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For a More Playful Communication Studies

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For some people, it is difficult to be radical; for them, it is difficult to get to the issues at stake in the world. They have abstracted their life into areas that are so removed from humanity because they are interested in those things that remove them. They have formalized, professionalized, and otherwise removed themselves from society.¹ They have lost the central conviviality of humanity and replaced it with an automated and frequently exhausted life, where having lived well is equated with being tired. It is the life of modernity where the fundamental misunderstanding is that everything is so serious, and thus we need to be serious. Indeed, there is much at stake in the world right now, and not everything should be playful; there certainly could be much more play and joy in communication studies than there is.

Indeed, communication studies as a field tends to take its problems seriously. Communication is indubitably a serious field of study, but does it need to be as serious as it frequently is? Is it over-professionalized? Has it pushed play too far out of its center? Communication studies arose within the context of the universities. In their contemporary formations, these universities were formed to centralize and disseminate knowledge but slowly transformed into systems for organizing classes in society and systems for providing administration for colonies.² Universities have troubled pasts, even if they are arguably systems of economic mobility and are liberatory for some. Communication studies arose in this particular institution and has some of the problems that this institution has, which is that it seeks to excise or compartmentalize elements of human life such as play.³

Communication studies and the university as a whole need to remember to play.⁴ They need to recognize people who play daily. Play must be integrated into

¹ Ivan Illich, *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

² Avery Smith (Black American), Hine Funaki (Tongan, Ngāpuhi, Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Whatua), and Liana MacDonald (Ngāti Kūia, Ngāti Koata, Rangitāne o Wairau), "Living, Breathing Settler-Colonialism: The Reification of Settler Norms in a Common University Space," *Higher Education Research & Development* 40, no. 1 (2021): 132–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1852190>; Olufemi Taiwo, "Colonialism and Its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production," *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993): 891–908, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2932216>.

³ Francis Hearn, "Toward a Critical Theory of Play," *Telos* 1976, no. 30 (1976): 145–60, <https://doi.org/10.3817/1276030145>; Nicola Whitton, "A Manifesto for Playful Learning," in *Play and Learning in Adulthood: Reimagining Pedagogy and the Politics of Education* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 87–124, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13975-8_4.

⁴ Rikke Toft Nørgård, "Philosophy for the Playful University – Towards a Theoretical Foundation for Playful Higher Education," in *The University Becoming: Perspectives from Philosophy and Social Theory*, ed. Søren S. E. Bengtson, Sarah Robinson, and Wesley Shumar (Cham: Springer, 2021), 141–56, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69628-3_10; Alison James, "Making a Case for the Playful University," in *The Power of Play in Higher Education: Creativity in Tertiary Learning*, ed. Alison James and Chrissi Nerantzi (Cham: Springer, 2019), 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95780-7_1.

practice, into our teaching and research.⁵ Higher education frequently abstracts or removes the everyday play of our lives in its search for truth. The search for truth should not be drudgery, should not be joyless toil, but should be playful and perhaps even fun. It should recognize the value of play and its centrality to human lives. However, as a field, communication studies should essentialize or define play for operational goals; it should embrace an intuitive understanding of play centered on our shared experiences of play and its benefits. People will ask, “What is play?” but that should be resisted, as it will fall to the bureaucratic encapsulation of play. Instead, we should follow Wittgenstein and say, “We are playing,” when we are. The bureaucratic tendency of play directs itself to the gamification of activities, which is actually not playful but rather a transference of the activities of play into work, which become standardized, normalized, and less play-like because the teleology of play is lost. The teleology of play is one of fun and, ultimately, eudaimonic joy.

Similarly, in our everyday communication practice and within communication studies as part of higher education, many normative constructs and institutional imperatives remove the playfulness and joy from learning and research. Granted, some people will immediately claim that these norms are necessary to appear professional, set standards for behavior, etc., etc. I want to ask in this essay, why not just play? Communication can be inherently playful, our lives can be naturally playful, and our nature can be inherently playful. So I ask, why not just play? Why not make an effort to make the field more playful to make it more livable for more people?

Play is central to higher education done well, where it engages students and faculty; where it sparks the joy and fun of new knowledge. Sadly, many people have begun to see higher education as training for future work and as a simulation or preparation for employment. They have re-established the university as a model factory for the contemporary workplace, but the university is not a factory. The university is a communal institution for developing and sharing knowledge, both of which can be playful activities. This type of university is preparation for life, full, rich life, and play is a significant part of that life.

We can transform much of our academic life into cognitive play.⁶ Cognitive play is playing with our minds. Cognitive play is just a playful manner of dealing with

⁵ Jeremy Hunsinger, “Toward a Critical Theory of Playful Research in the Internet Age: Exploring Playful Research in *Second Life*, *Minecraft*, and Hackerspaces/Makerspaces,” *Journal of Play in Adulthood* 3, no. 1 (2021): 87–102, <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpa.868>.

⁶ Kuan Chen Tsai, “All Work and No Play Makes an Adult a Dull Learner,” *Journal of Education and Training* 2, no. 1 (2015): 184–91, <https://doi.org/10.5296/jet.v2i1.6979>; John Morreall, “Humor as Cognitive Play,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 3, no. 2 (2009): 241–60, <https://doi.org/10.1515/JLT.2009.014>.

one's day. Academia tends to reduce academics to thinking machines, performing research and teaching in a repetitive machinic mode to increase efficiencies through standardization. One should not fall into machinic repetition or become machinic; one should strive for humanity and use our brains to play, think through, and simulate, all of which can be fun and playful. People should ask, what or whom does my model of life serve, my model of teaching, my model of research? If the answer is inhuman or anti-human, such as the corporate or neoliberal university (or worse) and its reproduction of society as an anxious and austerity-driven populace, it should be resisted. One way of fighting is by embracing play as a mode of resistance.

When thinking about their teaching in communication studies, faculty should ask those questions and be especially critical of the answers. To ask, "Whom or what does this teaching serve?" will clarify the role of the pedagogy and curriculum. Frequently, the curriculum and pedagogy serve the institution or imaginations of other institutions. Most pedagogy ends up less as learning and more as institutionalization and normalization. Andragogy is where higher education should be, aiding the person's and their mind's development. Andragogy centers on the adult's choices, which ideally should be playful and engaged with the world. We should assist our students in their development, challenge them, and play with them in deeply personal learning environments and experiences. Andragogy is not the one-size-fits-all model of the pedagogical classroom, but an agreement to learn together and hopefully play together to build shared knowledge. Communication studies can engage our students' passions through playful andragogies that will transform students and the field.

Play, research, and teaching cannot be separated except through the machination of human life, as Guattari proposed, or perhaps through Foucault's governmentality and biopolitics, where one becomes part of the bureaucratic mechanics of governance, and their mindset maps onto the bureaucratic mechanics.⁷ In administrative universities, one or the other almost universally happens as we learn to govern ourselves in higher education. The bureaucratic action and inaction models seep into our mental models. We reproduce them in our classroom as normal and good

⁷ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Félix Guattari, *Soft Subversions*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet and Chet Wiener (New York: Semiotext[e], 1996); Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

when they are usually colonial, divisive, and occasionally oppressive. I propose play when our research, teaching, and life become bureaucratic.

Communication research can become a form of formalized play called scientific, with the formalizations being the processes that check and cross-check the validity of the scientific practices that loosely map the special sciences. It can have rigor while maintaining the playfulness of knowledge; it does not have to be reduced to bureaucratic or administrative drudgery. Creative and speculative play is the other side of academia, which engages knowledge creation through thought and play, following inter/trans/meta/disciplinary methods to create things to know, something to enjoy knowing.⁸

When we lose the play aspect, we lose something important in knowledge, part of the communality of knowledge, and centrally part of the joy of knowledge. It is sad because the play aspect of knowledge creation is frequently transduced into capitalistic profit motives, where the joy of knowing becomes confused and often inseparable from the joy of profiting. When this happens, we must return to play and challenge ourselves to be playful.

A playful communication studies is possible...but...we have to break the cycle. There is an overwhelming tendency in universities to recreate the success of others, which frequently denies that the prior's success is based on being novel, likely colonial, likely oppressive, 20-200 years ago. This tendency to recreate or reproduce instead of create or produce is the largest barrier to anything new in academia and communication studies, as it is frequently confronted with the idea that the best it could be is the way it was. Indeed, nostalgia for the way things were is often a trap that brings back old pains, old problems, and old oppressions. Recreating these old ways recreates those same bureaucracies, problems, and denial of play as a central part of humanity's existence.

To overcome these nostalgic tendencies and reproduction, communication studies must put play as the priority, as the core element of the field, our research, and our teaching. We need to hire people committed to playing in knowledge creation and andragogical learning environments.

The academy resists radical change, which is one way it stays resilient as an institution to its benefit and detriment. However, if one field could change, it could be communication studies; it can radically reimagine itself and what it accepts as a human. Communication studies can become playful and recognize the value of play.

⁸ Alison James and Chrissi Nerantzi, eds., *The Power of Play in Higher Education: Creativity in Tertiary Learning* (Cham: Springer, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95780-7>.

Doing this will enable our students and future faculty to be more complete, convivial humans by being playful humans. Models of playful learning and playful universities already exist in this world; our challenge in communication studies is to make them real in our field.

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