

Pathways to Innovation and Development in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays



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Chapter 4

“Making fools of ourselves”

A play set in Unreal Academy

Angela Rickard

DRAMATIS PERSONNAE:

THE CHANCELLOR OF UNREAL ACADEMY

TOM FOOL (A JESTER)

STU DENT

ANNE OTHER

MISS ROOLE (AN EDUCATOR)

ALSO NON-SPEAKING PARTS FOR: TIGER, MONKEY AND BEAR.

ACT I SCENE I

Set in a great hall of Unreal Academy in historical time past. The set is dark, grey, monochrome. Tom Fool, a jester, is speaking with the Chancellor of Unreal Academy.

CHANCELLOR

Prithee Fool, what's this I hear of this charivari festival of thine? This Carnival nonsense? A Festival of Misrule in the hallowed halls of Unreal Academy? Can it be true? Art thou serious?

TOM

Ah my lord, it is a riddle! Tom Fool must not be serious, if he is to be Tom Fool! Yet, I jest not. For whither to convince thee to let this Carnival be, I must say I AM serious, most seriously, serious for thee and all the Unreal academics to be as not serious as me! I prithee

try it my Lord. What dost thou say being both serious and not serious ... simultaneously?

CHANCELLOR

Ah thou art Fool with thy riddles and upheavals! It cannot be! This is the Academy, a hallowed site of learning, and place for rational intelligence. We seek the calm tranquility of the scriptorium. We have no place for ribaldry and riot and we must not be distracted and disordered in our scholarly pursuits. In any case we do not care for such diversity! Why a Carnival would turn all this on its head!

(stops: looks both perplexed and curious at once)

No, no, no. It cannot be. Such frivolity may do for the common man, the guilds and artistes... and for women perhaps! But truth, reality, the scholarly, rational mind: these are our concerns.

TOM

Ah, my lord, thy wisdom and scholarship are indeed great, but alas wouldst thou split thy crown as did my lord, Lear? I entreat thee do not sever the link to the hands and to the heart. For it is only a partial wisdom. Trust in my Tom Foolery... Besides thy grey matter wilt grow if thou wouldst let in some colour.

CHANCELLOR

My wisdom and brain-power would grow, is't so? Hmmm... Yet I am NOT convinced, but we shall see. Let it proceed, we shall let thy Carnival be.

TOM

Ah my lord, let it be and we shall indeed begin to see.

ACT I SCENE II

Set in an equally dark and monochrome lecture hall in a modern-day university. The atmosphere is hushed, solemn and very dull. Two students are talking...

STU DENT

Another feckin' lecture! I am not joking you, but I have a pain in my backside from sitting here this long!

ANNE OTHER

Oh I know what you mean. It is ridiculous! We've been in the same spot all morning. I can't take much more of this!

STU

And d'you know they go on about feckin' group work and cooperative learning... it might be alright if they did any of it themselves! Ha!

ANNE

And you know what...? I could do with a bit of bloody cooperation from the crowd in my school!

STU

God, yeah. Me too. And don't get me started about technology either! I'd be afraid to let my lot even near a computer. Sure they'd wreck it the minute you had your back turned! I'm serious: it's like a feckin' zoo there sometimes! I should have signed up for lion taming classes not teacher training!

ANNE

Yeah I know, pure crowd control. How are you supposed to control them when they don't even care? You know, now that you mention it, there's times I'm like "I just want to run away to the circus!"

STU

I know! The school I'm in is so bad it is like the friggin' circus! Especially with the second years ... Oh. MY. GOD.

ANNE OTHER

Hang on here she comes. ... Better take out the notebooks!

ACT I SCENE III

In the same lecture theatre. A single podium centre-stage. Miss Roole steps up to the podium to address the students.

MISS ROOLE

You know that they say you dream in black and white. And yet I have always thought that such an odd idea. I've been working in this Academy for

years and the longer I am here the more I think that the daily reality here is so black and white. You know the idea we try to have: the teacher teaches, the learners learn, we all know where we stand... And yet you say it does not match the reality in school. Yes, but how can we re-imagine it?

(pauses to reflect)

The more I think about it, the more dream-like I actually think it needs to be. But in every colour of the imagination: not at all in black and white. I think we need to turn things upside down, to look at the whole thing differently. Let me show you what I mean.

ACT I SCENE IV

Miss Roole and the students walk through an opening in the wall behind the podium into a new (imaginative) space. They wander around for a while. They meet up again in front of a small group of animals: Tiger, Monkey and Bear. The animals are playing with magic lanterns.

STU

Wow! Amazing! That is so cool!

ANNE

Fabulous!

STU

They are so young, aren't they?

ANNE

Yeah, they're brilliant though. And so articulate! I mean for animals they're pretty good!

STU

Wait a second... what's the tiger doing with that magic lantern? ... She's like pointing it over the Pharaoh's tomb and ... hang on a minute... it's coming to life!

STU & ANNE

(speaking together, excited) Oh my god! Woooow!

ACT I SCENE V

A few weeks after the Carnival. Students are catching up on each other's news.

ANNE

Back to reality eh? How's school? And those unruly second years?

STU

Yeah... the second years! No, well they're great really! Something has changed I have to say. It's different now. You know I realized they were struggling and didn't enjoy studying because they found my way of presenting the information and the topic "boring". At the Carnival I saw a presentation on using a visualizer to create 60 second stories. The basic idea was that students would draw pictures to present the story and then video themselves flicking through their images, while narrating it. I loved this idea and I decided to use it in my history class. I made a silly 'Day in the life' of my own life to show them how it works. We were doing the 1798 Rebellion and I got them to create short clips in groups representing the key events. They really enjoyed the exercise and learned a lot more than they would have if I'd stuck to the traditional, boring way.

ANNE

Wow! That sounds great! You must show me what they did. So I take it you are not still thinking of running away to the circus?

STU

(Laughing) No, no I'm not! I've a different idea about the circus now actually: a little more 'Clown' and a lot less 'Ringmaster' I think works a lot better.

ANNE

(Also laughing) Yeah, I think you are right: it really can help to make a bit of a fool of ourselves from time to time! It's more real that way.

THE END

Teaching Educational Technology in the university I have always been uncomfortable with the incongruity of giving lectures about constructivist, student-centred learning using an approach that was anything but constructivist and student-centred! To mitigate against this, at least to some extent, I organise a one-day event aimed at student teachers that is now called *METS Carnival of Creative Learning*. It began life in 2011 as the *Maynooth Educational Technology Showcase (METS)*. Besides the contradiction in the format a one-hour lecture once a week is also very limited in terms of time to cover the dynamic and ever-changing area of 'Ed Tech'.

Carnival is an ancient and deeply pagan Spring-time "Festival of Misrule" where ordinary time and regular routines are suspended for a day: in fact everything is turned on its head and "either/or" dualities dissolve in favour of "both/and" possibilities. In the Education Department in NUI Maynooth this involves, among other things, the idea of school children becoming teachers for a day and sharing with students and teachers in the university their creative and colourful ideas about learning with technology. We are all *both* teachers *and* learners.

I wrote this piece of Tom Foolery to trouble ideas of what is real and not real. Having written it, I do not of course propose to read it as well by providing a detailed explanation of what I was trying to achieve. It will be for the reader to determine if it resonates for you and your own practice. What I will say, however, is that by writing it and by thinking about Carnival I have learned to embrace more creative ways to teach and to learn.

Making Fools of Ourselves has all the hallmarks of fiction, but believe it or not, the second level students who took part in this Carnival of Creative Learning in March 2013 showed up dressed as circus animals - a tiger, a monkey and a bear - to lead a workshop on using iPads in the classroom. Also the account of the impact of the day, described in the exchange between Stu Dent and Ann Other on the last page of the script, is copied directly from an essay by one of my students that year who came to think differently about his second years following the METS Carnival.

"Fooling around" with the idea of Carnival has enabled me to enter new creative spaces in my teaching: I hope reading it has made you smile and has prompted new ideas for you too.