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Crafting Inclusive Playful Learning Environments: Exploring Affective Strategies and Atmospheres

Abstract

This article contributes new critical perspectives to Playful Learning, an emerging educational field rooted in inclusivity, democratic principles, and adaptability. It seeks to bridge the gap between playful learning and affective thinking, exploring how atmospheres can enhance inclusivity within higher educational contexts. Specifically, it investigates artful teaching practices in the Social Education Study Program at a University College in Denmark to uncover affective strategies that foster inclusivity within playful approaches. The article establishes the potential of integrating affect-based thinking in playful learning. It navigates the complexities of the magic circle of play and contextualizes the study within the broader landscape of art education and atmospheres. Drawing from a situated relational approach to affect, it introduces the concept of affective arrangements and atmospheres, showcasing their influence on agency and inclusion. The empirical analysis presents two ethnographic vignettes demonstrating how intentional design choices create atmospheres of inclusion. By shedding light on the interplay between affect, atmospheres, and inclusivity, this article contributes to the emerging field of Playful Learning. It offers critical insights for educators striving to create inclusive playful learning environments.

Keywords

higher education; playful learning; artful educational practices; magic circle; affect; atmospheres of inclusion

Introduction

Within the evolving landscape of educational theory, Playful Learning has emerged as a vibrant field of research and practice. Championing more inclusive, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2022), playful learning is considered a responsive strategy to counteract the negative influences of neoliberal governmental logic (Jensen et al., 2022; Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård et al., 2017). Playful learning carries values rooted in inclusivity, democratic principles, and adaptability to change (Nørgård et al., 2017). At its core, it seeks to create safe, collaborative spaces where learners can develop trust within a magic circle of play (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018; Whitton & Moseley, 2019; Whitton, 2022). This metaphor of the magic circle revolves around the idea that play establishes a safe possibility space for learning, where experimentation is nurtured, failure is accepted, and learning is facilitated. While the magic circle metaphor helps conceptualize play spaces, scholars highlight the importance of acknowledging its potentials and limitations (Whitton, 2018). Its application in the real-world context of higher education is fraught with challenges, as creating truly safe spaces for all learners, devoid of power dynamics and tensions, might be an unattainable goal (ibid.). Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is crucial for cultivating inclusive and equitable playful learning environments.

This article aligns with the »turn to affect« (Clough & Halley, 2007) within the humanities and social sciences. The article identifies an unexplored avenue for enhancing inclusivity within playful learning – the lens of affective thinking. Atmospheres generated by affective arrangements (Slaby et al., 2019), with their power to shape human agency and social dynamics, present an improved approach to navigating the complexities of inclusivity. By investigating how atmospheres can be harnessed through artful teaching practices in the Social Education Studies Program¹ at a Danish University College, this article seeks to uncover affective strategies that promote inclusivity within playful approaches. In this article, I concentrate on the training of social educators in Denmark. This sector, including policymakers, educational researchers, and practitioners, is increasingly turning towards playful learning as an alternative to current neoliberal educational practices. Here playful learning emerges as a hopeful alternative ethos, promoting relationality and community over individualism and embracing a safe, enjoyable present over an uncertain future (ibid.). To frame the article, I concentrate on the combination of play and practices of artful teaching and learning in Social Education Studies and ask:

How can an investigation into artful teaching practices, utilized in the creation of affective and embodied spaces for democratic education in the Social Education Studies Program, reveal affective strategies that promote inclusivity?

How can these discoveries enhance the progression of more inclusive methodologies within playful learning?

The article's structure unfolds as follows: It begins by establishing the potential of integrating affect-based thinking in playful learning, grounded in the practice of staging affective states of mind and body to enhance learning (Staunæs, 2016). It then navigates the complexities surrounding safety as a foundation of the magic circle, particularly when aiming for

inclusivity. It contextualizes the study within the broader landscape of art education, engaging with contemporary discussions of the role of affect in art education and growing interest in the potential of atmospheres. Moving forward, it draws from the work of esteemed scholars, primarily Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wuschner (2019) and Krueger (2021), to develop the theoretical orientation centered around atmospheres of inclusion. It then elaborates upon the methodological approach employed in the study, providing insight into the chosen research framework, and afterward presents the study's setting. Following this, the article presents the research project that serves as the foundation for the empirical content discussed later. The latter half of the article is devoted to the empirical content, showcasing it through two ethnographic vignettes. The vignettes are followed by a discussion that explores the interplay between atmospheres and affect within the context of an art-pedagogical unit known as Burning Man. Finally, the article highlights the potential of harnessing atmospheres to cultivate more inclusive spaces for playful learning.

Affective dimensions in playful learning: navigating comfort, safety, and inclusivity

The relatively unexplored potential of affective thinking within playful learning emerges from efforts to infuse play's fundamental qualities into educational encounters for enhanced learning experiences (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). This shift emphasizes not only teaching and cognitive skills, but also the orchestration specific affective states of minds and bodies for enhanced learning (Staunæs, 2016). The transformation of the educational environments, such as through physical play labs and playful milieus², particularly evident in Denmark's professional college sector, far from leaving actors unaffected, is conducive to engendering and shaping certain ranges of playful comportment among actors. Deliberate efforts to orchestrate playful and social atmospheres inculcate affects in students, nurturing more playful processes of affective subjectification (Valero et al., 2019) that contrast the current neoliberal governance through affect in higher education. Within this context, affective states of minds and bodies are regarded as fueling meaningful learning processes. Playful learning revolves around establishing safe, collaborative spaces, within which learners can cultivate trust by engaging within a »magic circle« of play. However, creating truly safe playful spaces for all learners that promote a sense of safety and comfort while reducing distress and worry remains a challenge, demanding a continuous commitment to inclusivity.

The affective turn complicates the idea that comfort can serve as a reliable foundation for inclusive learning. Influential figures such as bell hooks (2014), Sara Ahmed (2014; 2004; 2007), and Michalinos Zembylas (2016) inspire the understanding of the impossibility of assuming universally safe, welcoming, and caring learning atmospheres. According to Zembylas (2016; 543), comfort is a highly subjective experience, shaped by an individual's cultural background, experiences, and personal context, making it impossible to gauge by a universal standard. Ahmed (2004: 10) argues that our perceptions are subject to the angle of our emotional state upon entering a space. This perspective underscores the contextual and dynamic nature of our interactions. Drawing on bell hook's insights on atmospheres of racism, Ahmed elucidates the complexity of how race changes affective encounters (Ahmed, 2010). Zembylas (2016, p. 543) further points out that for those individuals facing systematic injustices, feelings of trust and safety are not prerequisites for participation but privileges stemming from existing power structures. Recent explorations into the affective and embodied

dynamics of playful learning by Skriver & Jensen (2023) have revealed how marginalized individuals may not perceive play spaces as genuinely safe, potentially inhibiting their full engagement. Power imbalances and past discrimination can contribute to skepticism regarding the magic circle's safety assurances (ibid.). This skepticism to engage fully within the boundary of the magic circle emerges from an acute awareness of the complex dynamics that underlie emotions within certain spaces (Ahmed, 2014; 2004; 2007; Skriver & Jensen, 2023). While playfulness can foster a sense of communal connection and involvement, it may also inadvertently obscure underlying disparities and inequalities (Skriver, 2023), including the ongoing privilege associated with whiteness (Ahmed, 2007). Such insights call for a deeper consideration of the diverse affective and embodied experiences of learners, moving beyond the notion of the learner as a disembodied subject and recognizing the complex interplay of emotions, power structures, and cultural contexts in learning environments. By embracing affect-based theories, educators have the opportunity to challenge the traditional notion of emotions as purely private affairs and emphasize their contextual and collective nature. This approach enriches our understanding of the power dynamics within playful learning, paving the way for more socially aware and inclusive educational practices.

The turn to affect and the arts in education: exploring new horizons

Art educators are increasingly interested in the affective dimensions of pedagogy (Thompson & Hall, 2021). Artful and performative approaches in education use the arts as a lens, staging affective episodes that prompt students to delve into complex inquiries involving self, others, and the world (Østern & Knudsen, 2019). Affect theory provides insights into affect as a construct based on a fundamental relationality between bodies and objects, emphasizing the ontological precedence of dynamic interactions (Slaby, 2016, p. 4). From an affect theoretical standpoint, the world is replete with affects, operating on registers of awareness that often elude conscious reasoning. As succinctly stated by Siegworth (2020: 87), »*Affect arrives at every moment of contact, of body world encounter*«, entangling us in experiential-experimental complexities and sensorial training. Affect and pedagogy are intrinsically intertwined. Scholars and practitioners engaged in arts-driven work have integrated affect-based perspectives to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between bodies and affects (Harris & Jones, 2020; Hickey-Moody, 2013a; 2013b), redefining the inherently affective nature of learning (Hickey-Moody, 2013b). This shift disrupts the traditional Cartesian concept of a self-contained, rational subject, welcoming a perspective that perceives human and non-human assemblages as porous and permeable (Blackman, 2012). It enables viewing a body as a dynamic process, continually shaped by affects, rather than a static, self-contained entity being acted upon from without (Clough & Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2015). This perspective empowers educators to harness the collective affective power of bodies learning together (Harris & Jones, 2020), sparking »...*adventures into the unknown*« (Mendus et al., 2020: 20) and reshaping perceptions of self and the world (McLaren & Welsh, 2020). Crucially, this orientation equips educators to address persistent inequalities and power dynamics within classrooms driven by factors like race, class, ability, gender, and whiteness (Harris & Jones, 2020). In addition to these advancements, there is an increasing interest in exploring the atmospheres generated by affective arts practices, objects, and spaces, and the possibilities they open up (Mesías-Lema et al., 2020; Thompson & Hall, 2021). This focus on affective

thinking brings into the spotlight the materiality of learning (Mulcahy, 2019), encouraging a broader view of agency that includes not only individuals but also objects, spaces, places, and atmospheres (Krueger, 2021). Such perspectives enable us to begin to understand and value the regulatory role of atmospheres, which holds significant potential for enhancing playful learning practices.

Affective arrangements and the concept of atmosphere

Affective arrangements and the concept of atmosphere have gained prominence within the framework of situated affectivity. »Affective arrangements«, introduced by Slaby, Mühlhoff, and Wuschner (2019), encompasses diverse elements forming unique affective textures through local patterns of affective dynamics. This concept, rooted in a relational understanding of affect, illustrates the dynamic interplay of affect across a diverse array of individuals, objects, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions, or other materials, which coalesces into a coordinated configuration of mutual affecting and being affected (Slaby et al., 2019: 109). These formations are held together by affect relations, triggering and guiding new affect dynamics while influencing individual dispositions and harnessing energies and potentialities for the overall setup (ibid.). As a theoretical tool, this concept sheds light on local socio-material settings where affective dynamics emerge and continuously evolve (Slaby et al., 2019: 3). It aids researchers in understanding ongoing affective relationality across various settings and facilitates in-depth analyses of the nuances of these relational dynamics. This understanding extends to both the entities coalescing within these settings to generate relational affect, manifested as affective resonance or dissonance, and simultaneously, the overall 'feel,' affective hue, or atmosphere that prevails in such locales, which are born from affective arrangements (ibid.) and constitute a form of affect in their own right (Anderson, 2009). As Mühlhoff (2019: 188) describes, atmospheres possess affective resonance – a relational processual phenomenon in which reciprocal modulation occurs between interactants. Atmospheres exhibit contagious qualities, enveloping a multiplicity of bodies within their scope (Riedel, 2019).

Atmospheres, agency, and inclusion

As Krueger conceived (2021), atmospheres correspond to affective arrangements and align with situated affectivity. Integrating critical phenomenological perspectives into this framework, Krueger cultivates a perspective of the interplay between atmospheres and agency. Krueger describes atmospheres as intimately tied to their surroundings and capable of eliciting certain atmospheric experiences, including the emotional expression and behavior accompanying them (ibid.). Atmospheres encapsulate the broad affective tonality prevalent in a particular time and place, imbuing the world with a distinct »...*tone of feeling*« (ibid.: 113). Atmospheres emerge when individuals are present and poised to engage with them in some way (ibid.), making them inherently experiential. They actively regulate the emotional experience and behavior of those within affective arrangements, shaping the character and intensity of the interpersonal connections forged (ibid.: 115). Simply put, they can expand or restrict the ways we connect and share with others.

Krueger draws on Ahmed's (2007) work to propose that the circulation of affects within atmospheres has an orienting effect. Atmospheres coordinate shared experience and

behavior, generating and upholding normative expectations that orient bodies within a given context (ibid., p. 116), shaping what actions to take and how to execute them. Krueger asserts that atmospheres »*do things*« (ibid.: 112) by furnishing possibilities that orient us and help or hinder us as we »...*find our way*« (Ahmed, 2006) in the world. This regulative work involves opening and closing possibilities for emotional experience, behavior, and social connection. Atmospheres emotionally orient the bodies they encounter, aiding bodies in fitting into their world in different ways and conditioning how individuals connect or fail to connect with others (Krueger, 2021). Affective arrangements serve an important social function by creating »...*atmospheres of inclusion*« (ibid.: 118), as they make us feel at home in an individual sense and »...*help us find our way to and with others*« (ibid.: 118, original italics). Atmospheres of inclusion are designed to bring people together and enrich and intensify their sense of interconnectedness, providing cues of a landscape of shared arrangements bodies can *together* fit into and take shape within (ibid.). This social-regulative work is often unobtrusive but vital.

Affective arrangements can also give rise to atmospheres that induce disorientation, unsettling one's sense of embodiment, agency, and affect at a deep level, leading to a feeling of not fully being at home where one happens to be (Slaby, 2016). This discomfort may be intentional or not. Disorientation encompasses a discomfort and an inability to navigate, extending beyond lack of information (Krueger, 2021: 118). It involves the sense of being lost, often accompanied by bodily discomfort, and signifies being out of sync with one's surroundings (ibid.: 119). Such experiences are multidimensional and indicate a loss of familiarity and direction. While some disorientations are more privileged and easily overcome within inclusive environments, others are more intense and have profound practical and political consequences (ibid.). Critical phenomenologists have explicitly drawn our attention to powerful connections between bodily discomfort, disorientation, and the politics of space, linking them to the exclusion of particular bodies from arrangements (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; 2007; Fanon, 1986; Yancy, 2016). Affective arrangements can potentially inadvertently generate atmospheres of exclusion (Krueger, 2021). Furthermore, they can be intentionally configured to create exclusionary atmospheres (ibid.). Atmospheres of exclusion constrain certain bodies, limiting their agency and emotions and disturbing them at a pre-reflective level (ibid.). Krueger's exploration of atmospheric dynamics and agency offers insights into the role of affect in shaping human agency and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within complex social contexts.

Summing up these conceptual advancements, I would like to briefly highlight the potential that the notion of affect and the atmospheres of inclusion offer to the emerging playful learning field. Firstly, a situated perspective of affect underscores the relational nature of affect, emphasizing the importance of dynamic interactions. It embraces the perspective that affect continually shapes bodies, disrupting the notion of self-contained subjects. Secondly, the concept of affective arrangements underscores the interplay of affect across various elements, giving rise to unique affective textures in diverse settings. These arrangements, expressed through local patterns of affective dynamics, contribute to the creation of atmospheres and atmospheric experiences. Thirdly, Krueger's viewpoint links atmospheres with agency and inclusion. Atmospheres possess the potential to either expand or restrict connections among individuals. They orient bodies within contexts, guiding behavior, shaping interpersonal

connections, and exerting regulative influence. Inclusive atmospheres provide cues of shared arrangements, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting interconnectedness. However, atmospheres can also induce disorientation, planned or otherwise, with varying degrees of impact. This emphasizes the necessity of a delicate balance to ensure inclusivity.

A note on the method

This study is part of the author's Ph.D. research, focusing on artful educational practices in the professional education of social educators within the Social Education Studies Program at a Danish University College. These practices are interlinked with play and learning, recognized by both the program's educators and the researcher. Employing a post-qualitative approach to research at the intersection of ethnography and affect studies, the methodology involves a decentered researcher practice for ethical engagement with affective dynamics. Fieldwork manifests as an embodied and affective undertaking that moves beyond traditional data collection approaches (Gherardi, 2022; Gunnarsson & Bodén, 2021). The generation, analysis, presentation, and discussion of the empirical material is understood as a process of composing (Stewart, Kathleen, 2013). In this article, I aim to present a research account that is connective to the empirical material and sensitive to my affective experiences during the research process (Michels & Steyaert, 2017). In Table 1, I present an overview of my compositional endeavor, revealing how the writing of the respective vignettes is based on various sources of data collection and how I interpreted them in various clusters of concepts (ibid.).

Generating empirical material

Through affective ethnographic research (Gherardi, 2019), the author accompanied two educators and three diverse groups of students in enacting three iterations of the week-long art pedagogical unit: *Burning Man* (see table next page).

The students embarked on the unit without prior preparation beyond knowing the location. Commencing with introductions to participant roles and the presentation of the ten guiding dogmas, the students were encouraged to explore the space at their own pace and form affinity groups based on shared interests. Progressing through stages such as introductions, idea generation, collaborative artmaking, and the culmination of the unit in celebration, I accumulated a substantial corpus of empirical material detailing the educator's spatial and conceptual design efforts and the unfolding of the art-pedagogical unit over three enactments. My exploration of participant experiences involved on-site interviews and follow-up interviews. Over three iterations of the unit, I generated extensive data, including hours of audio-visual recordings, numerous on-site interviews, shorter interactions, and several follow-up interviews. I also collected documents like didactic considerations and project outlines in collaboration with educators. In addition, I documented my own experiences through auto-ethnographic (Bødker & Chamberlain, 2016) audio recordings and generated several pages of field notes capturing my affective encounters. The utilization of audio-visual and audio recordings not only facilitated the creation of »notes« attuned to the sensory dimensions of socio-material contexts (Pink, 2015) but also provided a valuable lens through which to explore the phenomenon of atmospheres.

Empirical material				Process of analysis	Results
Video ethnography	Audio ethnography/ Autoethnography	Interviews	Documents		
- Recordings of: - 1 team interview with both educators - 2 on-site walking interviews with individual educators		3 interviews (1-2 hours) with educators responsible for the design of the art pedagogical unit	- Planning documents - PowerPoint presentation of the unit from educators - Notes from workshop with the educators	Reconstructing the process of designing the art pedagogical unit, by way of tracing the affective capacities of the site and how they were anticipated in the design process (see e.g., Anderson, 2014)	Vignette »Setting the tone« tells of the spatial work by the educators that explores the affective capacities of the forest as a site for the enactment of the art pedagogical unit Burning Man
- Recordings of the pedagogical unit (3.64 hours) - Photographs of the pedagogical space - Photographs of students' artmaking process	4 autoethnographic audio recordings of observations			Associational and poetic reconstruction of the first day of the burning man unit (based on aesthetic and affective exploration of the empirical material) (see e.g., Bøhling, 2015; Gibbs, 2015; Stewart, 2007; 2014)	Vignette »Emerging atmospheres of inclusion« shows how temperature affects mood and furnishes different possibilities that <i>orient</i> some students, helping them as they find their way to and with others, and simultaneously <i>disorients</i> others, hindering them as they find their way, while the arrangement cues interconnectedness and prompts differing affective involvement among individuals, resulting in students taking responsibility for an altered collective atmosphere of inclusion

Table 1: Processes of data generation and analysis for atmospheres of inclusion in the Burning Man unit

Data analysis and writing research accounts

Informed by Michels and Steyaert's work on composing atmospheres urban art interventions (2017) and Anderson's assertion that understanding the formation of atmospheres involves grasping how diverse elements come together (2014), I approached the art-pedagogical unit as an affective arrangement. I started by zooming in on the educator's work with the spatial design and the aesthetic form of the affective arrangement, which contributed to communal cohesion, the overall pedagogical goal of the unit. I was affected by the changing atmospheres generated by the arrangement during each unit iteration. As a researcher, I experienced the impact of the cool temperatures on the first day of each fall and spring unit and the sensory impressions from the forest. This experiential involvement shaped my understanding of the atmospheric encounters curated for the students. From my own insider experience, I was curious to engage with the various responses of the participants. A theme that prompted systematic analysis was the tension between the inducement of orientation and disorientation on the first day, affecting participants' agency to varying degrees. After transcribing interviews, I conducted a close reading, bracketing key passages to highlight designed and accidental aspects and their interrelationship. A similar process was applied to video recordings and fieldwork documents. Supplementary to the coding process, I incorporated my conceptual sensibilities to evaluate my evolving grasp of inclusive atmospheres. Through iterative coding and conceptual refinement rounds, influenced by reviewer feedback, I refined my interpretation of the art-pedagogical unit in facilitating the convergence of entities and yielding local coalescence of relational affect within a broader atmosphere of inclusion (Krueger, 2021). I distinguished between educator-facilitated interactions and serendipitous participant engagements to explore how chance events contributed to the composition of »...we space« (Krueger, 2011). Recognizing that the writing process itself was an affective experiment, I transformed clusters of interpretation into vivid vignettes, interweaving analytical categories, interviews, observations, quotes, and my emotional perspective. Moreover, I integrated vignettes and image collage into the article to enable readers to immerse themselves in these instances of affective encounters (Anderson, 2014).

The setting

This study centers on an art-pedagogical unit called Burning Man, collaboratively developed by researchers and educators skilled in aesthetic learning methods. Integrated into a local University College's Social Education Studies Program, it forms a key part of the democracy and citizenship curriculum. Inspired by the annual festival of the same name, where participants gather to construct a temporary metropolis dedicated to art, self-expression, and self-reliance, the Burning Man unit mirrors this ethos by incorporating festival elements, including ten dogmas outlining principles of interaction. Serving as a conceptual pivot point, this approach enables experiments with democracy through co-creative arts-based methods. Taking place in a forested area outside of the University College, this week-long experiment challenges students and educators in unconventional ways, providing an opportunity for democratic learning and interventionist art practices. The Burning Man unit commences by actively engaging students, playfully opening an experimental space, an atmosphere where imagination can flourish, and thought experiments can unfold (Michels et al., 2020). Participants engage collaboratively in artmaking and aesthetic learning (Jensen, 2017),

embodying democratic principles and fostering a contingent community through social dialogue and collaboration. At its core, the unit focuses on personal freedom and community dynamics, allowing for expressive autonomy while fostering a sense of responsibility towards the larger community. The unit concludes with celebratory festivities, culminating in the ceremonial burning of the Burning Man installation. An integral component involves guiding students to collaborate on joint projects within public spaces or communities. This experience offers students the chance to work alongside diverse groups of citizens, translating theoretical knowledge into a practical understanding of democracy and citizenship principles. During the featured iteration of Burning Man, educators, social educator students, and students with immigrant or refugee backgrounds³ collaborated to form a contingent community for the unit's duration.

Atmospheres in Burning Man

This section presents and analyses the empirical material. It features two vignettes that explore how affect is modulated within an art-pedagogical affective arrangement to produce an inclusive atmospheric quality of experience. I seek to show how the affective arrangements atmosphere emerged from two elements: the attempt to design the pedagogical encounter through spatial design and aesthetic form and the serendipitous outcome of encounters in the unit's enactment.

Vignette 1: Setting the overall tone

Since its introduction in 2013, the Burning Man unit has experimented with the spatial experience of community-based art practices, often in collaboration with the public community or within a public space. In experimenting with spaces and collaborative art processes, a temporary metropolis dedicated to art, self-expression, and self-reliance known as Black Rock City became a point of reference for designing an art-pedagogical unit. Now an integrated part of the democracy and citizenship curriculum within the Social Education Studies Program, the Burning Man unit brings social educator students and their educators affectively together in a distinct pedagogical space set apart from the traditional educational setting. Bringing the intervention to a faraway location is anything but coincidental. Situated within a state forest in Jutland, the space holds intentional significance in setting the tone for the immersive encounter and fostering a contingent community. The departure from the norm is described by one of the educators:

We take them out into a learning space that is completely different from what they are used to – it sets the tone for Burning Man.

From the educators' perspective, the secluded forest setting is pivotal in fostering a cohesive atmosphere, addressing a challenge previously faced within the University College's premises. Through the process of exploring various spaces, the educators found that the forested backdrop contributes to communal cohesion, which is harder to achieve within the constraints of the College's environment. In addition to this, the educators stated that the dynamic style of the Burning Man unit did not seem to fit in the more serious affective arrangement of the University College. Through experimenting with spaces, the educators

gained expertise and a feeling for where the unit could be held that allowed for the principle of radical expression and enabled the creation of a contingent community. In that sense, the educators' work became attuned to the possibilities of the space and the affective capacities it produced. Educator two reflects on the pedagogical significance of the forested environment, drawing parallels to Astrid Lindgren's universe in *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*:

The backdrop of the space is fundamental. We tried to set it up at the University College, where we also had access to workshops and so on, but it was just as if it was difficult to keep people together. The fact that we are in a space where we can't just walk away from each other – or at least you must make a strong decision not to be here. In the forest, people stay together. The fact that you are tied together in that place... The scenery and the atmosphere it creates... It's a bit like Ronja Robber Daughter's⁴ universe. I think the Burning Man we had at the University College gave us the courage to try it out at some other locations because it was so difficult to gather people together there.

As inferred from the educators' insight, the atmosphere of the pedagogical space is far from inert; it actively shapes the students' perceptions and behaviors. The educators contemplate the potentiality of holding the unit in other locations. Yet, it makes sense for them to hold it in the forest, as it is evident that the space plays an active role in shaping the possibilities that emerge:

We have talked about it, but it makes good sense to do it in the forest... the location and the physical setting is an active player. They matter for what emerges. We talked about what if it rains...? Then we might have to go inside, and then we might be in some rooms in the sports hall, and so on. Then other things will happen and then the experience will become something else. It doesn't have to be in the forest... But the setting offers something important to what becomes possible.

The second instructor expresses his conviction that the space itself matters, as does the fact that it contrasts starkly with what the students experience in their everyday lives.

It matters that it is different than what the students do daily.

Beyond the distinctive setting, the Burning Man unit starts by intensifying and rearranging the relationship between educators and their students. This endeavor treats equality as a foundational condition for cultivating a contingent community. Operating from non-hierarchical social forms, Burning Man is framed as a collaborative and self-directed educational venture emphasizing freedom and community. Educator two reflects on the distinctive affective style of the Burning Man unit, revealing the diverse responses it evokes among students:

It can be difficult for some of them since it can seem quite unstructured... We don't come and tell them what to do. It's really a big challenge for some that they have to figure it out themselves. Nothing happens if they don't come up with it themselves. There are some

who would almost like to have the week in a spreadsheet... And for others, it is a colossal freedom to gain. But that freedom can also be scary.

With its non-hierarchical form and operating from radical inclusion and equality as a precondition for collaborative artmaking, the Burning Man unit grants a great deal of leeway in how participants choose to engage. This allows for a considerable range of expression, behavior, and emotion. The educators explain that the extent of freedom the project offers elicits varied reactions. As educators highlight, students entering the affective arrangement of Burning Man might need practice and time to acclimate to its unique affective style and overcome their sense of disorientation regarding the unit's organization. During this transitional phase, a complexity of affective dynamics can circulate in the arrangement's atmosphere. To this instructor, one adds:

The students have to wait until something comes along. But just like the students, we also have to wait for the students to either come up with something or for their fellow students to invite them to dance.

Engaging in the process of perceiving and comprehending the affective arrangement from within as part of it and focusing on tuning into atmospheric qualities demands patience from both students and educators. Patience emerges as a crucial element that significantly influences the affective dynamics within the overall arrangement. Educator two, therefore, underscores the significance of conveying to the students the legitimacy of peripheral engagement and the value of patience as they navigate their path:

This legitimate peripheral participation means that it is legal and legitimate to stand out in the periphery until one becomes confident in oneself and in others and in what the project is about. It is important that we have some patience with that process.

Vignette 2: Emerging atmospheres of inclusion

On the week of the Burning Man unit, the weather was ideal. Blue skies and cool fall weather. The week-long unit followed on the heels of COVID-19 lockdowns in Denmark. Entering fieldwork, I vividly recall arriving at the remote forested location of Burning Man on a crisp October morning in the fall of 2020. I ventured down an unfamiliar earthen path that led into the forest. The initial atmosphere had a more-than-human quality about it. Walking along the path, I became enveloped in the atmosphere of the forest. This was not a passive encounter; the atmosphere engaged me at a deeply affective level. Each step was accompanied by sensory impressions of the perfectly azure sky overhead, the sun filtering through the trees, and the earthy scent of the forest floor mingling with the tangy aroma of coniferous needles. Somewhere in the trees, a joyous chorus of birds echoed from the branches above, a symphony that resonated through the air. These impressions stirred an affective response in me, evoking a sense of familiarity and triggering an affective resonance of place that put me at ease within the space.



Figure 1. A visual composition of images enhanced with filters used to highlight the author's attunement to atmospheric nuances of the Burning Man unit.

As I began to meet the students entering the space, it became increasingly evident that the atmosphere was more than just a backdrop; it actively shaped the perceptions and behavior of the arriving students. Observing the bodily demeanor of some of the students, it was clear that the atmosphere facilitated an affective response that rendered some of them comfortable within the environment. Conversely, there were students whose responses suggested a degree of discomfort. Their clothing indicated unpreparedness for the coolness of the morning, and their remarks, expressions, and bodily comportment revealed their heightened sensitivity to the chilly temperature. Both groups represented a diverse mix of genders and ethnicities.

Upon entering the space of the pedagogical intervention, a lively scene greeted me. Students were gathered in animated conversation while educators stood nearby, awaiting

the final arrivals. The atmosphere emanated warmth and exhilaration, with a palpable sense of excitement permeating the air. In the ensuing moments, educator one addressed the assembled group, delivering an introduction to the unit:

This week, we are no longer your instructors, we are co-creators creating together a strong experience that we all can take with us from this space or will want to leave behind. It will all depend on us. Nothing happens if we don't make it happen.

This announcement triggered a small buzz among the group, and I discerned the students' rapt attention. Their participation and role in this endeavor were crucial, as the success hinged significantly on their active engagement. Educator one presented a set of ten guiding dogmas that would coordinate the patterns of shared experience and behavior throughout the unit. The dogmas encompassed *radical inclusion, unconditional gift-giving, avoidance of monetary transactions, embracing radical self-sufficiency due to the remote location, fostering radical self-expression, mutual assistance, leaving no trace, full participation, and cultivating presence for both oneself and others*. Further into the day, the instructors guided the students through the physical space, pointing out opportunities for various activities. From metal smithing to wood carving, wood-fired pottery to food preparation over an open fire, a plethora of options lay before them. The forested pedagogical space emerged as a potent arrangement designed to immerse participants, channel their affective capacities, and cultivate radical creative expressions that coexisted in tension with considerations of radical inclusion within a communal framework. After introductions, students were given time to form affinity groups and seek inspiration for gift-giving and involvement in interventionist art practices. This allowed students to adjust to the arrangement's affective style and acquaint themselves with its atmospheres. Educators understand that participation cannot be coerced but only encouraged, necessitating patience while students engage their affective capacities. During this time, a complexity of affective dynamics circulated within the arrangement's atmosphere.

After initial introductions, the educators relinquished their guidance, allowing the students to forge their paths. As if responding to an unspoken cue, most of the students began forming small clusters, engaging in animated discussions, and sharing their developing ideas. Amidst this lively exchange, I stood alongside them, attuned to their conversations as they built on one another's ideas. These students exhibited active participation and their contributions were met with genuine consideration. Additionally, some students displayed initial uncertainty about their direction, requiring exploration across multiple groups before finding their definitive direction. Gradually, the groups began to refine their ideas, one by one detaching from the larger assembly and embarking on explorations of the surroundings. In a brief period, select affinity groups established their presence, positioning themselves around stations where they intended to work.

On this first day, the forest's atmosphere, particularly the temperature, appeared to wield a differing influence over the student's agency. Those who had come well prepared for the cold and were attuned to the forest's ambiance seamlessly delved into their tasks, driven by unfazed determination. Meanwhile, less prepared individuals found their momentum disrupted. The temperature acted as an interruption, testing the students' capacity to affect

and be affected within the space. While all students found themselves enveloped by an atmosphere that preceded their involvement, a subtle shift occurred among those students who had anticipated the cold. Attuned to the discomfort of their peers, these students initiated a transformation in the unevenness of the prevailing atmosphere. Intrigued by their actions, I shadowed them as they worked within a nearby log structure, inquiring about their activity. They were in the process of building a fire. Curious about the purpose behind their actions, I questioned them. They elaborated that they had noticed fellow students had arrived ill-equipped for the cold, prompting them to initiate their gift-giving endeavor with a warming fire. In a matter of moments, the log structure was enveloped by a friendly atmosphere. More students gathered around the fire's glow, warming themselves and sharing their thoughts about their encounters with the space.

One of the students by the fire describes the atmosphere in this way:

It's so good to get out after being in for so long. It's nice... Also, just the sounds out here. There is the fire – then there are birds – we are not used to that at all. It creates a completely different atmosphere.

A second student describes it like this:

It's a freezing atmosphere.

The students' cheeks are rosy, and they are standing, hands outstretched in front of the fire together, staring into the embers while carrying on a lively conversation. I am keen to hear their impressions.

The first student responds again:

Yeah... But I think it's also more relaxed, somehow.

A third student responds:

»Don't you think it's very individual? I miss the smell of McDonald's... I'm not so much into the woods or the smell of smoke on my clothes.

Although unforeseen, the students' re-composition of the atmosphere prompted by the cold weather and the subsequent dialogic exchange near the fire was not only anticipated but also fostered by the design. For example, using the dogmas gave the students cues of a landscape of shared arrangements, shaping their actions as they found their way together. Consequently, the atmosphere effectively accomplishes what the educators anticipated by animating the unit's overall feel and affective tonality while also regulating actions at the individual and collective levels and determining the range of social possibilities present or absent within the specific context.

Discussion

In the empirical analysis, I retraced how an atmosphere of inclusion emerged, brought on by a collaborative art pedagogical intervention. The analysis provided the understanding that atmospheres of inclusion emerge from the intentional design choices of the educators of the art pedagogical intervention and the participants' engagement with them in serendipitous encounters. Something happens through this interplay within the affective arrangement: atmospheres emerge and evolve, evoking different moods and influencing students' capacity to affect and be affected.

Vignette one describes how the separation from traditional educational arrangements enables educators to experiment with the affective tonality of the forested pedagogical space to imbue the unit with a distinct tone or feeling (Krueger, 2021: 113) and encourage different affective engagement that aligns with the unit's goals. The educators' experience tells them that the forested environment is integral to creating an atmosphere that can both foster an immersive encounter and a contingent community. This choice emphasizes the importance of the physical environment in shaping affective experience and social connection (ibid.: 112). The contrast between the forest and the traditional educational environment highlights how the unconventional setting influences the affective arrangement, encouraging communal cohesion and a sense of togetherness in a shared »...we space« (Krueger, 2011), an endeavor that is harder to achieve in the traditional educational setting. The design intentionally creates an atmosphere where students and educators collaborate equally, fostering an inclusive community where everyone's contributions are valued. The emphasis on freedom and community regulates the emotional experience and behavior of the students within the arrangement (Krueger, 2021: 115). It encourages diverse expressions, behaviors, and emotions, allowing participants to engage in ways that resonate with them. The non-prescriptive approach contributes to openness and acceptance, generating normative expectations that orient bodies (ibid.: 115) even as it evokes varied student reactions. This recognition of diverse reactions promotes an atmosphere of understanding and respect for differences. The emphasis on legitimate peripheral participation encourages inclusivity by acknowledging different levels of engagement and allowing participants to become part of the community gradually. Overall, the vignette underscores the significance of intentional design choices in creating atmospheres of inclusion within the Burning Man unit. These choices include experimenting with spaces, creating distinct educational environments, prioritizing non-hierarchical social forms, emphasizing freedom and community, and recognizing and accommodating diverse reactions to the designed atmosphere.

Vignette two describes an emerging atmosphere of inclusion within the week-long educational unit inspired by the Burning Man festival. The passage begins as I recount my experience entering the forested location on a crisp October morning. Walking an unfamiliar path and becoming enveloped in the atmosphere highlights the strong connection to nature the atmosphere triggered in me. As the engagement with the natural environment triggers an affective response, I allow myself to be moved by the sensorial effects of the forest, voluntarily engaging in affective resonance with the atmosphere (Mühlhoff, 2019), which aids me in fitting into the world in a specific way (Krueger, 2021: 116). As students arrive, their interactions with the atmosphere become noticeable to me. Some students seem comfortable and engaged, while others show discomfort due to the cool weather. The students

varied responses to the atmosphere indicate it is more than just a backdrop – it actively shapes their perceptions of what is possible, influencing their behavior (ibid.: 113). Within the pedagogical space, a contagious atmosphere (Riedel, 2019) of warmth and exhilaration emerges as students gather and educators introduce the unit. The declaration that »...*we are no longer your instructors; we are co-creators*« establishes an inclusive environment where collaboration and shared experience are central. The guiding dogmas, including principles of radical inclusion and mutual assistance, contribute to an atmosphere that encourages active participation, coordinating shared experience and behavior (Krueger, 2021: 116). Students form affinity groups and align themselves with the prevailing atmosphere. The freedom to choose their path and the presence of diverse options ensures that each student can find their place within the unit (ibid.: 118).

Vignette two goes on to describe how it becomes clear that the weather affects students' agency and engagement on the first day. Those who are well-prepared for the cold weather seamlessly immerse themselves in their tasks, while those less prepared experience disruptions and become momentarily disoriented, however at a privileged level (ibid.: 118). This aspect highlights the atmosphere's effect on individual agency and the way it catalyzes students' interaction and support, intensifying interpersonal experiences (ibid.: 119). A group of students noticing their peers' discomfort takes collective action to build a fire and create a warmer, more inclusive atmosphere. This act of care and consideration reshapes the atmosphere and fosters a sense of community. The students' interactions around the fire generate discussions and exchanges that deepen their connection to the space and each other. The vignette includes student voices expressing different responses to the atmosphere, showcasing the diversity of experiences and perspectives. This diversity reinforces the inclusive nature of the atmosphere and helps the students find their way to and with others (ibid.: 118), acknowledging that individuals have unique affinities and reactions to the space. The vignette highlights how the designed atmosphere accomplishes the educators' intentions. The atmosphere animates the overall feel of the unit and shapes the range of social possibilities. This demonstrates how a consciously created atmosphere can influence participants' interactions and experiences positively. In summary, the vignette captures an atmosphere of inclusion through the interaction of individuals with the physical environment, the intentional design of the overall tone of the unit, the design of the educational space, and the collective actions of students. This atmosphere encourages diversity, collaboration, and care, fostering participants' sense of belonging and shared experience.

Conclusion

In summary, this article explores the potential of affect thinking for the design of more inclusive playful learning encounters. The article establishes the potential for integrating affect-based thinking in playful learning and highlights the complexity of creating safe and inclusive playful spaces for all learners, recognizing the subjective nature of comfort and safety. Furthermore, the article explores the role of affect in art education and its potential to shape educational experiences. It discusses affective arrangements and their influence on human agency and social dynamics, introducing the idea of atmospheres of inclusion to foster belonging and interconnectedness while also acknowledging the potential of atmospheres of exclusion. The empirical analysis focusing on the art-pedagogical unit Burning Man illustrates

how intentional design choices, including the physical environment, non-hierarchical social forms, and attention to freedom and community in tension, contribute to creating inclusive atmospheres. The vignettes within the analysis demonstrate how these atmospheres shape and are shaped by individual and collective experiences, promoting diversity, collaboration, and care.

This article underscores the significance of affective thinking and atmospheres of inclusion in the realm of playful learning. It calls for a nuanced understanding of comfort, safety, and inclusivity within the magic circle of play. The article sheds light on the potential for creating more inclusive educational spaces by examining the interplay between atmospheres, affect, and agency. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of intentional design choices in fostering a sense of belonging and shared experience within playful learning environments.

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Notes

1. In Denmark, the Social Education Program is a 3.5-year professional bachelor education equipping prospective social educator students with competencies in pedagogics, learning, caregiving, development, and innovation that prepare them for coming professional work in nurseries, after-school centers, 24-hour treatment and residential homes for children and youth, or people with various impairments or the elderly in institutions and psychiatric clinics. See Social Education (pedagogue): [https://www.ucn.dk/english/programmes-and-courses/social-education-\(pedagogue\)](https://www.ucn.dk/english/programmes-and-courses/social-education-(pedagogue)).
2. See Playful Learning: <https://playful-learning.dk>
3. Students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds participating in Burning Man in the fall of 2020 were enrolled in a preparation course for the Social Education Program. In Danish, the preparation course for immigrants and refugees is called *Forberedelseskursus for indvandrere og flygtninge* (FIF).
4. *Ronia Robber Daughter* is the English translation of a children's novel from 1981 by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

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