program. At the same time, it has been good that the focus has not been on the finished article, but rather that we have come together and explored things without a focus on the end product, which I think is so dominant at the university otherwise – our own experiences were an important part of the entire process rather than supplements. I was really excited about how this was going to turn out because it was a bit diffused at the start. We often started our conversations with something specific, and then we ended up pretty far away from where we had started. I felt like we played with the different topics and looked at what emerged from our conversations. The development of our conversations was especially exciting, where we could share our own thoughts and gain insights into what others have thought about the same experiences. The final transformation from the 2x1 meter map that you mentioned Kristi to this text here was demanding, but also natural. For me it was also important to keep the conversational format, as conversations were so important in our work.

Patric: Yes, the emergent nature of our conversations is indeed what I think is so valuable. From the start, I had a strong trust in the process. I had a basic assumption that it was going to be very exciting anyway, and for me it has been. To just let it flow and see what topics we arrived at. What is really relevant to us? Not just for me, but for all of us. It was exciting to see each time we met which directions we were going to take. For me these conversations were really important. They gave me hope and reminded me about what really matters in higher

education. I think what is often missed in traditional teaching or education is precisely this type of conversation where we just get together and talk and try to explore and learn from and with each other. It might take a little to say yes when there's no plan. But at the same time, I thought it was important that I didn't decide everything (Shor, 1996). I'm glad you three took the risk and followed the invitation to play with ideas and perspectives in higher education. And I hope that the conversational format will invite readers into the dialog and stimulate everyone to ask and explore their own questions.

Spaces to play with ideas in higher education

Patric: Coming back to the course "Environments for Learning" (Wallin, 2020b; Wallin & Aarsand, 2019), I see the course as an invitation to collaborate, a space where we can redefine the rules and boundaries as we move forward. For me, this course captures what lies at the very heart of the university, as Wilhelm von Humboldt described it – it's about students and teachers working together to explore different perspectives, gain new understandings, and create meaning. I'm very inspired by the work Mike Neary did on "Student as Producer" which relates to this notion (Neary, 2010, 2016; Neary & Winn, 2009). In our case the theme was "learning environments" with a particular focus on universities and you three worked with three other students in an interdisciplinary group one day a week throughout the semester. Let's talk a little bit more about how you experienced this invitation to create something different and the opportunity space in the course.

Kristi: I remember that after the first day of the course I thought that it was very nice and fun to not focus so much on the project report. That we could laugh, talk together, and get to know each other. When I think about it now, it's interesting that I normally don't associate laughing and having fun with studying at university. I've always been so focused on efficiency and getting things done – but it's kind of strange.

Patric: Yes, that's very interesting. Why do you think that laughing and having fun is something that you don't normally see as part of what you do at university?

Kristi: When I'm at the university or studying at home I feel that I'm under a certain kind of time pressure. I'm supposed to work on something and finish it. I feel that working eight to four, Monday to Friday, is too little time to do all the work that I want and need to do. So, it's about the time pressure – I don't have time to laugh and play!

Håkon: I recognize that feeling and I think that from the start EiT was framed differently from many other courses. We had a different way of starting the course. We started with a clear focus on the process part and getting to know each other. We put a lot of effort into creating a good learning environment from the start. I also think humor was something that felt important right from the start. Over time, it became an important part of the group work and we took time to laugh and play.

Maud: Yes, we were quite good at taking breaks, joking around, and just having fun. For instance, when I study

alone, I find myself in a more serious role where I have to be focused and just absorb everything from the course syllabus. But in this course I experienced my role to be more playful, where I could explore new topics together with you and the rest of the group. So it opened for a more playful approach then I was used to. Maybe it made the collaboration more harmless as I could decide who I wanted to be and relate to in the group.

Håkon: In traditional group work you often work together with friends whom you know well from before, while in EiT we had the opportunity to collaborate from scratch. We had never seen any of the others before and we were given the opportunity to shape the entire collaboration from the start, and we didn't have to keep to the roles that we usually have with our friends whom we have known for a long time – things were not set from the start and we could play around with different roles and how we wanted to work together. So that's why I think that working in a new collaboration with people I didn't know was important.

Kristi: And we had that *tone* throughout the whole project. It wasn't just the first couple of days. The conversations and the playing during the first days were mainly to help us get to know each other, but we also played with our work and how we worked together. We laughed and played with the results from our research. And it's that kind of play that I'm less used to from my daily study routine.

Maud: I agree with you Kristi – playing with ideas, approaches, results, and writing is something that I've not really experienced in higher education before. I really liked this playful approach to learning and the possibility to explore different directions and perspectives. Looking back, I don't understand why we don't do this more in other courses.

Patric: It's nice to hear that you experienced that you had the opportunity to play. But I'm also sad to hear that this is so unusual at the university. To me it feels like the opportunity to play with ideas and thoughts is important for higher education and research. In my work I often start with something and then I twist and turn it around. Many times, I might go in one direction that doesn't lead to anything, but at least I had some fun with that idea and learned something along the way before turning in a different direction. Just this playful approach to ideas and thoughts, where no definitive answer is necessary – I think that's really important and it's something that is important for how I look at the EiT course and really for how I think the university should be.

Learning through playful approaches to research

Håkon: I think for me one key element here was that we as a group defined our own research question and what we wanted to work on. Because even at the Master's level there are almost always rather strict boundaries and a focus on answering a specific question or looking at one particular part of a larger project, and so there's little room to develop research questions yourself. That's why I think it was very exciting the first few days when we only tried to get an overview of the theme and explored different possibilities. We learned a lot in this process where we developed the questions that we wanted to work on.

Patric: Yes, I think a difference between this course and other courses is precisely that you work together around the development process. I'm not the one deciding the problem or research question, but neither are you the only ones who develop a research question that is approved or not approved by me – rather we do this together through dialog.

Maud: For me it also felt easier to work on the project later on precisely because of the process we had for developing the research questions. Knowing that this was something we decided together gave me a sense of security and was very important for feeling that we owned the project. Since we were such an interdisciplinary group, the process of developing the research question in our project demanded patience and a playful approach from all group members and resulted in long discussions on both content and methodology. It was crucial that we had time to play around with different research questions and that we were not forced to come up with a project already on the second day. It allowed us to challenge each other with different ideas, and in the end we created research questions for our project that felt meaningful for us.

Patric: Yes exactly. One thought that I have when framing the development process at the beginning is that it builds a kind of community and a shared responsibility. I can create a certain space of opportunity, but then you have to fill it with what you want to work with. In my role, I try to support those processes, but I can't be the owner of the problem or the project. Developing the project is a shared responsibility and we need to do it together from our different positions.

Håkon: Yes, I can see that, and I think that it also means a lot for our motivation that we get to explore different possibilities and have time to play around with different questions. If we had received exactly the same questions as we ended up with served from you or if we were forced to work very quickly, it would have been a different start compared to now when we were able to figure it out ourselves.

Kristi: Absolutely. But the opposite could also have happened. That is, always deciding for ourselves could have made the demands too high, and drained motivation. On the other hand, we were a group of six, and we knew we could make it together. But you need to know that it's going to work out. You need that secure feeling. And we knew throughout the entire project that if we didn't manage something, if we got stuck in a discussion, there was always someone who could come and help: Another person who didn't have an interest in promoting one particular opinion, but at the same time was familiar with the project and was interested in helping us as a group to develop and grow. I think that this gave us the sense of security we needed, and the motivation to try to solve problems ourselves. And we mostly did – we didn't need your help Patric, but we needed you to be there.

Maud: I agree and at the same time I also think that the different tasks Patric gave us made us connect on another level. And then we got the help we needed if we as a group were stuck. Patric, you listened to what we said and asked questions that pushed us to come up with our own answer. You didn't provide any explanation for the situation we might have, but asked questions that made us reflect on things in a different way. You

started a discussion and gave us guidance on how to solve the challenge ourselves.

Håkon: In this connection, it's also very interesting to think about what kind of expectations teachers set for their students in more general terms. I think we're shaped by this a lot. A teacher sets the premise or determines the framework you can experiment within and students are often given few opportunities to go beyond this. I think that's a pity. I'm a creative person and many times in higher education I have felt limited by the boundary conditions that teachers have set. I think I get too little use out of my creativity at the university, especially considering that I'm studying to become an engineer where there should be room for creativity and innovative solutions. We have had a couple of practical courses where we have built things and experimented and formed our own projects – I think those have been really fun – but this was more the exception than the rule. Instead, the focus in most courses was on following a long, strict syllabus that left little room for developing my own ideas.

Patric: This saddens me, but unfortunately does not surprise me. I think that for me as a teacher it's extremely important to create a space where we can be creative together. A space where we can also fail, where there are no major consequences. That everyone can test and play with different ideas and approaches and that we can learn from the times when things go as planned, as well as the times when things don't work out as planned. We need a space where we can succeed and finish a course regardless of how a project turns out in the end. For me, the focus should be on the process and the dialogs we have. I think it's important to be creative and play with questions and ideas and to challenge frameworks and boundaries. That's one of the reasons why I put so much emphasis on feedback. I think it helps me to convey that there's not one solution, but that you should experiment and play. This is also the reason why I feel that it's so important to have a continuous dialog to explore what you want, how I can help, and what we can achieve together (Nicol, 2010).

Håkon: Yes, I feel that the dialog was really important and again it has a lot to say how you present it to us. In some courses, if I send something to the professor for feedback and get an answer, I often feel that I have to make all the proposed changes from the feedback. I kind of feel obliged to do it. But in EiT, you framed feedback very differently and made it very clear that the feedback you give is only your suggestion on how to potentially proceed with the project, but that it is only a starting point for discussing various possibilities within the group and together with you. I felt that it was within our power whether we wanted to go for those changes or whether it made more sense for us to go the way we initially charted.

Patric: This makes me think of something I read the other day by Sean Michael Morris (2019). His point of departure was that all the students he teaches are "geniuses" – that was his default assumption. I think this is very interesting and it resonates with the way that I see students when I teach. I have the assumption that the students I teach have a lot of diverse experiences, they are able to carry out a lot of interesting work, and in certain areas, they know a lot more than I do. I want to acknowledge this and I often feel very privileged to work together with students to learn from and with them as we explore different areas. I agree with Sean, I see

my students as geniuses. For me it's important to have this as a starting point rather than defining intended learning outcomes that in many ways define a deficit in students that teachers are trying to fill. I think it's very problematic if I define where we should be at the end of the course – it limits our possibility to play and explore freely in the time that we have together.

Maud: I have to say that I'm a little bit surprised, I've never thought about it that way. From my previous experiences, more or less all the other professors I have had at university would love to influence the direction students take in their projects. I see in so many of my courses how professors use their own point of view and their own research to influence their students. However, I think they may do this subconsciously as many professors get involved and want to share their knowledge. I think that what you describe, Patric, really influences and frames the relation between you and us as students in a different way than what I'm used to in other courses. This kind of establishes a foundation of trust, which from my point of view all professors would benefit from.

Håkon: Yes, usually there is a clear division of roles between student and teacher. The students come in and expect to obtain information. While in this course it was more of a flat structure where you, Patric, as the teacher had a more organizing role. You coordinated how things should take place to create a space for us. You were more a guide who could help us when we needed support. I really think we were in control of what we wanted to do and how we wanted to work on our project. These were things that we decided as a group. It was important and refreshing that you didn't dictate "from above" what we should and should not do, but that you listened to our ideas and asked questions to better understand what we wanted to do, and you also provided your perspectives so we could take them into consideration.

Play in a neoliberal university landscape

Maud: I think it was a very exciting way to learn, but I feel this might be difficult when the student number increases to 200 or more like we see in so many lectures at the university today.

Patric: Yes, that would certainly be more challenging. For me, one of my tasks, as I see it, is to create a kind of opportunity space, and to keep that space open so that something can happen. And it's so much more difficult in a large auditorium with 200 students where we might be more disconnected from each other to build trust. It is possible, but challenging.

Håkon: Because when you as a teacher can sit down in a chair with a group of students and you can have a real conversation, it really helps to develop trust and build a strong relation compared to a large classroom where the teacher is very separated from the class.

Kristi: But then the question is if it's the structure of the course that makes the building of trust possible, or if it's the person who is teaching the course that is important. A course with smaller groups can have teachers who aren't interested in their students, even though the boundary conditions might allow the approaches that we've

talked about. And a teacher can have a strong desire to build relations and trust but experiences being trapped in a setting where that's not possible.

Håkon: In most cases it will probably be a combination of both structure and person.

Maud: Viewing this from a different perspective, I think we need to consider the strong trust many Norwegian students have that the university will do what is best for them (Hopfenbeck, Tolo, Florez, & Masri, 2013; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013); that universities will create conditions that allow students and teachers to create meaningful learning experiences. I'm not sure if we should have this trust, but I think it's linked to a more general unconditional trust in both the government and the authorities that the majority of people in Norway have. It's part of how our society is organized – we live in a welfare state that aims to provide financial security, equal rights, and equality for all Norwegian citizens. For example, this system provides Norwegian students with an opportunity to study at university almost free of charge, which is not the case in many other countries. For me it's interesting to think then about whether this contributes to the fact that students trust the university so much that many don't question some of the boundary conditions in higher education. I believe sometimes that the trust many students have in the university is unreasonably high.

Patric: This is an interesting point Maud. I have also reacted to this and asked myself why students don't critically question the way the university organizes courses and study programs more often. And the same is true for teachers – why don't they question the boundary conditions that they have to work with more openly? I think it's important to be clear about how the university has changed in recent decades (e.g. Barnett, 2017; Giroux, 2002; Taylor, 2017). We talk more and more about the university as a production line and use a market philosophy to justify decisions and approaches. I feel that there is a strong emphasis on efficiency and individualism. For me this is really problematic and threatens the space that I feel is so important and that we need in order to play.

Maud: Yes, I agree. Most of the courses and teaching approaches that I have experienced are very goal-oriented. All students must work towards an examination and preferably in the most efficient way possible. The one thing that matters the most is to achieve a certain goal and not necessarily the way to get there. I think this focus on efficiency and individualism, which is also deeply embedded in our current society, leads students to focus on making deadlines and getting things done as quickly as possible. Instead of being playful with what we read, write about, and discuss in an assignment. The most important thing is to get the assignment done. I feel that as students we always have something due tomorrow.

Kristi: Yes, and I notice that in my own approaches. I work in a very goal-oriented way. If I'm writing an assignment, I don't have time to play with the problem. I feel that I need to decide quickly what I want to work on so I'll be able to get it done. I just have to start. I don't have time to use a week to play around with different ideas, redraft, or check alternatives with other students or even teachers.

Håkon: I agree with you Kristi, this is the way I also feel most of the time. This became very apparent to me in

the course we had together, where I felt that I was one of the driving forces behind this need for efficiency. Already during the brainstorming session I was quite concerned that we should move on to the next topic and structure the suggestions we already had. I thought that the topic and the research question had to be finished early if we were to make progress. And initially, I was struggling to adapt to work differently. Right there and then, I was not 100% convinced that what we did would work or was meaningful.

Kristi: Yes, I also struggled a little bit. I remember that already on day two I was afraid we had used too much time on discussions and decisions. I started the course with the idea that efficiency is the gold standard of project work. I didn't even consider that I should question or challenge that assumption. And in the beginning, we didn't question our focus on efficiency, we talked about it as exclusively positive. However, at some point that changed, and we started to discuss our focus on efficiency and how it could affect the quality of the work. This was very surprising for me and I think it was possible to do this because we had the space and opportunity to slow down and have discussions. You, Patric, kind of slowed us down at the start to reconsider some of our fundamental assumptions. In our group, efficiency became something that wasn't exclusively positive any longer and something that we saw as much more problematic at the end than we did at the beginning.

Patric: The struggle that you mention is interesting and something that I think is important to consider for both educators and students. Creating an opportunity space for play requires to break with traditions, habits and strategies adapted over many years to an education system that does not necessarily value play. For me the struggle is an essential element here. While it is not easy, it is necessary and worth it.

Maud: Yes, we should not forget that we, as students, bring with us a lot of expectations, strategies and experiences. Doing things differently and taking a step back is demanding. When we look back now, it all looks great and we can really value the experience, but there and then it felt demanding and challenging. I think many of us struggled in some way. At the same time, I agree with you that it was worth it. However, maybe not everyone looks back at it in a positive way.

Patric: Yes, definitely, there are all kinds of individual differences here and that is why dialog is so important here. By acknowledging our struggles and talking about them, we can move forward together. Coming back to what you said about efficiency and how that discussion changed over time. I think this relates a lot to the issue of time and the importance of taking time that we touched on earlier (Wallin, 2020b). I also think that it really illustrates the importance of having open discussions and a playful approach to ideas and concepts that we often take for granted. For me, it was very exciting to see how your group became more aware of this, because that's what's so important, that there's a space where those discussions can be held, not only in this course, but in general. We need to stop sometimes and think about what we take for granted. I feel that it's in those moments where we take the time to discuss different perspectives that we can play with different ways to understand things and develop new understandings in a playful manner.

Kristi: Yes, and it's exciting to think about, where the definitions we have of efficiency come from. For me,

efficiency has always been something that was a fundamental part of the university. I also think that many of my other teachers want me to be efficient. They want me to finish my courses in time and graduate within the stipulated time for the program. I often feel obliged to be efficient and not question this assumption too much. We're students and are supposed to be clever, talented, and high performing. We live in a performance culture (Olssen & Peters, 2005). As students there's so much we're supposed to manage, both at university and on the side (Braten & Olaussen, 1998). We want to do so much in the shortest possible time, and at the same time have high-quality results. It was a relief to experience a different perspective on this.

Håkon: Yes, I agree. We think about the next step all the time, instead of thinking here and now, because if we don't complete or pass the final assignment, we have to retake that part which will postpone our next goal or assignment. I don't know if that's good, but I think ahead and want to do a good job at the university to be prepared and ready for the job market.

Maud: Again, I think this relates to how our society is organized and how we in Norway focus on education and work. I grow up hearing "you need to get an education, you need to get a job", and when you get a job you'll give back to society and do your social duty. Since we students get scholarships and loans from the state, we have a formal duty to work on our courses and get enough course points per semester, otherwise we might lose our rights to continue both the scholarships and loans. This shows how dependent we make ourselves on the state, and not least, how controlled we are to both complete and get a university degree. Also, I think that many of us feel the obligation that Kristi mentioned to finish our study programs in time and to give back to society when we're finished. All of these things limit how playful we are in higher education, even though play might be exactly what we need in order to imagine a different society and move forward. For me, the experiences from both the course and our conversations show the potential of playful approaches to higher education and that play and higher education aren't in opposition to each other, but contribute to and thrive on each other (James & Nerantzi, 2019).

Kristi: Yes, but at the same time I think that it is important to develop these playful approaches in a way that work with large student populations. Otherwise, we risk creating elite institutions for a few selected rather than a higher education sector that is open for everyone. I want playful universities that welcome everyone and that celebrate diversity.

Time for play in an era of assessment

Patric: That was beautifully said Maud and Kristi. In connection to completing assignments, courses and programs, I think it is also interesting to talk about summative assessment. What I think is interesting is what happens to play when there is such a strong focus on summative assessment and completing assignments. From my point of view, the obsession with assessment that I oftentimes see both from students and teachers diminishes the time and opportunity for play. Instead of a focus on play and playful approaches to learning, the

focus is on control, accountability and comparative approaches through summative assessments (Biesta, 2009). When summative assessment becomes so important, the idea of failing becomes frightening and sometimes unbearable - we start to avoid risks to fail as much as possible. However, in order to play we need to accept that there is a certain risk (Biesta, 2013), that things can go in a different direction than planned. So, for me, I think it's important to ask ourselves: Do we dare to fail?

Håkon: It's very hard to say if we dare to fail. Maybe the project report that we wrote as a group in EiT can help here as an example. This report, together with the process report, was the final assignment in the course to determine our grades. I felt that we chose a safe solution for the report. We had the opportunity to play with different genres. You, Patric, also mentioned that we could produce a podcast or short film instead. But we didn't. We didn't really take any risks and wrote the report in a format that we felt comfortable and familiar with. I think that one of the reasons was that the stakes were too high. This final assignment nevertheless determined our grades and with that in mind we looked for security rather than play and risk. At the same time, I don't think that we had a proper discussion on this, and we didn't explore it in the same way as we did with the efficiency term. In a way, we just fell back on the default position, and that is to write a standard report because that's what we're used to from our studies.

Kristi: Yes, I agree with you Håkon. I thought about something the other day. Every group in our course chose to write project reports, even though we were told that it was open to use other more creative presentation formats. It made me wonder if that was something you, Patric, promoted, perhaps inadvertently? Because we talked about the power you as a teacher have, and if you had an expectation or wish that there were going to be three research reports, maybe that contributed to exactly that?

Patric: That is an interesting and very important question Kristi – and the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, I truly welcome different forms of presentation and I would have been very happy if a group chose to do a podcast, for example. On the other hand, I don't think I've emphasized that part so much and pushed you to think about genres in the same way that I have done in other areas. It's interesting that you point this out, because I think this might actually be a problem and an area where I've started to focus a little too much on my own interests. For me, it's good to get those reports and every year I offer groups the possibility to publish their reports in a digital anthology (Wallin, 2020a). The problem is if my interests are steering you in that direction too much, the opportunity space where we can negotiate and talk about different formats easily collapses. The risk is that I misuse the power that I have as a teacher. And it does need to be in a way that I say that everyone has to write reports, but it's just as important to think about how much I open up and frame opportunities to discuss other genres.

Håkon: Yes, because I think you, Patric, were pretty clear that we as a group should discuss our research questions in-depth, what methodology we wanted to use and so on – those things were framed very openly. You were also clear that we shouldn't think about the end product right away, but rather how we would get

there. So the presentation format for the projects was left a bit out of our discussions and we didn't challenge our assumptions in the same way as we did in other areas. However, I don't think your framing was the only reason. We were three groups, and I think if one group makes a choice early, either methodologically or when it comes to presenting their findings, then other groups can be easily influenced by this.

Kristi: I also think that it's important to consider our background and what type of presentation formats we're used to. I think that I've learned to write and present my work in one particular format, but I didn't learn too much about how to develop a problem to be addressed or sit down and explore a special field to come up with something you want to write about. I missed that and I believe it's important that we learn something about the process of framing problems and playing with them in different ways right from the start. If you had something similar to this course in the first or second semester, then you would maybe build a different kind of foundation that would be more diversified and nuanced.

Maud: I agree, but I don't know if the ideas from our course would work in a first-year course because then you don't have the same academic foundation. I think it's necessary to first learn some basic ground rules about what the university demands, how to write in different formats, and what academic writing means. If you don't know that and get thrown into a course like this where everything is left for the group to decide, it'll be hard. I think this course worked so well because all the group members were already used to studying at the university. We all had some foundation to build on because we were third- and fourth-year students. For me it's a little bit like in jazz music – you need to know the rules in order to break them (Day, 2000).

Kristi: But if you don't introduce this early, it might contribute to us being less interested in play, and more focused on following rules and procedures. I think that it's difficult to do something different after being told year after year how things should be done – I kind of lost the desire to play and do something differently. I think that also was one of the reasons why I decided to go for a standard report and not explore other formats.

Maud: I just think that this creativity might be too scary to embark on when first starting at university. We are used to following rules and templates that are supposed to work as tools to help us. Just think about how an article or report is supposed to look like. There are quite a lot of rules to be followed, and as we learn from childhood, we're not supposed to break any rules. That's something that I think shapes students in a subconscious way and contributes to less creativity. However, I do believe that we need that academic foundation or those tools, but that we need to be aware that they are only tools and not a blueprint.

Kristi: This makes me think about a term that we often use in my study program. We talk about "low-risk assignments" – assignments where you take a safe approach that might not be very interesting, but you know you will most likely get a C (good presentation). If the grade you get doesn't matter, like in many of my courses, the "low-risk assignment" is the safest and quickest way to finish courses. If, on the other hand, you're going to play with the assignment, you often have no idea how things will turn out and what grade you'll get. I wrote such an assignment this semester. I found the topic very interesting and I wanted to play with and explore it. I

chose to combine two theoretical perspectives that are normally not used together and explored what emerged at the intersection between those perspectives. I think it was very interesting and I learned a lot, but it also took a lot of time and there was a big risk that my argument would collapse or that the teacher would not like the approach. This was definitely not a "low-risk assignment".

Patric: I find it really strange that so many assignments in higher education are designed only to test what students have understood. These are assignments that are only read by the teacher and have no meaning beyond assessment. I think there should not be the possibility of writing "low-risk assignments" – assignments should be playful and meaningful.

Maud: I agree with you, but I also think that we should not forget that there is a formal division and that teachers have power, especially when it comes to assessment and grades. I think there is a potential risk here for bias and that we as students become dependent on the teachers – that we kind of depend on the mercy of our teacher and being liked.

Patric: Yes, definitely. I can see that risk and it is not so easy to overcome. For me personally, this has to do with integrity and moral. Yes, I do have power when it comes to grades, but I need to be very responsible with how I use it. I need to be open about my reasoning and discuss with you what lies behind the grades. If you asked me, I would rather get rid of grades and develop new approaches, but as long as we have to deal with grades, I think openness is a key to mediate the risk that you mention Maud.

Moving forward

Patric: I think this has been a very interesting conversation. We have touched on many different aspects of play in higher education and we have done so in what I feel was a very playful approach. For me, the question then is why we don't do this more often? If we find it meaningful and rewarding, why don't we have these kinds of dialog in higher education? For me that is one of the key questions for the future. Another is how can we reclaim and shape timescapes in higher education to create opportunities for play? What thoughts and questions are you left with?

Håkon: I've found this playful collaboration to be a lot of fun and meaningful. It has been interesting to explore how the focus on efficiency threatens play in higher education, so I wonder how we can get the creativity and playfulness back into the universities? Why don't we conceptualize higher education as a place where students and teachers can play together with ideas and thoughts?

Kristi: I'm left with the feeling that an important opportunity for learning is being taken away from us by the strong focus on efficiency at the university. Play can contribute to motivation, enjoyment, and engagement in the disciplinary fields that we study and work within, both for students and teachers. Maybe the pursuit for efficiency has made us forget why we chose our fields of study in the first place – we started because we thought it was fun! How can we remind each other of that and how can we recapture this excitement?

Maud: I'm left with a deeper understanding of how people collaborate and how taking part in a bigger conversation increases our knowledge. Dialog is an important part of the university, and that's why I'm left with the question of why students still sit quietly in a big auditorium while the professors feed them information. I'm wondering when the university will let go of the traditional teacher-student perspective and let the students participate in creating a shared understanding in a playful way?

Patric: Those are fantastic questions and I think exploring them will help us to re-imagine and hopefully transform higher education into a place for play. I think we can end with all these questions. And I think it is important to remember that we are not looking for simple answers and solutions, but it's the process that is important for learning. I hope that by participating in the process of exploring these questions together with students, colleagues, friends, and people with different perspectives we can move higher education forward. After all, it is through conversations that we learn.

References

All our conversations and the subsequent transformation process of the material into a coherent research narrative were informed by a wide variety of perspectives and literature that we took with us from our various disciplines into the collaboration. In particular, perspectives from critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010; Kaufman, 2017; Shor, 1996), student partnership (e.g. Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Dwyer, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Peters & Mathias, 2018), and play (Aras, 2016; Huizinga, 1938; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Jarvis, Newman, & Swiniarski, 2014; Wood, 2014) are key references in this work. In order to make these links to previous work visible, we decided to add the most important references to the conversation. However, it is important to point out that the majority of these references were added during the editing process and not explicitly mentioned in the conversations, and undoubtedly there are other perspectives that have influenced our conversations that have not been explicitly mentioned. Our aim has been to find a balance between anchoring our work in the literature, while at the same time maintaining the conversational nature of the text.

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