

10 Play in practice

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Introduction

Play is evident in many aspects of the life of Silver Street. People play games and puzzles. They enjoy discos on Black History week, coming to the Centre dressed in their own ethnic costume. The games dimension of play is experienced in swimming, walking and other sports activities such as cycling on specially adapted tandem bikes and tricycles. They paint and sculpt; they listen to music. In these senses play is more prevalent in this community than in many others.



In this chapter, however, I want to explore in what senses play is present within the intrinsic aesthetic of the Centre and in particular within the action research project, the start of which I described in the previous chapter. If so, how do play theories help structure my understanding of this dimension of practice? Also how does such an understanding influence me in my own reflexive experience of practice as well as when working with others?

In this chapter therefore I aim to,

- define what play in practice means to me
- analyse an incident in the Silver Street-2 project for its 'playfulness'
- assess the contribution that this understanding of play makes to my first and second person practice.

What play in practice means to me

Before analysing the continuing story of this Silver Street-2 project, I first want to set out what I understand to be some of the main parameters of play as a form of human interaction. In doing this I shall also consider in what sense playfulness is experienced in my personal and professional practice.

Play is a voluntary activity without purpose

The purposelessness of play has been commented on by a number of theorists, (Huizinga, 1938. Caillois, 1958, Gadamer, 1975). We define play in part by contrasting it with work, which has purpose. Play is voluntarily engaged in. If forced to play, we would probably not know where to start. Unwillingness to play by some, spoils the play for others.

Gadamer refers to Schlegel's view that play is recurrent but purposeless process,

'The movement of play has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.' (Schlegel, 1882, cited in Gadamer, 1975, p. 104)

Gadamer reinforces this sense of the purposeless of play, which he sees as in no way diminishing its importance,

'So too it is an inadequate approach to ask what the life function and biological purpose of play is. First and foremost, play is self-presentation.' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 108)

This idea that play is self-presentation suggests to me a connection with first person inquiry and autoethnography. First person inquiry and its expressive extension through autoethnography and other channels involve self-presentation. Although this may be done consciously and for a developmental purpose, the imaginative and improvisational qualities of reflexive thought and its representation are playfully unpredictable in their direction and outcomes, – hence the aptness of the 'journey' metaphor, used at intervals in this thesis.

There is playfulness to this travelling. The journey is worth making for what it may unexpectedly uncover, not in the hope of reaching a terminus.

Play is not 'ordinary' or 'real life'

Bateson (1975), Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1958) each explore the difference between play and non-play. Derrida (1978) also points to how readily we distinguish between the artifice and theatre of, for example, all-in wrestling and unfettered aggressive fighting.

There is a similar awareness of the difference between spending time in an away-day together reflecting on work, and actually 'working'. There is a sense in which time spent in this way constitutes an 'artifice'. By the term 'artifice' I mean the group cultural conventions of 'development' days, which include going to a new venue and sitting in different relationships to those found in normal team work settings. The pattern of the day, from introductory warm-up activities, through large and small group sessions, to some sense of finale, emphasize that this is 'not real life', although it strives like drama to create imaginal analogues of real life. It might be seen as a microcosm, in its crafted beginning, middle and end, of the longer and less orderly cycles of working life.

Play creates order, *is* order

Huizinga (1938) comments on the essential function of the rules that govern team games, and which are often enforced by a referee. Deviation from this order 'spoils the game'; it has its rules, the infringement of which makes the non-compliant player a 'spoil sport'.

Gadamer (1975) takes a more metaphorical view of the rules of play when he claims that the 'field of the game' is defined by the spirit, rules and regulations of the game not by any physical boundaries that constrain it. He nevertheless regards this informing principle of 'field of the game' as an essential characteristic.

A set of rules concerning boundaries, time and place is seen to be necessary as a framework within which play is free to occur. Without such a framework play changes and degenerates.

Although play may be voluntary, without purpose and on occasions wild, it needs some containment, some shared understanding of boundary. Similarly experiencing the playfulness of an inquiry group also raises the issue of boundaries and conventions. The facilitator who ignores this, does so at her or his peril. In the Silver Street-2 story I am about to tell, the vital process of working out these boundaries and conventions can be seen taking place.

Play, art and organizations

The connection between play and art is widely asserted. Gadamer (1975) wrote about play in his discussion of the ontology of art, seeing it as a form of hermeneutic relating to the world. It is through playful improvisation and interaction that we inquire into and make shared meaning.

Gadamer describes how play is transformed into art; in particular he explores the relationship between play and a theatrical play and then considers the ways the roles of author, actor and audience contribute to its meaning in performance over time.

Barrett (1998) views the play involved in jazz riffs and inventions as a metaphor for improvisational processes in organizational life.

Shaw (2002) also sees a link between theatre and organizational life,

'I am suggesting that we could approach the work of organizational change as improvisational ensemble work of a narrative, conversational nature, a serious form of play or drama with an evolving number of scenes and episodes in which we all create our parts with one another.' (Shaw, 2002, p. 28)

This captures very well for me the bricolage of playful encounters in my own experience of action research.

To conclude this section on the parameters of play I refer briefly to the definition of Caillois' four types of play already given in Part A, Chapter 4, *Inquiry methods*, as these types have a clear relevance to the analysis which follows. Caillois (1958), describes four fundamental types or 'anthropological dispositions' of play; they are Alea, Agon, Ilinx and Mimesis.

To recap very briefly, Agon, or contest, forms the basis for all competitive team and individual games. Alea, or chance is found in many games, including gambling. Ilinx, or carnival occurs in revelry or Bacchanals. Mimesis encompasses all play where people assume roles and behave in imitation of others, including drama.

In illustrating how these types or dispositions manifest themselves Caillois draws on examples from early history as well as contemporary anthropology. Some of this material refers to rituals and ceremonies; much is drawn from organised games which have their roots in ritual.

In this chapter I shall examine how far these types can be related to the practice of action research. I have already drawn on this typology in analysing journal material earlier in the thesis. I shall do so in greater detail in the commentary which follows.

Front-line week 3 – 25/5/2004

It is to a particular moment in Week 3 of the Silver Street work with front-line staff that I now turn. I shall draw on the discussion of the parameters of play in the previous section, as I add my commentary to the journal record.

The *mis-en-scène* of the Irish Community Centre has already been referred to in the previous chapter. The unintended irony of the notice, *No dancing on the landings*, captured its quality very well for me. On the particular morning described in this journal entry the room allocated to us was too big by a factor of three, and left me feeling as though we were in a transit lounge. I arranged the chairs to create a more human scale of stage within this space. In the previous chapter I have already introduced some of the characters who were to play out this as yet unwritten script.

*J*ournal ... SCENE ONE – IAN'S INTERVIEW

Journal

The programme today consists of a morning where I have decided to do some skills development on listening and giving feedback, followed by some initial thinking on the direction of our work together in the two inquiry groups. The afternoon is to be used in visiting Mencap.

Reflecting on last week and the tension between my wish to achieve something and their being slow to take up the invitation, I had decided that the opening session on

Commentary

listening and dialogue might illustrate through practical example, a type of inquiring dialogue which would help them engage with each other and me. My plan was to find a volunteer to have a conversation with me while the rest observed; then I would invite them to find a partner and each in turn talk about an aspect of their work experience in order to receive some supportive feedback. I realise this was assuming an interventionist direction, but I judged that they had not had much experience of reflective dialogue with others.

In fact it didn't quite turn out as planned.

I explained the purpose of what I was doing and then asked for a volunteer. Ian offered to talk to me. We arranged our chairs so that we felt OK for a conversation and that the observers could see our faces.

The conversation between Ian and myself started. He spoke about his anxiety about his new post as key worker. He had been a care assistant for twelve years and reckoned that he had gained a good reputation for his practice with service users. He felt his promotion might reduce the freedom he had come to value in developing work with users.

So far in this session I have a sense of treading carefully into an unknown territory, a form of *Alea*. My risk was that there could have been a situation where no one wanted to volunteer. It might be too that, in offering an example of dialogue, the quality of it might not be evident or if it were that it did not inspire others to relate differently in their own subsequent practice sessions.

Ian too had taken a chance on volunteering to have the dialogue session with me.

I knew him better than others in the room and knew he would trust me not to set him up.

Sitting together in the centre of a circle of spectators created nervous anticipation which had elements of *Agon* or contest, the sort of encounter that the audience might associate with other competitions. Of course neither of us declared this to be a competition. But in my head I was matching myself to the occasion; can I make this into the sort of dialogue session that will

He also spoke very frankly about his worry about not being able to write very well. (Later in the morning he wrote some headings on a flipchart and I think he must be dyslexic. There were very few words that were spelt correctly.) He said he often checked his spelling in a dictionary that he carried. Navado said that the spelling checker in a PC could sort out a lot of these problems. Lucy added that grammar problems could be sorted out in the same way.

His new post would carry greater responsibilities, including writing to parents and carers, producing plans and doing reviews. I encouraged him to explore what was good about his present practice and what he might carry through of that into the new work. I also asked him how he had got support before. Who could he talk to about his concerns? He made it clear that he was pleased to be moving ahead and sounded as though he had enough energy to work on solving his concerns. I felt persuaded that this was so and told him that. He smiled.

The group spontaneously clapped their support. It felt like a better example of dialogue than I could have hoped for.

Ian's reflection on his new role is an example of imaginative mimetic projection. As the group listened to his hopes and concerns about taking up this post, some, like Stella, would have been imagining how they would handle this transition.

demonstrate a level of openness to each other? For Ian, he must have wondered how he would be seen and judged by an audience of peers.

This all seemed very supportive. I took this as a sign that in observing the small enactment between Ian and me, they had engaged imaginatively in Ian's story.

There was a respectful and wrapped quality about the silent listening, as in a play. The spontaneous applause from the group completed this act in a short celebration, the llinx that concludes the game of skill. Ian had shown very clearly that he had risen to the invitation of the dialogue. People showed their respect for this by clapping.

Through mimesis we experiment with other ways of being and acting. Mimesis is also evident in art. All first novels are supposed to be autobiographical in source, and maybe not just first ones. Music contains imitative reflections of human and other than human sounds. Drama presents mimetic personae, in relationships which are analogous to our own. No matter how close or distant the reflection, mimesis must have some place in the artistic process, as an expression of the individuality of the creator's eye, ear or hand. The mimetic process whether in life or art may be little more than a springboard for a new imagining. There is an original theme even if it is virtually lost in the many transformational variations. So too in this event we were constantly re-inventing through subtle in-the-moment performance the selves we wanted to present.

I am regularly aware of this mimetic process of influence in reflecting on my own experience. I notice how the 'presence' of influential people stays with me for varying periods. I hear myself sounding like them or hear them in others' voices. Such is the mimetic potency of close relationships that the Gestalt they create may remain there as a source of imaginal reference for a lifetime.

*J*ournal ... SCENE TWO – LUCY'S CHALLENGE

Journal

Ian returned to his seat.

As if from nowhere, although of course nowhere does not exist, Lucy laid down a barrage of preparatory disclaimers and caveats, along the lines of "Alan, I don't mean to upset you. I'm not saying this to be difficult. I'm not sure if I should be saying this."

Sensing that something was in the offing, I said playfully, "Lucy, come on – spit it out."

She replied, "OK, where is all this getting us? We are in Week 3 now and I wonder what we have achieved."

Commentary

What can I tell people that we have done? I get ready to come here and I wonder what we are learning?"

Holding on to my belief that action research is a shared responsibility, I know that this intervention is very valuable. I find myself without a shred of self-defensiveness or anxiety. (I can remember situations in the past where a challenge like this would have left me rocking on my heels.)

I do however feel peeved that Lucy has gone straight into this, without giving Ian any positive feedback. After all she too has just been promoted in a similar way. Maybe this is a bid for attention. I look round the group.

Then a flow of dialogue sets up around the room.

Journal

Navado: "Of course we are learning. I am learning from Alan; he is very calm. He is not a teacher who stands up and writes on a blackboard. That is not what we are doing. We are here to talk about our work and learn from each other. I thought at first a bit like you; what is this all about? But I saw how it is going. We are learning all the time."

Ian endorsed the point.

Donna who is sitting beside Navado, has been very quiet following her operation to remove wisdom teeth during

I think back to De Board's account of Tavistock Interpersonal Relations programmes (De Board, 1978). Nearly thirty years ago I had attended one of the Tavistock's Leicester Conferences. Whilst I was not assuming the same austerity in my role with this group, nor was I offering the provocative Freudian analysis provided by Eric Miller and his consultant team, I felt my 'calmness' and listening stance had been right in this moment.

Commentary

The shape of the dialogue that surrounded Lucy's intervention consisted of an opening statement from Lucy as she questions me about the purpose of our working together. There then followed a series of responses which came from unpredictable directions around

the preceding week. She speaks quietly: "I have learnt a lot too. I'm learning to listen, to hear what other people think and do."

The next to me Stella speaks up; she has often been quiet during sessions.

"I wish I had known, Ian, what you were feeling about your writing. I held back from applying for that job because I had the same fear. If I had known, I might have tried for it."

She then went on to mention the Mandela poem I read to them in Week 1 and the video in Week 2 which she had found inspirational.

By this time I was wondering what Lucy might be feeling, faced as she was by this opposing affirmation of the quality of learning in the group. Why was she the only one to express her doubts about what we were achieving together?

I tried to sum up by thanking her for providing the stimulus to the group to reflect on their experience of how we are working together. I thanked the group for what they had said and added that I too was finding there was a lot to learn for all of us and what a privilege it was to have some time to work this way.

I reminded them that I had urged them to find a different way of learning, a play on the 'different' theme embedded in the Service's quest for different ways for service users.

the room, each one filling in the space created by Lucy's question and the last response. This live enactment of relationships was for me an example of what Shaw (2002) aptly describes as 'improvisational ensemble work'. I hear in it the aesthetic form of musical play when an opening theme is handed round the orchestra in an embroidery of meaning.

I turned to Lucy and said that I also had been struggling to see what would emerge from the group, particularly last week when it was so hot and the going seemed hard; but the group had just given a spontaneous description of its learning. If she hadn't voiced her concern we would not have known.

Finally I said that I knew it was hard when the person who might be assumed to be responsible for leading everything, kept handing the task back to the group; but I still felt that this would serve us better in the long run.

Beverley sitting beside her said it was like I was watering the plants. I uttered an unspoken blessing on Beverley and replied that the best form of watering at this very moment was to break for a cup of tea. They laughed and we did.

While people made tea and coffee or went out for a smoke, I scribbled a few notes to capture some of the key moments of what had just happened. I felt truly alive to the group and would cheerfully have weighed this moment of practice in a positive scale against years of other work.

Improvisational plot

Re-reading this account I am reminded of the impact that the Lucy dialogue had on me, then and since. It was as though all the internal self-questioning that I had experienced over a number years about the type of group work I wanted to do, was being played out around me. It set me thinking about different types of knowing that we can seek out together, some propositional, others experiential, presentational and practical. Each is important and each has its own time and space in a group. The difference for me in working in a propositional way as part of an action inquiry is that I now aim to help the group build propositions from experience and reflection, rather than import them from elsewhere. In doing so I am not dogmatic to the extent that I would withhold theory that I felt might help a group move on.

I notice now my concern that Lucy was becoming exposed in her position. It was however up to her to reflect on the gap, between her judgement of what was going on and that of others.

However it felt right to notice and voice in this way my own interest in her question. It was not only present in her. She was the one at that moment who was holding this question of purpose, for the group, and it needed to be attended to.

However the predominant mode of knowing I now seek out, is created locally by us as we work together.

This is what I sensed was happening in the room on this morning. In this discussion the group had shown its capacity to work through a double loop of learning and reflect on how they were learning – quite remarkably and spontaneously, (Argyris, 1974). My judgement was firstly to be open to her question and secondly to give the group space to respond. In other words, listen and be quiet.

*J*ournal ... SCENE THREE – RESOLUTION

Journal

When the group reassembled after the break, Beverley spoke up for herself and her friend, Lucy, both older women with a lot of experience of working with people with learning disabilities.

Whatever they had said to each other about the last session outside the room I shall never know; but she now asked me if I wrote poetry, because when I had read them extracts from my Silver Street journal last week, they thought they were very poetic. I can only guess that this was their way of articulating what they found different or difficult about me. There was, I thought, also an element of placatory gift, unnecessary of course, but OK, if it got Lucy over the problem of mounting a critique which had then been dissipated by the group response. I said simply that I did and if they wanted, I'd read some next week.

Then to my astonishment Beverley said, "Would you write something about us?" I presume that she

Commentary

This continuation and development of the theme by Beverley had that dramatic quality of a theatrical play which has moved on during the interval.

When the curtain rises, the audience catches up with the changes that are imagined to have occurred. It is Beverley who acts as Lucy's foil in asking about poetry and who raises the possibility of tapping into my journal about our encounter. It almost becomes a play within a play, as she asks to see my script of what has happened.

She casts me in a role of

you write something about us?" I presume that she had picked up that I had done this in the autumn at Silver Street and now thought I might do the same about them. I had pondered after Week 1 whether I might share this writing with them but felt it would be too intrusive and might inhibit people, in much the same way as being videoed.

Now though I'm not sure; what might happen if I did read extracts complete with substitute names?

(Later note: In fact this name swap idea proved ludicrous; I should have realised. When I read excerpts to them, they urged me to revert to their actual first names, which I have done.)

rapporteur of the group's words and actions. This springs from Beverley and Lucy's curiosity about how I see them. By describing what I might write as *poetic*, she is locating this relationship in a different territory, a place where 'normal' dialogue was less likely to occur, where something rarified and separate would happen. I feel a bit uncomfortable with this, but can see it helps them fix me in a place they can understand. However trying to be the cause of no disruption or surprise serves no one and leads to stasis.

What are we doing in groups?

In concluding this reflection on play in relation to this episode, I return to the question of validity and purpose in this form of inquiry.

In fact I too hold as valid the objection that Lucy raised – yes, I also would like to know what we are doing in groups. It is taking the writing of this thesis for me to find some deeper and more satisfying answers.

The explicit agenda of group events inevitably encompasses a 'silent implicative double', a concept described in Linstead (2000) to which I will return when I consider poetics in practice in the next chapter. From these tacit and implicit sources, the wishes and fears of the individual and the group become manifest. Whatever we hear in the explicit dialogue of the group, its silent double is in interaction with it, shaping and forming people's feelings and ideas in working together.

Lucy's intervention also has other implications for me as a facilitator. She made me question whether my stance towards action research facilitation was helpful to her or not. How long

could I hold back from running the sort of course she expected and wanted? In fact as the continuing story of this piece of work will show, by the end of the programme Lucy did deliver more in the way of ideas and material than others in the group. Although Beverley seemed to me to coast along, when she did speak, her comments were often very insightful. (She brought in a CD of excerpts of classical music for me to borrow between weeks. This token of friendship was much appreciated.)

I thought back to the introductory volunteering stage at Silver Street where I would have simply been working alongside Lucy and Beverley, as I had with Ian, for example. Crossing this boundary to take up a recognised role of facilitation brings with it different relationships and expectations, which I as facilitator needed to hold attentively in mind as we worked. It becomes my responsibility to manage this in introducing an action research approach where we subscribe to a more democratic way of inquiring together. I notice though that a valid alternative for me is to work alongside and interact with people. Whilst this still does not free me from the task of facilitation, it strips away some of the more formal structures associated with the artifice of an event-based practice. I'll return to this theme in the final chapter of this thesis.

I have described above Lucy's tentative challenge to the rules of the game that occurred when I was facilitating the second Silver Street project. In fact it seemed to me less of challenge than an opening for a new type of game; for the challenger she was registering her discomfort with the way the rules had so far been defined. Understanding and agreeing the rules of play in the free flow of sessions should be a continuous process of reflection and agreement. When people go off on different tracks with different rules, there will be friction. The artifice of practice events may be less formally constrained than a sport or other games, but it still defines itself by mutually accepted rules.

Links with expressive play in organizations

I recognize in my emphasis on attending to the intrinsic play and drama of action research, I have said nothing about the expressive use of theatre in inquiry. (This falls into line with my declared position in this thesis of avoiding writing about methods of which I have had little direct experience.)

Explicit links between dramatic play and practice have been made by groups like the Danish theatre company Da Capo Teatret (2006) and Olivier's (2006) Mythodrama based in the UK. These take theatre into organizations and work with issues of importance to participants. Olivier (2006), for example, inquires into people's understanding of issues such as

leadership or politics through live presentation of excerpts of Shakespearean drama and subsequent work based in part on Jungian theories of archetypal roles. Taylor, (2000 and 2005) draws on his expertise and experience in play-writing and performing, as a vehicle for inquiry into organizational life in the academy and in business. In his most recent production which I saw performed in Kraków in September 2006, he uses a playful account of the transition of his hero through death into a limbo between heaven or hell, to explore issues of power and manipulation in becoming a member of, and influencing organizations.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1995) works through a form of participative action inquiry using dramas on significant social issues that are written and performed in community settings. The audience is then invited by a 'joker' intermediary role to participate in re-writing problematic moments; the actors then perform according to these audience interventions and thereby prompt a further round of reflection and decision-making in the audience.

I have so far only experienced these approaches as a participant in conference programmes, but hope to form a fuller judgement of their value to my practice as further opportunities arise.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, accounts of my practice include examples of intrinsic and spontaneous play and I highlight these as they occur. In this chapter I have explored play as an embedded experience in practice. The way in which practice is facilitated can lead to more playful and creative experiences for all participants. However, moving in this direction requires sensitivity to the expectations that some groups hold about rules and purpose.

In this chapter I have reviewed the main parameters of play and recapped on theories of play as defined by Huizinga (1938) and further developed by Caillois (1958). The four domains or dispositions – Agon, Alea, Mimesis and Ilinx were described. These theoretical elements of play were then applied to an account of a day with a group of front-line staff during the piece of work referred to as Silver Street-2.

The story of Ian's interview and the subsequent challenge about purpose by Lucy have been analysed using the framework of play parameters and types referred to above. The dramatic structure of this session was described, as were different types of play relationship. I also used this example to plot aspects of my growing sense of security in working within an action research approach.

My interest in play has so far developed through analysis of the *intrinsic* play that I experience in practice. This influences my facilitation style with regard to, for example, the balance between the freedom that is synonymous with play and the equally important holding of boundaries around this freedom.

I added a brief note to recognize that aesthetic inquiry can also take a more expressive stance through the introduction of theatre into organizational contexts. This currently lies beyond my own practice experience.

In the next chapter I explore the sense in which the poetic permeates practice and I will also note the extent to which the poetic interweaves with play, both in the literature and in practice.