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Fun and games in Higher Education: an analysis of UK student perspectives

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Abstract

In an increasingly neoliberal Higher Education sector, there is increased pressure on institutions to enhance learner engagement and student satisfaction. Many academics believe that students expect their university learning experiences to be enjoyable, and discourses of game-based learning reflect this, with a dominant narrative highlighting the fun of educational games. Whether students expect learning to be fun or see a relationship between fun and games is under-explored. To address this, we investigated student perceptions of fun in Higher Education using a thematic network analysis based on data from 37 in-depth interviews with undergraduate students. Here, we highlight five themes that encapsulate what students perceive to be a fun learning experience: stimulating pedagogy; lecturer engagement; a safe learning space; shared experience; and a low-stress environment. These aspects are not unique to games, and we conclude by considering the relationship between educational games and fun, and alternative playful approaches.

Keywords

Game-based learning; fun; engagement; gamification; playful learning; playfulness

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Introduction

Over the past forty years, Higher Education worldwide has become increasingly subject to a neoliberal agenda of increased commercialization and accountability (Ball, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Universities continually strive to enhance their positioning in a competitive global Higher Education market place, and academia is being restructured and corporatized to account for this shift (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011; Jayasuriya, 2015). One outcome of this growing marketization of tertiary education is the value now placed on measuring student views and learner satisfaction as a way of ranking university performance (Parker, 2005; Stevenson, Burke, Whelan, Sealey, & Ploner, 2014).

Increasing student fees, university rankings and league tables, and student surveys have been questioned in terms of a philosophical realignment of the sector (Lynch, 2015). This focus on measurable quantitative outcomes drives institutions to focus on instrumental goals, rather than supporting longer-term intellectual development, in what Ball (2015) refers to as the 'tyranny of numbers'. Coupled with this, there is significant rhetoric positioning students as 'customers' or 'consumers' to be satisfied (e.g. Mark, 2013; Tight, 2013), although it is contested that this view is held by a majority of learners (Saunders, 2014) and there is evidence that the reality is far more nuanced (Budd, 2016).

There is also a changing ethos in university education, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, with a move away from content delivery for knowledge acquisition towards active student-led approaches that facilitate knowledge construction (Beetham & Sharpe,

2013). This has led to a growing impetus on academics to consider pedagogies and practices that increase student enjoyment and satisfaction (Lala & Priluck, 2011). Advocates of game-based learning (e.g. Prensky, 2007) argue that modern students ('digital natives') require learning to be fun and entertaining, and that games, particularly video games, are an ideal way to do this; these ideas are commonly alluded to in higher education practice despite their contentiousness (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Jones et al., 2010).

While there is evidence that games are motivational for some students, the reality is more complicated and depends largely on the specific types of games used and the contexts of use. There is a strong narrative in the research literature that games are effective for learning because they are fun and engaging (e.g. DuBravac, 2012; Grimley, Green, Nilsen, Thompson, & Tomes, 2011); but while good games can be effective learning tools (Gee, 2003), this is typically because of their appropriate pedagogic design rather than as a direct effect of their motivational value (Whitton, 2010). More problematically, studies on the use of games and learning commonly fail to consider the exclusive nature of the medium, particularly relating to gaming literacy, social capital, cultural expectations, and learner acceptability. There remains a paucity of evidence that educational games are perceived as fun by a majority of learners, or indeed are widely accepted in Higher Education in the UK and internationally. Going beyond the superficial discourse of fun and games in Higher Education, there is a need for a better understanding of whether students believe that there is any place for fun in their university studies, the elements – beyond games – that contribute to feelings of fun,

enjoyment, and satisfaction, as well as the general consideration of whether games are an essential prerequisite for fun.

In this article, we aim to provide insights into the nature and nuances fun in Higher Education, exploring whether students believe this is a crucial part of their educational experiences, and what they perceive to contribute to a sense of fun. This exploration is significant because it provides an underpinning analysis of the relationship that students perceive between learning and fun in the UK Higher Education, which will inform the use of games and other innovative pedagogic approaches across the sector.

We first consider the discourses and value of fun and games in Higher Education, as a context for situating our empirical research. We then describe how we used thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) on our student interview data in order to explore student perceptions of the relevance of fun, and highlight the range of elements that students say makes learning experiences at university fun. We conclude the article by commenting on the relationship between fun and games, and discussing alternative pedagogic approaches that can enable enjoyable and motivating learning experiences.

Fun and games in Higher Education

The role of fun in childhood education, particularly early childhood, is uncontroversial. Learning through play is accepted to support learning, imagination, and creativity (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Lieberman, 1977) but as learners progress through formal education, a greater emphasis is given to performance and measurable outcomes, and the relationship between fun and education becomes detached. However, there is evidence of

the importance of play adulthood (Colarusso, 1993) and a growing body of research on the value of fun in the workplace to enhance creativity and productivity (e.g. Baldry & Hallier, 2010; Lamm & Meeks, 2009).

The question of whether learning in Higher Education should be fun is more contentious, and many academics see the use of fun and playful approaches as inappropriate and frivolous, undermining the academic nature of higher study. In contrast, some researchers argue that making learning fun is important for engaging learners, encouraging participation and promoting deeper learning (Beekes, 2006; Robinson & Kakela, 2006), while some focus on the value of humour for developing playful interactions (Baid & Lambert, 2010; Benjelloun, 2009), and others argue that frivolity is positive because it decreases the personal value of failing (Guynup & Demmers, 2005). There is also evidence that fun and positive emotions enhance optimistic thinking and problem-solving abilities, reduce stress, increase emotional and physical resilience, and also create a bonding experience while increasing group belonging (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Fun can be an intrinsic motivator for some learners, allowing the suspension of social inhibitions and creating a state of relaxed alertness (Bisson & Luckner, 1996). An atmosphere of fun also helps to produce a safe environment in which to practice and make mistakes (Koster, 2005).

Discussion on the relevance of fun is made more problematic by the differing ways in which the notion is constructed. Researchers from different traditions and backgrounds use the concept of fun in different ways; notably that fun can be viewed as both a

psychological and physiological experience. From the perspective of cultural theory, Huizinga (1955) contends that fun describes the ‘essence of play’ but presupposes that only play can be fun. Game designer Koster (2005) emphasises the chemistry of fun, noting ‘fun is all about our brains feeling good – the release of endorphins into our system’ (p40). While from a computer modelling perspective, Schmidhuber (2010) describes fun as the internal joy for the discovery of creation of novel patterns, where a pattern is interesting or surprising. Fun is not necessarily simple or frivolous, and Carroll and Thomas (1988) highlight its complexity, noting that too obvious jokes, or games that are not challenging, are not fun. Papert (2002) uses the term ‘hard fun’ to describe a situation where something is fun *because* it is hard, not in spite of it being so, while Lazzaro (2004) distinguishes between ‘hard fun’ as overcoming meaningful challenges, strategies and puzzles, while ‘easy fun’ as stimulating exploration, discovery and curiosity. Koster (2005) argues that fun arises from mastery, comprehension and solving puzzles; whereas Prouty (2002) suggests that fun and humour themselves lead to the creative and ‘fluid state’ needed *in order to* engage in problem solving. It is important also to note the cultural differences and alternative constructions of fun, which may have significant impact on the interpretation of the word by an international audience.

While fun may have social, mental and emotional benefits, there is ongoing debate about whether it is appropriate in relation to learning, and many practitioners and students believe that it is inappropriate in the ‘serious’ business of Higher Education. Despite this, there is an evident discourse that students expect university education to be fun, and that the use of games is the way to achieve this because they motivate and engage students

(Kapp, 2012; Prensky, 2007). There are a variety of ways in which games-based approaches have been used in Higher Education including ‘game-based learning’, the use of games in the classroom (e.g. Connolly, Stansfield, & Hainey, 2011; Warren, Dondlinger, McLeod, & Bigenho, 2012) and the ‘gamification’ of learning by applying game mechanics to education (e.g. Barata, Gama, Jorge, & Gonçalves, 2013; Feigenbaum & Feigenbaum, 2013; Knautz, Göretz, & Wintermeyer, 2014). There is evidence of the value of games to engage learners (Boyle et al., 2016) but there remains a lack of research into the nuances of engagement when game types and learner characteristics are taken into account. Games are not universally motivational, and may be an expensive and impractical way to engage students. Some learners, particularly mature students, may feel that fun and games are a frivolous and irrelevant ‘waste of time’ (Whitton, 2007).

This article addresses the lack of understanding of the relationship between fun and games in Higher Education by exploring student conceptions of the value and acceptability of fun in Higher Education, and examining the elements of learning they perceive as fun.

Investigating Fun in UK Higher Education

In order to investigate the perspectives of Higher Education students regarding the value of fun in their studies, we analysed data from a series of interviews that were conducted with undergraduate students at a modern University in the North West of England. This research was carried out as part of the wider work of the JISC-funded Supporting Responsive Curricula project (Bird, Forsyth, & Whitton, 2012). These interviews explored a variety of issues relating to the students’ experiences of university and their

uses of technology, but for this study we focused on a subset of the interviews in which students talked about the relevance of fun to their university experiences and the things that they felt made learning fun.

Our focus on students' perceptions of their personal experiences led us to use a constructivist qualitative research methodology. Underpinning this approach are the assumptions that the nature of reality is a social construction and a belief that knowledge of the world cannot be truly objective, but that individuals construct personal meaning and shared understandings can be reached through discussion with others (Cooper, 1993). Within this paradigm, it is the role of the researcher to make sense of these multiple perspectives through interpretive analysis in order to reach a subjective understanding of the phenomenon under study. For this study we used thematic analysis to draw out the key features and similarities of the body of interview data, because it is an approach that is flexible, accessible and can usefully create a 'thick description' of a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, we used thematic network analysis, which draws out 'web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text' (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 385). Using these approaches, we investigated the global theme of 'fun in Higher Education'. First, we coded the interview data; second, we interrogated the codes to identify twelve basic themes; third, we analysed these basic themes and clustered them into organizing organising themes. Each stage of this process was iterative, and involved checking and re-checking codes and classification for sense and coherence until the final network emerged. This provided a robust and rigorous approach to the analysis of qualitative data, enabling the identification and interpretation of the key

interlinked themes that emerged from the data around perceptions of fun and learning in Higher Education.

In total, thirty-nine UK university students took part in in-depth interviews to explore their experiences and perceptions of university, including around the appropriateness of fun and games in Higher Education. Participants were recruited via the institution's student jobs service, and were each paid for an hour of their time. While this enabled the straightforward recruitment of students for the study, it also inevitably created a biased sample of students who were potentially already engaging with university life to a greater degree than others. However, we have no reason to assume that levels of engagement are related to perceptions of fun. The sample comprised 18 males and 21 females, with ages ranging from 18 to 37, studying in the areas of arts and humanities ($n=21$), science, technical, and health ($n=10$), and business ($n=8$). Each interview was based around a set of open-ended core questions, with opportunities for the discussion to move in a variety of ways at the discretion of the interviewer, depending on the directions the conversations took. Of particular interest to this study were questions about elements of the learning experience that were fun and enjoyable, and the participants' previous experiences of games in education. The same researcher conducted all of the interviews, and the interview length varied between 25 and 90 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed in full for analysis. We coded and analysed each transcript using the nVivo qualitative data analysis software. Institutional ethical approval was granted for the project, and students gave full informed consent. To ensure anonymity, we have changed

all names in the extracts that follow, although genders, ages, and study areas have not been changed in order to provide context for the reader.

In the following section we describe the results of our thematic analysis of fun in Higher Education in detail, highlighting the elements that students believe contribute towards a sense of fun in learning.

Fun in UK Higher Education: A Thematic Analysis

Students were asked about their perceptions of fun and learning and whether they believed that learning at university should be fun. The vast majority of those interviewed ($n=38$, 97%) said that they felt that their university education should be a fun experience to varying degrees. Some felt that fun was an essential element of their experience:

“I think learning should be fun no matter what age you are.”

(Kirsty, 22, International Business)

“It should be fun. Shouldn’t be just the boring way, it should be fun.”

(Umar, 21, Mechanical Engineering)

While others had a more balanced perspective on the role of fun in their university educations, highlighting the place of fun in the bigger picture of university education:

“I think it should be fun, but ... you should remember why you’re here.”

(Guido, 28, Interactive Arts)

“To some extent because it should be fun to learn ... but there is some things that just aren't going to be fun.”

(Philip, 21, Wildlife Biology)

“I think it should be fun, but it's a serious thing as well.”

(Peter, 21, French and Spanish)

Only one student felt that fun was an irrelevant factor in university education, making an interesting connection between fun and ‘dumbing down’ education. Her interview shows a clear assumption that for learning to be valuable it has to be difficult and serious:

“I don't think it should be made out to be fun, like the teachers should have to make tutorials and lectures fun because economics everyone finds the most boring but because I'm interested in it I find it really interesting but I think if they made it fun maybe it would be just like dumbing it down.”

(Rachel, 21, Economics)

Overall, there was a general positive – but measured – feeling towards fun in Higher Education, but there was no evidence in the data that the students linked fun in education to the use of games. In fact, very few students had experience of games in their university study and their limited experiences were predominantly from those used at school. Their

perceptions of fun and learning were more wide-ranging and related to five different aspects of their learning and teaching experiences.

Participants were asked to consider which aspects of their Higher Education experiences they felt contributed to a sense of fun. Our thematic network data analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) of the student interviews led to the identification of five organizing themes, each highlighting an aspect of university learning that promotes a feeling of fun. These are: stimulating pedagogy; lecturer engagement; safe learning spaces; shared experience; and a low-stress environment. The complete thematic network comprising one global theme, five organising themes, and twelve basic themes is shown in Figure 1. In the five sections that follow, each of these organizing themes will be explored in detail.

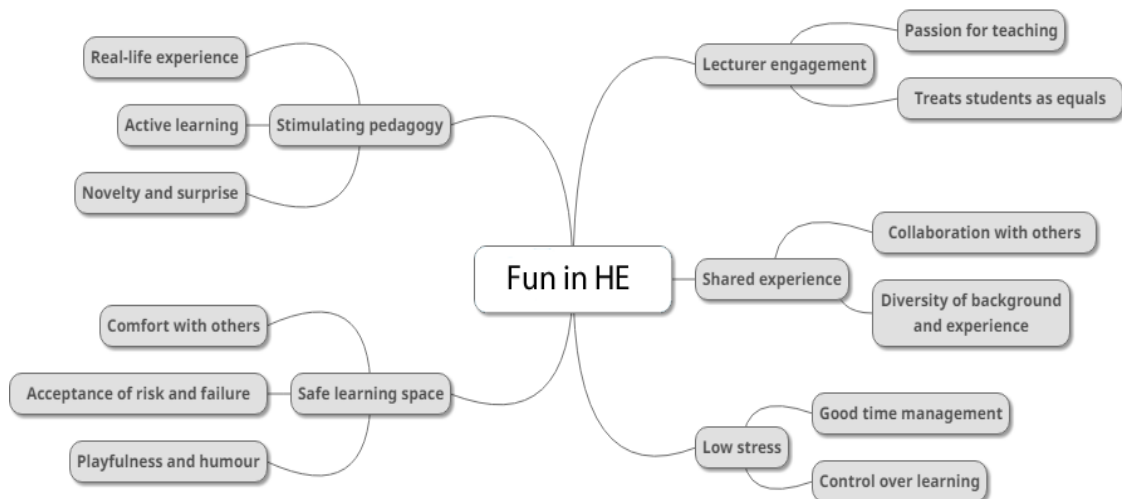


Figure 1: Thematic network for Fun in Higher Education

Stimulating pedagogy

Three basic themes were classified within the organising theme of stimulating pedagogy, which exemplifies teaching approaches that students regard as contributing to a sense of fun. These are: taking part in an activity rather than passively watching or listening; novelty and surprise; and experiential and real-life learning. There were many examples from the data of the ability of active, experiential and novel teaching methods to create enjoyable learning experiences for students. The following quotes provide examples of how active learning can create a sense of fun:

“What makes it fun ... I just remember going on a day trip somewhere learning about something, I can't remember what. I think you learn more because you're actually seeing it in front of you and you experience it, rather than just listening, sitting down listening and just writing notes.”

(Camile, 24, Bar Professional Training Course)

“You can actually apply what you've learnt into an actual business situation and I think that's what makes it more fun is you can actually feel yourself in it rather than just on the outside looking in at what people have said about it.”

(Kirsty, 22, International Business)

There were also several examples in the data where students described the benefits of teaching methods that were novel or unexpected, and discussed how these made their learning experiences enjoyable. For example:

“... they do surprise projects where they’re just like right you’ve got a day to do this ... you’ve got a day to go round and you’ve not got anything with you and you’ve got to just come up with a piece of work”

(Guido, 28, Interactive Arts)

Students also highlighted stimulating pedagogy through teaching and learning experiences that could be directly related to real-life or physical objects, and were therefore seen as a more realistic and valuable experiences. For example:

“We have this class where the lecturer actually ... when he is explaining something, let’s say he’s explaining the heat pipes, so he doesn’t actually just draw the diagram, he actually brings us out – just go to have a look at the pipe.”

(Umar, 21, Mechanical Engineering)

“We had a linguistics practical ... we were given a series of children’s toys, so we were given like a doll or we had Mr Potato head or some children’s nursery rhyme books and we had to basically come up with semantic relations words for each kind of toy, so that was a lot of fun, you know, playing with the toys and ... that was enjoyable.”

(Sarah, 27, Speech and Language Pathology)

In some ways it should not be surprising that pedagogic approaches that use active learning and meaningful, real-world problems to stimulate learning are valued by students as they map onto established active learning approaches such as experiential

learning (Kolb, 1984) and problem-based learning (Boud & Feletti, 1998). However, the data showed that students associated these types of activities with a sense of fun, as well as being part of a valuable learning experience, which suggests that the motivational aspects of fun may be a factor underpinning the pedagogic benefits.

Lecturer engagement

The second organising theme, lecturer engagement, draws together basic themes that highlight the importance of lecturer enthusiasm and engagement with teaching their subjects, and their attitudes towards their students, for creating an atmosphere of fun. For example, teacher subject knowledge and passion for teaching were given high importance:

“I’m lucky enough to have a lot of enthusiastic teachers ... and they do tend to make it fun anyway.”

(Peter, 21, French and Spanish)

“... well-versed in their subject area, so interested ... you can tell they’ve read widely from magazines and journals and different newspapers ... just the way they quote all the examples and talk about things.”

(Tahir, 21, Human Resource Management)

“When they’re excited and when they really know what they’re talking about then you can sort of get a lot more from them than someone that’s just standing reading a PowerPoint.”

(Rosie, 20, Sociology and Criminology)

Participants also stressed that their relationships with their lecturers were very important in creating an environment where learning was fun and engaging. In particular, the ability of a teacher to create an equitable relationship between themselves and their students, moving away from the idea of a lecturer as the deliverer of knowledge to that of a facilitator or co-learner. The following two quotations highlight this, where students have cited lecturers as accessible and being treated as an equal as important elements for creating enjoyable and motivating learning experiences.

“... the lecturers in my lectures they’re really funny so you can talk to them about anything”

(Kwame, 19, Biomedical Science)

“... you can feel the lecturer has an interest in his own topic and also everybody is treated equal”

(Lauren, 37, TEFL and German)

It is interesting to note that while there is an extensive literature on student engagement in Higher Education (e.g. Trowler, 2010), there is limited research on lecturer engagement and its potential impacts on learning and student satisfaction.

Safe learning spaces

The creation of safe learning spaces underpins the third organising theme and was a factor discussed or alluded to by many students in the data. This encompassed three areas in particular: feeling comfortable with others; an acceptance of risk and failure; and a sense of playfulness and humour with both peers and academics. Students stressed the importance of feeling relaxed and comfortable with fellow students, as shown in the following quotes:

“... you’ve just met every single person, everybody’s getting along, it’s your final few months, years, so we’re all learning together and there’s no worries”

(James, 22, French and Italian)

“We had some good debates during class ... everyone could just, you know, say something”

(Karol, 22, Italian and Digital Media)

During interviews, many students saw the presence of other people, and crucially the comfortable shared experience, as key to creating a sense of fun. Particularly important was the feeling of safety in which learners could take risks and feel comfortable with

failure. This is very much in keeping with recent work highlighting the importance of safe spaces for active learning (Ní Raghallaigh & Cunniffe, 2013). There was clear pressure put on students when learning involved the possibility of making a mistake in front of their peers. For example:

“... they’d have exercises and ask people to read out the answers and no one would. It was like painfully embarrassing because no one wanted to put their hand up.”

(Jonathan, 21, French and German)

Several students also highlighted the ability of a lecturer to approach teaching in a light-hearted, playful or comedic manner, which they considered an important factor for making learning fun. For example:

“There were a couple of units where the lecturers were really good fun ... there’d be silly examples and a few jokes and things and it got quite interesting, some ethics stuff to do with zombies and things like that.”

(Elaine, 21, Philosophy)

“... they’ll have a joke with you ... they’ll use websites or they’ll use videos and things like that ... they’ll do songs and they’ll show you the lyrics and what they mean, hidden meanings, things like that.”

(Peter, 21, French and Spanish)

This creation of safe spaces through a sense of playfulness, comfort, and acceptance of failure was key to fun for many of the students interviewed. However, this is not something that can happen immediately, but a state that evolves through the development of supportive and trusting learning communities.

Shared experience

The fourth organising theme, shared experience, encompasses the social and collaborative aspects of learning that emerged throughout the interview data. In particular, areas highlighted were learning with others through collaboration and discussion, and valuing the diversity of backgrounds, skills and opinions in their student communities. The value of collaboration and interaction with people was important, as shown in the following quotation:

“Learning now also includes something like getting to know each other, normal interaction between people, actually it’s very important in our subject. So ... this makes really fun.”

(George, 23, International Business)

“So it’s learning and it’s fun. It’s good and to me the ethos of the course is networking and being sociable.”

(Guido, 28, Interactive Arts)

This echoes the findings of Zepke and colleagues (2010), who highlight the importance of learning relationships and collaborative learning, as well as focusing on the importance of institutional cultures that value diversity. The integration of people from different background and cultures, and the value of diversity of approach was also something that several students highlighted. For example:

“Most of my friends are from different countries. They are from Cameroon, India, Spain, Italy ... and you can find different friends – a whole world in a university studying together, it’s quite fun.”

(Raza, 24, Accounting and Finance)

The evidence in this data that students value learning with others and find the social aspects of learning fun is not surprising. There is strong evidence for the benefits of learning with others, through enhancing the possibilities for what can be learned (Vygotsky, 1978), creating social learning environments (Bandura, 1977), or through the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Low-stress environment

The final organising theme of fun in Higher Education that emerged from the analysis was a lack of pressure and anxiety as a necessary factor for a fun environment.

Throughout the interviews, students strongly identified stress as one of the most common reasons that learning was not enjoyable, and this stress was commonly associated with

pressure of assessment. The key contributing factors that we identified were lack of time-management skills, and lack of control over learning. The impact of assessment and lack of time management is exemplified in the following quote:

“... I leave it to the last minute. I put it off, and put it off, and put it off and it’s not fun ... you want to cry because you’ve got all this writing to do.”

(Guido, 28, Interactive Arts)

Other examples of stress taking the fun out of learning occurred when things happened that were outside of the learner’s control. For example:

“... the first week with the timetables, like they messed up our timetable and like all our seminar groups were in the wrong places and that was really stressful.”

(Katie, 18, first year History)

“... we had to do a group project ... people wouldn’t turn up and it was just extremely stressful.”

(Martha, 18, first year Human Geography)

The provision of an environment that is low-pressure and relatively free from stress was key to enjoyable learning for many of the students interviewed, and the main causes of stress were time pressure associated with assessment (often self-inflicted) and lack of control over their own learning.

Discussion

Our analysis of student interview data showed that there are several different elements that contribute to a student's sense of fun in learning, and that the vast majority of learners in our sample believed that learning in Higher Education should be fun. It is interesting to note, however, that while most students valued fun, few associated it with the use of games. In this section, we examine the implications of this thematic analysis of fun for teaching and learning practice, and suggest that playful approaches can promote learner enjoyment, highlighting that these are not exclusive to game-based approaches.

The results of this study indicate that the perceived relationship between fun and learning is complex and nuanced, although several themes were drawn from our synthesis. There are many subtle factors involved, interacting with individual differences of students (and teachers) that influence the approaches to learning that are preferred or deemed enjoyable. Designing learning experiences that are universally fun and inclusive is complex and simply using a game to motivate learners in Higher Education may not be an effective strategy. While all of the themes highlighted could be facilitated using games, none is unique to games; it is apparent that there are a host of other ways of creating a sense of fun and addressing learner motivation and engagement.

This study shows that games are not necessary, or even integral, for the creation of fun learning experiences. A current challenge is the ways in which institutions can support lecturers to be more experimental and innovative in their pedagogic practices, in an increasingly pressured sector where failure (by academics as well as learners) is

negatively constructed. There is an ongoing pressure to balance the demands of both research and teaching, and it is difficult to take risks in an environment that is increasingly driven by performance metrics. Equally, the removal of learner stress factors, such as high-stakes, inflexible assessments, would require a fundamental reshaping of policies and provision.

Our analysis suggests that we need to consider more fundamental ways of building fun into learning by changing the ways in which we teach and interact with our students. One approach, associated with the use of games but that moves beyond it, is the use of a wider toolkit of playful approaches in Higher Education (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen, & Whitton, 2017). Playful learning is an emerging philosophy and set of pedagogic tools, techniques and tactics (Whitton, 2018) that focuses on how play in adult learning contexts can support learning and intrinsic motivation. It is underpinned by notions of the ‘magic circle’ (Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004): a virtual, mutually-constructed boundary between the real-world and a play-world, with different rules to those in the real world that are generally understood by the players. In this magic circle, learners can establish a sense of trust and community in which they feel safe to fail, and learning from their mistakes, build confidence in managing failure and take increasing risks to develop new, innovative and creative ideas in a playful space.

The construct of the magic circle is interesting for Higher Education because it allows us to imagine a different type of learning environment. A place where learners suspend disbelief with a willingness to enter into the spirit of play, or ‘lusory attitude’ (Suits,

1978), and explore new possibilities and ways of being and engaging with others. The magic circle provides a comfortable, collaborative place where participants do not fear failure but see it as an integral part of the experience, and learn from it. It is a place where participation is intrinsically motivated for the pleasure of the experience itself and not from external rewards.

Creating playful learning spaces can support learner engagement in ways that echo the findings of this study. They can develop stimulating pedagogy through creation of active, innovative, and explorative learning experiences. They support playful teaching – lecturers who are friendly, willing to take risks, humorous and dynamic (from Barnett, 2007) – to promote lecturer engagement. They create shared experiences by engaging deeply and critically with other people. Crucially, they help to develop safe learning spaces and lower-stress environments within ‘magic circles’ of learning, where students can take greater control, take risks, innovate and learn through failure.

Conclusions

It is difficult to predict the impact on student enjoyment of encouraging playful approaches in the university education classroom, not least due to the complexity of factors involved in any particular context. For pedagogic innovation to succeed, it is necessary for learners to perceive the benefits of learning activities (as individuals) and also for these gains to be translated into outcomes that are viewed positively within the quality monitoring of the institution. Examples of the pressures to ‘perform’ in a competitive market place are commonplace (e.g. Rolfe, 2012), thus there is a potentially risky aspect for academics to challenge students to be playful and have fun in order to

learn, particularly within a wider curriculum that does not embody these values. The question of when it is appropriate and how to do it will depend on many factors, including the learners, the teachers, the curriculum, and the learning environment. There is also a need to explore how output metrics, such as those of student satisfaction and learning gains, are influenced by pedagogical interventions to enhance enjoyment and playful interactions.

Potentially, the current climate of Higher Education will heighten barriers to pedagogies that use more playful approaches. Despite their potential, playful learning approaches do not easily conform to consumerist models where adults engage with serious ‘grown up’ ideologies and outcomes. This elicits a need for greater discussion and understanding of the benefits of more playful approaches to tertiary education and the potential long-term benefits to current and future students.

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