The university as an infinite game

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Symposium: 90mins

According to the philosopher James Carse (1986), life is comprised of at least two kinds of games. One is finite games, in which the object is to win, and the other is the infinite game in which the object is to keep the game in play. Finite games have boundaries, include only select players, have rules that must not change for the duration of the game, and are played with extrinsic values. In contrast, the infinite game has horizons that move as the player moves, welcomes everyone into the game, has rules that must change over time, and is played with intrinsic values. Finite games may further the infinite game or, if they become disconnected from the infinite ethos, render it obscure.

The premise of this symposium is that, at its best, the university is the infinite game par excellence. It is a site in which all players' insights can contribute to the finite games we play; in which new knowledge is co-created; and in which we are deeply and creatively engaged with the ongoing social debate about how to live well together.

Niki Harré will outline the rules of infinite and finite games and how common university practices can be understood in their light; Sean Sturm will explore how focusing students on what they value can transform both their experience and the institution itself; Kirsten Locke will look at gender equity as a way to embrace all players and adjust the game accordingly; and Barbara Grant will show how the critic and conscience role of academics offers a key site for deep engagement with issues in the public arena and within the university itself.

The infinite game of higher education

Niki Harré

All too often, as university academics, we have become entranced by finite games in which narrow forms of measurement distract us from our potential as participants in, and facilitators of, infinite play. Such finite games include the research outputs game, the competition for “top” students game, the grants game, the h-index game, the promotion game and so on. And we submit our students to the finite games of relentless assessments, prizes and GPA calculations, which force them to walk a knife-edge between inclusion and exclusion. While much of this could be attributed to the structural forces of the “neoliberal university,” we are also complicit in the maintenance of these games by pursuing and proffering the rewards they promise. This can leave us – and, no doubt, our students – with a yearning for the more vibrant, rich and open-ended infinite game, yet unable to let go of the finite games on offer. This talk will suggest ways to revive the infinite ethos at universities, including self-reflection, subversive networks and a willingness to give up on winning the finite games that lead us astray.

“Teaching the university”: Learning from the play of values

Sean Sturm

Teaching is public intellectual work, in at least two senses: first, the teacher can embody the role of critic and conscience for students; second, the teacher can empower students to take on that role for themselves. One
way to do the latter is to “teach the university,” as Jeffrey Williams (2008) puts it: to alert students to the social, institutional and disciplinary context in which they are studying, and how it shapes what and how they study, in particular, its values and value judgments. This can awaken in them a sense of critique as “problematization,” as “the questioning … of [the] present to which [they] belong and in relation to which [they have] to situate [themselves]” (Foucault, 1985: 88). But the teacher can also empower students themselves to “teach the university” (or their teacher, at least) more directly: by undertaking critical-creative – playful – activities and assessments (games, dérives, blogging, mapping, occupations) that embody what they value about the university, students can intervene in the operation of the university; they too can teach the university.

**Gender equity and the university project as “infinite game”**

Kirsten Locke

The university as an infinite game prompts a reading of gender equity in the university project. Research drawing on gendered career trajectories at Danish and New Zealand universities explores the extent to which the university recognises itself as a microcosm of a society that embraces the notion of living well together. For the university to do so, academics (and students) must be alert to how it perpetuates or disrupts gendered articulations of power. Issues of pay parity, equal career trajectories, and general policy frameworks that support women in society are severely compromised when universities “forget” their obligation to ensure that the gendered structures within which academics work are equitable, as statistics on the number of women in academic leadership roles attest. A recognition of gender and its intersectionality with sociocultural categories at play in and outside the university sphere such as class, ethnicity, age and status (Locke, 2015) is critical to a project that aims to keep open the possibility of the infinite game for all in academia.

**Critic and conscience of the university: Animating the infinite game?**

Barbara M. Grant

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the role of “critic and conscience” is given to universities by legislation: it is a role that enfoolds the value of academic freedom with elements of being a public intellectual (see Bridgman, 2007). While the primary way in which critic and conscience has been interpreted, enacted and defended to date is to promote an active, critical engagement between academics and their wider society, we might also think about the necessity of inhabiting the role within our own institutions. How do we act as critic and conscience of our universities, when our very living depends upon them? In the current time, for example, how might we usefully – and in principled ways – intervene in a culture of pervasive and perverse measurement? In my presentation, I give the history and legal standing of the critic and conscience role in NZ, its connection with academic freedom and the idea of the public intellectual, and I consider its ramifications for the university as an infinite game.

**References**


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