Designs for Playful Learning: An Editorial

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The first special issue on 'The Playful Academic' in this double issue dealing with the Playful University focused on the role, identity and approach of the playful academic. In this second special issue, we turn our eyes to the design and practice of higher education: the methods, objects and approaches that might be playful in themselves, or might be imbued with playfulness by the playful academic.

This relationship between the player and the playful object is one that has occupied recent theorists. Ian Bogost (2016, p117) sees play emerging when a player encounters an object with natural limitations: "we should think of everything as *playable*: capable of being manipulated in an interesting and appealing way within the confines of its constraints". Miguel Sicart (2014, p40) suggested that "when we are playing, anything can become a toy": the object remains the same, but the way a playful person looks at it, uses it and imagines uses for it changes.

Looking wider at collections or arrangements of objects, both Bogost and Sicart see *playgrounds* offering the affordance of play to those with a playful attitude. Whilst Sicart sees playgrounds designed for play or games as something enhancing the play affordance for players (pp49-59), Bogost suggests that players can make anything their playground – he gives examples of children avoiding cracks in the pavement; brewing coffee; or mowing a lawn (pp1-26), and notes "We just need to pay enough attention to discover what [playgrounds] do and how they work… and then to make use of them in gratifyingly novel ways" (p9).

Within this volume, we discover a symbiosis between the player and the object: at times it is clear that particular objects or tools have inspired playfulness in the authors; at other times seemingly ordinary situations have been made playful by the authors' approaches. In either case, playfulness in the academic is a crucial element: without that, we simply have ordinary objects, tools and situations.

Across the articles five emerging and connected themes surface, and they relate in part to previously identified characterisations of play and games, yet also add to more recent discussions about the role of play

in creating more open, slow, spaces in a higher education sector filled with closed and busy attitudes.

1. Open-ness and space

Julia Reeve describes how she creates an open, contemplative space through tangible playful media – either monocolour Lego bricks or more colourful collage (drawing on Julia's previous work on *Swollage* - combining free-association collage with more focused SWOT analysis: Reeve, 2020). Julia describes how this creates space for everyone to contribute and listen – which in turn encourages compassion and empathy.

Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns and Sandra Sinfield used a similar technique of personal/shared collage to open up spaces for dialogue across continents and education systems. They saw a value in creating a space for critical reflection; and for their students they could imagine such a space helping them to develop their research methodologies: from closed minds and approaches to open minds and more creative/empathetic approaches to meet the research need.

Patric Wallin, Kristi Larsen Mariussen, Håkon Mogstad and Maud Sønderaal also see value in creating such open spaces: in their case an interdisciplinary postgraduate module where students and tutors from different discipline bases come together to explore teamwork. The emphasis is therefore on creating space for that team to develop and explore their strengths and weaknesses: not on forming a team to solve a specific other problem. As a result of this open-ness and spaciousness, the participants are free to explore topics in any way they like: they can try an approach that fails, yet can then reflect and discuss the failure as a learning process.

All three of these examples demonstrate the role of open-ness and space in naturally introducing high-value concepts such as empathy, compassion, collaboration and an acceptance of failure as a learning experience. The examples here all use a playful 'object' to open up the space and create the right atmosphere: whether Lego bricks, colourful collages, or a loose concept like 'teamwork'.

The examples here are based on small numbers (3-30), and Wallin *et al* do wonder how such a space could be developed for large numbers of participants. We could imagine a space and culture of open-ness being ideal when an institution re-thinks its future strategy, for example; or when enhancing a large degree programme. Here space (both temporarily and physically) become a problem – though Reeve and Abegglen *et al* both describe shorter and distributed (little and often) approaches that might work at scale.

2. Structured vs unstructured

In the examples above, open-ness creates a space for apparently unstructured activity: exploration without traditional limiting borders of time or focus. Indeed, it seems this deliberate non-structure encourages the higher-level responses evidenced (such as empathy). However, in most cases this non-structure is brought into a more structured approach, either through a framework (such as SWOT) or through a medium (such as finalising and sharing a Lego model or picture collage). In all three examples above, both the unstructured and structured parts seem equally important, as is the move between them.

Stephan Caspar, Nicola Whitton and Peter Whitton adopt a similar mix: suggesting a defined framework for the playful use of video in higher education (whether designing, watching, reacting to or creating), but encouraging a more relaxed / unstructured approach to quality, style and method. As above, the unstructured parts are currently more problematic: the article suggests that removing expectations, norms and self-criticism from the mix allows for greater and wider use of video in a range of qualities and styles for a range of purposes.

3. Imagining different realities

This removal of customariness is another theme that is picked up across this collection. In any large organisation - and particularly higher education institutions - traditional approaches, governance and rules pervade: 'normality'. It takes a great effort to oppose such a status and approach something differently, or create something new or 'other'.

This is, according to Paulo Freire, a way that authority keeps itself separate from the community it rules: "the peasant feels inferior to the boss because the boss seems to be the only one who knows things and is able to run things" (quotation from a peasant in Freire 1970, p37). Or, in Freire's own words: "The criteria of knowledge imposed upon them are the conventional ones" (*op cit*).

Play, with its open-ness and potential lack of structure, can therefore be a challenge to this authority. More importantly, it can help players to imagine new or other approaches, outcomes and realities.

Jenni Carr, Catriona Cunningham, Jennie Mills and Natasha Taylor found exactly this, when faced with a loss of identity caused by the inability of authority to value difference and creativity. Following diaspora, they adopted a playful approach (roleplay and identity shifting, with a narrative of searching for lost items or hidden treasures) in order to image new realities for themselves. Indeed, they used their own knowledge criteria (to recall Freire) to form a signature pedagogy of playfulness: characterised by mixed media, storytelling and celebration of failure.

4. Identity, agency and trust

Identity, from a social-psychological perspective, is commonly described as a personal collection or *schemata* (Monroe, Hankin, & Vechten 2000) of attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviours; that is also socially and culturally influenced (Hogg & Reid, 2006 describe these as *social identity prototypes*). In Carr *et als* article they describe their identities as being lost or weakened, then subsequently rebuilt and strengthened.

Agency, seen from the same social-psychological perspective, is action taken on a trajectory that flows out of one's own identity. Weissman (2020, p17) suggests that "agency expresses itself… when imagination contrives stories that infuse our lives with significance". If we can imagine a new reality that draws on or resonates with our own identity, we gain a sense of agency.

Hanna-Riikka Roine, Mikko Meriläinen and Ville Kankainen found that their students gained agency

through group game jams as a form of assessment: particularly those students who prepared as a group before the game jam. The freedom given to these groups in the way they could prepare and operate within the light boundaries of the activity, meant that those students who built shared identity as a group saw the opportunity as empowering: they could imagine their own reality for the course.

Emanuela Marchetti, in her paper, discusses applying a playful approach to ethnographic observation. Her students, already familiar with non-playful roleplay in clinical situations, were asked to observe peers playing and talking about video games. By using framing to encourage play and playfulness in this observation, she found the students moving out of control of the teacher, and creating their own methods and practice (such as setting impossible tasks for their observees, in order to observe and laugh with each other at their comical reactions). The agency felt by the students was a result of an implied trust on behalf of the teacher. Their imagined realities became allowed and real.

A Freirean view would see this process of creating trust (and therefore opening dialogue on a level platform) between learners and leaders a key to the creation of agency, and the opening up of imagined realities. Wallin and colleagues found this levelling of students and teachers as instrumental to creating a space of trust, and opening up the possibility for playful experimentation.

Søren Baltzer Rasmussen and Merethe Haahr Francis used this Freirean model as a basis for their playful experimentation. They positioned students as equal partners in pedagogy and learning design: removing the hierarchy between the designers and the participants. Their 'design collaboratories' saw students from different discipline bases (crossing arts and science domains) draw playfully from existing models and frameworks, and use them as heuristics in developing new models of their own (imagining new realities).

5. Slowing down

The final theme emerging across all the papers in one form or another, is a sense of 'slowing down' the usual fast paced treadmill of higher education: teach, assess, administrate, teach, assess… There is growing interest in 'slow academia' (catalysed by Berg & Seeber, 2016, but more critical takes have emerged – see Mewburn, 2018 for a measured summary), and similarly the articles here aren't about lack of pace or excitement – more about making space for things that matter.

Across the articles we find staff and students invited to sit down together and share reflective models or collages; we see students given time to form and develop groups then invited to experiment and play with limited boundaries; we see students and staff take time out to rethink pedagogic approaches, or to embark in game jams.

As a reward for this slowing down, the participants are rewarded with a greater sense of identity and gain the agency to imagine new and different realities that could unlock new knowledge, approaches, or mindsets.

When we are sitting preparing for a new term, or marking the latest pile of work, or watching forlornly as senior managers reveal unimaginative strategies – maybe it's time for us to slow down and learn from some of the approaches we've encountered across these two volumes. Whether for ourselves as academics (playful or not), or in our designs for learning (ditto), it's time we all took time to playfully imagine our own new realities.

References

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