

Play not Tell: agency and becoming in the playful university

Introduction

There is an old screenwriting maxim: show not tell. The principle here is to avoid exposition, to focus on telling a story using audio visual language. In doing so you avoid lazy writing that does all the work, explains everything in lengthy monologues and dead dialogue. It gives agency to the audience; it gets them to do the work. It's doesn't fill in the gaps, instead it leaves them wide open for exploration. It places the audience as co-creator with the writer/director since they will have to puzzle through the motifs, metaphors, allegories and mise-en-scène to make sense of the narrative. Show not tell is a call to a form of active audience agency that is echoed in this chapter's call to action which asks how play might be employed as an active learning strategy to promote agency and autonomy in our learners.

Challenges

My own personal interest in play emerges from a reflection on several challenges faced by media practice educators. In particular, how best to promote creativity among undergraduate students especially during the early, ideation phase of their project work. Students tend to race to the end of a project and don't value the ideation phase of project development. Consequently, their ideas are often poorly conceived and suffer from what gestalt psychologists call 'experience bias', sometimes referred to as 'functional fixedness'. A cognitive bias that can sometimes prevent us from coming up with novel or creative

solutions to creative problems. Instead, we fixate on the familiar and find it hard to think 'outside-the-box'.

In addition, there is an ongoing need to articulate the way in which critical thinking manifests within creative practice. In part because to be able to speak it, means we are better placed to design teaching strategies to promote it. But also, because, as practice educators, we need to be able to defend our subject discipline against criticisms that media practice is not academic. The theory-practice nexus is difficult to untangle but it is important we attempt to do so.

Then there is the feeling that when engaged in the early stages of a creative process the creator is 'scratching away' at something, that there is a revelatory process at work. Michelangelo is often quoted as saying that "every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it" (possibly an internet meme rather than an actual quote). There is a resonance here with the notion that the creative idea is shaped by the milieu, the context, the debate, it is embedded within an assemblage of concepts, traditions, and practices. The role of the creative is to reveal, shape and bring into being form through a kind of archaeological exploration. It is the creator's tacit intuition that often leads the inquiry in one direction or another and this is another of the key challenges for creative practice educators. How on earth do you teach tacit intuition?

A possible solution

The answer to these challenges is fairly simple once you get to it. You do it by adopting 'playfulness' as an active learning strategy. There is a growing body of literature on this topic, drawing from research into early years development, evolutionary theory,

pedagogy and philosophy. The basic premise is that everything we learn from an early age, we learn through play, that this is the primary mode through which we discover the world. But, as argued below, play doesn't just promote physical skills, it is also the principal way in which we develop our creative and critical faculties. It is through the repetitious practice of play that we develop, our tacit and intuitive capacities. The activity of play gives us strategies for exploring what is possible, it helps us with ideation since it gives us permission to experiment. It structures a liminal space between rational and pre-rational thinking in which the theory-practice nexus resides. It offers a methodology that is at once revelatory and places tacit intuition at the heart of the creative process.

Learner agency, autonomy, and the neuroscience of play

In the case of higher education, agency refers to “the capacity to act in the world” (Larsen-Freeman 2019). I would argue that even more than that, agency comes about when learner's take a position in relation to the world. Agency is essentially dialogic; it is fundamentally creative and evolves through responses to problem encounters. Implicit within the notion of agency is the possibility for transformation and thus any pedagogy that promotes agency is surely also a pedagogy of becoming. We don't exist passively in the world, adapting to events as they pass us by; “we create and dwell in a world” (Joseph An 2017, p. 24). Approaches to learning and teaching that embrace this philosophy are typified by exploration, openness, non-judgemental acceptance, improvisation, ownership, problem-solving, risk-taking, co-construction and collaboration (Cremin & Chappel 2021). They scaffold a bounded play-space where purposeful and responsive thought co-constructs knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the world. What occurs in such a space is

"joint attention" (Joseph An 2017, p. 8) through a shared, participatory encounter that is truly inter-subjective.

It has been argued by Boyd (2009) that activities which promote joint attention are adaptive evolutionary strategies. They serve as a "stimulus and training for a flexible mind" (Boyd 2009, p. 86) in a similar way that physical activities such as wrestling, running, and hide and seek provide opportunities to rehearse behaviours that would enhance the potential for survival. This kind of physical play provides a means for rehearsing possible future encounters and therefore survival of the individual, the group, the species. In a similar way, play promotes mental activities that train the mind for encounters beyond the here and now. Boyd (2009, p. 88) argues that play is an evolutionary adaptation that enables human beings to respond to dynamic information flows, to make decisions that impact directly on survival. The ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise information, be it social, environmental, physical, or affective, impacts directly on a species capability for survival. A compelling argument in support of this position is the fact that we, as a species expend quite so much time, effort, and energy in such a highly motivated activity that would, in the savannah of our origins, have resulted in a high risk of predation. Boyd suggests that consequently play must serve an important and powerful function beyond that of the obvious immediate rewards. Think about how we develop skills for flight and fight, recovery and balance, cooperation, and strategy in children's play. These are essential survival skillsets in the savannah.

Play as pedagogic strategy

Play is characterised by purposiveness, openness, free expression, boundedness (in time and place). The play-space is a conceptual, imagined space in which experimentation can occur. Play is immersive and collaborative, interaction and co-construction are the primary constitutive elements of play (Joseph An 2017, p. 23). We have a compulsion to play, it is something that comes naturally to us, and it is something we enjoy for its own sake. Surely, if play is such a powerful and compelling driver for participation in activities that offer the opportunity to explore problems, try out different solutions and engage with a full range of possibilities (Smith 2019, p. 61), then there must be a benefit to adopting play as a pedagogic approach.

The evidence from neuroscience suggests that play encourages the growth of more neural tissue. Play, we are told "enhances neural plasticity, intellectual dexterity, adaptability, emotional learning and resilience to depression" (Nørgård 2021, p. 151). Psychologists also tell us that play correlates with all sorts of positive cognitive attributes including non-linear, divergent, and imaginative thinking (Loudon 2019, p. 69). Capabilities that correlate with creativity and innovation which are highly sought-after employability skills. In addition, we are told that play stimulates the brain to release dopamine, a powerful reward stimulus that motivates us to repeatedly engage in play. Smith (2019) explains that though we recognise the value and importance of play to young children. At around the age of five we are expected to abandon play for more serious learning. Smith argues that play is a serious business at any age and challenges the assumption that play is only of value in early years teaching. The importance of play in knowledge construction is clearly set out in developmental psychology. Very young children engage in exploration, solve problems, conceptualise, and make decisions based on evidence that is generated through play (Smith 2019, p. 58). Through play they acquire knowledge about the world, explore the world,

interpret the world leading to the creation of novel ideas. Their play is analytic, evaluative and leads to synthesis. Furthermore, Smith (2019) evidences the way in which play-based learning shares common characteristics with the process of academic research: knowledge construction, problem solving, evidence-based decision making and so on. So why do we abandon it as a pedagogy early in the educational journey? Surely, we should embrace it!

But we need to be careful with our terminology and ensure we are clear about “what play is and what play isn’t” (James 2019, p. 3). For example, many have argued that there is an important difference between games and play. Boyd recognises play as a “mutually amplifying” (Boyd 2009), open ended, cooperative zero-sum game i.e., in which nobody wins or loses. Whereas games are structured, task orientated, goal focused and competitive (James 2019, 7). For Nørgård (2021) games reflect the metric driven ecology of higher education. Where the focus is on quantifiable performance and extrinsic rewards thereby accentuating "a culture of competition and performance" (Nørgård 2021, p. 142). Games encourage students to "do education" (Nørgård 2021, p. 142) since there is no incentive to be playful, to take risks, to be exploratory or to celebrate failure and thus to embrace limitless possibilities. In a similar fashion James (2019) argues that creativity and play should be thought of as separate and at times antithetical categories (James 2019, p. 7). Creativity we are told is driven by a need for outcomes while play is exploratory. Play is removed from the everyday, it doesn't satisfy the need for food clothes and shelter, it's for-the-sake-of-which is entirely abstracted from the practice of the everyday. Nevertheless James (2019) challenges us to resist definitions and typologies lest it constrain us, and we get lost in trying to pin down the idea and wrap ourselves in superficial analysis. Play is an attitude, a mindset, it is anything that is exploratory, open ended and is entirely subjective. It is about giving yourself up to the moment, allowing the encounter to be the experience from which

you learn. James argues that this mind set better prepares students for uncertain, messy encounters in the real world (James 2019, 12).

The playful university – welcome to the mind gym

Though still difficult to define and much contested as a concept, the idea of the playful university is clearly a well-established and well documented phenomenon. There are annual conferences, jams, books, articles, manifestos and even a regular magazine (cf creativeacademic.uk for Exploring Play in HE). Nevertheless, we must consider the possibility that "playful higher education lacks [a] robust theoretical and conceptual foundation" (Nørgård 2021, p. 143). In an attempt to address this gap in our theoretical understanding, Nørgård posits a theoretical framework which addresses some of the definitional problems in the field. In particular, Nørgård is concerned to separate the concept of play from that of playfulness suggesting that it is the latter quality that we should be aiming to promote, that play, in and of itself, is not the ambition of the playful university.

The autotelic (Nørgård 2021, p. 144) nature of play means that it is intention-less. In other words, the for-the-sake-of-which of play is nothing more than play, it exists for its own purposes. That while there may be consequences, outputs or actions that arise from play, these are not intrinsically the purpose of the play. However, in higher education there is a requirement for intentionality. A drive towards knowledge acquisition, development of competencies for employment, values, and beliefs (Nørgård 2021, p. 145). Unless we wish to abolish the intentionality that underpins the educational project then we will need to find a way to resolve what Nørgård sees as competing tension between play and education. Actually, we can resolve this tension simply by adopting a playful mind set in which we become playful and occupy ourselves with playfulness. It is this playful attitude that we

need to take hold of or allow to take hold of us. We can do this in a way that allows us to respect the goals and intentions of higher education but preserve the spirit, the attitude of the playful mindset. In this sense the for-the-sake-of-which of playfulness is no longer autotelic (i.e. lacking intention), it can be purposeful, undertaken with intent and goal orientated. Yet it retains the possibility for the open ended, exploratory, messy, uncertain, risky characteristics of play.

However, Nørgård cautions that we should remain starkly critical of approaches which seem playful but in fact are just gamified activities. Pedagogies that wear an illusory mask of playfulness but are typified by gaming and gamification (Nørgård 2021, p. 146) are counterproductive and will reproduce the metric driven 'doing' of education typified by the neo-liberal university model. If we seek to promote learner agency, autonomy, and a becoming pedagogy then arguably we should steer away from the kind of activities that merely construct a *playpen* rather than provide a *playground*. Instead, we might imagine our learning spaces as *mind-gyms* in which we train for higher intellectual capabilities. In the same way that elite athletes train for gold medals we should seek out the science of learner agency and design learning experiences that work on the muscles of the brain, that grow new neural pathways and develop those critical and intellectual capabilities that will equip our students for the future. Such a space might embrace Nørgård's three principles for playful learning:

- *The Exploratorium*: a playful space in which students can be curious take risks, explore alternatives, ask what-if questions and wonder about the world (Nørgård 2021, p. 146).

- *The Experimentarium*: an unbounded space in which students can "experiment with themselves, knowledge and the world" (Nørgård 2021, p. 148).
- *The Collaboratorium*: a shared space where people have "care and concern" (Nørgård 2021, p. 150) towards each other and form an empathetic cooperative which is intensely social and inherently interpersonal.

We might think of the *mind-gym* as a becoming space where transformation can occur. It is a space that celebrates divergent thinking and offers opportunities to practice thinking differently and embracing the novel. Where impossibilities can be imagined, boundaries crossed, and the world turned upside down. Importantly it is a safe place to take risks.

Conclusion

A playful pedagogy is focused on transformation. It is a becoming pedagogy. It is social, collaborative and celebrates co-construction as means for "training for the unexpected" (Vandervert 2017, p. 208) and for the development of capabilities for "the skilful manipulation of ideas" (Vandervert 2017, p. 208). Acting out, rehearsing, experimenting by taking on different roles, not by being me but by becoming someone else. These are the kind of qualities that give our students permission to be risk takers and ultimately to break down what they know, rearrange it, and create new ideas (critical thinking = analysis, evaluation, and synthesis). Playfulness is highly purposeful, though it is not action towards specific goals, instead it is about generating limitless possibilities (Loudon 2019, p. 68). Through playfulness socialisation occurs as one person enlists help from another to solve a problem or to achieve other goals (Vandervert 2017, p. 214). Playfulness promotes a curiosity for what is not known, or not apparent, and a realisation

that reason logic and structured thinking may not be on its own be enough to reveal what is hidden from us. It ferments a non-judgemental mind-set that would help break free of experiential bias that traps us into functional fixedness when ideating, creating, and innovating. The playful university is a liminal space in which critical thinking is employed as a tool for discovery and exploration.

If we can embrace these ideas then perhaps, we can collectively work towards turning our classrooms into an *Exploratorium*, a *Experimentarium* and/or a *Collaboratorium*. Perhaps this is a model for a playful university in anthesis to that of the neo-liberal model in which students 'do' education. Perhaps it is time to rethink what universities are for and to embrace a new way of doing things.

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