Our politicians tell us, now as so often, that we live in hard times; and in such times, the forces of conservatism always turn their attention to play. Especially in difficult financial times, play is regarded as suspect, frivolous. Governments, like later-day Malvolios, regard playfulness with suspicion, righteously denying cakes and ale to a struggling population. Like the ghosts of Gradgrind, they leave no room for anything that can be regarded as excess. Gradgrind, remember, is ‘a man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over ... With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to’. That is Dickens in 1854; but it could equally well be a contemporary utilitarian and instrumentalist ideology of education. While extolling the supposed virtues of modernization, we have caught up, in our official thinking about learning and teaching, with 1854.

This is the conservative view, and it has triumphed not just through conservative political administrations. In all cases, what it says is that there is no time for play. Children, students, teachers: there will be no easing up on productivity. Now, however, there is some genuinely different work going on. Open-space Learning (OSL) counters the prevailing ideologies. With Schiller, it recognises that play, Spielen, is central to education; with Vygotsky, it acknowledges the power of imaginative play in human development; with Huizinga, it knows the power of homo ludens in the social sphere. Like Shakespeare, from whom it takes much of its initial opening impetus, it says, ‘the play’s the thing’. The play – playing – is indeed the thing where we will not only catch the conscience of kings and authorities; it is also the opening space where we will release the consciousness of the learner, the student, the child.

This is a book about learning, about teaching, but it is also a book about how we can learn across disciplines. Who would have thought that we could energize the budding lawyer, the chemist in her laboratory, by getting them out of the courtroom or lab and into the open space to which the actor is more accustomed? And, in the truly open interdisciplinarity which marks The WISH List series, what happens when scientists and lawyers meet not just each other but also medics and literature students in the same space? In this book, and its accompanying e-apparatus, Nick Monk and his colleagues reveal the ways in which people can be moved to learn through the body. The body is not divorced from the mind in OSL. Rather, we acknowledge that the mind is always at its learning best when it is embodied, as in the development of a craft. When one learns to play a musical instrument say, one does not
learn solely by learning the theory then moving it into the practice. As in any craft, we learn by allowing our hands to accustom themselves to particular shapes on the keyboard or fretboard. This is how actors learn their lines: it is a social thing, it involves the body in history and in collaboration with others, it does not drive a wedge between the life of the mind and the life of the body. Writ large, it does not drive a wedge between the university or school on one hand, and the public sphere or society on the other.

In OSL, we open public space as well as the private spaces in which we learn. The writers of this book have explored how it is that we can enhance what is fashionably called the student experience of learning; but they have done so by actually giving students the possibility of experience. Experience involves risk taking, it involves experiment, it involves not knowing the outcome of particular avenues of exploration, but being willing to take the opportunity that the opening of a space affords them. The students whose work is central to the writing of this book come from diverse disciplines: English, law, medicine, the hard sciences, the social sciences; but they come together in the driving open of a space in which they also make time, they make time for learning. OSL is also an opening to time and to history. It offers, maybe for the first time in our times, the real risk of a student experience.

In case studies and in non-textual materials, the reader who engages with OSL will find many examples of the sceptical student or learner; indeed, the reader may be just such a sceptic. ‘If I wanted to dance about I would not have done an English degree’, you may say (as some of the learners here do); but, as the dance progresses, and we start to get the establishment not just of community and communal learning, we also find the other things that go with this: the development and enhancement of self-confidence, the awareness of the body as a social being, the necessity of team work, the ability to lead and be led and to change places and dynamics accruing to the occasion; and, in all this, to bring to life texts, law cases, chemical elements and so on.

Learning is a much-discussed dimension of university and school life in our hard times. But we do not learn if we are taught Gradgrind-like. We can go through certain motions, we can ‘perform’ in the way that Pavlov’s dogs performed; but learning is so much more than what Dickens attacked as ‘murdering the innocents’. It is the opening of a space for us to live in and through; it is the making of an environment for that space; it is a collegial occasioning of the demand for such openness, an ever-expanding opening to living.

That is what you will find here. The writers work through the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) in Warwick University. IATL began as CAPITAL (the acronym expands as Creativity and Performance in Teaching
and Learning), a collaboration between the University (especially the English and theatre departments) and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Warwick’s Reinvention Centre, another teaching and learning initiative, joined in. The gambit was that Warwick students could learn by performance, by the techniques of creativity that are deployed in the acting studio in preparation for the stage, by encountering space itself – more generally, the learning environment – in different ways; and that the learning could be reciprocal. There emerges a dialectic here, where performance and creativity both thrive, are both enhanced. Quickly, the techniques that Monk, Rutter, Heron, Neelands, our students and others work through are also made relevant to the other parts of the university community – and beyond. Schools, teachers, and all other disciplines – even the least likely – can take part. How does an atom behave? To a student of chemistry, that can be a formula; but it can also be a thing of beauty, an action, an occupation of a dynamic space or environment wherein explosions happen, wherein floods take place; and to learn this is to find a way of understanding what we are in education for. In the same way that play (Spielen) shows us that there is no real divide between the realm of the mind and the realm of material history, likewise the practitioners in this book show us that the divisions among disciplines are purely provisional. Poets, doctors, lawyers, architects, teachers, engineers can all be brought into learning – and teaching – in OSL. Unlike many interdisciplinary exercises, this book does not just bring two well-established disciplines into collision. Rather, it makes a productive cohabitation among many disciplines, giving that other sense of play – the loosening of otherwise tight relations or rigid structures into a freedom of action or of movement – a local habitation and a name.

The book is a beginning, is itself an opening of the spaces – including, in its e-apparatus, the technological spaces – in which we teach and learn. It is vital that such spaces become more and more expansive, more and more diverse, more and more open, if we want a genuine risky student experience and if we really do want teaching and learning to happen.

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