

STORIES OF HOPE

REIMAGINING EDUCATION

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8. Playful Higher Education futures: Hopeful and utopian thinking in pedagogy

Kim Holflod

Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of playful Higher Education as a space infused with hopeful and utopian voices that resist prevailing trends of efficiency, performativity, and individualisation. Through a thematic analysis of playful voices, it envisions alternative futures for Higher Education that prioritise communality and relationality. Drawing on insights from a three-year, design-based research project involving playful learning experiments and interventions in interprofessional contexts, the chapter highlights how playful education can act as an imaginative utopia, promoting a hopeful pedagogy. Ultimately, it argues that embracing playfulness in Higher Education is both a hopeful and utopian endeavour, offering a meaningful path toward transforming and improving the educational system.

Keywords: playfulness; Higher Education; hope; utopia; pedagogy

Prologue: Framing playful higher education

In recent years, playful approaches to learning and pedagogy have emerged in Higher Education research and practice. Drawing on play characteristics, playful Higher Education emphasises imagination, wonder and joy while harnessing elements from, for example, creative, experimental, aesthetic, and relational pedagogies. The growing interest in playful Higher Education comes to light through numerous recent scholarly books and articles (Boysen et al., 2022; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Jensen et al., 2021; Whitton & Moseley, 2019) and impactful research programmes (e.g., the nationwide Playful Learning Program in Denmark involving all six Danish university colleges). In this chapter, I initially consider the state of playful Higher Education and the problems it seeks to solve. From here, I explore why there is a current need for alternative ways of imagining Higher Education and, thus, its future(s). I furthermore strive to frame and discuss playful Higher Education as deeply connected to and permeated by both hopeful and utopian voices that rebel against the contemporary educational tendencies and requirements of effectivity, performativity, and individualisation (Ball, 2003; Jensen et al., 2021; Nørgård et al., 2017). Through a thematic examination of *voices* of hope and utopia in playful Higher Education, the chapter presents concepts and reflections aimed at envisioning what Higher Education could become in a *probable* or even *preferable* future (Dunne & Raby, 2013), with educators and learners engaging in Higher Education inspired by voices of playfulness, hope, and utopia (Holflod, 2022b; Nørgård, 2021). In this chapter, the concept of *voices* plays a significant role in understanding and reflecting on playful Higher Education. Drawing on dialogic communication theory (Holflod, 2022c), I approach voices as themes, discourses, ideologies, or perspectives, rather than simply utterances—or the concrete acts of speaking. Discussing playful voices of hope and utopia, hence focuses on the multiplicity, entanglements, and interplays of diverse voices that influence each other, and how they might be paradoxical and tensional in today's Higher Education landscape (Holflod, 2022b).

Playful Higher Education generally relates to pedagogical themes and learning approaches drawing from creative learning, innovative

learning, experimenting and joyful approaches, relational and affective spaces, and active, embodied participation (Boysen et al., 2022; Holflod, 2022a; Jensen et al., 2021). It extends from a realisation that at present Higher Education is riddled with individuality, performativity, metric-driven thinking, and marketisation—or what is often attributed to the neo-liberal university (Nørgård, 2021). This is discussed, for example, in relation to poor (academic) wellbeing or stressful educational processes that lead to a soulful struggle that changes both individuals and collectives, teachers and students, in education, and not only what they do but also who they are (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Approaching Higher Education playfully is, however, more light-hearted and intrinsically hopeful. It opposes those tendencies in Higher Education by dreaming of alternative, desirable educational futures. As such, it also envisions Higher Education utopias of what might be achievable, probable, preferable, or even preposterous.

Voice 1: Playful voices of hope

In a relatively recent research article, I examined how collaborative playful learning in Higher Education is, at its core, a hopeful pedagogy drawing on both constructionist and imaginative and pretend-based approaches to learning to dwell on future practices and play with anticipations and potential outcomes (Holflod, 2022b, p. 81). Educational researcher Rikke Toft Nørgård argues for the term “hope-punk” to address the inherent hopeful aspirations within Higher Education pedagogy, focusing on radical transformations towards preferable futures (Nørgård, 2022). Hope-punk is a pop-cultural phenomenon, conceptually opposing “grim dark”, and outlines an attitude and belief aimed at imagining better futures in life, education, communities, and societies. It accentuates rebellious strategies of hope, but it is impermanent and something to continuously fight for (Nørgård, 2021; Ramos, 2020). Consequently, playful Higher Education might be conceptualised as pedagogical hope-punk, as continuous whimsical journeys towards desirable educational futures of creativity, experimentation, and relationality that resist the contemporary tendencies in a Higher Education of performativity and individuality (Holflod, 2024) but still aim to enable students to

develop into empowered and knowing professionals who are able to meet the societal demands of the future (Jørgensen et al., 2022).

From 2020 to 2023, I participated in a research project on collaborative playful learning as part of the extensive Playful Learning Programme in Denmark. The project was methodologically guided by design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004; McKenney & Reeves, 2019), and I co-designed playful learning interventions on interdisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration with educators from different Higher Education programmes. We shared and discussed themes, considerations, and perspectives on Higher Education playful learning—and thus also the interplay of multiple voices present in playful Higher Education (Holflod, 2022b). A common and shared educator perspective emphasised the participants, primarily students, as playfellows (Nørgård, 2021) or as participating in communities of play (Thorsted, 2016), potentialising novel ways of relating to each other and imagining different educational futures of communality and relationality. From a practical point of view, this might be facilitated through object-mediated activities where the participants collectively create and share constructions symbolising hopeful futures that evoke not only disciplinary insights but also affective and experiential knowledge, and enable new interpersonal connections and communality (Holflod, 2023b). Accordingly, Julie Borup Jensen et al. (2021, p. 15) propose that “the culture of play is related to the hopes of dreams for the future, where other ways in which educational practices can work and take place align with ideas of sustainable lives”, with the culture of play emphasising not only learning and knowledge but also human flourishing and a sense of belonging in Higher Education as a response to the increasingly individualised and goal-driven educational present.

Voice 2: Playful voices of utopia

The previous brief exploration of playful voices of hope implied that hope connects to utopian desire and longing; a deeply felt hope for other and better futures. In Higher Education, educational philosopher Ronald Barnett (2022) argues that utopias must be feasible and thus achievable, and not only “dreamable”. This perspective on “educational

real utopias”, a preexisting concept in utopia discourse, is, however, contested, as it might lack the holistic, critical, and imaginative potential of utopian thinking and doing within pedagogy and education (Levitas, 2013; Webb, 2016), with Darren Webb (2016) criticising the real utopias of domesticating utopian imagination. Working towards holistic and imaginative utopias is connected to what British sociologist Ruth Levitas (2013, p. xii) addresses as an underlying desire to be “otherwise”, that the most common objections to utopia lie in animosities towards making the world otherwise (Levitas, 2013, p. 7), and that “utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living, and as such is braided through human culture”.

Research on playful Higher Education discusses the utopian elements of playful learning as problematic (Knudsen & Rasmussen, 2023), empowering (Holflod, 2023b), and feasible (Nørgård, 2021) in educational and pedagogical environments. It accentuates a continuous longing and desire to think and do education *otherwise*, while problematising the current educational practices. Nørgård (2021) argues that while the playful university is still a utopia, current developments and practices reveal that it is reachable and provides opportunities for rethinking what education might become. A recent article on playful learning designs with students from teacher and social education in Denmark shows its feasibility and potential for novel learning and socialisation through the students’ shared imagination and tangible constructions (Lyager, 2021). When collectively modelling and visualising utopian institutions (i.e., schools or kindergartens) through diverse materials such as paper, feathers, balloons, glue, and building blocks, the students articulated that their playful and aesthetic processes led to greater conceptual, theoretical, and embodied understanding. This highlights a diversity of ways of knowing, playing with creativity, aesthetics, and arts, to be explored within Higher Education when transitioning from primarily discursive language to symbolic communication, i.e., shifting from verbal communication to collective aesthetic and artful expressions in classroom learning activities (Holflod, 2023b)—and that it might both aid in formal learning and education and become a path towards imagining desirable utopias in Higher Education.

Designing for “otherwise” futures within playful Higher Education pedagogy

The playful learning research programme aims to design playful experiments in Higher Education through, for instance, constructionist, embodied, sensory, and atmospheric approaches to pedagogy, drawing from diverse playful voices, pedagogies, and methods such as creative learning, arts-based methods, aesthetic learning processes, and open-ended learning design (Boysen et al., 2022; Holflod, 2022a; Jensen et al., 2021; Jørgensen et al., 2022). In my research project, I tested numerous object-guided playful experiments with educators and students collaboratively constructing, modelling, and discussing shared objects. It drew theoretical inspiration from object-mediated communication, evocative objects, and boundary objects (Holflod, 2023b)—and was further guided by design ideologies of speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), which strongly relates to tangible activities in pedagogy to examine and construct imaginable and desirable futures collectively. From a practical perspective, this was operationalised through learning activities such as “wonder spaces”, “moodboards”, and “play design futures”. They share similar approaches by drawing on play theory, aesthetic learning processes, and co-creation of evocative objects (Holflod, 2023b). I initially discuss the “play design futures” activity in the following parts: a collective design activity developed as part of my doctoral research on voices of playful learning (Holflod, 2023a), where educators rapidly create tentative playful learning experiments. Afterwards, I discuss the activity of “wonder spaces”.

The “play design futures” activity uses a set of cards categorised into “Future” (i.e., probable or preferable near or distant future), “Context” (e.g., a laboratory, an open learning space, or an ordinary classroom setting) and (playful) “Voices” (e.g., creativity, experimental, relationality, affectivity, imagination, or pretend). Educators are invited to develop a tentative learning design by contemplating a future scenario where a playful design experiment can be tested, including its context and conditions, and its voice—or, in other words, a playful theme and perspective. When the educators have developed a tentative design, the second part of the design activity is initiated: empathy mapping. In empathy mapping, you imagine what the participant might experience,

feel, think, do, and say in a given context—a future playful learning experiment in this setting. The insights created from this part are finally used to redesign and further develop the playful experiment. By designing for or visualising preferable, probable, and tangible pedagogical futures and shifting the perspective from the educator to the student, the designing educator anticipates and emphasises the future participants' academic and embodied experiences of the activity. While I developed and used specific materials in these activities, they can be readily adopted using available materials and spaces in other contexts. The design activity is largely based on utopian thinking in approaching educational futures by externalising the participants' imagination and desires to transform current pedagogical and educational practices.

The learning design of “wonder spaces” shares similar approaches and anticipations, focusing on constructing and visualising a problem of today and a futuristic or utopian solution through various materials. In this activity, the participants communicate an interpretation of today and a vision of tomorrow to contemplate and imagine a preferable future in Higher Education. They are encouraged to collectively dream wildly, and during this process, they generally find that playful collaboration through both verbal and symbolic communication helps to establish new forms of relationality, communality, and ways of knowing.

Through playful methods, the activities' attempts to examine and encourage “otherwise” and desirable futures in Higher Education materialised as tangible learning designs aimed at the educators' own practices or material visualisations of potential futures. Drawing on the experiences and insights from multiple design experiments and interventions in the research project, and in relation to the contemporary scholarly voices of playful learning in Higher Education, playful Higher Education is not only significantly connected to hopeful pedagogies and utopian visions—it is also imaginable and possible.

Epilogue: Hope, utopia, punk, pedagogy

Working between playful pedagogies and utopian Higher Education is both meaningful and challenging, and it has several implications for Higher Education development and practice. Playful learning in Higher Education is not only hopeful in the sense that it can potentialise

alternative visions and practices; it is also inherently tensional and paradoxical, with the whimsical, open-ended, and processual elements of play clashing with the traditional educational structures and intents (Holflod, 2022b). Playful Higher Education strives towards different educational realities, towards desirable futures that are both possible and imaginative utopias. As such, it resembles the educational and pedagogical movement of hope-punk that accentuates rebellious hopefulness towards creating better Higher Education futures of relationality, joyfulness, communality, and playfulness. In this chapter, I have attempted to make a case for adopting playful approaches to Higher Education as relevant methods and practices of pedagogy, with the aim of advancing towards potentially desirable educational futures and utopias.

The chapter began by highlighting a general problem in today's Higher Education—that is, the culture of individuality and performativity. While this chapter does not address the underlying structures of Higher Education, doing so is essential for developing, implementing, or experimenting with playful pedagogies. As expressed in diverse research publications, a culture of time (Jensen et al., 2021), individuality (Koernes & Francis, 2020), performativity (Holflod, 2024), marketisation (Jørgensen et al., 2022; Nørgård, 2021), and educational legitimacy (James, 2019) permeates Higher Education, challenging and disrupting the implementation of playful pedagogies. What might be needed, and perhaps potentiated by these difficulties, is new stories of hope and utopia in Higher Education that dare to imagine alternative realities and futures—stories that emphasise togetherness, relationality, and playfulness, to contrast and counter the tendencies and challenges of today's Higher Education institutions.

Steps toward hope

- Integrate playful and imaginative approaches in Higher Education to challenge current trends of effectiveness, performativity, and individualisation.
- Integrate hopeful, forward-thinking pedagogical strategies to inspire educators and learners to envision and strive for equitable and compassionate educational futures.

- Develop learning communities that emphasise shared experiences, collaboration, and interpersonal connections to enhance collective educational outcomes.
- Promote alternative futures—of togetherness, relationality, and playfulness.

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