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Ok, you've had your fun.....[?]

Placing Pleasure at the Heart of Pedagogy

Teaching & Learning Conference, University of Huddersfield
September 14th 2007

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We all know the scenario:

“Ok, you’ve had your fun, now settle down and get on with your work”

“Ok, you’ve had your fun” (as a seemingly inappropriate joke fades to silence), “but this is supposed to be a serious issue.”

“Ok, you’ve had your fun,”

Because as we know, fun has no *integral* relationship to learning – sure it might be useful as a way of diverting people for a few moments from the fact that they are about to learn, or as an appropriate mechanism to ease kindergarten children from a life of hedonism into twenty years of pedagogic drudgery. But fun, playing, enjoying oneself, messing about? Surely the antithesis of work. At a university our primary functions are teaching, learning and research. This is our work - serious processes that require serious approaches to achieve serious outcomes.

Actually I’d agree with most of that last bit: education is a serious process – I suspect that many of us would feel that it is the core process of our culture. Teaching and learning do require a serious approach, or at least a seriousness of purpose in the way we approach them. And the outcomes of our work are serious indeed – the development of our communities, our world, our technologies, our cultures, the achievement of personal happiness, stability of relationship – what we do here is a core mechanism by which citizens of the world achieve fulfilled, productive and unregretful lives. Serious indeed.

Is it such a paradox then for me to argue, as I will in this paper, that the foundation of this serious purpose needs to be in the terrain of pleasure, of joyousness, of fun? Is it paradoxical to suggest that the more serious our intention, the more we need to insist on the primacy of pleasure in the execution of it? Perhaps you will find it so, perhaps not, depending on your predispositions and your history. Nonetheless, that’s what I want to explore over the next thirty minutes or so.

This paper will not address directly issues of transition, though I think it is a core aspect of what I am talking about. I want to discuss how we structure and conceive of the process of education. At the heart of allowing that process to be effective for those who entrust their education to us, is that we help them make the transition from the processes they have encountered at school to the processes we require them to engage in here. Too often school education is based on the attaining of a result – an exam grade – at the expense of the process of learning. I’m not attacking the work of teachers though I would want to question both the governmental philosophy and the delivery mechanism that characterise much secondary education. But as headmaster Dr Anthony Seldon said, speaking on Radio 4 and encapsulating the scale of the challenge this transitional process represents: ‘Places of learning should be places filled with love and enchantment... Many schools for many children today are quite miserable, brutalising places’ [?]

Could we make our teaching and learning a process based on love and enchantment – love not as a flaccid feel-good generality, nor as a substitute for rigour nor as an excuse for mediocrity, but love as a way of engendering in our students and our colleagues, and (crucially) maintaining in ourselves, an unwavering commitment to the process of growth through learning. When we learn, we become greater, more capable, more resilient. Perhaps the greatest gift we can offer our students is that they take that knowledge with them through their entire lives.

Put simply, our approach to education might be: “OK, you’ve had your fun, now let’s have some fun.”

Before I go on, perhaps I should throw in a little personal history. I work in the Drama Division here – my specialism is in the training of performers. As such it would be easy to assume that it’s simple for me to make my work fun and that the principles I’m going to be talking about have limited application across other disciplines. After all Drama is always fun, isn’t it? It’s a suspicion I would refute from two angles. Firstly it’s perfectly possible to make the training of performers deathly dull and fraught with suffering and pain – we only need to think of the cliché of the suffering artist to know how wedded the performance world can be to the idea of pleasure-free creativity. Performance training is a rigorous, repetitive and draining process and, like any other educational discipline, needs to find structures and mechanisms that let the student *want to engage with the work*. Secondly, before I moved back to the UK to take up a job here, I worked for a decade as a freelance artist in Australia. Much of my work there was around areas of helping teachers in primary, secondary and special education find creative teaching structures. I also worked in areas of mental health promotion and transitions from primary to secondary school, applying these principles across a range of teaching and learning environments. In all contexts, from dysfunctional youth theatres to elite conservatoria, from reception class in primary schools to teacher training seminars, I have found that approaching learning through the lens of pleasure-seeking, provides valuable and transformatory perspectives on the educational process.

Optimal Experience

I want to talk for a little while about the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, whose work on what he calls ‘flow’ and ‘optimal experience’ provides a useful theoretical background for this paper.

Csikszentmihaly is a psychologist who has researched across a number of decades into the mechanisms of enjoyment and what is happening in our consciousness when we become truly lost in, absorbed by and concentrated on the task we are engaged in. He writes that the origins of his

research were in an attempt to understand: "*the quality of subjective experience that made a behaviour intrinsically rewarding. How did intrinsic rewards feel? Why were they rewarding?*"[?]

I think it is crucial to note right from the start that Csikszentmihaly is talking about the intrinsic, not the extrinsic rewards of engaging in a process. I think we should be starting from the same perspective. As we begin to conceive of our role as educators, we need to be asking ourselves how we, with our students, are going to find rewards *within* the act of learning. The alternative perspective – namely how most efficiently to hurry through the educational process so that the student can attain the extrinsic rewards, be they a qualification or simply the chance to ‘get on with their real lives’, betrays our experiences as educators, belittles the potential of our students and, I would suggest, calls into question the whole idea of complex education and thinking.

Csikszentmihaly based some of his early research on interviews with rock climbers – why on earth would someone choose to engage in such a difficult and potentially dangerous activity, simply to reach the top of a rock wall that they will have to come back down again and which they could well have reached much more easily by taking another route? The results of his research make for interesting reading which I’ll not go into here in detail, except that he encapsulates the subjective experiences of climbers very neatly when he writes: “The mountaineer does not climb to reach the top of the mountain, but tries to reach the summit in order to climb.”[?] This seems to me to set a huge and fascinating challenge for us as educators – how do we structure our work so that every step of the process is filled with what Dr Seldon called ‘love and enchantment’? To use a rather less grand metaphor than Csikszentmihaly, how do we ensure that the qualification that our students earn here is the icing on their cake, rather than the cake itself?

Csikszentmihaly posits that the heart of optimal experience is the ability to structure activities so that the participant can experience a state of flow. He explains that he chose this word because it was one that people he interviewed from a range of areas of activity used as a metaphor for what happened in their consciousness at the point when their activity became truly and intrinsically rewarding – in other words became something they wanted to engage in for its own sake rather than for any extrinsic rewards. He writes: “The key element of optimal experience is that it is an end in itself.”[?] Across a range of activities, he found that there were strong commonalities in what the conditions were that were most likely to enable an individual to experience flow, to achieve an optimal experience. At its most simple, he suggests that optimal experience lies at the border between anxiety and boredom. If, in a given task, we are overly anxious – about failure, about the end result, about looking foolish – then we are unable to engage fully with that task for we are distracted by the need to engage with our anxiety. Similarly if the task is too simple

for us, if we are bored by it, then we do not engage fully because it is hardly worth our while investing our concentration in something that will yield scant rewards. Crucially, for an individual to achieve a sense of flow within a task, be it a learning task or climbing a rock face, he or she needs to be able to increase and decrease the complexity of that task in real-time – while they are engaged in doing the task – so that they can increase or decrease the challenges inherent in the activity and thus maintain a balance between boredom and anxiety.

Sociologist Richard Mitchell puts it slightly differently when he writes: “We experience (flow) when a balance is achieved between abilities and responsibilities, when the skills we possess are roughly commensurate with the challenges we face, when our talents are neither underused nor overtaxed. Flow emerges in circumstances that are perceived as both problematic and soluble”[?]

Already from this simple description of the idea of optimal experience and flow we can see some pedagogical challenges opening up - how to structure our teaching and learning so that students take responsibility for balancing the relationship between their capacity and their fear? In other words, how we might make it possible for students to experience learning as an optimal, easeful experience rather than an effortful chore.

For if we can find ways of doing this, we offer students the chance to value not just what they have learned, but to value the act of learning. We begin to offer our greatest gift – that those who entrust their education to us will want to continue learning throughout their lives, enhancing their employability, their personal resilience, and the contributions they can make to their community and relationships.

But how to do this? How do we put pleasure at the heart of learning?

Put simply, over-simply, the process is this. All learning involves a student engaging in tasks. Those tasks will be of varying degrees of simplicity or complexity, involve varying balances between active and passive, reflective, analytic and discursive, physical and mental. Learning is a process of doing things.

I want students to identify what it is, within each task, that they enjoy. I require them to be precise about the details of that enjoyment. I require them to articulate the nature of that enjoyment to themselves, to their peers and to me and, when tasks are collaborative, I require them to tell the person they have just worked with what they liked about the working relationship and about the way their peer did their work. I also require that they listen to their peers tell them what it is that they do well. This is harder than you might think – most of us deal with being told what we have done wrong, but to be told by a peer that we are smart, witty, subtle, articulate and funny is more than many of us can bear.

I require the complex process of feedback to be positive – in other words I require that the student talks about what they liked about what actually happened during a task rather than what they would have preferred to have happened or what they felt ought to have happened.

Already in this process the student is being offered the chance, some might say coerced, into seeing learning as a process they can engage with rather than something they need to endure. Given the detachment and cynicism that pervades much of our culture, this already represents a step forward.

Once a student has begun to build up a vocabulary of their personal enjoyment I expect their work to move to a new level of sophistication. While I will still set the tasks that they do – after all I am guiding their education – I ask them, with their developing self knowledge, to do the necessary task in such a way as to give themselves pleasure. I want them to put the pursuit of pleasure at the heart of their engagement with education. Let's be clear – this is not about a student doing what they want, but about a student finding a pleasurable way of engaging with what their education requires of them. The demands of the task come first, pleasure is to be found within the doing.

If a student cannot find any pleasure in something they need to do, I need them to look more closely at their work and identify in it what could, if done differently, yield enjoyment. This helps that student find ways of reorganising their attitude to themselves as a learner. It also gives me useful clues about how I might restructure the work I am asking students to do, so as to help less engaged students come on board. However, I should be clear about this, I seldom allow the fact that a student is struggling to find pleasure make me radically alter what I do. In the end the student has chosen to be here and must take personal responsibility for how they engage with their education. If we do not allow students to take responsibility, we do not allow them to be adult. What I am offering to them is a developmental language and structure to facilitate engagement and the taking of responsibility.

In the end it is not my job to make education fun – though I try to – it is a student's job to make their education fun and my job to help them and - crucially - to give them permission.

However, 'fun' is a problematic word – it smacks of triviality and superficiality. So perhaps it's time to try to start making the language of pleasure a little more complex.

Inevitably when we start trying to finetune the vocabulary we use, we encounter the limitations of language. What exactly is fun, pleasure, joy, enjoyment? What are the differences between them? Csikszentmihaly uses the word 'pleasure' differently to the way I do – for him the pursuit of what he calls 'pleasure' is a reasonably unproductive pursuit, for he uses the word to describe the satisfying of genetic or biological imperatives, hunger, sex, sleep. As such, though not inherently destructive, the pursuit of pleasure is simple and unconscious and, if unmoderated, can lead to addictive and destructive behaviours.

However I find the term 'pleasure' useful for a simple reason. Though I think Csikszentmihaly's language is more complex and sophisticated than mine, if I ask students to look for optimal experience, they do not know what I mean. If I ask them to pursue pleasure, they have enough of an idea of what I'm looking for to start the exploratory process.

In explaining to students how I want the pursuit of pleasure to be at the heart of their learning process, I try to find a differentiation between three related states – fun, pleasure and joy.

Let's look at these in a bit more detail:

Fun:

Fun is something that we can have – the ability to laugh, enjoy being in a learning environment. It is easy, relatively superficial and, after a while, like sweeties and pop, becomes unsatisfying.

It seems self evident that any process we want to commit to for a long period should contain strong and immediate elements of fun. I am not talking of the fun that surrounds the work – the conversations beforehand or the socialising afterwards – I am talking about the work itself.

Czikszenmihaly writes: 'When experience is intrinsically rewarding, life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain.' [?]

Fun should be intrinsic, because to be able to engage in the work through immediate and easy enjoyment offers a portal through which the student can walk, if they are to discover the landscape beyond.

At the start of a learning process a student needs to be able to place themselves at their ease. There are a number of simple ways that this can be encouraged. It's useful to create an environment where the ideas of 'right' and 'wrong' are redundant; one where mistakes are welcomed and the student feels they are uncritically accepted and respected for who they are and for what they bring to the work. I require an atmosphere where laughter is generous and inclusive, where we recognise and cherish the fact that we are all ridiculous and magnificent.

The results I'm looking for are simple - I need an environment that participants want to inhabit, one where they work because they want to.

It's fun that makes students want to come back for more. The idea that there is 'more' is crucial, for fun soon pales into tedium, leaving an important hunger for something deeper and more nutritious.

Pleasure

While fun is something we have, Pleasure is something that we achieve through our efforts. It's something we work for. It is a sustainable and repeatable state, though it is sustained only if we commit ourselves to that process of sustaining it.

At the heart of learning, for me, is an insistence that the student actively pursues the achieving of pleasure within each and every educational task. Note that I say within each and every task – I am not talking about a student doing what they want, I am talking about them finding active pleasure in what their education requires of them.

From the outset this demands of the student that they place themselves into a conscious relationship with the work they are engaged in. They must become mindful of their work. They must observe the task that has been asked of them and make conscious decisions about how they will pursue and engage with that task. And they need to take responsibility for the outcomes of their work.

Czikszenmihaly reminds us that ‘ pain and pleasure occur in consciousness and exist only there’[?]. **I want students to structure their conscious engagement with their work so that the doing of it is pleasurable, not unpleasant. I want them to undertake a conscious ordering of their consciousness.**

This does not imply that the student should avoid difficult or unpleasant work. Quite the reverse – it requires that they construct a positive, pleasure-based rationale for undertaking tasks they might otherwise seek to avoid. Even if, on balance, a student does not ‘enjoy’ a task, it is necessary for them to be able to identify what within that task was pleasurable to them. For that nugget of identifiable pleasure within a difficult task can be a key to that student being willing to repeat their engagement with a thing they fear, or to engage with other weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Ultimately if a student can identify and exploit what they could enjoy within what they don’t enjoy, they can transform a task they avoid into a task they relish.

When a student returns to a task – and most learning involves considerable elements of repetition - she or he needs to address the task as a fresh experience. The question develops from ‘how can I pursue pleasure in this unfamiliar task?’ into ‘how can I find pleasure in this familiar task?’ Specifically, when a student revisits a task, they need to address the question of how to find pleasure *on this occasion*. **The idea of time and repeatability enter into the student’s agenda. The question becomes, ‘how, *today*, will I achieve pleasure in this task?’**

This approach demands that students take responsibility for their own engagement, in the moment, with the task, rather than permitting that which is extrinsic to the work – other people or things that happened at other times - becoming excuses for their inability to engage fully in their work.

When I am training performers, I insist that they forgo excuses and take responsibility. It is a tough approach, which builds, I hope, a mental toughness on the part of the student. Yet when that toughness feels overwhelming – as at times it must because all of us need to be able to blame other people from time to time – then we can take a step back from the details of the training and remind ourselves of the bigger picture. What I’m asking my students to do is to enjoy themselves – hardly an imposition – and to accept that if they are not finding pleasure, if they are suffering and struggling then perhaps responsibility for that is personal rather than the result of a cruel and hostile universe.

Joy:

I'm not going to talk much about Joy. If fun is something you have and pleasure something you achieve, joy is something that visits you, often when you least expect it. Joy is epiphanic, something we encounter in our work from time to time (if we are lucky). In a state of Joy we are inspired and often inspirational. It is an unstable state that decays inevitably. While we cannot make ourselves joyful, we can make ourselves receptive to the possibility of Joy. When Joy visits, the mechanics of teaching and learning are replaced by a tremendous sense of easeful possibility. We cannot force our education to be inspired or inspirational – we need to work at the highest level of competence, but always keep the door open to the possibility that inspiration will visit us. We can insist on pleasure, but only hope for joy.

These three overlapping terrains within the broad term 'pleasure' offer useful structuring opportunities when I design teaching. How am I going to create a fun environment? How am I going to ensure that the 'fun' students have is not a distraction from their education but contains core elements of what I require them to learn? (Just as an aside I should emphasize that I absolutely am *not* suggesting anyone structures their classes by having ten minutes of fun at the start and then getting onto the 'real' bit. That's far too close to 'ok you've had your fun...' for me.) How am I going to embed challenges in the fun I set up so that students can move beyond it to start the harder work of pursuing pleasure, or optimal experience? How can I keep the work I do sufficiently flexible that I and my students are open to the possibility of truly joyous experiences overtaking us – of our learning becoming transcendent, life-changing, inspirational? How can I do all of this in a secure environment that permits risk-taking, failure and foolishness, from me and those who work with me?

Csikszentmihaly usefully proposes a phenomenology of enjoyment – eight elements of a state of flow.[?] I think it's worth reflecting on them for a short while.

1. The experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing.
2. We must be able to concentrate on what we are doing.

(What prevents you or your students concentrating on their learning? Are you working in a suitable environment or is your work liable to disruption? What is the appropriate balance between different types of

concentration within different tasks?)

3. Concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals.

(Who sets the goals? Is there a hierarchy of necessary and/or desirable goals? How can a student balance their personal goals with the educational goals you have set them? Is there a relationship between goals and assessments?)

4. Concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken provides immediate feedback.

(How do we value different forms of feedback? Tutor to student, student to student, student to self, student to teacher? Is a task best served by analytic or reflective feedback? What is the relationship between feedback and the repetition of a task?)

5. One acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.

(Do you want your teaching environment to be part of the outside world or separate from the outside world? How do you help students individually and collectively decide where it is appropriate for them to focus their attention? What are the structures you are going to put into the start of a session to enable students to cross the threshold from the distractions of the outside world to the concentration of a learning environment?)

6. Enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions.

(What permissions do you give students to exercise control, increase/decrease challenges, reinterpret tasks?)

7. Concern for the self disappears but paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over.

(How do you facilitate self-reflection by the student on how immersing themselves in learning has changed them? How do you encourage them to value those changes?)

8. The sense of the duration of time is altered, hours pass by in minutes and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

This phenomenology suggests that as we conceive of how we teach there are a number of interlocking considerations for us to contemplate – physical environment, pedagogical structure, feedback and reflective mechanisms, as well, of course, as the essential question of the content of what we teach. It goes without saying that as we contemplate finding a form for our teaching that makes possible a joyous engagement by students in their work (and I would add, a joyous engagement by us in the act of teaching and learning, for without that we will never be able to maintain our commitment to innovation and excellence), we need to ensure that the structures and environments of our teaching support and enhance the content rather than distract from it. We are not trying to coat the pill of education with sugary distractions. We are trying to bring students face to face with the reality of learning and help them realise what a rich and magnificent opportunity it affords them.

I'm drawing to a close, but before I do I would like to propose a series of questions that you might find useful if you choose to think about how ideas of pleasure might help develop or deepen your teaching. These are questions that I find useful working in drama, but which I think are applicable across any discipline. I do not for a moment consider them to be comprehensive, rather I see them as a stimulus to you finding your own enquiries:

- All learning involves repetition. What are the necessary repetitions in your teaching?
- What structures can you create that allow a student to undertake the necessary repetitions as if every time was the first time?
- What excites you about your subject?
- Do you dare risk seeming foolish by being an enthusiast?
- If a student could learn everything they needed to know by reading a book, what would be the point of their spending time with you or in your department? What do you, uniquely, bring to the live experience of learning?
- How can students increase and decrease the level of personal challenge in the work you give to them and receive immediate feedback from themselves about how it's going?
- Who made you excited about your discipline? How?
- How can you simultaneously help students learn and learn how to learn?
- What do students actually do when they are with you?
- What takes priority for you – what you teach or the way that you teach?
- What teaching structures do you have that permit you to learn/discover/enjoy the intrinsic nature of your work *with your students*?
- Are you ever bored teaching? What are you going to change so that never happens?
- Does any class you teach actually matter? For you? For your students?

And two final questions in deference to the particular nature of this conference:

- How can the pursuit of intrinsic pleasure guide an individual's transition from disengagement to immersion in the learning process?
- In your non-academic roles – as a manager, a colleague, a relation, a citizen – how might

these principles help you merge the worlds of work and joy?

I hope that I have outlined a useful set of questions and principles in the course of this paper. Some may be fresh to you, some familiar. Nonetheless I think they are worth contemplating and revisiting regularly. They can help dissolve the accumulated grit thrown up by the daily grind! Though the foundation of my argument is that education should be fun, profoundly fun, I am suggesting that the way to achieve that is through rigour, toughness and daring. If we truly value our role as educators then it seems to me we need to value the process of education, not just its benefits. Of course I want graduates to achieve success, fine jobs, civic honour, contented lives, but I believe we help them onto that path by respecting the vehicle they have chosen to achieve their dreams, the processes of teaching and learning. Whatever we teach, the biggest betrayal of our students is to see them leave here glad that they will never have to learn anymore. Firstly because it's not true. Secondly because we have denied them one of the true wonders of being a fulfilled human being, the pleasure of attaining wisdom. Dare I say that towards the top of our aspirations is that on leaving here, our graduates can live in the world with love and enchantment?

[1] Some parts of this paper are taken from "The Pleasure Principle" a paper I delivered in February 2007 at the 'How To Act' Conference at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London.

[2] ed. Csikszentmihaly & Csikszentmihaly (1988), p 7

[3] ed. Csikszentmihaly & Csikszentmihaly (1988), p 33

[4] Csikszentmihaly (1992) p67

[5] From "Sociological Implications of the Flow Experience" Richard G Mitchell Jr. ed. Csikszentmihaly & Csikszentmihaly (1988), p 36

[6] Csikszentmihaly, (1992) p 69

[7] Csikszentmihaly, (1992) p 19

[8] Csikszentmihaly, (1992) p 49

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