

Play and Creativity as Extra-Curricular Festivities: A Case Study Following the Winchester Play and Creativity Festival

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Introduction

The University of Winchester has completed the second annual Play and Creativity Festival in April 2018 and is preparing for the 2019 Festival¹. The Play and Creativity Festival brings together staff and students for a week of playful and creative events, which happen all across campus in both familiar and new spaces. The Play and Creativity Festival team organised the event, pulled together a programme for all the Festival's sessions and led on marketing and promotion, which can be seen on our Festival website, www.playandcreativityfestival.wordpress.com. Throughout the event students were engaged as champions alongside staff within each faculty, galvanising support and inspiring session leaders. This paper will provide a case study of its practice, track its developments and look towards the future of The Play and Creativity Festival.

The *purpose* of the Play and Creativity Festival is to celebrate, inspire, explore and enjoy the numerous ways play and creativity can permeate university life. The *process* it uses to achieve this aim is by organising a weeklong event comprising a multitude of individual sessions, hosted by staff, students and the Student Union. The Festival was facilitated by both staff and student Play Champions working together in partnership to facilitate the Festival's activities. The *product* of the Festival has led to the creation of an extra-curricular festival of activities, a new student engagement initiative in the form of student Play Champions, which emulates the Digital Champion model (Harvey, 2018), and an opportunity for students to design the marketing material for the Festival to add to their professional portfolio. This form of student engagement in the wider campus community offered new pathways to engagement and prompts for discussion to work alongside other activities to enrich staff-student educational experiences (Astin, 1984). Through creating meaningful opportunities for staff to creatively engage students and through empowering students as champions, the Play and Creativity Festival offered something different and exciting in the Winchester calendar. This paper offers a perspective on creativity and play as a means to engage students and staff in a higher education environment, through the Play and Creativity Festival and student Play Champions.

James and Brookfield (2014: 3), state in the opening of their book, 'Imagination is the key to human progress. Without the capacity to imagine a different world that is more beautiful than the one in which we live, change is impossible.' Vital to the success of student engagement is that it remains imaginative, creative and flexible. Student

¹ Since publication the University of Winchester has run a third Play and Creativity Festival in 2019, with greater engagement from staff and students. We had 21 Play Champions who led sessions and co-facilitated the event, determined the direction of the festival and fed into key decisions. We had 48 activities across the festival offering a range of different opportunities, which were delivered by a mixture of staff and students. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*
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engagement must continue to evolve and flourish in new ways, engaging different students through different means; reproducing more of the same will only engage the same students (Dunne, 2017). An innovative and creative student engagement initiative that engaged various types of students has been born in such a way from the university's Play and Creativity Festival. The opportunity of being a Student Play Champion attracted students from across the university in a meaningful and imaginative way. This kind of participation was previously untapped in our current academic, research and volunteering focused student engagement initiatives. The Play and Creativity Festival is dedicated to striving towards a higher education landscape that is more exciting and engaging in its pedagogy. However, promoting play and creativity as normative in higher education is not without its difficulties, it demands a culture shift. Norman Jackson (2006) suggests this culture shift can be achieved through changing the prevailing paradigm in which the culture is propagated. Through celebrating creativity and play in higher education, it can be shared across the institution as best practice to emulate. The student Play Champions help to shift the culture by promoting these activities as experiences they thrive within and support in their institution. Oliver et al (2006), produced a research study on student experiences and perceptions of creativity. The students in this study noted that creativity provided a freedom from routine, an expression of imagination, opportunities to take risks, and felt creativity was an infectious aspect of life. Such perceptions are echoed in the sentiments from the student Play Champions and other participants of the Festival, which will be discussed in the evaluative outcomes section of this paper.

Playful and creative practices in higher education have never been more important in a climate that is driven by metrics and focused on value-for-money. James (2017) describes the pleasures of play to be an antidote to such pressures. Stuart Brown defines play to be 'an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and a sense of time' (Brown, 2009: 60). Adults operating outside a playful environment can be self-critical, competitive, perfectionistic and preoccupied with obtaining the highest scoring end result (Brown, 2009). Whilst these attributes can be seen to be conducive to high attainment, play enables students to practice skills in an environment free from the pressures associated with the feeling of failure that is attributed to the grades they receive. It also leads to a sense of community and belonging for students and helps them to see other people's points of view through learning from their peers (Walsh and Clementson, 2017). These are all attributes of play and creativity in the student experience that can positively affect the retention, attainment, satisfaction and enable students to develop the skills they need to succeed in their future employment (Walsh et al, 2017). Students engaging in creative activities will be generating ideas, sensing opportunities to develop themselves, giving and receiving constructive criticism, which will provide the skills that will influence their impact on an economy which thrives on innovation and creativity (Jackson, 2013). Play and creativity in the higher education landscape supports students to flourish during and beyond their higher education experience.

The Festival's Development

The Play and Creativity Festival started in 2017 and offered the opportunity for staff to contribute any creative or playful practices from their teaching or research, to a

weeklong Festival celebration. Staff were invited to host and organise their own sessions in a time that suited them. There was little structure, beyond a timetable that was dictated by the session hosts, little restriction on what could be in the Festival, other than its need for a playful or creative element, and a little group at the centre to bring the timetable together and promote the event. There was, however, huge amounts of enthusiasm at the institution for the experimental nature of the event. Staff from across the university contributed over 65 sessions of playful and creative activities that would usually stay within their classrooms and not shared with the wider university community. For example, there were sessions that raced maggots, from a tutor who specialises in forensic entomology, and sessions that had participants catching flashing tennis balls in the dark, from a psychology tutor undertaking research on cyclist safety lights and reaction time. These are examples of already fantastically creative and playful pedagogic practices happening all over the institution within the curriculum, but not being shared with people beyond their programme. The Play and Creativity Festival offered the opportunity to open up the classroom doors, share and celebrate the playful and creative practices with both students and staff, who would otherwise not know or see this work happening. The attendance for the sessions differed greatly depending on the type of activity. For example, a session facilitated by a sports coaching lecturer teaching mobility through playing with balloons, had an audience of approximately 30 students and seven staff, whereas a session drawing squiggles in the spirit of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott drew an audience of predominantly staff. However, there were also sessions that attracted staff and students evenly, such as the exploration of eighteenth century hand gestures and performance. The ratio between staff and students varied greatly, but as the Festival was dedicated to engaging the whole university community in play and creativity, irrespective of position or role, the engagement from students and staff working together in any capacity was seen to be a success. The Festival achieved its mission to turn what was once great curricular creativity, into an extra-curricular opportunity for all to engage.

The Festival has now become an annual event at the end of semester two and has seen further developments in 2018. One such example is the creation of a student engagement opportunity, in the form of becoming a student Play Champion. The role entailed attending the Festival, contributing to multiple sessions throughout the week and encouraging other members of the university community to engage with the sessions. The student Play Champions applied for the role by submitting an application outlining what they could offer and were asked to attend an informal interview to assess their interests, understanding of the role and enthusiasm. The Play Champions were invited to attend a briefing event to further outline their roles, the aims and objectives of the Festival, and also as an opportunity to offer their ideas as to how they might contribute to the event. The Play Champions were also consulted for their thoughts on the direction of the Festival at multiple meetings throughout the year. The Play Champions were Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) accredited and paid a bursary for their time and effort. They acted as ambassadors for the Festival, speaking to both staff and students on campus to engage them with the Festival and programme of events. They were also welcome to attend any Festival session that looked interesting to them, so they could participate in and enjoy the Festival. Engaging students as co-facilitators of the Festival meant that students brought their expertise and energy to the event. The eight student Play Champions came from across the institution, some were students

who said they could directly feed their experience to their course, such as Primary Education, some came from courses without any perceived direct linkage to the Festival's theme. One such student said, in reference to a session on abstract painting, 'it's nice to be bad at something' and once in a while. It took the pressure off of striving for perfection and enabled students to experiment without rules. Having the Play Champions' support proved invaluable. They invited peers and classmates to attend the Festival and gained support from other students to host sessions.

Other ways students were involved with the Festival included a logo competition, whereby students were asked to submit an entry to the competition for a logo for the Festival (the winning logo can be seen in Appendix 1). The logo was used on all the publicity materials for the Festival and on the t-shirts given to Play Champions and the wider Festival team. The winner received a voucher, which was presented by the Vice Chancellor at the opening ceremony of the Festival. Students were also invited to create some teaser trailers for the Festival, which were used to promote the Festival and explore the theme of play and creativity. The teaser trailers were posted on Twitter and on our Festival website. The Student Union also hosted some sessions including a session called Drama Games, in which the Vice-President Education and another student explored the primacy of play and creativity in theatre. The Student Union's support was integral to the promotion of the event, as they posted through their social media channels about the Festival and invited engagement from the student societies. Their support led to performances from the Busking Society and the student music group Showstoppers at the Festival finale.

In 2018 we decided to create a central hub for the Festival, rather than run sessions in a more dispersed manner. This was to give the Festival greater visibility and provide a base for multiple activities. To this end we had a Play Tent, a marquee on the university field, which housed on-going sessions throughout the week joint-led by student Play Champions and staff. These sessions included: Jewellery making, ceramic painting, abstract art, no-sew bunting, origami, Warli drawing, geo-mag, LEGO and more. By the end of the week the marquee was covered in the creations from students who had popped in to the tent to celebrate handing their final work in at the end of the semester, or just needed a space to unwind, and staff who needed a space away from the office to be mindful and creative. Photos of these creations can be seen in Appendix 2. The introduction of the Play Tent in 2018 gave a heart to the Festival, a sense of place and a Festival-come-village-fete aspect to the week. It was great to have a place to display all the creations from the participants. We also had three blank canvases in the Play Tent, which were dedicated to the university's values: Spirituality, Individuals Matter and Compassion. Anyone who entered the tent was invited to add something, no matter how big or small, to the canvas. The final results of this university community collaboration can be seen in Appendix 3.

Outcome

The Play and Creativity Festival took activities which hitherto had been embedded within a programme's curriculum, and confined to the students on that programme, and made them extra-curricular for the whole institution to engage with. The Festival invited students and staff to come along to any session they thought sounded interesting and learn together. The session hosts were the teachers and anyone else in the room was a student, regardless of their position within the university. All

participants in the session were learning through playful and creative means about subjects they were not experts in, removing any previously conceived notions of hierarchy between staff and students within the session. Through this, the Festival sessions emulated the ethos generated in what Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014 :28) describe to be a 'partnership learning community', whereby staff and students were placed in new roles, which challenge the inherent power structures associated with the learning environment. Everyone in the sessions were equally sharing knowledge and exploring new ideas creatively. The sharing of knowledge and dispersal of power were key to the success of the Play and Creativity Festival. Examples of this can be found in the 2018 session entitled 'Playing the Past: The Fall of Rome' created by a history tutor at the university, in which students and staff played a board game to discuss the how the Roman Empire fell, and the 2017 session entitled 'Breaking Code like Sherlock Holmes', where participants were set codes to break using clues, hosted by a professor in English Literature, whose research focuses on the detective novels by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. All attendees in these sessions were novices and all became students as they learnt in creative ways through play.

An evaluation of the Festival revealed positive responses from the varied participants who came to the sessions in the Festival. Participants including: the Vice Chancellor, both Deputy Vice Chancellors, Assistant Vice Chancellor, students, those in academic roles, department of Researching Knowledge Exchange, Marketing, Business Development, Library, Estates, Academic Quality and Development, Administrators, Personal Assistants and Cleaners. They left comments after sessions such as, 'A relaxing and freeing exercise – no standards to live up to and no worries about the result. It opened my mind to what I can do when I don't put pressure on myself' and 'What an immersive experience... stilling, experiential, sensory and connecting to being human. With no distracting, agenda, or purpose' and 'Having a great time! It's great to be trying out these wonderful and creative things!' Further responses stated that they enjoyed 'how it connected all staff, students and tutors from all levels' and gave them 'freedom to express yourself – with nothing to prove!' In an ever-increasing pressurised higher education sector, from all angles and for all who experience it, it is easy to become immersed in the pressures of achievement. The Play and Creativity Festival gave the participants time to escape these pressures and enjoy creativity for creativity's sake. Further proof of its success is the Festival also won a university Senate Learning and Teaching Award in 2017, as decided by a panel from a range of university stakeholders including Senior Management.

Future Festivals

The Play and Creativity Festival's second year has been a great success and we are looking forward to the third iteration in 2019. The Festival is unique in its operations and creative to its core in its method to engage students and staff. The introduction of the new student engagement initiative, in the form of student Play Champions, has been an invaluable asset to the Festival. It will provide an integral aspect to future Festivals, alongside the successful experience of engaging students to make videos and design work for the Festival. The student Play Champions have described their experience in the role as hugely influential to their university experience and thoughts for their future employment. The student logo competition winner has also

been able to use the Festival as an example of her work in her professional portfolio. However, there have been lessons learnt for the future, as with any new student engagement initiative. Firstly, for future iterations of the Festival, it would be useful to capture the students' feedback and experience formally through a model that measures the development of skills in areas they have identified as wanting development. Ideally this would be captured through providing the Play Champions with a model to map their confidence in certain soft skills before the Festival, to identify some areas they would like to develop as a result of being a Play Champion, and ask them at the end to complete the same measurement tool to map their development. An example of a model that would capture such development could be the R2 Strengths Profile, as explored in the Office for Students funded LEGACY Learning Gain project (LEGACY, 2018). This would provide us with the feedback to ensure their experience as Play Champions is the best it can be and also provide the students with a tool for self-reflection and personally tailored opportunities for growth. We would also set the students specific duties throughout the week, which they would choose, so as to ensure the Play Champions are evenly spread throughout the Festival activities and developing in the skills they have identified. Overall, the Play Champion's engagement meant the Festival was able to connect with a more wide-reaching audience, as they were able to engage their peers with the activities across the week. They were an asset to the Festival and moving forward we have learnt lessons and would like to further improve their experience of being a Play Champion.

For the future, we would also like to work more with the student societies across campus, who may be willing to host taster sessions or increase the number of performance events. There is also, as there always will be, more work to be done to engage the wider student and staff body with the Festival's extra-curricular activities across the week. One such way to address this would be to utilise further the networks of our student Play Champions, the Student Union and their societies. Equally, we would like to involve students on programmes that could directly benefit from the experience, such as Events Management and Marketing students. Overall, it has been a pleasure to host an event that has students and staff working together to celebrate play and creativity. Looking to the future, it would be great to further the links with students through embedding their input throughout the fabric of the Festival. We would like to do this through weaving their input more prominently in the Festival by inviting more students to host sessions themselves, or more explicitly asking staff to co-lead their sessions with students. The Play and Creativity Festival has led to the creation of a new student engagement initiative, opportunities for students to develop their design portfolios, broken down barriers to student-staff relationships through situating them in equally novice environments and encouraged creativity to flow in all activities. The Festival will continue developing, as it endeavours to engage more students and staff each year.

Conclusion

The Play and Creativity Festival offered a unique opportunity for student and staff engagement, learning together through play and creativity. It is important in an increasingly pressurised higher education sector to remember the foundations on which education is built: developing learners, providing opportunities for personal growth, inspiring students to engage with their education and the wider world. Play

and creativity are methods through which we can connect with these foundations and inspire students to explore and learn in an environment that facilitates risk-taking and growth mind-sets. The Play and Creativity Festival dedicated a week to engaging students in this manner by creating extra-curricular activities they could attend in new spaces. Building on this ethos, the newly established student engagement initiative, Student Play Champions, were key to the success and were formally recognised in the importance of play and creativity through a bursary-paid and HEAR accredited opportunity for students to engage with and advocate play and creativity. Play and creativity are vital for student engagement, and the Play and Creativity Festival concretises this through celebrating its importance with staff and students.

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Appendix

Appendix 1



Play and Creativity Festival 2018

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

