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# The Magic Circle of Learning: A Framework of Play in Education

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#### Abstract

The use of video games in formal education has grown across all sectors over the past twenty years. However, much literature focuses on measuring learning and motivation, foregrounding game technologies without critical exploration of contexts and politics of use. This neoliberal approach of valuing what we chose to measure limits our understanding of the wider benefits of digital play in formal education. Here, we present the 'magic circle of learning' as an alternative theorisation that considers play as philosophical principles that enable critical reframing of pedagogy, transcending a preoccupation with game design and technological implementation. We first identify five characteristics that align with the metaphor of the 'magic circle' from game studies: meaningful experience, intrinsic motivation, failure mindset, lusory community, and imaginative freedom. We then present a framework for analysing how the magic circle is manifest during learning and explore a large qualitative data set generated by teachers learning to use new technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic. We highlight three examples of how teachers learned to teach in new digital spaces, moving outside and into the magic circle, and discuss the barriers to adoption of play. Finally, we highlight the potential of this analysis approach to reimagine formal education.

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#### Introduction

The use of digital games in education has grown significantly over the past ten years (Ekin et al. 2023). Evaluating their effectiveness is commonly based on measuring learning gain, student motivation, and other quantifiable characteristics (e.g., Clark et al. 2016; Ekin et al. 2023), which both privileges the measurable and fails to consider wider political and philosophical implications of play for learning. The same is true for mainstream education, where teacher and student performances are measured, quantified, and outcome-driven (Ball 2003, 2015) with pedagogy reduced to 'what works' (Biesta 2010) to memorise and regurgitate facts to pass high stakes exams (Holloway and Brass 2017). Greater critical exploration of digital play is needed in relation to the accountability-led policies that encourage performative pedagogies rather than critical approaches. We must consider inclusivity and social justice, representation of marginalised groups, who has permission to play, development of play literacies, and problematic forms of play (Whitton 2022).

With video games vilified by the media as addictive and violent (Whitton and Maclure 2017), it is important to move the discourse of game-based learning from a primary focus on their potential for learning and engagement, to an understanding of how the philosophy of play shapes, and can reshape, pedagogic assumptions and beliefs. There is a need to focus on the values that underpin play to critically examine how it influences the interaction of people, technologies, objects, and the contexts in which they operate. We need to understand the political ramifications of play in education and how it affects the wider ecosystem of learning and the abilities of students and teachers to perform within it.

Digital play for learning is subject to the same critiques applied to learning technology generally: technological (or pedagogic) determinism, binary thinking, and a focus on technology at the expense of understanding the socio-cultural contexts of educational gaming practice (Bozkurt 2024). Similarly, analyses of pedagogic innovation highlight potentials of technology to facilitate change (e.g., Wang et al. 2024) but typically do not consider embedded beliefs about pedagogy and technology or consider how these may limit transformation. The value of play ideology for disruption and reimagination is underexplored.

Gee (2003) progressed the argument for digital games in education from the idea that they are good for learning because they motivate (e.g., Prensky 2001) to recognise that good video games embody learning principles, and embedding these principles leads to better learning design. We apply this approach to educational play more generally—transcending games and going beyond digital—to show how learning can be reframed using play philosophy. We build on the metaphor of the 'magic circle', originally from play theory (Huizinga 1955) and later adapted in game studies (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). We extend this metaphor to identify characteristics of learning in the magic circle and a framework for analysis.

We then put the theory to work in an analysis of teacher discourse, exploring a large dataset generated during the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, schools across the UK were closed as a response to the spread of the virus and began emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al. 2020). Teachers continued to provide an education to their students, while negotiating changing government guidance and differential access to technology (Greenhow et al. 2021). The Pandemic-Induced Virtual Online Teaching (PIVOT) project took place in seven schools in a multi-academy trust in Northern England to explore teachers' experiences of learning during this unique period of change. Before the pandemic, most had no experience of teaching online and had to quickly learn to teach digitally, emergency online education as a stark difference from high-quality planned digital education (Adedoyin and Soykan 2023).

We use this data set because it is large and rigorous, containing three types of qualitative data collected at a time of enforced learning that exemplifies the 'messy' entanglement of 'digital and analog, material and symbolic, technology and sociality (Weich and Macgilchrist 2023: 1) that underpins postdigital theory. This imposed change from classroom to online teaching necessitated teachers trying new things and reimagining how teaching happened. In theory, this was a time when playful approaches by embedding the implicit philosophical values and assumptions that underpin play (Nørgård et al. 2017) might support learning through problem-solving, experimentation, and learning from failure.

In this article, we first define the characteristics of the magic circle of playful learning, developing the metaphor as it is used in the study of digital games. We describe the PIVOT study and the analysis framework we created to put the theory of the magic circle to work in practice. We then present the outcomes of our analysis, using the playful analogy of a three-act drama, and conclude with a reflection of the systemic constraints on teachers and how this impacts the ability to innovate. We present an original development of theory and exemplify its use through an analytical framework to explore and disrupt established learning practices.

#### The Magic Circle of Learning

The 'magic circle' is a metaphor from play theory, coined by anthropologist Huizinga (1955) to describe sacred spaces outside the normal constraints of reality. It was later expounded by video game theorists Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 95), who define the magic circle as a 'special place in time and space created by a game'. It is a boundaried play space—real, virtual, or imaginary—separated from reality, mutually constructed by those within and around it, with its own norms and practices. The magic circle demarcates a space of safety, where the 'real world' rules do not apply, and experimentation is free from the consequences of failure.

The magic circle has subsequently been theorised as a space in which the values and philosophies of play enable the creation of learning spaces (McNicol 2017; Nørgård et al. 2016; Remmele and Whitton 2013) that have rules distinct from the rules of the 'real world' and provide safe and voluntary places to explore, imagine, and experiment. The magic circle is idealised, and we recognise that there can be no true separation between a play world and the real world, and that transferability of learning between the two worlds is crucial. Theorisations of the magic circle of learning have not thus far explicitly extrapolated the characteristics of play that benefit education (as Gee 2003 does for games). We address this by synthesising existing work on the signature pedagogy of playful learning (Nørgård et al. 2017), explorations of fun in learning (e.g., Koster 2005; Whitton and Langan 2019), playful pedagogies (e.g., Baecher and Portnoy 2024; Forbes and Thomas 2022; James and Nerantzi 2019), and educational games design (e.g., Gee 2008; Squire 2011; Whitton 2014) to identify five characteristics of play that underpin our theorisation of the magic circle.

While there is a preoccupation with video games in education, playful learning can take many forms and employ a range of technologies. Whitton (2023) identified seven approaches to playful learning: roleplay (taking on alternative identities), simulation games (real world models), traditional play (in-person games), digital play (computer games and virtual worlds), game-making (creation of games), gamification (game mechanics in non-game contexts), and postdigital play (hybrid play forms such as escape rooms). Our conceptualisation of the magic circle is inclusive of all forms and technology-agnostic.

The magic circle of learning recognises both the objective form of a game and the subjective attitude of playfulness. Education can use games and playfulness independently of other (for example, a mandated serious game or an artwork created playfully), but the power of the magic circle for learning is greatest when both games and playfulness co-exist through the embedding of gameful design and facilitation of playful attitude (see Fig. 1).

Gameful design uses authentic and problem-based learning to create meaningful experiences and game challenges and mechanics to develop intrinsic motivation. Playful attitudes are supported by the creation of inclusive play communities in which players are free to experiment and imagine. Making errors is normal in games and the development of resilience to manage mistake-making is facilitated by a playful attitude; this creates space for practice, reflection, and positive construction of failure.

Meaningful Experience describes the importance of learning activities that are personally relevant to learners who see the value in both the activity and the



Fig. 1 Characteristics of learning in the magic circle

intended outcome, which can develop increased critical thinking (Lameras et al. 2017; Vlachopoulos and Makri 2017). Game-based learning theory views games as constructivist learning environments (Whitton 2014) drawing on theories of active learning that is experiential (Kolb 1984), problem-based (Boud and Feletti 1998; Savery and Duffy 1995), and authentic (Brookes and Moseley 2012).

Intrinsic motivation draws on game engagement theory (Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015; Boyle et al. 2012), which highlights the importance of a desire to participate in an activity for its own sake rather than for an extrinsic reward. Play is, by definition, voluntary (Brown and Vaughan 2010; Caillois 2001), and games have evolved to embody mechanics that develop intrinsic motivation (Arnab 2020; Subhash and Cudney 2018). Games stimulate curiosity and provide achievable yet difficult challenges (Malone and Lepper 1987), balance levels of skill and difficulty (Schell 2008), and keep learners in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1992). This is in direct contrast to gamification, which uses game mechanics in non-game contexts (Deterding 2012) to stimulate extrinsic motivation, typically with short term effects.

Lusory Community builds on Suits' (1978) concept of a 'lusory attitude' that is necessary to engage in play: a willingness to immerse oneself and mutually construct play spaces by (explicitly or tacitly) agreeing to abide by the alternative rules of the spaces. This facilitates the creation of open, inclusive, and learning democratic spaces (Nørgård et al. 2017) in which players collude to ensure continued engagement in the experience (De Koven 1978), working collaboratively to generate new knowledge and shared understandings (Savery and Duffy 1995). The creation of safe spaces though play can increase sense of belonging (Forbes 2021; Herro and Clark 2016) but to be part a lusory community is a privilege and understanding the inequities of play is crucial. We recognise that play can be exclusionary and that there is a need to give learners permission to play (Walsh 2019).

Free Exploration highlights in the importance of learners having agency over their experiences (Malone and Lepper 1987) where they are free to make choices based on curiosity and use imagination to consider alternative possibilities, increasing creativity (Tsai 2012, 2013). This is drawn from theories of learning through discovery (Bruner 1961), constructionist creation and tinkering (Papert 1980), and exploration and experimentation (Nørgård 2021). It incorporates ideas of engaged pedagogy (Hooks 2014) where education is seen as the practice of freedom whereby the act and intention of play is a political act undertaken with criticality and care, with the goal of liberation and social justice.

Failure Mindset realigns mistake-making as a positive experience rather than something to be feared, which can be debilitating to learners (Choi 2021). Failure is an inevitable and integral part of games for without the possibility of failure they cannot be fun (Koster 2005; Schell 2008). Playfulness facilitates the management of failure and supports learners to take measured risks, build resilience, and increase focus on the learning process rather than outcomes. Normalising failure as a natural part of learning reduces fear of failure and increases innovation (Koeners and Francis 2020; Whitton 2022).

To describe learning within and outside of the magic circle, we mapped each of these five characteristics against assumptions about the nature of knowledge and learning (see Table 1), viewing playful learning in the magic circle as the antithesis

Characteristic	Playful learning (within)	Performative learning (outside)	
Meaningful Experience	Solving authentic problems Evidencing process	Acquisition of useful information Evidencing outcomes	
Intrinsic Motivation	Driven by curiosity Appropriate and flexible challenge	Driven by external reward Challenge fixed by external bodies	
Failure Mindset	Failure is expected and positive Practice and reflection are key	Failure is feared and negative Successful outcomes are key	
Lusory Community	Knowledge developed with others Democratic	Knowledge transferred Single source of truth	
Imaginative Freedom	Free experimentation Exploring possibilities	Set pathways Predefined knowledge	

Table 1 Playful and performative learning within and outside of the magic circle

of performative learning outside. As well as highlighting beliefs that underpin the magic circle of learning, Table 1 shows how playful and performative learning linked are to curriculum ideologies and Aristotle's three forms of knowledge (Mufti and Peace 2012 in Goodley 2018), shown in Fig. 2. This demonstrates our premise that content-based outcome-oriented curricula combine two forms of knowledge that marginalise the learning process as a legitimate form of knowledge production. We see this combining of the liberal and instrumental as creating performative pedagogies that sit outside the magic circle and counter to critical learning that sits within it.

We recognise the overlap between learning in the magic circle and other pedagogies that are inherent in games (e.g., active learning, experiential learning, authentic learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning). We also recognise that there are many different ways in which the magic circle of learning can be manifest beyond video games (e.g., traditional games, role play, simulations, toys, storytelling, virtual worlds). We do not argue that these characteristics are unique to play but



Fig. 2 Curriculum ideologies (from Goodley 2018)

that, as a whole, they provide a depth of understanding of playful learning beyond video games. We also remember that the metaphor of a magic circle as a completely safe and separate space is a theoretical ideal. In reality, a clear distinction between the inside and outside seldom exists; the boundaries of the magic circle are permeable and fuzzy, and this can be seen strongly in our data analysis.

In the following two sections we test our theorisation of the magic circle of learning in practice by first presenting an analysis framework for exploring the assumptions of the magic circle in teacher discourse and then applying it to a large qualitative data set collected from teachers at seven schools during the second phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **Putting the Theory to Work**

The PIVOT project explored teacher learning during the rapid move to digital teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, in a longitudinal qualitative study involving teachers at seven schools in an academy trust in Northern England (two primary, five secondary) from October 2020 to March 2021. This was a time of constant change, with schools required to organise students into 'bubbles' that had to selfisolate if any member tested positive and a second lockdown in Spring 2021. Students were in and out of school and teachers had to quickly learn to teach online and hybrid classes.

We used a multiple-methods approach with two phases of data collection, one in late 2020 (October–November) and a second in early 2021 (January–March). At the start of each phase, all teaching staff were invited to complete qualitative questionnaires, first in October 2020 (n = 72) and second in January 2021 (n = 59); from a total staff of 352, this represents response rates of 20% and 17%, respectively. The questionnaires explored use and perceptions of technologies and changes to practice that had occurred. Participants could also complete short diary entries in response to prompts over the course of the ten weeks in either autumn (n = 193) or spring (n =129). We did not cross-reference diary entries for individuals because our focus was on overall rather than individual narratives, which were at times highly personal. In May 2021, we undertook a series of in-depth interviews with teaching staff who volunteered to share their experiences (n = 11). We did not want data collection to create additional stress, so all research activities were optional. Data are anonymised and names pseudonyms.

To explore how teachers learned to engage with new digital technologies and teaching practices through the lens of the magic circle, we based our analysis of the data on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001; Maclure 2003), identifying assumptions about the world that were evident in the language used and the ways in which systems and beliefs were privileged (Gee 2014). Table 2 shows our analysis framework, demonstrating how we used each characteristic of the magic circle as a tool of enquiry (Gee 2014: 90) to consider where approaches to learning sat in relation to the magic circle.

Each document in the data set was reviewed, first digitally and then on paper, using this framework, highlighting quotes that we believed showed activity within

Characteristic	Aspects	Position in the magic circle	
		Inside	Outside
Meaningful Experience	Nature of learning	Active	Passive
	Nature of knowledge	Skills	Information
	Personal relevance of learning	Important	Unimportant
Intrinsic motivation	Nature of motivation	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Difficulty of learning	Challenging	Easy
	Driver of learning	Curiosity	Reward
Failure Mindset	Construction of failure	Positive	Negative
	Focus of assessment	Learning	Measurement
	Focus of learning	Process	Outcome
Lusory Community	Creation of knowledge	Constructed	Existent
	Ownership of knowledge	Democratic	Dictated
	Nature of truth	Multiple	Single
Imaginative Freedom	Agency over learning	Student-led	Teacher-led
	Pathways to learning	Open	Set
	Exploration of alternatives	Encouraged	Limited

 Table 2
 Analysis framework to explore assumptions in relation to the magic circle

or around the magic circle. These quotes were then cross-checked and reviewed for prevalent themes and discourses that drew out common tensions to identify, develop, and evidence our understanding of the story of teachers learning in and around the magic circle. The following section describes our findings and is followed by a discussion of the wider implications of the applicability of the theory of the magic circle for reimagining pedagogy.

## The Magic Circle in Three Acts: Teachers Learning to Navigate the New Digital

In our analysis, we tell the story of teachers learning to navigate the changing environment of the pandemic within and around the magic circle. We use the playful metaphor of a three-act drama to describe how teachers learned to navigate the environment of rapid change and uncertainty. We look at the confrontations and challenges that arose as the pandemic progressed and note where boundaries blur and liminal spaces develop. Finally, we show resolution through an example of playful reframing inside the magic circle.

#### Act 1: When a School Is Not a School

In March 2020, a national lockdown across the UK meant that schools had to find ways to teach at a distance. The primary schools in our data set put together packs

of worksheets while secondaries pivoted immediately to whole cohort online teaching. School teaching, traditionally ringfenced behind the school gates, was delivered online or physically. It crossed the home threshold, so that the 'as if' world of the school (Holland et al. 1998) with its associated norms of classrooms, desks, exercise books, and bells became a memory.

When it was announced that schools would close, leaders and teachers in the trust were trained to use online meeting software. The following extract shows just how bewildering the idea of teaching remotely was at this time:

the training finished, and there was a bit of a silence. And then somebody broke the silence, by saying, 'Are we going to need to take a register?' And everyone looked at everyone else, it was just such a simple question... we all just looked at each other.

And I thought, 'even though none of us know what we're doing or what's going to happen, somebody needs to answer this teacher's question, because they're going to be the most petrified'.

So I remember saying, 'Yes, I think that would be a good idea. Yes, just make a note of who turns up to your lesson.' And then thinking, 'I've got no idea. How does a register work, when the kids are at home?' (Alice, School Leader)

The Senior Leadership Team decided that one lesson per subject per week should be taught, by a member of the senior team. This meant that 'there was a lot of pressure there, I felt, to get it right ... and it didn't always work' (Bridget, School Leader). Teaching online was visible because parents, students, and other teachers could watch without a teacher's knowledge and, as cameras were turned off for safeguarding, many felt they were talking to a void. This creating additional pressure on top of learning a new way to teach:

It made me feel very much ... like an NQT again, learning routines and techniques of how to deal with things ... I'm scripting my lessons. I've got bullet points of exactly what I want to say for each slide. (Bridget, Assistant Headteacher)

Aspects of the magic circle are visible in this discourse. Learning to pivot to emergency digital teaching was meaningful and authentic; teachers were intrinsically motivated to use the technology well and deliver good lessons however possible. There is a sense of a lusory community, where one accepts the new rules and where support and the ability to learn with and from one another exists. What is missing is the safe space where it is acceptable and positive to fail; the already limited failure spaces for teachers were constrained future by additional and constant scrutiny. The visibility and pressure to 'get it right' detracted from the ability of staff to creatively navigate the boundaries of the new normal.

The new rules are built around what would normally take place in a physical classroom: a register is taken, slides are used, the pressure to be seen to teach well is amplified. There is a performative 'gaze' (Goodley and Perryman 2022; Foucault 1963: 88) with teachers learning in public impacting on their ability to

be playful, pulling some of this learning outside of the magic circle and limiting imaginative freedom.

By Autumn, schools re-opened and returned to teaching in-person classes. Teachers were expected to be able to offer face-to-face and online lessons simultaneously, as well as catch-up activities in both formats. Teacher survey and diaries show an increase in technologies and digital teaching resources being used. Innovative ways of thinking are also evident, showing how lockdown constraints led to creative ways of reimagining teaching. For example:

I was part of teaching Textiles A-Level ... in school, they would normally be doing some form of, like tie-dyeing and different things. The A-Level students, they didn't have paints, or tie-dyes, or things like that, so we were trying to find weird and wonderful ways for them to dye fabric.

So, we have now found out ... with parental permission, that red wine dyes fabric really well, fake tan, coffee, and tea, and the stamens out of lilies. (Grace, Art Teacher)

This shows space for innovative thinking, and also the use of trial-and-error, practice and failure, that must have taken place during the discovery process. There was also evidence of genuine excitement at the new possibilities afforded by digital teaching, for example one teacher described the value of being able to see the writing of all students at the same time. This facilitated real-time spaces for learning to take place though making mistakes. The teacher would make a comment about a paragraph that was being written:

... then you see their cursor move back to that word, and they start changing it, and that was eye-opening because you could actually see that cognition that was taking place between me giving advice, and actual action taking place. Whereas, if you have that two-week delay before they actually get their assignment back. (Fiona, English Teacher)

For some, learning to teach online was 'weird and wonderful' with the constraints of lockdown necessitating creative and playful ways of thinking, but for other, the pressure to perform and ensure positive student outcomes with the restrictions of curriculum and technology meant a regression in their teaching style. One teacher describes using 'far more direct instruction in my lesson pedagogy due to remote learning on [platform] but I will continue to do this now as it has greater impact than other collaborative activities' (Diary, Spring 2021). While there are examples of teachers stepping into the magic circle to develop creative ways of meaningfully engaging with the enforced digital environment, for many, the focus was, perhaps inevitably, more performative than playful.

#### Act 2: Navigating a New Normal

Teachers were under extreme pressure to identify learning gaps to stop students from falling behind, without knowing how much of the curriculum they needed to cover and how assessment would take place. In Spring, once examinations were cancelled

and teachers required to officially grade their students, classrooms became spaces where every assessment was linked to high stakes outcomes, rather than spaces where failure could be embraced.

The pressure of learning to teach online and deliver the curriculum meant that learning was typically constructed as something done to students rather than something that they do themselves, where students 'watch something or listen to something and learn from it' (Interview, May 2020). There are multiple examples of teaching being viewed as 'the opportunity to deliver content' (Survey, October 2020) tested through 'recap and retrieval' (Diary, March 2021) and learning constructed as assimilating and accommodating new knowledge (Diary, March 2021). We recognise that those who participated in research were possibly keen to perform what they understood to be a 'good teacher' but even so, the construction of learning as 'curriculum content that can be memorised and reproduced for assessment' is still apparent. The excitement expressed by some who were learning to teach differently gave way to the need to locate and fill gaps in knowledge before formally assessing students. This pushed teachers outside of the magic circle as the pressure to become assessors became more important than the desire to experiment, and the meaning and motivation were directed towards performative assessment activity.

The interviews offer a deeper understanding of how some teachers saw beyond the performative necessity of assessment to view education more widely, encompassing student welfare, mental health, and deeper engagement with education as a social endeavour (Miller et al. 2018). For example:

In the first lockdown, we did try really hard to put on a decent curriculum offering, but we were also quite aware that it probably wasn't going to be good enough. It wasn't going to be the same as what they would have been learning in school. But we were just trying to do our best for a term of thinking outside the box. (Caroline, School Leader)

In this sense, 'thinking outside the box' included celebration ceremonies, things to do for fun with your family, cooking activities, and engaging online games. However, despite best intentions, the ability to truly think differently seems to have been limited by the need to not only cover curriculum content, but to assess it in an ongoing and pressurised manner. During this period, education as an outcome-orientated process often led to learning being bypassed for the performance of curriculum stipulated 'important' knowledge to be demonstrated. The separation of school and community from teaching and learning as performance became apparent, not as a problematic tension, but an accepted norm.

Using the magic circle as a tool of analysis, we see how meaningful experiences can be separated into two distinct high stakes areas: academic success and student wellbeing. We note that a lusory community was formed during this time among staff, where teachers and leaders worked together to construct new ways of being that incorporated both care for wellbeing and enhancement of academic performance. Teachers were simultaneously in a world where 'normal rules do not apply' and one where actions have huge consequences on the real world: working simultaneously inside and outside of the magic circle. Leaders took the risks of failure first, choosing to deliver whole cohort online lessons as they managed issues with cameras, student behaviour, and what a good lesson might look like. A failure mindset and imaginative freedom was visible but they were largely limited to extra-curricular activities that were not mandated or assessed.

#### Act 3: Learning To Play

We close our analysis here by presenting an example of how learning that took place by the school leadership, which shows deep reflection on what was appropriate and possible. The following quote shows how teachers were thinking holistically about the student experience:

Towards the end of that summer term, it became more about how do we get students excited about the prospect of a summer holiday, when essentially, they'd just been at home, and off for the months anyway.

So, we tried to do a bit of an end of term celebration in the best way we could. Because the end of summer term is always a really exciting thing, and we didn't want our first cohort of students to feel like we'd forgotten that was a big deal for them. So, we did an awards assembly online. I decided to do something ridiculous where I ran a 10 K around the local area and told the kids where I was running. And they all came out to the streets with banners to cheer me on because I told them that I'd be running throughout lockdown and I wanted to get better, and I was trying to get my best ever 10 K time.

And they came out, and it was really emotional at the end. I turned into the school bit, and there were loads of kids lined up, all socially distanced and doing the right thing, but they'd come together on this last day of term which was really nice. And yes, it was quite, I suppose, a collective thing that we had together. (Caroline, Assistant Head)

This moment shows an example of working within the magic circle to create a lusory community of teachers and leaders learning how to do things differently. While an end-of-year celebration is in no way unusual, the idea of running a far enough distance for students to be socially distanced and still feel included and part of the school community is an example of imaginative freedom.

When Caroline describes her surprise as she runs towards the school and sees the students lined up, we learn that she was worried about poor turnout, and she shows a willingness to publicly fail. The mixture of an award ceremony online, with in-person running, shows an understanding of the need to recreate rituals and structures, alongside a more innovative, playful approach. This exemplifies the potential of the magic circle for creating meaningful and engaging activities that bring together communities creatively and provide safe spaces for failing and learning from those failures.

#### Discussion

We have argued that the characteristics of the magic circle embody playful learning, but we are also realistic about the idealist nature of the theory. There can never be complete separation of learning spaces from the real world and some actions taken will inevitably have wider consequences. We recognise that in classrooms students can be disruptive, teachers may be overworked, motivation can be low, and lessons can be boring; we offer this framework as a tool for reimagining assumptions about the inevitability of existing practice.

In our data, the magic circle of learning showed ways in which the systemic constraints of schools, heightened by the pandemic, make it difficult to create magic circles. The limitations of time and pressures of assessments made it difficult for teachers to find safe spaces where they were not judged or measured to reflect and learn from mistakes. The teachers in our study were actively engaged in learning to use new technologies, but they did so by necessity rather than choice. Despite points of failure being an almost inevitable consequence of the uncertainty and pace of technology, there was no space to acknowledge this or openly learn from failure. When final exams were cancelled, rather than increasing space for experimentation and freedom to try new things, this decreased the ability of teachers to openly fail because every assessment became high stakes.

While school leaders tried to create the space to get things wrong, they were limited in practice by government policy and rhetoric, media discourses of teachers as lazy, and intense pressure to perform. Play could have helped teachers learn to embrace online teaching in engaging and creative ways, but they were not given permission to play. Teacher beliefs and practices are inevitably shaped by the neoliberal discourses of modern schooling with drivers of school performance targets and measurable outcomes echoed in the pressures on student achievement. Long-term neoliberal decline is a root cause of an inability for teachers to learn in the magic circle; the move to emergency online teaching merely amplified these.

At their heart, our school systems are driven by exam outcomes to differentiate students and evaluate teachers. These are fundamentally antithetical to learning within the magic circle: they focus on tasks that can be measured in exam conditions limiting their value in the real world; they highlight the extrinsic motivator of a grade outcomes; failure matters, and it matters a lot; they reward individual effort; and assume a single approved knowledge base. Alternative ways of viewing the relationship between assessment and failure highlight the importance of learning to fail through game play and design (Rawlinson and Whitton 2024) but a fundamental rethink of the nature and value of exams in schools is needed before meaningful change can happen. We must understand and address embedded pedagogic assumptions to be able to support the successful adoption of new technologies.

As Gee (2024: 1100) says, 'schools are effective at doing what they were designed to do-for example, signalling which sorts of positions in work and

society different sorts students are fit to occupy—rather than what we actually want them to do, which is to help students learn how to solve problems and make good decisions for individual and societal flourishing'. As a society, we need to consider the purpose and value of education, and the ubiquitous and systemic nature of the barriers to rethinking pedagogy. Empirical critiques on theoretical contributions such as Gee's (e.g., Bacalja et al. 2024) open conversations and enable reframing across contexts. We offer the framework of the magic circle of learning as a provocation for problematising existing practices and beliefs and rethinking the fundamental assumptions about how and why teaching takes place within the wider political ecosystem.

#### Conclusions

We developed the metaphor of the magic circle of learning based on five characteristics and created a framework to analyse learning. We then put this framework to work, showing that it can be used to offer insights into the assumptions that underpin accepted teaching practices. In identifying practice that sits within, outside, and across the boundaries of the magic circle, we can question the rationale for the way things are and use a reframing of practice within the magic circle to consider what might be. In applying this framework to teachers learning how to teach differently, and without the tools and environment in which they had been trained, we offer insights on how performative pressures restrict playful approaches to learning.

The lesson from this research, with broad significance across the educational sector, is that the introduction of any new initiative, digital or otherwise, is unlikely to drive pedagogic change if the performative pressures remain the same. To embrace the playful philosophy of the magic circle, we must reconsider our fundamental assumptions around what education is for (Biesta 2015) including what knowledge is, and how it is formed and demonstrated.

Play philosophy has the potential to disrupt our understandings of knowledge and pedagogy, but real change requires radical reimagining beyond introduction of new digital ways of teaching. Performativity in the form of dense and mandated curriculums assessed in high-stakes examinations and inspections can stifle teachers' abilities to both learn and teach within the magic circle. We have shown that teachers manage to operate within and around the edges of the magic circle as they incorporate their understanding of what a meaningful educational experience is for the students that they teach. For some teachers in our data, a postdigital age of teaching may well be a return to classroom teaching without the technologies used during school closures, but for others, it will be an opportunity to embrace playful practices that emerged and imagine what might still be possible.

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#### Declarations

**Ethics Approval** PIVOT was approved by the Durham University Centre for Academic Development Ethics Committee (DCAD-2020-09-14 T14:33:58-gffx88) and adhered to BERA (2018) guidelines.

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