

Playful teaching between freedom and control: exploring the magic circle in higher education (0175)

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The Higher Education landscape is changing throughout Europe. Land (2004) accentuates the growing competitiveness in HE as universities embrace market competition, efficiency and applicability. A newer expression of this scholarly managerialism in HE is the impending introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK (Business Innovation and Skills Committee, 2015). This tendency inevitably affects teacher practices and learner experiences. There is a growing discourse around ‘students-as-customers’ in Higher Education (Wajtrakul, 2014) as well as ‘instrumental linear learning progression and criteria-based assessment criteria’ (Bengtson & Barnett, 2016). Together, this creates a culture in HE characterized by fear of failure, avoidance of risk-taking, focus on outcomes, extrinsic motivation, and goal-oriented behaviour. All these traits that align with a so-called ‘gameful approach’ to education also found in recent upsurges of gamification and serious games within HE. These approaches to teaching bear the risk of rewarding and promoting a ‘gaming-the-system’ approach to education (Baker et al., 2008) – a ‘gamification’ of HE through ‘Points, Badges, Leaderboards’, which fosters extrinsic motivation to achieve instrumental targets (Deterding et al, 2011).

In this paper we explore the notion of ‘playful teaching in the magic circle’ as an alternative approach to develop imagination, participation, citizenship and critical thinking in education (Nørgård & Paaskesen, 2016). Thinking through the concept of the magic circle we are able to find a liminal space between the free-form and the rule-bound; a place where teachers and learners suspend disbelief and openly explore and experiment with the creation of new knowledge and understandings through playful attitudes and approaches, which remove the fear of failing and promotes ‘open-ended imagination’ (Dettmer, 2005). A teaching stance aiming for ‘ideational learning’ as an open and experimenting attitude and approach (Dettmer, 2005), through Apollonian rule-systems and Dionysian play-practices (Dixon, 2009), within the magic circle.

## Exploring the magic circle

Underpinning the above notion of playful teaching between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is the concept of the ‘magic circle’ (Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The magic circle is a central metaphor within game studies and play culture denoting the creation of a specific social situation, where participants cross a virtual boundary into an ‘imaginary and imaginative play-space’, wherein interactions and experiences emerge through exploration of freedom and control. This framing of the magic circle is interesting for education as it allows the imagining of a different type of learning environment, providing a safe educational space, in which making mistakes is not only encouraged, but is necessary in order for competency to emerge (Remmele & Whitton, 2014). Such a framing allows for an educational liminal space within HE; a space for Dionysian improvisatory and risky play and Apollonian structured controlled experiments; a space where active, ideational, and explorative experiences can take place (Whitton, 2014). Here teachers and learners can engage with each other, on the grounds of a tacit agreement to abide by the ‘lusory attitude’ of the magic circle (Suits, 2014). The magic circle has the ability to temporarily transform people, places and activities through playfulness and to provide a creative, collaborative place where participants do not fear

failure but see it as an integral part of the experience. It is a place where participation is intrinsically motivated for the pleasure of the experience itself and not from external rewards.

## **Playfulness in teaching**

Importantly, when exploring the potentials of the magic circle and playfulness in teaching and learning in HE we are not advocating for the transformation of HE into play. Education is not, and should not be, simply play. What we are advocating is rather the adoption of a ‘lusory attitude’ – the ability to juggle order and chaos, freedom and control (Sicart, 2014) through playful engagements with HE through teaching and learning. With playfulness a liminal space between the Apollonian, systematic, synthesizing, and reflective and the Dionysian, imaginative, improvisational, and creative, opens up towards teachers and learners in such a way that teachers and learners do not become trapped in either domain (Nørgård & Paaaskesen, 2016). In playfulness the purposes and goals of the original context (HE) are respected (Sicart, 2014), but augmented with an experimenting, inquiring and diversifying attitude and approach (Dettmer, 2005). With playfulness ‘education is a liberatory enterprise, one in which teachers and students help each other overcome their respective weaknesses and build on their respective strengths, in order to create a new and better understanding of the world, an understanding they can share’ (Beckett 2013, p. 60). Through playful teaching in the magic circle education emerges as a dialogue between idea-generating and problem-solving; it is not so much about being full of ideas as it is about giving form to ideas and then critically reflecting upon them. It is knowledge emerging through Dionysian improvisation and Apollonian scrutiny; through Dionysian-Apollonian collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking within the educational magic circle. It is teaching in a way that resembles ‘hard fun’ (Lazzaro, 2004) aiming to create a learning that echoes Miguel Sicart’s *Play Matters* (2013) – an experience of *Education Matters* as a world that we participate in in valuable, relevant, motivating, and meaningful ways.

## **Potentials of playful teaching between freedom and control in the magic circle**

Investigating the liminal space between rule-bound and free-form in HE can shed light on the potentials of adopting more playful approaches in teaching and learning to move beyond the current tendencies of instrumental ‘gameful’ HE. This might also circumvent some of the tendencies to ‘game the system’ within current HE where students and teachers are embedded in a narrative of one-shot catastrophic fail inducing fear and strategic assessment-driven behaviours into the education system. The aim of this paper is to highlight the potentials of playful teaching between freedom and control in the magic circle. This is done to examine how lusory attitudes and approaches within the magic circle carry within them potentials to relieve fear, induce playfulness, create intrinsic motivation and make HE matter as an open educational process rather than as a high-score assessment product.

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