The *RoutledgeFalmer Guide to Key Debates in Education*

Section 5

New Times and the Retreat from Education

Chapter

Education as Entertainment

EDUCATION AS ENTERTAINMENT

Introduction

At first sight there ought to be nothing contentious about the idea of education as entertainment. Who, after all, has not been entertained, at least once in their life, by a great teacher – has not been diverted by the teacher's wit, enthusiasm, bearing, tone of voice, turn of phrase or use of eye contact? And who has not learned something profound from a great entertainment – from a brilliantly performed Shakespearian play, for example? Yet underneath such common ground lurks another idea that ought to be very contentious: the idea that education, to be truly *modern* and therefore *accessible*, should nearly always be *entertaining* – for otherwise it may not be *inclusive*.

This view condescends. It is an attempt to sugar what is obviously thought to be a bitter pill. The *struggle to learn* is, in this conception, not valued for what it is: an active struggle, with the potential that such an activity has to build character among the millions of pupils and students who are prepared to engage in it. No, since the struggle to learn is, very probably, perceived as *painful*, so entertainment – a less active, strenuous pursuit of *leisure* – must take some or all of that struggle's place.

In the current culture, education as entertainment marks the final stage in a broader turn away from the substantive business of education. That much is confirmed by the specially exalted role given to different forms of *play* within education.

The Role of Play in Education

Today, influenced both by the spread of information technology (IT) in schools and elsewhere, and by a loathing for what is held to be the authoritarian pedagogy of the past, experts believe that education should not be a one-way exercise in teacher 'chalk and talk' (Woudhuysen, 2002a and 2002b). Despite or perhaps because of the couch-potato implications of recasting education as entertainment, its advocates in the world of education are firm that they want teaching to be interactive and 'student centred'. In a significant borrowing from American management theory and its cult of user delight in new products, they hope that education can prompt awe, wonder, excitement, laughter and exhilaration. In short, educationalists believe that education should be entertaining in the sense that the pupil or student is able to *play with ideas*.

In ancient Greek philosophy, a clear distinction was made between the teacher and the entertainer. In Roman times, a sound body, promoted in part through participation in sport, was seen as useful for the preservation of a sound mind. However today's liberal educationalists take the Romans a step further. They intend that the catchphrase of the Early Learning Centre retail chain – 'Playing to Learn, Learning to Play' – should be understood not just by parents of pre-school children, but by teachers everywhere.

Government policy is to have more and more very young children supervised in formal play sessions at British primary schools. It is sympathetic to the speculation that computer games can provide a model for e-learning, the online school and the corporate university. Importantly, too, government reserves a special place in the curriculum for *sport*.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's chief executive during 2000-01, David Hargreaves, argued that physical education and school sport were 'a vital part of pupils' learning experience, enhancing attainment in other subjects' (O'Leary, 2001). Then, announcing a £450 million programme of investment in school sports in October 2002, Tony Blair committed the government to recruiting nearly 16,000 new school sports coordinators and teachers, as well as to a guarantee that all 5-16 year olds in the UK would receive a minimum of two hours a week of physical education and sport by 2006 (DCMS, 2002). Sport is seen as a means of keeping young people engaged and out of trouble (DCMS, 2002). Most recently, *chess* has been revived as an excellent means of assisting child development.

It is a short step from here for government to see adult attendance and participation in *playful entertainments as a fitting arena for state education*. Both junior and senior audiences, after all, were the target of the Millennium Dome (McGuigan and Gilmore, 2000), which might best be considered a giant induction of millions into the Blairite conception of citizenship (Lewis, Richardson and Woudhuysen, 1998). Following in the

footsteps of the San Francisco Exploratorium and the Science Museum's Launch Pad, 'hands on' is the philosophy at science museums in Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Playful interactivity also characterises many exhibits at many Lottery-funded museum developments.

What Play Means in the Classroom

Since the early 1950s and the pioneering work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, the idea has grown that child development is strongly assisted by a particular activity: play. Play and its effect on schoolchildren have been the concern of key post-war educationalists in both America (Jerome Bruner, Brian Sutton-Smith) and Britain (Peter and Iona Opie). Yet if we build upon the seminal Dutch author on play, Johan Huizinga (Huizinga, 1938), we can perhaps sketch those aspects of play that particularly lend themselves to those today's educationalists.

Though the attribute of beauty does not attach to play as such, it has a profoundly aesthetic quality about it, and assumes marked elements of beauty. Thus playful classrooms are a matter of ornament and decoration. They are festive.

Play builds social cohesion around rules, order, and finite boundaries of time and space. It is a form of discipline in class, but a politically correct one. There are no dunces in the ludic framework for education; there are only those pupils who do not want to be team players.

In play one dis-plays to win admiration. In play we deliberately and enjoyably suspend rationality. Not for nothing are the clownish interpersonal skills of David Beckham the subject of many vacuous studies in class.

Because today's schools frown on competition and want no more risks than are already felt to be present, aspects of play that involve winning, losing and chance are not too prevalent in the classroom. But playful pedagogy does rely on *new tricks*, in the sense of exploration and improvisation, and it also favours *role play*. Many schoolchildren, for example, are invited to do projects that invite them to imagine they are children of Stone Age people, the subjects of racial attack and so on.

Play as Retreat

In play today there is rarely thoughtful experiment, but all too often a relentless trend toward public exposure and disclosure. Play only rarely lives up even to its promise of real mastery and self-development, because it only rarely embraces sustained contemplation, reading or intimate tutorials.

The argument that playful, interactive forms of education are a basic good is misleading. It begins in 1975 with the influential psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his book on leisure, significantly titled *Beyond boredom and anxiety* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The argument values playful, interactive entertainment not in its own right, but, as Fox

and Walker have pointed out, instrumentally. Leisure and entertainment within it are really only celebrated insofar as they generate

- a sensation-based, 'optimal experience' of 'flow', the means to happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) and
- positive effects on self-esteem, the economy and 'the normalized values of productivity, achievement, challenge, action and worthiness to dominant societal standards' (Fox and Walker, 2002: 18, 23).

Active, public and open though they may appear to be, classroom play and the 'flow' it is based on lead not to education and the liberation of the Self, but to a bogus ecstasy and the diminution of Self. Csikszentmihalyi argues that flow is 'autotelic', in that the autonomous Self makes its own teleology, or goal-directed activity, into something with which 'the doing itself is its own reward' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: 67). In the flow of Csikszentmihalyi's dancer, rock clumber and chess player, all the 'psychic energy' of each is, in a 'spontaneous, almost automatic' manner, focused on the task in hand. Significantly, then, flow stops people being aware of themselves as separate from the actions performed, Indeed, 'in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: 53, 54).

In this conception and in many practical ways, too, classroom play becomes not education, but its antithesis. Yet early in New Labour's first administration, it was

reported that Cabinet ministers and policy advisers had ‘adopted’ Csikszentmihalyi as the ‘high priest of our future wellbeing’ (Chittenden, 1997).

In many translations, for a mass audience of youth workers worldwide, *Gamesters Handbook*, written by Donna Brandes and Howard Philips, further popularised Csikszentmihalyi’s instrumentalist approach to play. The *Handbook* gathered together scores of games ‘for developing self-awareness, confidence, decision-making skills, trust, assertiveness, and just for fun’ – in that order (Brandes and Philips, 1977, and Brandes and Philips, 1982). The *Gamesters* manifesto is worth quoting in full to bring out the therapeutic dimensions of play as it has come to be interpreted today:

> ‘Games can be used constructively and not as pointless activities… can help sort out problems, the kinds of problems found in inter-personal relationships. They can help social inadequacy by developing co-operation within groups, develop sensitivity to the problems of others through games needing trust, and promote interdependency and a sense of personal identity
>
> ‘… By helping people to relax in groups, games can promote the flow of communication between complete strangers – particularly important with shy people who need additional encouragement.
>
> ‘The “role playing” aspects of many games provide the security which enables group members to develop their ideas and express themselves. The enjoyment which can be generated by games does more than anything to develop a group identity…

> ‘Sitting in a circle… gives the same status to everyone, including the leader, and allows a much greater degree of eye contact...
>
> (Brandes and Philips, 1982: 7)

In a similar vein, Rice and Yaconelli wrote, about a decade later:

> ‘Winning should be either irrelevant or anticlimactic, never the focus of game playing.
>
> Just as enjoyment is more important than competition, participation is more important than performance…
>
> ‘….After a game is over, players should be better friends than when the game started.’
>
> (Rice and Yaconelli, 1993: 10-11)

Ultimately, education as entertainment turns a noble profession into a relentlessly upbeat and communitarian kind of social work. At the end of the class, everyone has enjoyed playing with each other… even if they have learned nothing.

Conclusion

The claims that are now made for play in education are dishonest. Play in that domain today is not about expanding minds, but about what James Heartfield has analysed as the death of the active, conscious Subject (Heartfield, 2002). It is a kind of therapeutic mental massage that is fundamentally restrictive and conservative. To give but one

example, a lurid but a telling one: toys have been pressed into service, with no public outcry, to try to cut down on America's unrivalled world lead in teenage pregnancies: 40,000 'infant simulators', in the shape of $250 Baby Think It Over electronic dolls that come in five different ethnicities, have been delivered by Federal Express to US high schools since 1993, in the hopes of convincing young girls of the burdens of parenthood (Bax, 1999: 121).

Everyone likes to play. But the tasks facing British education are more serious than ever.

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