

(Re)Imagining higher education: an inspirational guide for academics

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Presentation abstract

We live in times of certain uncertainty with Higher Education in constant need of reflexive adaptation. The Reimagining Higher Education project, funded by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), explored creatively and playfully the future of education. It invited the academic community to participate in workshops to reflect on the current status of Higher Education and, at the same time, to conceptualise what form a humane and integrated Learning Development, the holistic and sustainable fostering of academic literacies and practices, would take within that Higher Education system. The outcome is an open-source guide of Higher Education models, real and idealised, that potentially have the power to change perspectives and attitudes. In this short presentation, we (the project team) will showcase the guide, outlining what a more inclusive, empowering, and creative academia would look like. Our research participants have imaged the unimaginable: universities open, accessible, full of trust, care and laughter. Please join us to further reflect on the future of academia, with hope and positivity.

Keywords: higher education; futures; imagination; creativity; students as partners

Community response

Play generates energy. It does not sap it like some academic practices do, and as a result, this session was one of the most inspirational moments of the conference. The presenters spoke with passion about the role of creativity in higher education, and it gave a glimmer of hope for a future in higher education. We are seeing a paradigm shift driven by neoliberal marketisation, the economic state of the sector and through technology (notably Big Ed Tech and generative AI). Creative practice is almost antidotal. Yes, AI can mimic creativity, but only in the bounds of what it is trained on. We still do not have it pushing those next boundaries. This is, for now, still an innate human quality.

Positivity itself is creative. For example, the current study on the future of LD is so interesting precisely because the positive appreciation approach forces us to move beyond complaining and gives a sense of agency. Learning is (and should be) messy and hard to disentangle, but it is a beautiful messiness, and creative practice is the ideal vehicle for it. Cormier's (2011) ideas around rhizomatic learning are perfect for understanding and working with this messiness.

Learning should be disruptive; it should require us as learners, students and Learning Developers alike to question our underlying assumptions and to view the world slightly differently. Attending this showcase was an experience of that disruption, in how it explored the way artful, playful, forms in higher education can both reveal who has been 'forcibly excluded from sight' (Laing, 2020), and can also function as a site of 'respite' – an escape. Creative approaches and "bringing humanity into assessment" can, potentially, dismantle the artificial intelligence steamroller, thus, as was argued, putting us 'ahead of the curve' with AI. Considering the potential for approaches to learning which produce original and interconnected

insights gave pause for thought. Sandra, Sandra and Tom's approach provokes awe in the way they challenge so many of the established practices and assumptions of higher education. Our role as Learning Developers is described as helping students to navigate the rules, assumptions and complexities of higher education but Sandra, Sandra and Tom turn this on its head and fight to make higher education less complex, to encourage students to break the rules and challenge the assumptions themselves. Never mind navigating through them on an established path, students should be free to choose their own directions and remove obstacles rather than accepting them or working around them. Sandra, Sandra and Tom make this dissension playful and joyful too - an amazing achievement.

However, the main thing to take away from this resource showcase was the need for more inclusive representations of what higher education is, who it is for, and what its purposes are. Visualising it, like one participant in the resource, as a gloriously colourful water scene with students represented as fish in the 'HE System' or river, seemed both hopeful and indicative of what higher education, and LD more specifically, could, and should, be. Similarly, it was hopeful that so many of the images generated in the workshop were of trees, plants and nature. Inspiring, joyous, and a thing of beauty, this is a resource to return to and reflect on again and again, to bring creativity more resolutely into our practice. That it was co-created with students supported by ALDinHE funding somehow makes it all the sweeter.



Image: A visual reflection on the session tweeted by Jacqui Bartram (@jaxbartram)

Author's reflection

Play provides the energy, the eruptions, the poetry and the connectivity for engagement and success. Play transforms deficit-fixing teaching, it is creative and emergent, it provides spaces and places of reimagining and agency – play has the power to transform education, and educational experiences and outcomes (Sinfield et al., 2019).

In many ways we inhabit 'interesting times!' Richard Hall (2018; 2021) writes of the alienated academic and the hopeless university, and he is not wrong. We find ourselves working in these supercomplex and challenging times. However, there exists even more urgently the need for a politics of hope – a belief that things can be different. Our own practice is playful, creative - and harnesses arts-based practice. As Laing (2020) argues, 'art has begun to feel not like a respite or an escape, but a formidable tool for gaining perspective on what are increasingly troubled times.'

In our session we talked about what a more positive, inclusive and empowering higher education would (should) entail, and we showcased the results of our ALDinHE-funded small-scale research project. In creative, playful workshops Learning Developers and other academics 'built' the ideal higher education. They collaged, drew, sketched, animated, and made. They wrote poems of what is and what they would like learning and teaching to be – an 'appreciative inquiry' of what makes liberatory and empowering higher education practice.

'Makes' and session and guide feedback showed that creative and playful research gives 'voice' and creates 'joy.' Participants feel empowered, similar to our Students-as-Partners who worked with us on the research and designed the look and feel of the Guide. To good effect, for example, their cover was nominated for the GGS/GSA Images of Research Competition 2022-23 people's choice award by the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Calgary. We need more spaces and places – and time – that allow us to dream and imagine. Because, as Chrissi Neranzti in the

Guide Preface (Abegglen et al., 2023, p.2) states: 'Anything we can dream can happen.'

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Sandra Abegglen is a Researcher in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape (SAPL) at the University of Calgary, Canada with a strong interest in collaboration, co-creation and social justice. Her research focuses on online education, hybrid pedagogy, academic literacies, creative learning and teaching methods, inclusion, and identity. She is the Principal Investigator for [Playful Hybrid Higher Education](#) and [TALON, the Teaching and Learning Online Network](#) - and she is the project lead for several other online education research projects. Sandra has written about her research and teaching practice in a variety of books and journals, and she has presented her work nationally and internationally. She has been awarded for multi- and interdisciplinary work with the Team Teaching Award 2020 by the University of Calgary and the Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) by [AdvanceHE 2022](#).

Sonia Kamal has a passion for solving problems and enjoys the thrill of taking on new challenges, particularly when it involves improving people's daily lives through the process of planning and design. She is currently enrolled in the second year of the Master of Planning program in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape (SAPL) at the University of Calgary. Prior to joining SAPL as a full-time student, she worked as an architect for complex projects like township development, parks, and playground design. As a registered architect in Bangladesh, Sonia is skilled in coordinating multidisciplinary consultants on design development and project implementations.

Tom Burns is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Centre for Professional and Educational Development/Directorate for Transformational Teaching and Learning at London Metropolitan University, developing innovations with a special focus on praxes that ignites student curiosity, and develop power and voice. Always interested

in theatre and the arts and their role in teaching and learning, Tom has set up adventure playgrounds, events and festivals for his local community, and feeds arts-based practice into his learning, teaching and assessment practices. Tom is the project lead for (Re)Building the Ideal Higher Education funded by the Association for Learning Development in HE ([ALDinHE](#)), published as a LearnHigher [resource](#). He is co-author of [Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors](#) and [Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University](#) (5th Edition). Tom is a University Teaching Fellow and was part of the #creativeHE collective that won the Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) by [AdvanceHE 2022](#).

Maryam Akhbari was born in 1988 in Tehran. Maryam has a BA in painting and an MA in illustration from the University of Tehran. She moved to London (United Kingdom) in 2022. Currently, she is undertaking a Masters in Visual Communication: Graphic Design at London Metropolitan University. She was teaching in different universities in Iran from 2016 to 2022, and she was promoted to a faculty member in a technical and vocational university in 2020. Maryam is a visual artist and has participated in numerous exhibitions, workshops, and art festivals. She has done art projects such as urban murals and published two illustrated books. The main theme of her artwork is human, which reflects her own personal life. Her work technique is mainly figurative, based on the tacit understanding of abstracted shapes. Maryam is assisting the ALDinHE project as a student researcher.

Sandra Sinfield is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Centre for Professional and Educational Development/Directorate for Transformational Teaching and Learning at London Metropolitan University and a co-founder of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education ([ALDinHE](#)). Sandra is the lead of the learning development focused [#Take5 blog](#) that has national and international reach as part of ALDinHE - and that shares inspirational practice with LD folks and London Metropolitan staff. She has also co-authored [Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors](#) and [Essential Study Skills: The complete Guide to Success at University](#) (5th Edition). Sandra is interested in creativity as liberatory and holistic practice in higher education; she has developed theatre and film in unusual places; and inhabited SecondLife as a learning space. Sandra is a University Teaching

Fellow and was part of the #creativeHE collective that won the Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) by [AdvanceHE 2022](#). Together with Tom and Sandra Abegglen, she has co-edited the book [Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice](#), just published by Bloomsbury (summer 2023).