Vol.2 No.2 (2019)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : **2591-801X**

Content Available at : **http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index**

The Play's the Thing… an introduction to the Special Section on "Pedagogy & Play in Teaching Today"

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2019.2.2.6

There is a moment in Act 2, Scene 2, of *Hamlet* where the titular character declares that the "play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of king." In this moment, Hamlet is wrapped up in developing a plan, a scheme, to catch out what he believes to be the King's guilt in his father's murder. And he wants to catch him out, to call him out, through the medium of making insinuations about his complicity through a stage play… a play within a play. As odd as this might sound, I would argue it is a fitting point to begin a consideration of how the dynamics of a pedagogy more informed by play and the ludic aspects of life could begin.

How, or why, is that? Why does it make any sense to start from Hamlet's suspicion? It is because today it is very easy to find ourselves wary of even more invitations, which are often demands, that we should participate more, think outside the box more, develop a different approach to the ways we work and interact. Today we find that there are ever-increasing competition for our attention, from the nature of overwhelming media environments, to the demands of our working lives. Or, as Franco "Bifo" Berardi suggests in his book *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009), the problem is that while cybertime is infinite, the capacity of our bodies clearly is not. Thus, we find ourselves exhausted, and rightfully sceptical of attempts to extract even more labour and value from us, even when it comes dressed in the form of fun and play. Sitting here, writing this introduction on Boxing Day, 2019, I can feel this tension acutely, as I'm torn between my desire to be a good worker-academic and finish my given task of writing this introduction, and wanting to go keep developing my FIFA20 Ultimate Team Squad (which I can say with confidence is pretty stellar).

In other words, the problem is that we want to play, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, as Jack Nicholson might remind us. In truth there is no war on Christmas, but there is a war for our attention. And what that produces is a condition where it becomes difficult to truly engage, to develop that kind of deep-seated interaction only requiring itself, that play demands. We are always there, but not there, at the same time. This is what Melissa Gregg describes in her book *Work's Intimacy* (2011) as "presence bleed," or the particular

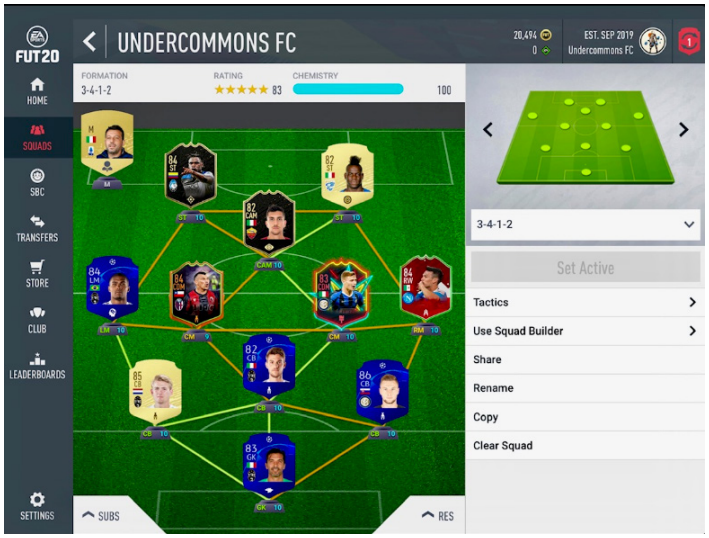

Figure 1: Undercommons FC, FIFA 20 Ultimate Team companion app team management view.

ways that digital and communication technologies facilitate this dynamic of being there / not there. And this is an experience that is quite common, from the way we find ourselves checking our emails after business hours, or always being attentive to our phones. Gregg argues that while this dynamic has been common among upper level management for quite some time, in more recent history it has become more widespread across a much wider range of knowledge workers. Based on this, she suggests that "it is no longer simply the 'creative,' cutting-edge or highly paid positions that require an always-on dimension. Rather, it is typical in the most mid-range and ordinary kinds of information jobs regardless of status or financial compensation" (2011, p. 46).

This dynamic of having 'no time / no space' seems especially present somewhere like Singapore. This was pointed out by Agnes Chew, who observes that while Singapore has the world's 10th higher per capita gross domestic product, ranks lowest worldwide in terms of job satisfaction, and that Singaporeans face the longest working hours (2018). Chew makes an argument for there being a close link between long hours and job dissatisfaction with a corresponding increase in concerns over mental health and wellbeing. In other words, yes, there are great riches being created, and

social conditions are improved, but not in all aspects. We are richer, but stressed out, unable to play. This is why the Institute for Precarious Consciousness has suggested that today, the dominant affective structure is precisely one of anxiety (2014). There are great riches being produced, but in ways that have only been intensified and amplified by problems of overwork and stress.

But let us leave these larger questions of work and the economy behind and return to the classroom. But can we? Thinking about Melissa Gregg's concept of presence bleed, we can see that this clearly does not just apply to our working lives, but has become highly evident in the classroom as well. This can be attested by any teacher who has found themselves having to compete for their students' attention against a veritable army of digital devices, not to mention all the demands of students' lives as well. I would argue this is a huge problem for teaching today, precisely because the best learning occurs when people are deeply engaged in learning. The problem is, this is what is blocked off and prevented, or at least made very difficult, by all these distractions and anxieties. For the vast armies of the overworked, over-stimulated, and over-anxious, play is precisely the space for really engaging in studying a topic, idea, or practice – not for an outcome, a mark, but simply for the value of it in itself.

This is what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten gesture towards in *The Undercommons* (2013) when they claim that studying is the one thing you can't do in the university today. How is that? How does that make any sense? While it is admittedly counterintuitive, it is based on Harney and Moten's rather idiosyncratic theorization of studying, which for them is any collectively pursued activity that is done for its own merits (rather than a more common sense notion of study as preparation for exam or something similar). This is why they argue studying is impossible in the modern university, as every activity has already been mapped against league tables, learning outcomes, and degree classifications. We're encouraged to go to university so we can stumble through it to get a degree, not because we have a deep-seated love of a subject or a practice. That kind of perspective blocks off any deeper sense of engagement.

And this is what brings us back to the questions of the role of play in pedagogy and teaching today. In Johan Huizinga's classic definition (2014), play is play precisely because it is the opposite of work. It is outside of everyday life. This sense of play is much closer to deep learning than an approach that dutifully wades through countless PowerPoint slides and memorizes information only to regurgitate it on the exam, only to forget it afterwards as soon as possible. When we started to work on organizing the "Pedagogy & Play in Teaching Today" symposium, the idea was to find ways to explore drawing on histories and more playful teaching practices, fully aware of the constraints they're under, as ways to transform and revitalize the classroom. The idea was to find ways that play can be used as a tool for opening other ways to learn and interact. That could take the form of gamified lab simulations that Bina Rai, Tan Hui Shin, and Leo Chen Huei explore in this issue of JALT. Alternately, we can find elements of learning in the broader dynamics of gamification that Yeo Xi-Wei explores.

I can think of a number of examples of this from my own teaching practice, but I'd like to briefly mention two in particular. One involves an advanced marketing module. I had assigned the students to read a case study about the use of child slave labour in chocolate production in the Ivory Coast. But this time, rather than giving the students a set of questions about the reading to discuss in class, I decided to set up a role playing exercise. In order to do that, I divided the class up into groups, with each group taking on a different role from the case study, whether the accused company, or as an NGO, a competing company, or government body. And then I simply asked the groups to think through what they would do and why. While every teacher dreads when a classroom has no response to a given brief, this had the opposite effect. Within five minutes, students were debating, with great intensity, about the merits of their plans, which ranged from a competing company trying to make good on the other company's misfortunes to groups arguing for a guerrilla insurrection against a government that was clearly unable or unwilling to protect its own citizens. Almost needless to say, this was a much more intense response than for most classroom exercises.

The second example comes from a postgraduate module I was teaching this year, on the nature of creativity and organizations. For this module, I did not want to fall back on simply describing the various approaches that organizations attempt to use to foster creativity amongst their members, I wanted to attempt to at least partially use some of these approaches in the running of the module itself. Given that I have long been interested in the use of escape room games as team building exercises, I figured it would be interesting to bring the class to one that had recently opened in Colchester. The idea was the students would take part in the escape room and then, that we would use that experience as a basis for thinking through the development of creativity in organizations. Much like the previous example, people engage with this more intensely than they would have normally in the classroom, and I could see quite different patterns of engagement, as well as leadership and problem solving, emerge.

Figure 2: University of Essex immersive learning trip to Escape Rooms, Colchester.

All of the materials presented in this special section attempt to, in different ways, engage with questions of play and ways to develop this deeper and more meaningful

engagement. The members of the design house and roleplaying consultancy Curious Chimeras would point out that these examples worked not simply because they brought play into the classroom, but more importantly, because they came out of understanding what the students were bringing to the classroom and attempted to shape the interaction in ways that worked for those students. Likewise, the discussion with arts manager Juliana Lim and bookstore owner Kenny Leck in this JALT issue tells us that if we want to keep open a space for being able to make art, which in many ways is based on the same dynamics of interaction as playful deep learning, it is because we have found a way to sort out structures and organizational practices that allow us to have that space and time. And this brings us back from the classroom to the wider dynamics of the economy and society today, where someone like Pat Kane (2005) suggests that we are seeing a shift from an overly serious Protestant work ethic to what he describes as a 'play ethic' as the main motivating factor. Likewise, this is what Daniel Pink suggests (2010) when he claims that workplaces are moving away from a model based on motivating employees through the use of carrots and sticks to jobs that are more dependent on creative, disruptive, and self-motivating workers who focus on developing autonomy, mastery, and purpose in what they do.

In other words, play is precisely the thing where we can reach the ear of the king, where we can find the voice to persuade the sovereign, even if indeed that sovereign is only ourselves. We do not balk at the reality that we will have to, as the cliché goes, work hard in order to play hard. Rather, the question is more one of who will get to determine the rules under which our play happens. This reminds me of the game "Calvinball" from the comics Calvin & Hobbes. In Calvinball, there are no fixed rules. But that does not mean there are no rules at all. In Calvinball, the game itself becomes the making up and changing of the rules, which is to say, playing with them. The game becomes the constant making, unmaking, and remaking of the game itself. It is a game that is always playing with the boundaries of itself and what is possible. Ultimately, that is what I would like to suggest we can get from turning to questions of play in our teaching practices: to learn and draw from a range of different approaches to learning and teaching that will help us expand what is possible in our practices, and beyond…

Figure 3: The wonders of Calvinball (*Calvinball*, 2007).

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