

Designing Transversal Futures: Agency, Play, and Relationality in Higher Education

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Preliminary Abstract:

A transversal line cuts diagonally through previously separated parallel lines, intersecting two or more lines in the same plane at distinct points. As such, it bridges worlds that would otherwise remain disconnected. This presentation examines what it might mean for higher education to design transversal futures, in which new modes of agency and relationality emerge and are reconfigured across worlds, disciplinary, professional, cultural and social, and where diverse perspectives can coalesce into interconnected shared visions for the future.

Here, play becomes a vital way of (inter)being in the world: a stance that does not take existing structures, systems, and hierarchies too seriously. Play, as a mode of being, and playfulness as an attitude towards the world, open possibilities for engaging with what is and what might be, for experimenting with yet-to-be-realised and desired futures, and for traversing and reconfiguring social worlds. Rather than being positioned as a method or tool, play is approached as a relational, speculative, and world-opening practice that enables movements across boundaries and worlds and invites alternative forms of participation and meaning-making.

In the presentation, I argue that we need transversal thinking and moves in and from higher education to move towards better futures, as is emphasised in the conference theme. Working towards such futures requires imagining agency and relationality otherwise, and play – as exploration, experimentation and disruption – might be just the right approach to do so as a generative way to enact such moves.

First, I will discuss the connection between design, play, transversality, agency, and relationality – and, further, that thinking *designerly* through play enables new transversal and collective agencies and relationships. Second, I will provide an example from a nationwide Danish research and development project on playful pedagogies and participation that explored and enacted transversal collaboration environments across researchers, educators, practitioners, and children. Third, I will reflect on a recently concluded European research and innovation project that developed the concept and framework of *cultural hubs* as vibrant spaces for co-exploration and co-creation across higher education, creative industries, cultural heritage institutions, and civic stakeholders. In both examples, themes of individual and collective agency, along with the exploration of new relationships and ways of connecting through play as activities, stances and values, run as recurring strands.

Across these examples, individual and collective forms of agency, and the emergence of new relations and ways of connecting, recur through play as a way of being and becoming together across worlds. The presentation concludes by arguing that designing transversal futures in higher education requires an ethical–relational commitment to agency, relationality, wholeness and difference. Here, playing with transversal thinking and actions becomes a way of imagining and designing *with* futures-in-the-making.

Short Bio:

Kim Holflod is an Associate Professor at University College Copenhagen, working across research and design on play and playfulness, participation, learning communities, and collaborative pedagogy from early childhood to higher education. Drawing on play theory and philosophy, social learning, co-design, and speculative design, his work explores how pedagogy and education, especially higher education, can become more inclusive, relational, and caring. He is a steering group member of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) and serves as both editor and steering group member of the *Danish Journal of Education Studies* (DJES).

