

Creativity and playfulness in Higher Education research

Abstract

Due to the diversity of academics engaging with research into higher education, there is no single methodological approach or method that would embody higher education research. In this paper we put forward the case that this is good and argue that higher education research can benefit from fusing existing methodological and theoretical paradigms with more creative, playful and artistic approaches more commonly associated with sociological or anthropological research and performance-based disciplines. In order to frame this attitude of creativity, playfulness and openness, we start by providing a brief delineation of the research field and methods of higher education research. In this context we introduce the Deleuzoguattarian concept of rhizomes and assemblages to provide the grounding for what we mean by creativity and playfulness, which leads to our proposal of a renewed approach to research into higher education. We draw upon our own work on embodied academic identity and trainee teachers' perceptions of their placement experiences in order to critically explore the benefits and potential pitfalls of incorporating this creativity and playfulness into higher education research.

Introduction

The higher education sector is increasing in size and influence, and consequently there is a need to consider the role of theory and method of higher education research and to critically review existing or developing theoretical and methodological practices. Research in higher education tends to focus on changes to academic practices and policy developments. Whilst there is definitely something to say about that, research into higher education is by far more diverse and complex. This can be evidenced in the number of simultaneous strands offered during higher education conferences such as the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference 2017 (SRHE, 2017), which included ten broad research domains. Higher education research includes research into academic practices and policy developments, but also explorations of institutions as social and cultural knowledge producers, of the lived experiences of stakeholders, investigations relating to institutional and organisational structures and aspects of leadership and management (Altbach, 2014). Considering the wide range of topics and research questions and these evolving areas of research interests, the approaches to and theories of research within higher education need to be subject to critical consideration in turn. This is particularly relevant as the developments in the sector go hand in hand with wider changes of understanding regarding the nature of research in related disciplines, such as behavioural and social sciences and beyond. In practice, the higher education research environment results in academics from a wide range of theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds engaging with research into various aspects of higher education experiences.

In this paper we argue that higher education research, as any research area, must be seen within the context of its field, its research focus, its aims and purposes, and that consequently theory and method need to be developed accordingly. Much too often there are calls for specific approaches, which may limit scope, potential and opportunities for higher education research as funders call for research that they recognise, are familiar with and know. Understandings of what both research and knowledge are will factor and colour these opinions, causing the historic 'divide' between quantitative and qualitative approaches and subjective and objective truths. In our view, given the varied disciplinary backgrounds of higher education researchers, there is an opportunity for an approach that embraces playful, creative assemblages and fusions coupled with a confident stance of openness. Research in general requires creative solutions to the issues of generating relevant data and using appropriate methods. For a discipline that is characterised by interested parties from across the full range of disciplinary backgrounds, a more creative and open approach to research could provide the impetus to allow traditional disciplinary methods to sit alongside and be combined with newer, less conventional ones. Adopting a playful, open attitude will allow for more creative approaches to research, problem solving, and communication of findings within the sector. Therefore, creativity, playfulness and openness could have benefits at all stages of research.

Within our line of research into higher education experiences and academic identities, we are fusing existing methodological and theoretical paradigms with more creative, playful and artistic approaches more commonly associated with sociological or anthropological research and performance-based disciplines such as dance and drama. We think that research approaches within higher education can benefit from such fusions of potentially unconnected, different disciplines. Whilst we appreciate that such approaches are not new or innovative in other fields, in higher education they are not the norm, and as such can garner interest. We seek to incorporate creativity and playfulness throughout all stages of our research work. To us, being creative means to engage with the research tools that are available from a range of disciplines and to playfully connect what may otherwise not be linked. We draw on multiple influences from a range of disciplines, and playfully adapt research methods to the particular context needed; just as children will play with the toys and in the environment that they find around them. For us, creativity is about bringing something new, something fun, something playful and is something we try to keep present from initial consideration of a new problem, to the data generation processes through to analysis and dissemination. However, in this paper in keeping with the focus on methods, we are choosing to concentrate on what this means at the data collection stage.

In order to frame this attitude of creativity, playfulness and openness, we will provide a brief delineation of the higher education research field and methods. In this context we introduce the

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Deleuzoguattarian concept of rhizomes and assemblages to provide the grounding for what we mean by creativity and playfulness. We draw upon our own work on embodied academic identity and trainee teachers' perceptions of their placement experiences in order to critically explore the benefits and potential pitfalls of incorporating this creativity and playfulness into higher education research.

Delineating higher education research

Higher education research is not a single project or product, but constitutes an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2016) of ideas and thoughts. Since the 1990s the sector has seen rapid developments and in this context a wider group of academics have become interested in researching aspects of higher education. These individuals often remain only loosely connected to a higher education research department or institute (Rumbley et al., 2014). The sheer complexity and dimension of higher education research is exemplified in Harland's (2012) categorisation of contributors to higher education research into seven major groups: "education department researchers, research institute professionals, part-timers, disciplinary education researchers, disciplinary specialists, academic developers and administrators" (p.704). Depending on academics' disciplinary and professional backgrounds, the foci for and methods used in higher education research are equally diverse. This diversity and dispersal have led to higher education being considered as an "open-access discipline" (Harland, 2012, p.708) or "a series of, somewhat overlapping, communities of practice" (Tight, 2004, p.409). Both concepts highlight the range of disciplinary backgrounds influencing researchers' epistemological and ontological frameworks and interests in specific areas of higher education research. It is within the context of a researchers' disciplinary foundation that higher education research develops (Haggis, 2008), even if the field itself may not be fully defined or clarified (Clegg, 2012). Difficulties in defining the field of study and the contexts of researchers have led to higher education research being considered as "a field without a clear intellectual, methodological, or disciplinary center" (Altbach, 2014, p.1319). With the possible exception of phenomenography (Tight, 2013), there is no single methodological approach that would embody higher education research (Tight, 2014). There have been individual attempts to reframe existing approaches: the use of literary analysis (Kelly, 2013), philosophical stances (Golding, 2013), multi-scale methodologies (Noyes, 2013), systematic review methodologies (Bearman et al., 2012), autobiography (Pitman, 2013), narrative approaches derived from philosophy and anthropology (Scutt & Hobson, 2013) and approaches adapted from Art and Design research (Trowler, 2013) have been promoted as relevant alternatives to existing methods (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013).

However, if the characteristic that unifies higher education research is the diversity of its researchers' disciplinary backgrounds, then we have to ask ourselves whether committing to even

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one particular group of accepted theories or methods is something that we should aim for? Would such a judgement be dependent on the multi-various goals and objectives of higher education research? Who would legitimately make such a judgment? And would not any such judgement limit the potential of higher education research? And yet, such judgements are made every time a researcher is directed away from a more creative method or theory in case it is seen as 'less rigorous' purely because it is not a traditional approach. Such directions push researchers from considering each problem creatively and embracing an open stance to theory and method in order to progress knowledge development, theoretical development and to find solutions.

We argue that as higher education researchers we need to develop a stronger sense of self, and that this would constitute the basis for a more significant epistemological and ontological viewpoint. After all, it has been observed that within educational research in general (Bridges, 1999) and within higher education research in particular (Tight, 2004), epistemological and ontological positions remain largely implicit. Instead of considering higher education research as fragmented and in need of unification, it could be interpreted as an interconnected ecosystem, which all researchers contribute to, using their particular strengths and disciplinary foundations (Harland, 2012, p.709).

The task of the researcher is to relate to and explore these "problematic phenomena as hot spots" (MacLure, 2011, p.1003). In Deleuzoguattarian terms research foci and analytical hot spots represent rhizomes, which in turn lead to further explorations. A rhizome is defined as a rootstock, much like a ginger root, where every area can potentially grow a new strand or root. As such, the rhizome does not have a "beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2016, p.26). If we were to apply a Deleuzoguattarian concept to higher education, the epistemological and ontological foundation implied would be that higher education research never leads to an ultimate, final truth, but allows for further developments. Through that, we acknowledge that through our individual disciplinary schooling we add a new avenue to the wider expanse of the discourses in higher education. Higher education research must be understood in its multiplicity of functions, purposes and outcomes. On the one hand, research could lead to immediate changes to practice and evaluations, but on the other, it may only open up more questions rather than providing answers. Higher education research is therefore only a middle, no beginning, no end. The entirety of higher education research is a collage of explorations. It looks at aspects of and things within higher education from a variety of fluid viewpoints, which would result in the formation of new ideas and connections. Indeed, the new knowledge is part of a much wider interconnected net, where "we, and the data, do not pre-exist each other" (MacLure, 2013, p. 229). The determinant in this, are lines of flight, which offers a space for methodological experiments with a variety of philosophies, theories and frameworks.

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Like musicians who jam together respectfully to experiment with new sounds, researchers would be apply the lines of flight as a starting point for their explorations (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). Using this analogy to explain creativity in research, we should respect that jamming musicians need to communicate about their intentions, and to play within an agreed form or structure, else they stop working together and instead play on their own to create a cacophony of noise unrecognisable as music. Similarly, as researchers we have to understand the forms of knowledge, ethics, and the factors that give validity and rigour to our research, so that it is recognisable to our peers.

In practice, the rhizomatic approach and assemblage requires the researcher to adopt a particular attitude of openness, similar to that advocated within phenomenological and lifeworld research paradigms. Within the context of phenomenology this attitude of openness and way of being open relates to the researcher's conscious understanding of their own intrinsic position vis-à-vis a phenomenon, the object of the research. Heidegger (1998) specifies this particular attitude as "curiosity" (p.214) and a "desire" (p.215) to get close to the phenomenon under study. As researchers we need to be curious, interested, and we need to genuinely want to explore what lies ahead and can be uncovered. Openness needs to transcend all areas of research work, the research question, the research situation or context, the phenomenon or field under study and oneself. In this sense openness includes an open, accepting attitude towards the incomplete, the unfinished, and "periods of chaos" (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p.112). Within the context of a Deleuzoguattarian interpretation of higher education research, a focus of study lies in the middle of an expanse within an ecosystem of practices (Harland, 2012, p.709). This attitude of openness towards what might come builds a powerful epistemological and ontological basis. It is this openness that allows for the active incorporation of multidisciplinary and diversity within the research field, as well as the methods and theories applied to the focus of the research. The adoption of openness leads to the understanding that any research within higher education is in itself a hot spot that may or may not be pursued further. Rather than falling slave to existing paradigms and disciplinary training, higher education research would actively seek out those methods that are best placed to explore a specific issue in hand.

With this in mind, we now turn to the exploration of creativity and playfulness within higher education research as an example for an open attitude and the development of the idea of rhizomes in the context of lived experiences within higher education.

Creativity and playfulness in higher education:

Within the current climate of education discourses creativity and playfulness are two concepts that are often used to infuse enthusiasm amongst students and raise their interest in learning contexts. Research into creativity and playfulness highlights the benefit and necessity of play and creativity

in relation to learning and understanding, especially in formative years of education in order to develop and practise problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Lieberman, 2014). Within higher education discourses playfulness is often subsumed in the multiple definitions of creativity, which is becoming central to teaching transferrable skills aimed at better student employability in the long-term (Cole et al., 1999). However, although they are interrelated to an extent, creativity and playfulness are not synonyms. There is a general consensus that creativity is related to “novelty and originality combined with utility and value” (Kleiman, 2008, p.209). With this understanding in mind, creativity is generally associated with aesthetics and arts. However, contemporary interpretations of creativity also relate to the process of making or creating something (Kampylis & Valtanen, 2010). On the other hand, within the idea of playfulness creativity is linked to an unfixed purpose, and as such play is a mode of expression (Sicart, 2014). The aesthetics of play does not relate to the objects and the final product as a piece of art, but to the activity of playing; an activity that depends on material objects, spaces and people. In this sense, play is simply one mode of conversation. Like verbal, non-verbal and embodied communication (Wharton, 2009), play is framed by the context of its space, its participants (the players) and its rules. Play disrupts existing norms and expectations.

Creativity and playfulness have already entered the field within social sciences research. Research into lived experiences include the process of creating representations through the use of Lego (Gauntlett, 2007) or the use of metaphors in sandboxes (Mannay & Edwards, 2013). In both cases, the activities remind us of attitudes children would bring to their play. In addition, social sciences draw on art workshops (Tarr et al., 2017) or collaborations between artists and research participants (Bartlett, 2015) to explore personal experiences and social interactions amongst humans. Although such art-based approaches are not without complications (Burge et al., 2016), these approaches often yield rich data, as participants are asked to reduce their experiences to the essence of a phenomenon and then elaborate on their experiences (Finlay, 2008; Finlay, 2015). This approach is based upon the understanding of human experience that borrows from linguistics, semiotics and psychology: multimodality (Jewitt et al., 2016), which in turn takes multiplicity and assemblage as founding principles.

Creativity and playfulness in practice

We (Jennifer and Nicole) have both employed creative and playful approaches in our research, where we have created methodological spaces for experimenting with data generation through the introduction of “playdates” (Jennifer) and “show and tell” sessions (Nicole). These terms have been used deliberately to evoke the non-judgemental acceptance and sharing that is reminiscent of primary school education. This might be exemplified by the idea of “circle time”, where children would gather round in a circle on the floor in order to share their experiences, feelings, the good

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and bad things that need to be commiserated or celebrated and to sort out any problems that are in the class. Jennifer has researched embodied academic identity using interviews in conjunction with drawing activities as well as movement. Nicole has used material representations and metaphors to allow for deeper reflections for her research into trainee teachers' perception of learning and teaching placements.

Jennifer

As part of a study exploring embodied academic identity I used a creative and playful approach to engaging participants and gathering data. I wanted to explore how academics who self-identified as having an embodied practice reflected on issues around whether and how that practice informed their identity, how it impacted on their academic work, and how they reconciled it with their academic identity. If embodied practice is understood as any practice that leads to an increased conscious self-awareness, then by extension there are many different forms of embodied practice. The practices shared by participants included running, dance, yoga, martial arts and meditation among others. In order to explore embodied experience and identity, I felt that it was important to use a research practice that was able to capture the essence and embodied experience of the practices that the participants were using. Meetings took place in studios, away from the office environment, and were on average two hours long. I asked the participants to reflect on their academic identity, to share their embodied practice with me, and to reflect on what it meant to them through drawing, talking, moving and sharing. I was asking them to reflect deeply and personally on their ideas of identity, and so during each meeting it was important to create a sense of authentic dialogue and sharing with each participant (Brown & Danaher, 2017). I decided to draw on my doctoral work with children (Leigh J., 2012; 2017; forthcoming) in order to consciously bring in a playful element to the work. This seemed congruent with both the research questions and my background in movement therapy (Hartley, 1989) and authentic movement (Adler, 2002), where visual and creative methods are used to allow reflection, processing and integration of experience.

Drawing and mark making is an avenue that is used to allow expression of views and experiences (Clark & Moss, 2001). It can encourage active participation in the research, whilst allowing participants to discover what they believe to be important (Punch, 2002). I ensured that the materials available were high-quality, so that it felt special, and encouraged the participants to pick them up and try them out (Coad, 2007). Although this study was with adults and not children, the act of drawing or creating can still be seen as a process of learning and research (Hay & Pitchford, 2016). When my first participant arrived and saw the studio space; which was bright, with windows looking out onto green lawns, blue skies, a clean wooden floor and with a scattering of cushions, three different colours of A3 size paper, oil pastels, graffiti double-brush pens, charcoal

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and pencils, she said that it felt more like a playdate than an interview. In a sense she was exactly right, and the phrase “playdate” seemed evocative of the essence of joy, creativity and play that I wanted the participants to engage in with me as they explored whether and how their embodied practice shaped their identity and academic work. I had 12 one-to-one playdates with participants, and one more with two participants, where we discussed some of the themes that had arisen from the study, and worked together to make a collage (see figure 1).



Figure 1 exploring academic identity

The resulting data were multimodal and included video footage, drawings, representations, transcripts and my own reflective journal. The analytical process was inevitably complex. For example, the video footage ended up being over 18 hours. In order to edit it I sought help from an anthropological film maker, Catriona Anne Blackburn. Rather than engage an editor to cut the film to tell the stories that I saw from the study, instead I decided to work with someone who would also input creatively into the experience, and handed over the footage with initially only the instructions for Catriona to tell the stories that she saw. This method of analysis, of picking out and using those elements that speak to us draws heavily on Maggie MacLure’s work (MacLure, 2003) where she encourages researchers to explicitly focus on what interests us. I took an autoethnographic stance (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) throughout the data collection, analysis and dissemination of the project as I was very aware that my own

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understanding and positionality were very much a part of the stories I would see and tell in the data. The stories that Catriona saw were different from those that I had picked out to write about, and initially I felt quite vulnerable that I had no control over what footage she would use or not. Of course, this was not the case, as we worked on a video essay together (Leigh & Blackburn, 2017) which included additional footage of us talking about the process of making the film, and some of the ethical and analytical issues that we both experienced. The resulting essay has been screened at a higher education symposium, a performing arts symposium, and has been submitted to an international conference on academic identity, a screening at a cinema, and a peer-reviewed video journal. The creative nature of the research rippled through the whole study, incorporating the design, the research approach and methods, the analysis and now the dissemination, with the outputs blurring the line between artistic, creative formats such as exhibitions, performance and screenings and traditional academic articles and chapters.

Nicole

For my research into trainee teachers' perceptions of their teaching placements, I focused on the use of metaphors and representations. Within teacher education, reflective practice is very much embedded into the curriculum as a compulsory element (Richardson, 1990), as it is thought that reflections provide the required link between theory and practice (Schön, 1987) to enable trainee teachers to develop their professional practice systematically. However, reflective practice is notoriously difficult to teach (Rogers, 2001), as there is no uniform understanding of what reflections are and because true reflections require a deep insight into one's own assumptions and knowledge. As a consequence, reflective thoughts often remain superficial and refer to immediate realities instead of providing a holistic view of experiences. For my research into the perception of placements, I was not interested in individual incidents and events, but the overall experience within schools. Therefore, I decided to apply a more playful approach to my data generation. In response to my questions such as "Who are you as a teacher?", "What was your learning journey like?" and "What was your placement like?", I asked the trainee teachers to provide an object or create a model that for them would best represent their experiences. These objects and models



were then shared with peers in reflective "show and tell" sessions, where the trainee teachers verbalised the interpretations of their objects. (Figures 2,3,4).

Figures 2,3,4 representing the learning journey through a placement

The three images Figures 2,3,4 demonstrate the outcomes of one such reflective practice session, where trainee teachers explored their learning journey through a



placement. The trainee teachers highlighted that initially their understanding of teaching was very much one of the teacher as authority who would instil knowledge into students. Over the course of the term, however, they developed the understanding that learning depends on a variety of influences and factors, which are represented by the multicoloured-bricks. Also, they highlighted how the classroom and teaching and learning needed to be student-centred, represented by the elf with the teddy, but allowed for many learning opportunities on the part of the students and the teacher, represented by the windows and doors. However, the trainee teachers also highlighted the many challenges of a placement experience along the way, which was expressed in the form of death, the skeleton with the scythe standing over the narrow bridge above the river of learning.

The process of sharing and explaining the models and objects is intrinsic to the success of this method. Playing with LEGO® or bringing in individual objects was seen as a playful, light-hearted activity. However, the trainee teachers soon expressed that these particular approaches to reflection deepened their thoughts and demanded of them to go “to the thing itself” (Husserl, 1970). Through identifying the absolute essence of their experiences, trainee teachers were able to practise and apply phenomenology without specific training or instruction. The verbalisation of condensing experiences to the essence and subsequently elaborating on those initial ideas is a more organic process of meaning-making and led to thoughtful insights. the trainee teachers reported that it was the playful work with creativity that enabled them to make connections regarding their own experiences and reflections they would not otherwise have made. The non-judgmental environment of a “show and tell” session meant that trainee teachers felt safe to develop their thoughts as they were going along rather than having to provide a correct answer immediately.

Critical evaluation of creative and playful methods in higher education research

The previous illustrations which employ creative and playful methods show that these approaches enable participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences. Even participants who may not be

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used to, or who may not have internalised reflective practices, attempt to seek the core of their experiences and are actively applying the phenomenological attitude of searching for an essence of a phenomenon. At the same time, however, the activities themselves are experienced as intensely enjoyable; it can be fun. This element of fun again allows the participants to go deeper into their own experience and process and share more and richer elements than they might otherwise. This phenomenon of playfulness leading to serious, thoughtful and productive outcomes has been acknowledged (Statler et al., 2011) in relation to research using LEGO® Serious Play®, which is regularly employed within the context of business and enterprise training and development days.

Within this context of deep reflections and the participants' readiness to share experiences more openly, we do need to consider the consequences of using creative and playful approaches. The creative and playful approaches certainly encourage and capture the emotional, sensory and real experiences of participants. However, this can mean that even innocuous subject matter touches on deep and personal stories. When these are shared both the researcher and researched are left vulnerable if they are unable to contain and process those emotions. Whereas a counsellor or therapist would have specialised training, resources and support in order to have boundaries around painful or personal material that is shared (Rogers, 1967), a researcher is unlikely to have the same. This means that issues such as transference, burn-out and knowing when and how to end a relationship with a participant are beyond the scope of many researchers (Leigh A. , 1998). Similarly, a participant may not expect to enter into such a personal and vulnerable space within the bounds of a research project, and without a qualified and experienced person holding the boundaries of that experience to ensure that they are contained, they may be left re-traumatised. Having said that, the creative and playful engagement in non-judgmental environments and contexts is often experienced as cathartic or revelatory.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that there are participants who do not want to play. In Jennifer's project, the call for participants clearly stated that the research study was going to use creative methods. And yet, two participants refused to engage with any visual or creative material at all, and asked not to be filmed. They wanted to shape the meetings away from a playdate and more towards a standard academic interview in which they felt more at home and in control (Burge et al., 2016). The emphasis on visual creative methods may have been an issue, as those who do not perceive themselves to be good at drawing might feel constrained when asked to draw (Buckingham, 2009). Nicole's use of objects and materials is a way round this, as the emphasis is less on the production of "art" and more on the representation of experience. Both approaches were designed to allow for multimodal communication of experience.

Creative and playful methods as in our examples of mark-making, drawing, model-building and developing representations allow for methods of communication that incorporate and use, but do not solely rely on the word. Certain experiences are difficult to express in words. This lack of precision of the word is best exemplified when considering experiences of pain (Scarry, 1985; Brown, 2017). Pain can, for example, be described as throbbing, stabbing, burning or pulsating. If a common experience like pain is as difficult to put in words, then how shall we be able to describe what learning or embodiment or identity are? Through using creative and playful approaches, we are asking participants to draw on multimodal forms of communication, so that they are able to explore and express their thoughts appropriately. In terms of research work, the analysis of the multimodal data generated through these creative and playful approaches is a definite benefit whilst providing a challenge. These research methods and the resulting data allow the multidisciplinary of experience within higher education to be lived and expressed. The kind of openness needed from both researcher and researched to use these approaches offers new insights, and allows for new connections to be made. The yield of these approaches is richer data, allowing us as researchers to get closer to the experience of our participants. Richer data does not guarantee 'better' outcomes of research, however, if our data more closely represents the real experiences of our participants then we are better able to see it as valid, reliable, and accurate. The analysis of such data may not neatly fall into one theoretical framework, and instead the application of several such frameworks allows for insights that would otherwise not be gained. It is hard to imagine a scenario where a playful research project results in only standard text-based data that can easily fit into known and accepted modes of analysis. Instead, a researcher using more playful and creative approaches is likely to be using analytical and theoretical frameworks that are less traditional within higher education, and instead fit more easily into arts-based research and practices. For example, Practice as Research is a mode of working that is commonly found in performance and arts-based subjects, and incorporates accepted ways of working and writing about practice (Trimingham, 2002), which is not often adopted within education. The interest in creative approaches to education research seems to be growing, with increasing numbers interested in the affective, the sensory, and rich and deep experiences of their participants, and it may be that Practice as Research will move into the social sciences from the arts.

We continue to argue that openness is necessary to create an interdisciplinary melting pot of combining methods. However, we are also aware that such fusions may lead to non-experts employing approaches, which they may not be very experienced with. Such experiences should not be judged as mistakes, clumsiness or unprofessional behaviour. If we return to our musical analogy it might be that we need to play with an instrument in order to learn how to play it, and in so doing we not only increase our skill, but also discover interesting new ways to make sounds that

we can later use when playing. For example, when Jennifer filmed her playdates, she mostly used her laptop. The resulting footage was not always the best quality. The angle was fixed, and did not always show both her and the participants. The sound quality and lighting were often poor. Two sessions were lost when the integral camera failed. These technical difficulties impacted the choices that were made in the video essay. However, they did not impact on the quality of the research project, as these methods were used in addition to digital recorders, and transcriptions of the meetings. Jennifer's reflections around the difficulties of dealing with the film footage led to her bringing in an expert and producing more and different outputs from those originally envisioned. Similar technical issues can occur when participants are asked to send in images as with Nicole's work. If the images are not of sufficient quality due to lighting, camera quality, or shakiness for inclusion in an article for example, difficult choices have to be made. It may not be possible to ask the participant to retake the photograph. Instead, it may be necessary to recreate the image which of course will not be identical to the original. Of course, these are issues that apply to all researchers relying on video-recordings or photographs. However, likelihood is that non-experts and less experienced researchers experiment with methods and approaches that may potentially lead to more 'failures' within research. This is not to say that we should accept poor standards of research if we are employing creative methods, far from it. This is where openness and acceptance are again crucial, as research cannot be merely successful enterprises, but must allow for attempts to find the best possible approach to the problem or focus on hand. We suggest building in contingency into these projects, to allow for diversions, new knowledge and the time to make what might be initially considered as a mistake into a positive outcome.

Another issue to consider is that the ethical processes and procedures that surround academic research do not necessarily fit well with these creative approaches because they do not consider issues around how and when a participant might choose to take ownership of their data and who it might belong to, particularly when data is images, footage, or material created by them. Although most research ethics processes would seek to ensure that participants' identities are anonymised and protected, that may not be the case with film, or with objects that may be identifiable to their owner. Similarly, if a participant creates a piece of art that they love and want to be identified with, should they be given credit for it, or does that data belong to the researcher? If the data is exhibited publicly, who gets the credit? In part this would depend on how participatory the research was, and the agreements made between the researcher and the researched, however it may be that not all eventualities can easily be covered by standard consent forms and processes.

Authorship and ownership extends beyond the participants to co-producers such as film makers and editors, and curators. In Jennifer's work she gave the film maker a voice and co-authorship of the resulting video essay. One lesson learned was that if film is to be employed within future

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research then an academic film maker should be engaged from the outset. This not only helps to ensure quality but also allows the editor to have more room to shape the footage and capture moments that might be missed if the researcher is attempting to be both film maker and interviewer. However, it brings in another dimension to filming, as the camera becomes attached to a person and is no longer a static, unseen eye. The role of that film maker is also interesting, in that in Jennifer's project she chose to give an equal voice to Catriona, and co-authorship on the result. This is not always the case, as many film editors work on a basis whereby they are paid to edit footage, and not given credit or authorship over the resulting film, similar to the artisans who create the art of conceptual artists such as Anthony Gormley who conceive the ideas for their large installation pieces and are not involved in their fabrication and outsource it to crafts people. Questions of ownership are interesting. Should the authorship belong to those who appear, or those who edit and create the final version? Does a documentary belong to those who appear in it, or those who edit or produce it? Similarly, with Nicole's work, if she were to create an installation of the objects brought in by her participants should she give them credit in the final piece, or take full ownership?

Linked to this is the dissemination of creative and playful research. Data that include objects, art works and film may be difficult to write about in standard and accepted academic journals and publications. There are often limits on the numbers of colour or black and white images that are allowed to be included in print. Unless they focus on accompanying text they may not be considered to be dealing with data that is 'real' enough to be considered valid. Researchers employing these approaches may struggle to find suitable and reputable outlets for their work, or end up employing more standard research techniques such as focus groups or transcripts in order to have textual data to talk about and to analyse in accepted outputs. Within higher education, Practice as Research is not yet an accepted paradigm, and exhibitions, screenings and installations, whilst they may provide welcome opportunities for research impact and public engagement, may not be acceptable for standardised research assessments in frameworks such as the UK's REF outside of creative arts departments. Being at the cutting edge of research is seen to be a good thing, and yet being at the forefront of the push may mean being seen less as a ground-breaker and innovator and more as a risk-taker even though the techniques they are employing may be accepted within other more open disciplines such as art, drama, dance or anthropology. Similarly, whilst interdisciplinarity is encouraged, it is a challenge to fit within the framework of research assessment, and pursuing it can be a risk for an individual researcher.

Concluding thoughts

There are many ways in which an attitude of creativity and playfulness can positively impact on higher education research. It can be directly part of the data collection methods and process, as

shown in both Jennifer's and Nicole's work, where a conscious decision to engage creatively and playfully with research participants leads to rich and varied data, and enjoyable and honest research experiences. Creativity and playfulness can also be a research approach as well as direct research methods. It is possible to draw on work with children such as mosaics of evidence (Clark & Moss, 2001), to develop a multi-faceted picture of experience to allow for a range of ways participants can express themselves. This is particularly useful with those who struggle to have their voices heard, due to issues of power, capacity or privilege. However, it can also be a powerful way to engage with the unspoken stories and richer streams of experience that even those who are eloquent might not instinctively tell when faced with a questionnaire, survey or standard interview question. The stories we choose to tell about ourselves on the surface are different to those that directly tap into our emotional and sensory experiences. In turn, the data generated by these creative approaches may affect the audience and the researchers in ways that words or text alone may not. However, untraditional data from films, paintings or images lead to artistic and challenging questions when it comes to analysis and dissemination. Should we analyse the mark-makings of a research participant with the same frameworks we use for visual art? Should we subject footage or images shot by or of participants to an aesthetic analysis? How should we present such data? Is it enough to let it stand alone, as art or representations of experience? Or do we need to provide a written commentary, an exegesis in the terms of Practice as Research, that explains, rationalises and analyses the impact on the researcher, the audience and the knowledge created?

There are also indirect ways in which creativity and playfulness can be of use to higher education research. As we set out initially, there are many areas of focus within higher education, and not all are suitable for artistic and creative research methods. Whereas those areas that look to investigate lived experience might be ripe for directly introducing creativity and playfulness in order to enrichen the research experience, not all researchers or participants are prepared to take that leap. However, an open and playful attitude can also be a much subtler thing, that results in an openness towards different and varied approaches towards research rather than fixed theoretical or disciplinary ideas that bound and constrain the acquisition of new knowledge. To take two examples, if we want to investigate student experience, rather than using a questionnaire with limited response categories, we might be inspired by Jane Bacon's (2010) work using Authentic Movement as a methodology, and use the art of witnessing to notice and to record the unconscious physical and bodily reactions of participants to our research questions. These might tell us more than written responses. Or if we want to investigate the impact of a new teaching approach, as well as looking at attainment and a statistical analysis of results and attendance, we could consider using playful focus groups to allow us to capture student perceptions of their experience to see whether these match up to academic expectations. We are not arguing that all

research has to be mixed-methods or interdisciplinary in nature, instead that researchers need to be careful not to be constrained by their disciplinary and theoretical norms, and hidebound by the expectations of the field of higher education as belonging purely to social science. This is particularly the case for higher education researchers whose foundational research training may have occurred within specific disciplinary contexts. We can be open to drawing on methods and approaches that attract us, that intrigue us, and that provide new and unexpected ways of considering our research problems. Humans are multi-faceted, with emotions, feelings, sensations and physical ways of being in the world. If we limit our research and approaches to those that are expected and accepted within our field, and to standardised ways of eliciting information then we are limiting ourselves and the field of higher education and the possibilities of constructing new knowledge.

If we are fixed in our ideas and methods of how to gather data and approach research then we might end up with fixed and restrained views of our problem that tell us only part of what we might be able to find out if we opened out our focus. If we restrict ourselves to analysing and disseminating only the textual, then we can only ever get one idea of the world, the one in which words are the most valued way of communication. By acknowledging the idea of multimodality, of other ways and means of communicating and expressing ourselves, we immediately become open to a vast array of additional information and data if we are able to encourage it to be expressed and then captured. Creative and playful methods call on us and our participants to utilise, express and convey these additional modes of communication. We can use creative and playful approaches to capture this information, and then need to be open to new and various ways of analysing and disseminating it. Whether we as higher education researchers directly call on creativity and playfulness within our research methods or not, if we are open to new approaches and assemblages, then we may find that we have new questions and areas of research opening up to us. The work and the participants may take us in areas that we had not even conceived of, even though the techniques they are employing may be accepted within other more open disciplines such as art, drama, dance or anthropology. To return to the analogy of rhizomes, if we only look for growth in one direction or constrain the growing conditions such that growth can only occur in that one direction, then we are closing off the multiplicity of directions and ways that growth could take.

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