

PLAYING
THE
UNIVERSITY
GAME



THE ART OF UNIVERSITY-BASED
SELF-EDUCATION

HELEN E. LEES

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Playing the University Game

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Self-Education

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WARNING ABOUT UNIVERSITIES

Universities are tricky and complicated. They require you to step out of your comfort zone, to be challenged, to take risks of thought. To travel and explore, to be humble, a beginner, a student. To defer. All within an apparent context of prestige, excellence, achievement and of 'their' success. Universities require you to think and think again and no longer know what you thought you knew. To be, no longer, who you were. To become. Like them. That is part of the joy of a university experience. It is a ride. It is an acquisition. But it can be explosive. It can hurt to change. It can hurt to come to know. To lose yourself to seemingly gain yourself. Exchange yourself. This book has your safety in mind because no one should get lost in a university nor in the idea of what a university could be. You are precious just the way you are. Acquire. Don't expire.

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Introducing the Game We Play

This book is about how to play the university game. Inevitably, how to win. Not play and win against the odds nor win against others through competition. This is about how to play and then win something precious and meaningful for yourself, as easily as possible and with joy, within a community that matters to you and to others. Whatever to win might be, or mean to you personally, inter-relationally, it is a good thing because it is positive. It's also a good thing because one way or another university involvement costs people a lot. Either money, usually in large amounts, or substantial life sacrifices – likely both – are almost always involved in being associated with a university. So winning is a good outcome for these various forms of investment and losing anything except ignorance, well, it's not what we want.

Universities can present to students a significant, sometimes bamboozling, challenge that can become an unenjoyable difficulty, if you are not prepared. This book seeks to avoid university-based negativity hurting you. A protective self-education is at hand here, not only dealing with the complexity of the university and its many levels and layers but also acknowledging that you yourself are complex and consist of many interlocking parts. Possibly the most challenging aspect for you of the university game is that a lack of compassionate humanity (which is very much needed for beginner players in any game) is not just a *part* of university experience, it is a defining characteristic of all layers and levels. It is an inhumanity without personal attention or care that is so embedded it serves – especially in recent times – as a function of how universities work. Who are you in all of this? The university will not provide the answer. Finding that answer and doing so meaningfully and with joy is something you have to do for yourself, through self-education. Enter not therein unprepared because university institutions aren't, it feels, *that* bothered about their inhumanity as a function. Even when various reports, publications and internal institutional complaints, formal and informal, around the world showcase these challenges, universities seemingly carry on largely regardless, their eye to the bottom line. Perhaps 'challenges' is the wrong word and 'dysfunctions' might be a better choice. I think they don't focus on it because the difficulties I'm talking about affect the heart, the personal level of university experience and your Self, none of which are, it seems, considered 'university business' in any profound way. But these personal layers of what you encounter when you attend a university ought to be attended to, because

going to university is your unique experience and *very* personally affecting. That ought to be a good affect.

In this book we *are* bothered about that affect, because we care about ourselves. We are going to work it, work the university game, as it is offered. We are quite literally going to play them at their own game and win but on terms of self-care and compassion. You will win because you matter and you will win in the face of the ‘challenges’, rather than by attempting to get universities to change themselves. This book is about dealing with the ‘dark academia’ (Fleming 2021) reality just hinted at earlier through focusing on what is good and right and identifying the strategic play. Because it is a game it is also good fun. Puzzles are enjoyable.

To see the game as a puzzle and one that can be solved or won or, at the very least, thoroughly enjoyed is, frankly, a therapeutic element in the face of the potentially impersonal journey to obtaining university ‘success’. We do that via the idea of you being in charge of your own education and that protecting you. Some prospective or current students may be reading this and not really understand what I mean by needing a protective education about universities, but they might. Academic staff may be well aware of my meaning. All told, the conversations in this book are designed to provide – for the initiate and the weary – a start, or boost, to understanding and awareness and to taking protective care of oneself. And the book is also *designed* to do this by avoiding being a teacher but rather acting as a facilitator of knowledge of some ‘rules’ – it’s very hard to play a game with any gusto if you have no ‘instruction booklet’ to facilitate your moves. You also can gain an understanding here in how to self-educate further, *beyond* this book, about your university investments. You gain value through reading this book for what it means to learn to continually learn, in order to navigate those spaces and their demands. This is so you can enjoy yourself by being in control of what you know. That self-educating attitude will serve you well beyond your university time. The skills acquired through *this* game can helpfully equip you in the future or help you help yourself and others, elsewhere and in different circumstances.

In the following chapters, some written and unwritten rules of the game are offered, either via conversations held between myself and some academic colleagues or through a collection of notes presented. So many things to think about. Not only is there a system of admissions, merit, privilege, equalizing, access and many other factors of being at a university in the first place, but inside the university space there are politics, positions and power. These are socio-material considerations: what we need to navigate as facts of university life and university function-dysfunction, so to speak. They are aspects to negotiate. Often they are issues to overcome or deal with: even, at times, battle out of necessity, in order to ensure you get the care you deserve and need. While the ‘rules’ simplify these, they are focused mostly at another

level: that of the personal level within this complexity. Other rules not here exist but those presented are a kick-starter kit to finding your way in, of and out of the idea of rules, so that a game, playing it, being played, all become easier. The personal is political, but it is also what you live with, colouring every moment. Moments you would prefer were nice to experience. So, the general idea of listening to 'rules' is there in order to help you make your personal life lived in the university environment calm and collected. Despite how universities actually operate to avoid the personal as much as possible – their business, after all, being the sciences of knowledge, not you – I see you and your personal as a science worth valuing. I see your personal as a web of significance and worth, intrinsic to any and all forms of knowledge. Universities would rather sidestep this unique web of yours and concentrate on money, knowledge and power as a matrix. The rules I offer are to ensure that your personal experience matters, given the game and the environment we are dealing with. They position you actively and positively at the heart of the university matrix, not as a passive acolyte. This is not a stance of individualism I am taking here where an individual gets to be selfishly ahead or egotistically beefed up. The perspective we are working with, as we self-educate in and through this book about university experience, is of community. There is no good community to be within, express ourselves within, care for ourselves and others within, if people are anxious, unfulfilled, unhappy and confused. Winning at university is a profound struggle for many students. I dislike this dynamic. It isn't fair and it isn't right. I have created this book to intervene in that situation by leveraging the personal Self as a form of power students can gain for traction in the university.

The Game

There are many aspects of the game, many stages and many moves. Most involve money somewhere because whether studying, teaching or researching, somebody's money is required to fund these. But the scholarship involved in study or teaching and research activity is another side; it is its own world and one where education as activity should rule, not money. Reputation and social position, yours and the university's, is a powerful player in this game. Success, whatever that means, in all its actual relativity, is another. Knowledge – very contestable knowledge, scientism, white, male, Western scientism – is another. All of it is mentioned, paid its due necessary attention and then it is ignored. We will be busy with better things.

Because universities are institutions, they aren't someone you can approach, regard, seek to understand and then reason with or intuitively get a feel for the

possibilities 'between you'. As buildings, systems, styles, courses, bills to pay, agendas, politics, policies, places, seminars, meetings to attend and hoops to jump through, universities are not there to care for you. So we need to notice, note, not ignore all of the politics large and small and deliberately focus on our own well-being by then ignoring this as just so much fluff.

Although universities might actually wish to care about you, they cannot alas because they are systems. They are also very managerial, meaning into various statistical targets (Collini 2017). To not matter yourself much and yet think the university matters a lot is a tough dynamic: a painful one to encounter and to bear. Don't bear such a dynamic. Drop it.

Universities are useful. That's it. This book largely assumes they *can* be useful in some way or ought to be, if they are fulfilling their role as a university and if you work out an equalized dynamic to your satisfaction. *Make* them useful to you. Giving of yourself to a university at the personal level as a kind of fantasy relationship (a common situation because universities are sexy) is not wise. What do you gain from that? In Chapter 2, I talk about university fantasy as a bad idea and not fantasizing about the great and good university as a good idea. A university is not a person and it won't look you in the eye when you meet. It may do worse. The conversation transcripts in this book give a taste of that disregard.

This book is to help you equalize the dynamic between yourself and the university. It is just a book and it isn't the only answer and it isn't all the answers. It does not want to be. Why not the grand saviour for distress? Because the right and best answers come from you and *your* working out of them. You are unique, as will be your answers and your ways to handle things. One of the best things about being in a university is the time it gives you to work things out for yourself. Unfettered time for you, we could say, so it is important you benefit as much as time allows. That kind of freedom from other obligations is rare in a lifetime.

So this book is about how to succeed, on your terms. For your needs and your ends. Getting through and getting through well, each day, possibly every day. Making the most of university. This 'making the most' has, I believe, a special formula: writing. Not just any writing but your writing, contextualized in 'their' knowledge (the canon, the archive, the state of the art, the cutting edge, the desired-to-be-known unknowns) such that your writing becomes their knowledge and thus your knowledge. That is a process the conversations which follow discuss. Do they give you detailed, irrefutable instructions, step by step? No. Why not? Because that process is not written in stone and nor should it be. It is your process.

If the answer to playing this university game well is, broadly speaking, 'take care of yourself', what does that have to do with being in a university beyond the standard advice to eat healthily and get some decent sleep? I don't mean

those things, although I include them as vital for other forms of self-care to work. I'm talking about avoiding the university hurting your feelings through its systematized institutional disregard because you are taking care of your heart. Taking care of your heart is to take care of your mind. If you have yourself at the centre of care and activity you will be self-collected and well grounded. All of this is about education. Then you will be able to read well and with best speed, write coherently and make decent arguments that you enjoy making. That's what gets you through university as a formal winner: care about self to care about writing. Universities are machineries for writing and if you enter in you had better appreciate that fact.

But when you enter in the sometimes brutal environment of the university, where fragility, error and ignorance are to lose and be a loser, you might be dismayed to find your inevitable neophyte weakness is seen as bad. But it isn't bad at all. It's human, humane, normal and a fundamental characteristic of what it means to learn, to grow and to come to know. It is also inevitable because, as Schwartz (2021) says, we are all partly struggling, most of the time. If I'm not mistaken, the purpose of higher education is to expand people and knowledge from a position of relative ignorance? Oh good. So we're on track and in the right place.

Believe that to be a student is beautiful. Your weakness in a university space is beautiful. It is, coupled with a desire to understand the world better, your special power. It is what makes you a good and interesting student. Otherwise known as necessary scholarly humility. Please remember that when you feel little in a seminar or lecture room.

Resistance

I know universities are not *good* enough and so do many others. There is fear and trembling involved in the playing, woven into the fabric of the academy (Hall and Bowles 2016; Hall 2021). I envision a better university where people matter more than prestige, where negative games of drama triangles (Karpman 2007, 2014) are not evident around every corner, and where the heart, emotions included, has as much status as the mind. This book is my way to get us playing the game in and of university life differently, like we personally, truly and beautifully matter, just the weak, developing, imperfect, wonderful, talented, intellectually curious and alive way we are. Alas to speak thus is to call for a counter-cultural revolutionary call to arms. Which is astonishing. It betrays the state of universities that asking for an atmosphere that is humane goes against the current tide of how universities treat people inhumanely (Hall and Bowles 2016; Smyth 2018; Brennan and Magness 2019;

Mayo 2019; Meyerhoff 2019; McCallam 2020; Fleming 2021; Hall 2021). But that is what we are asking for and indeed, through playing differently, we can create another university. We can get through well.

In this book you will find stories, advice, perspectives – from expert academic minds who each have reflected deeply and personally on the university, through years of experience – allowing you to think yourself to the centre of care and self-led education in university spaces and to effectively resist. These narratives, in the form of conversations to which you are very warmly invited, as if to a small and extremely friendly seminar space, armour you, they prepare you, they empower you. They support students, amid all the fanfare about universities as elite, awesome places of aspiration, to ground themselves in forms of truth telling. Given staff at universities are suffering significant negative effects of stress in their workplaces for various reasons (Morrish 2019) the narratives here can also serve them, as they are designed to serve students who are stressed out and wondering. Truth telling is, as Michel Foucault said, a ‘regime’ (Foucault 1977) involving ‘techniques of power’ (Foucault 1980: 125) and those who tell hold the power. Let’s be true.

So our game – to self-educate to self-care and self-care to self-educate through using the university for which you pay dearly – is in a moral, social and political context which, if we were to be a little on the pessimistic side, we could call ‘difficult’. Universities assume ‘epistemic and moral authority’ within a world system in crisis but are entirely culpable in being part of ‘the underlying violence and unsustainability of that system’ (Stein 2020). They have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Note to yourself: this is not an easy game.

My focus then is to enable the emotional, psychological and spiritual price of attending university to be both comfortably payable and fairly achieved. Lew, Huen et al. (2019: 2) speak of a ‘tense campus climate’ as a feature of a university environment and mention suicides. Hall calls the university an ‘anxiety machine’ (Hall 2014). These scholars link this tense machinery to some students and staff falling *inevitably* into grave mental health difficulties. It’s not healthy nor helpful to hang around tension. Because the university represents success and *being* success in a wider system it really matters how you experience it because you do not want tense environments impacting enjoyment of your university time and your life chances. In connecting yourself then to a university by attending for a course of study the stakes are high. If you fall short or fail in the university you fall short on a wider, lifelong, social and potentially economic scale. I am a teacher and an academic educationist with a specialism in what alternatives to a violent¹ education *system* there might be. This makes me interested to know how education as a system, which is part of wider societal systems, can *avoid* being poisonous in climate and experience, thereby harming people. It too often is poison

(Pilkington and Piersel 1991; Carlen et al. 1992; Yoneyama 1999; Yoneyama and Naito 2003; Harber 2004; Peim and Flint 2009; Flint and Peim 2012; Peim 2012; Lees 2014). It too often harms people, too much and too deeply. Although there is something to be said for imperfection, difficulty, disappointment and ambiguity in education (Tsabar 2014, 2021), we are playing the university game to ensure that accidental, impersonal tension from outside ourselves is not inner, personalized damage.

Education positions people in a binary – good, bad, strong, weak, win, lose, succeed, fail, stupid, intelligent, fit, unfit, appropriate, inappropriate (Lees 2012). People suffer from *not* being either a binary ‘1 or 0’. Of course they are not 0 or 1 because they are people. People are not code in a computer programme. It hurts people’s feelings, apart from anything else, to be reduced like this. Universities as a part of a ‘binarized’ (dichotomous) education system are involved in this hurt alas. To counteract this positioning of people one way or the other in a competitive frame it is ironic that we need to play to win, is it not? But our game here is designed in a special way to sidestep binaries and their positioning: playing the way this book advocates is through writing, as previously mentioned, but it also uses the power of education and educating oneself to help you rise above the nonsense of being labelled.

Resistance against education in action as harm is required, individually, collectively. If this book aims to interact with the status quo it is only – but this is never ‘only’ in a university context – by being honest and straightforward. There is resistance in fearless speech (Foucault 2001). Through reading this book you encounter respect for student and staff power, voice and choice, as the other way to know a university. Listen first to the voices in this book and then reflect for yourself on it all. You may or may not agree, and collegiate dissent is part of universities when they are going right. If powerful forces that dehumanize, label, sift and sort individuals are to be resisted because they don’t care about your brilliance (you are brilliant), then a *self-determined* identity as a student of the university must be forged and enjoyed. This is, as always, about power, but here the power is generated from within, not accumulated from without. Your inner self is powerfully articulate and deeply enabled to protect you. It is a powerful player in the university game. It does not have its power from the university matrix but is the natural power of people born as full of inherent energy, excellence and potential.

Writing Matters Most as Your Sports Equipment²

The university needs writing. It functions through mechanisms of showing writing (or other disciplinary relevant assessment methods for which writing

stands as a symbol). This means that you need to read, reflect, write, submit and wait for feedback, including your assessment mark. It's all about performance. This performance is relative: you are either the best or the worst or relative to either extreme. It isn't a university system that wants to enjoy your writing without this framework around it. The university needs that framework to make sense of and to judge your writing so it can measure it along the spectrum of success and failure. Hard-nosed it is, but hopefully fair (see rule 2, in Chapter 2). By focusing on writing as the key, overall and strategically encompassing 'rule of the game', I suggest you can turn the university system to your advantage.

The trick is to find a way to enjoy the writing task and create of it a vehicle for self-expression. In a university, there are standards of presentation, some standards of academic manner such as no plagiarism, an emphasis on original thought, using the right style of citation, scholarship, reading, researching, discussion and so forth. These manners can all be taught and universities are duty-bound to provide support with these mechanistic aspects that, if got wrong, can drag the important creative parts down, affecting marks or outcomes holding value. But ultimately writing is also without rules and without prior known destination: it is a mystery and an adventure. Through writing, by reflecting and thinking of and within positions of thought that matter, a person can fly and find intellectual ecstasy. No joke. Try it out. Your voice is interesting.

Universities are uniquely positioned to provide access to a context of other people, within which you can try out that voice that is uniquely yours. An audience, your performance. This is helpful and the special talent of a university: to provide context for the written, thoughtful voice of anyone. This book allows you to set yourself and your writing in a context of understanding of the game that writing is, within the game that a university is, which itself sits within a game of social success and, of course, all of this sits within the greatest game of all: attending to self with kindness and curiosity about what you want to say.

A Complex Journey to Enjoyment

In speaking with seven experts of students' experience (all connected to students as university academic teachers and guides) about the project of this book as a way for you to avoid suffering negative drama, I came to understand the journey to enjoyment in universities is complex. It is not just mechanistically tied to writing great essays and thus overcoming difficulties, as I had, at first, thought. That is why this book is the Russian Doll of university