



Using Creative and Contemplative Pedagogy to Promote Learning Efficacy and Wellbeing within First-Year, Undergraduate Students

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Students transitioning into higher education face a myriad of personal and educational challenges as they adjust to new ways of studying in unfamiliar environments. We examine the potential for helping students adapt by providing opportunities for interaction within the context of their courses through two distinct workshops delivered to first-year, undergraduate students at a UK University. The 'LEGO Serious Play' and 'Reframing' workshops allowed students to reflect on their educational journeys and the challenges they faced by providing activities which encouraged discussion and creative thinking. Student feedback in the form of post-workshop surveys and focus groups suggested the workshops were particularly effective for alleviating student concerns and encouraging new and alternative ways of thinking about and approaching their academic work. We present the findings and demonstrate the potential benefits for embedding workshops of this nature into first-year course curricula.

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KEYWORDS:

playful learning; creative pedagogy; wellbeing; LEGO Serious Play; transition; interactive learning

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Reeve, J, Jindal, R, Bartle, C and Stokes, N. 2021. Using Creative and Contemplative Pedagogy to Promote Learning Efficacy and Wellbeing within First-Year, Undergraduate Students. *Gateway Papers*, 2(1): 5, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.34>

INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that schools and further education colleges should play a greater part in preparing students for studying at University (Green 2007). Despite this, undergraduate students are still frequently transitioning into higher education with unrealistic expectations about University life (Pennington et al. 2017; Leese 2010), unprepared for, and often unaware of, the processes needed for studying at an undergraduate level (Lowe & Cook 2003). Almost two decades later, this still remains a problem for transitioning students (Hassel & Ridout 2018; Bartle & Wilson 2018), who are entering higher education without the necessary skills to approach their academic work (Tate & Swords 2013). Furthermore, the resulting confusion and uncertainty can also be a potential source of anxiety for students, some of whom may be reluctant to ask for help through institutional support services (Deasy et al. 2016). This situation is compounded for many students by unsettling changes to their personal and social lives that a move to University often entails (Hussey & Smith 2010), as they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings without their usual support networks. This is a situation which can lead transitioning students to experience many negative emotions including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and isolation (Hughes & Smail 2015). Such emotions should not be ignored and must be considered when implementing interventions, which may deviate from, and move beyond the traditional (McMillan 2013).

Left unchecked, students experiencing difficulties of this nature may underperform, or even drop out of University (Hassel & Ridout 2018). Appropriate and effective support should, therefore, be offered to help students during the transition period (Hughes & Smail 2015). However, there is a paucity of research exploring how lecturers can provide this help in an attempt to close this expectation gap, although the requirement for lecturers to fully understand their cohorts' needs has been suggested (Money et al. 2017).

This action research intervention investigated the impact of embedded playful, reflective activities on the learning, engagement and wellbeing of a cohort of first year undergraduate students during their first few weeks at university. The study was supported by a De Montfort University Academic Innovation Project grant for pedagogic innovation. It focused on a critical and contextual module for Level 4 Design Products (CULT1100 Design Cultures I). The module supports practice by developing visual literacy and considering the social, economic and political context of the discipline's material histories. Existing workshops within the module were developed to incorporate both creative and contemplative pedagogies. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected to determine the impact of this innovation on student outcomes.

MULTISENSORY TECHNIQUES: LEGO SERIOUS PLAY AND REFRAMING

The multisensory techniques used in this intervention, namely LEGO Serious Play and Reframing, have been successfully used within De Montfort University and the wider Higher Education community. LEGO Serious Play has been shown to increase engagement among undergraduate students at University of Strathclyde (Savage & Faulkner 2018), and exercises with LEGO bricks have been found to develop empathy and social connection among Youth work students (Purcell 2019). Similarly, Reframing workshops have been shown to foster engagement, reflection and social interaction in workshops previously carried out at the case-study institution (Reeve 2014), and have been used across disciplines (Reeve & Towlson 2019).

The workshops introduced and tested within our study drew on a constructivist pedagogy, which suggests that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world reflecting on their individual experiences. Thus, supporting the position put forward by Tsai (2000) who suggested that a constructivist pedagogy is an appropriate epistemological standpoint upon which to base an intervention, where the need to provide opportunities for social negotiations is considered important in enabling knowledge dissemination and integration. We also acknowledge the long standing notion put forward by Tinto (1975) that students need to integrate both socially and academically when entering higher education. This demonstrates the importance of providing a space for students to interact, through tasks that encourage discussion and creative thinking to help individuals verbalise their experiences and learn from each other. This also gives lecturers an overview of their cohorts' concerns and

pedagogical abilities, and helps to address the issues facing students as they embark on their University journeys.

Both workshops provided collaborative learning environments that also gave students opportunities to form new acquaintances and friendships, which can become an invaluable source of help at University (McMillan 2013). Here, we explore the opinions of first-year design students at a UK University who agreed to take part in the workshops, which were carried out during already scheduled teaching hours. The module leader ensured the workshops were appropriately timed (i.e. they did not clash with any immediate student deadlines) and fully integrated into the curriculum, to encourage attendance.

By using creative and contemplative pedagogies within a timetabled session we hoped to find that the workshops encouraged students to think about the new approaches they could use for their academic work, while at the same time helping students open up about their experiences. Creative pedagogies encompass a wide range of learning and teaching methods that approach learning in imaginative and dynamic ways (Ashton & Stone 2018). In this research, the particular focus is on creative teaching which can be described as multisensory and playful, including visual and kinaesthetic activities such as drawing and model-making. In contrast, contemplative pedagogies draw on techniques for self-knowledge through introspection taken from spiritual traditions, applying these within educational contexts (Hart 2004). These may involve activities such as mindfulness meditation or other quiet, reflective activities (Williams & Penman 2011).

The two workshops incorporated elements of both creative pedagogies, via playful and visual teaching approaches, and contemplative pedagogies, through providing quiet space for contemplation, both during and after the sessions. Identifying any potential advantages of incorporating these approaches into student curricula was the focus of this work, and involved examining the views of those who participated. The data suggest that there are benefits in taking part in the workshops as they can help develop student approaches to learning, while also recognising the impact of student wellbeing. This is an issue highlighted by a recent Advance HE workshop (Hanesworth 2018). Moreover, Brown & Collins (2018), inspired by contemplative pedagogies, used LEGO to support the wellbeing of researchers and acknowledged this creative approach to student wellbeing.

METHOD

Ethical clearance for this work, including the ability to publish outcomes, was obtained prior to the research being undertaken, via the ethical approval process for the Faculty of Arts, Design and Humanities at De Montfort University. Participants were provided with clear written information about the research, and gave written consent for their data to be used. Human data was securely stored in accordance with the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's Research Records Retention Policy.

First year students enrolled on the Design Products module were invited to participate in two distinct workshops: first, a LEGO Serious Play workshop to help them reflect on their experiences of University life; and, second, a 'Reframing' workshop to help them explore and discuss a specific essay question set by their module leader. Both workshops involved students working in small groups on individual tables in an informal setting with background music and creative materials available. The LEGO Serious Play workshop took the students through a series of exercises using individual small LEGO kits. These culminated in individual and group reflections on the first six weeks at University and what they hoped the next six would bring. The Reframing workshop required the students to identify their essay topic and carry out some initial research prior to the session. They then worked individually, step-by-step on A3 sheets of paper printed with concentric 'Frames' labelled with "What?", "Who?", "When?", "Where?" and "Why?". Students worked outwards from the centre of the sheet, adding words and images one frame at a time, following prompts from the workshop leaders. Finished frames, complete with key words for further research, were peer-reviewed and suggestions for development of essay topics were added via post-it notes.

Both approaches offer flexible ways of thinking and learning, through an understanding of the different ways that students assimilate and synthesise information. These multisensory

methods respond to the principles of Universal Design for Learning championed by De Montfort University (DMU 2021), by offering visual, tactile and verbal alternatives to text-based pedagogies. By asking undergraduate students in the first term of their first year to participate in both types of workshops, it was possible to compare and contrast student opinions of both approaches. This helped to ascertain if interventions such as these help to address student concerns about their academic skill levels, alongside any social or personal problems they may be facing.

Following the workshops, all the participating students completed a survey about their experiences. The surveys used for both the LEGO Serious Play workshops and the Reframing workshops followed the same design, although the questions differed slightly according to which of the two workshops had taken place. Both the LEGO Serious Play and Reframing questionnaires had six Likert questions. These asked students about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements that the researchers deemed important based on the aims of the workshops. Following on from these questions were three open response questions, which were included to identify any unexpected insights, and to give students the opportunity to provide more detailed responses. No identifying information was collected from the students to guard against possible response bias.

A total of 37 students took part in the LEGO Serious Play workshops, split across three sessions. The following week, 29 of these students also took part in the Reframing workshops, again split across three sessions. All three workshops for each approach took place on the same day and in the same location, and the workshop procedure was the same on each occasion. Additionally, the students were randomly assigned to a workshop from the same module for both workshops. This allowed us to combine the data we received from each of the three workshops for the purpose of the analysis, giving us two sets of results: one for the LEGO Serious Play workshop; and one for the Reframing workshop.

In addition to the survey responses, the module leader was consulted for her feedback and thoughts about the activity and its perceived impact on her cohort. This included a discussion around the desirability and practicalities of embedding the approach into the curriculum. The students were also invited to take part in a focus group discussion several weeks after the workshops had taken place, to find out more about their thoughts on the workshops and how or whether they had subsequently used the approaches. Although only two students opted to take part in the focus group, they provided some useful additional insights. The discussions were transcribed and thematically analysed for their key points.

RESULTS

The post-workshop surveys and the subsequent focus group discussion with participating students revealed a number of ways students perceived they had benefitted from taking part. From an academic perspective, both workshops had positive implications for how students approached their work. Moreover, the workshop structure afforded transitioning students an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences of University. This had propitious implications for their wellbeing as they acclimatised to new ways of living and studying, which they reported as both challenging and a potential source of anxiety. **Figures 1** and **2** show the overall results from the Likert survey questions following both workshops.

Figure 1 uses a compound bar graph to summarise the responses to all six of the Likert questions students were asked at the end of the LEGO Serious Play workshops. In total, 37 students took part in a workshop and all students completed all of the Likert questions, giving a 100% completion rate for this set of questions. Each bar represents the proportional split between student responses for each of the six questions. The section of the bar coloured green indicates the proportion of students who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, the section coloured orange represents the proportion of students who were undecided, and the section coloured red shows the proportion of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 1 displays the questions in order according to the proportion of students who agreed with the statements. Encouragingly, the majority of students agreed with the statements across all questions. Furthermore, only a very small proportion of students disagreed.

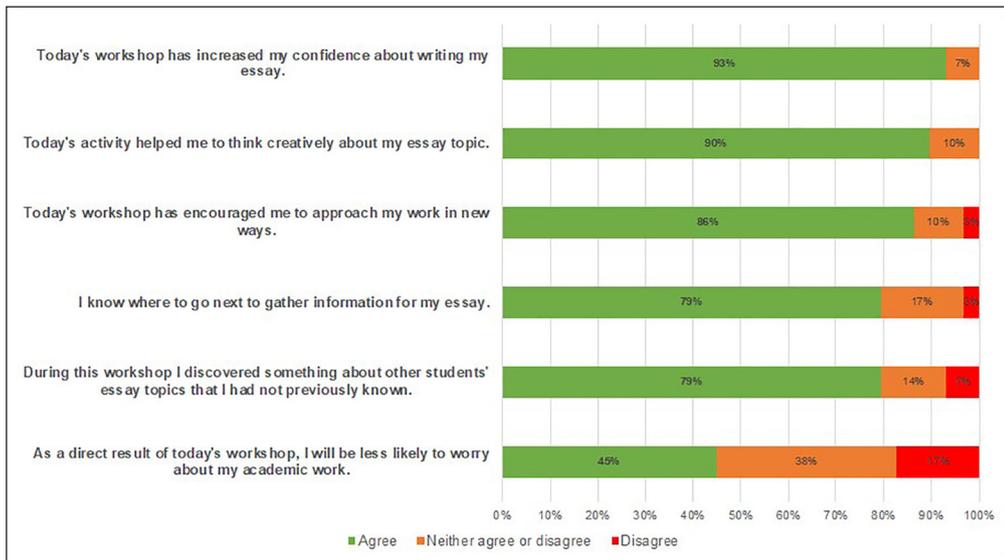


Figure 1 Graph showing student responses to the Likert survey questions following the LEGO Serious Play workshops (n = 37).

Figure 2 uses a compound bar graph to summarise the responses to all six of the Likert questions students were asked at the end of the Reframing workshops. In total, 29 students took part in a workshop and all students completed all of the Likert questions, giving a 100% completion rate for this set of questions. As with the LEGO Serious Play Likert questions, each bar represents the proportional split between student responses for each of the six questions. The section of the bar coloured green indicates the proportion of students who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, the section coloured orange represents the proportion of students who were undecided, and the section coloured red shows the proportion of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 2 displays the questions in order according to the proportion of students who agreed with the statements. In all but one of the questions, the majority of students agreed with the statements across all questions. Furthermore, only a very small proportion of students disagreed and, once again, all but a few of the students who did not agree with the questions were undecided.

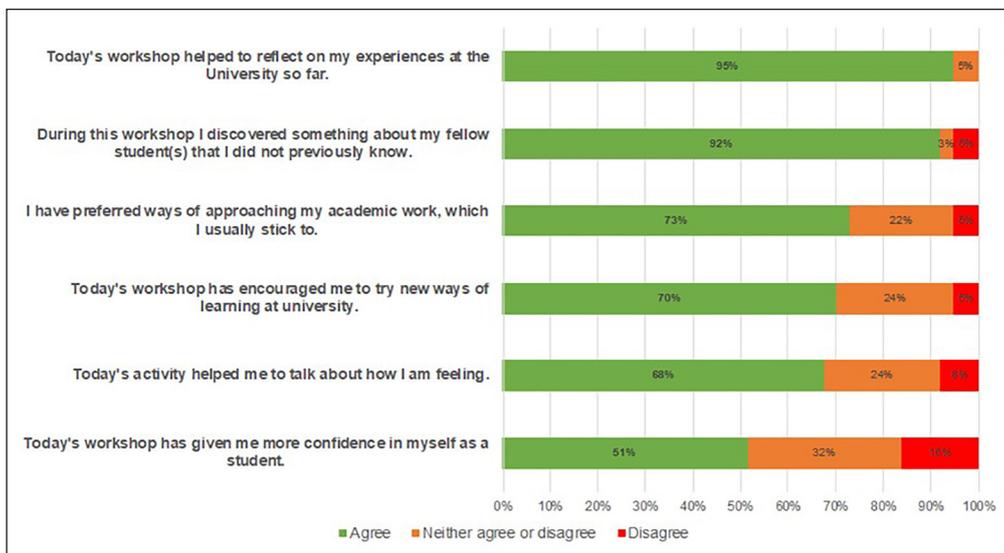


Figure 2 Graph showing responses to the Likert style questions following the Reframing workshops (n = 29).

ENCOURAGING DISCUSSION THROUGH AN INTERACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The interactive nature of the workshops provided an opportunity for students to discuss issues that were particularly pertinent to them as first-year undergraduate students, while also listening and discussing issues important to their peers. The students explained that while the workshops provided a welcome opportunity to evaluate their learning, there were also social benefits to be gained from participating, which they felt could help reduce any worries and concerns they had been experiencing since moving into higher education.

This was particularly true of the activities used in the LEGO Serious Play workshop, which encouraged the majority of participants to talk more openly about how they were feeling about their time at University (68%, n = 37). Indeed, over half of the participants (51%, n = 37) said they felt more confident about their role as a student after taking part in the workshop. Students particularly welcomed the opportunity they had to interact with others on their course, as it gave them an opportunity to get to know people who they may otherwise have had only a limited interaction with. This also gave students some context with which to reflect on their experiences.

I thought it was quite revealing for some people as they found out things about themselves that they didn't know before (LEGO Serious Play workshop participant)

The opportunity to express their thoughts with their peers helped students understand they are not alone when experiencing difficulties within their first year.

I've learnt that other students are in the same shoes as me in terms of finding the workload high... everyone has to adjust to University life regarding studies, accommodation and social life (LEGO Serious Play workshop participant)

Another student shared similar thoughts about the Reframing workshop:

Nothing was really familiar at all. That's kind of scary and it does make you think, oh my god, am I the only one thinking this? Have other people done this? It does help you realise that other people are just as overwhelmed with the work as you are... seeing other people are also really worried about the amount of work and getting it done and not doing it as well as they could, that did make me feel like, okay everyone else is thinking this, it is not just me not being able to cope with the Uni in the first year (Reframing workshop participant)

The LEGO Serious Play workshop was perceived as being particularly effective in encouraging students to open up in this way, which one student did not expect to happen.

I was actually quite surprised at how many people open up. Particularly with people our age, about this stuff, we just like hold it in (LEGO Serious Play workshop participant)

It was clear from the survey responses that some of the students were stressed about aspects of their University life and the workshop helped them put their concerns into perspective.

I have learnt that my peers are all feeling similar. There is a recurring theme of stress... I am determined to conquer my fears/stress with Uni and keep up to date (LEGO Serious Play workshop participant)

Another student explained that the workshop activities, including the discussions with their peers, had highlighted the importance of forming connections with other students, which can be beneficial for both their academic work and their sense of belonging within the institution.

Talking through my ideas with someone helped me think of more connections and also I could hear other people's ideas, which gave me more to research (Reframing workshop participant)

The Lego Serious Play workshop also gave students confidence to speak to others on their course, which they had been reluctant to do until then.

I can make friends even though I feel like I'm not good at making them, and that is a skill that can be learnt over time (Lego Serious Play workshop participant)

One student felt less comfortable with sharing their ideas with the wider group and would have preferred sharing in small groups only, while a second suggested that the LEGO workshop might work well with pre-established friendship groups as opposed to working with relative strangers. The environment was also commented on, with mixed reactions to the background music intended to create a relaxing atmosphere: some preferred different music and some found the music helpful.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING

Encouraging students to consider how they approach their academic work was the second aim of the workshops. This was particularly important as almost three quarters of the students

who participated in the Lego Serious Play workshop (73%, n = 37) said they tended to study in ways that are familiar to them, rather than considering other approaches. Although this was disappointing, a large proportion of students (70%, n = 37) indicated that the Lego Serious Play workshop had encouraged them to try new ways of learning.

If I was stuck creatively, I could use the LEGO as an alternative approach to get me thinking in different ways (Lego workshop participant)

The Lego Serious Play workshop appeared to have opened students' minds to different approaches to learning, which made them less anxious about trying new approaches. Three of the students explained how the workshops had made them understand the barriers to progression they were experiencing, as they faced what they considered to be demanding workloads, time management issues and a higher than expected degree of academic independence. One student explained how the Lego activities within the workshop allowed her to take a more visual approach to her learning, which appealed to her learning preferences.

I prefer making things rather than writing. I prefer being able to see something in front of me, and not just a piece of paper (Lego workshop participant)

This was strongly reflected in the feedback from the Reframing workshops, which helped the majority of students think more creatively (90%, n = 29) and appreciate the value of considering new approaches to their work by focussing on a specific essay question (86%, n = 29). The Reframing workshop helped students break down what they considered a difficult essay assignment into manageable portions of work, as well as providing an opportunity to ask questions of their peers and the module leader, who was present during the workshop. This provided a degree of clarity that had previously eluded some students and helped them approach their work in a logical and practical way.

Learning to break down a question into less complex pieces makes it easier to solve... I have learnt what reframing is as a way of laying out ideas. I think it is definitely a good way of planning work and exploring ideas (Reframing workshop participant)

Similarly, as students completed the different sections of the Reframing sheet, it highlighted where their knowledge base was lacking so they knew where to focus moving forward and could understand the reasons why.

By laying out my ideas I can [not only] see what I have and know, but also what I don't know and what I should find out... putting ideas on paper is helping me ask questions I hadn't thought about yet (Reframing workshop participant)

The most common suggestion from students on what could be changed in the Reframing workshop change was to allow more time for discussion and sharing ideas. For example, one student explained that they would have liked more time for discussion with the students in the workshop who were tackling the same essay question:

I felt at the end of the workshop we should look at our frames with people exploring the same questions to bounce off each other (Reframing workshop participant)

SELF-PERCEPTION AND REFLECTION

Providing a collaborative learning environment by introducing workshops to encourage discussion helped students consider how they could progress at University in a more positive way, by reflecting on the changes they have already made since the start of their student journey. Some students also indicated that the workshop had helped them think more positively about their future at the University.

I started out at Uni not knowing much, but I think I will develop the skills to meet the challenges... the student journey isn't a straight journey, but layers to achieve (Lego Serious Play workshop participant)

For many of the students, the workshop appears to have been successful by helping to instil more confidence with the student cohort.

I felt it encouraged me to have a positive outlook looking ahead (Lego Serious Play workshop participant)

As well as identifying areas and personal limitations, one student explained how, after talking with others, they realised they needed to practice speaking-up in class more as well as being more organised and sleeping and eating more!

The workshop allowed students to reflect on their abilities and journeys. For some students this was an ability to see the positive aspects of their personalities or approaches to learning:

I have learnt that I am always in a positive mindset even if there is a lot of work to do
(Lego Serious Play workshop participant)

For others, it was a recognition of some negative aspects of their personalities that needed addressing, such as a tendency to worry about their abilities to succeed:

I need to have more self-belief and that I don't need to be pessimistic of my goals
(Lego Serious Play workshop participant)

Disappointingly, less than half of the students (45%, n = 29) who took part in the Reframing workshop said that they would be less likely to worry about their academic work as a result of taking part in the workshop, despite mostly claiming that they are more confident about writing the essay they were working with during the workshop. This could suggest that some of the students were unable to see how they could successfully transfer this technique to help them with other coursework tasks and assessments.

Finally, the students also recognised the positive impact workshops such as these can have for students who are worried, anxious or suffer from mental health concerns, as it can help them voice their concerns while understanding they are not alone.

People with anxiety, always think that they are the only ones with anxiety. [The workshops] kind of showed everyone had the same feelings towards the Uni... Nobody really looked that stressed, it just looked like it was the normal thing for them. So, I was a bit confused because I could feel the weight of the work pushing down on me but when I look at everyone else, it is just another day in the park
(Participant reflecting on both workshops)

The workshops appear to have helped students feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings, which seemed very reassuring for students having doubts about their ability to complete their academic pursuits.

Three students explained how the workshop highlighted certain barriers to progress that they were experiencing, in the form of workload (more than expected) and the subsequent time management issues, unexpected obstacles (no further details provided), and the amount of independence that is expected of them at University. This highlights the need for close integration of wider services to support students within the curriculum, combined with these creative, reflective activities to foster self-awareness.

DISCUSSION

This study was specifically aimed at understanding how students would evaluate their experiences of undertaking Lego Serious Play and Reframing workshops, to gauge the potential for incorporating the workshops into the curriculum. Encouragingly, the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive for both the LEGO Serious Play and Reframing workshops. The student feedback revealed the ways they have benefitted from participating. Firstly, the workshops gave students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, which allowed them to evaluate their student journey in terms of the personal and academic challenges they have faced. Heron (2019) explained how providing 'a space for dialogue and conversation to take place provides an opportunity to listen to students' lived experiences' and the students participating in our workshops were quick to point out how they were inclined to open up more to each other about their student journeys from both a personal and academic perspective.

Secondly, the workshops provided an opportunity for students to undertake practical tasks while engaging in discussions with their peers and feeding back to the class at regular intervals. This proved to be an effective combination of activities for identifying students' worries and concerns, and for helping students understand areas and skillsets that they needed to improve. Interventions such as the LEGO Serious Play Workshop allow people to think differently when

making something using their hands (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006), which ‘embodies creativity’ (Reeve 2017) and is particularly suited to ‘deep personal reflection’ (James & Brookfield 2014).

Indeed, students taking part in the workshops talked openly with their peers, many of whom they discovered had similar problems or concerns. This supports the findings of Asghar (2014), who demonstrated the advantages of providing opportunities and encouragement for student interaction to improve their understanding of each other’s needs and concerns. This had a positive impact on students’ self-perceptions as they realised they were not alone when experiencing difficulties, and that they can talk to their peers and tutors about any issues they encounter during their studies. Furthermore, encouraging students to open-up in this way can encourage others to talk more freely (Youniss 1987) and unlock the potential for friendships to form (Brooks 2007). These can be invaluable for any students who find themselves in need of help and/or someone to talk to during their time at University. This seemed particularly pertinent for this sample of first year students, who had recently transitioned into University with a variety of expectations about what University would be like from an academic and personal perspective. For some students, particularly those who are the first in their family to go to University, this can seem like an ‘alien environment’ (Zarb et al. 2018). Our findings suggest that having the opportunity to talk about how they are adjusting to this new way of life and the challenges it provides can be both informative and necessary for the students.

Both the Lego building during the Lego Serious Play workshop *and* the sheet creation during the Reframing workshop were activities specifically designed to help students think differently about how they approached their work. From an academic perspective, the Reframing workshop was particularly useful for helping students understand how to break down their assignments into discrete tasks, which helped them think about their essay structures and identify the areas they needed to focus their attention on. The Reframing activity encouraged discussion as students appraised each other’s sheets, while their module leader was able to offer appropriate guidance where needed. In an article explaining student-staff partnership approaches to course enhancement, Chilvers, Fox & Bennett (2019) explained how deeper reflection and evaluation from students stimulated student-staff dialogue. This was reflected during the Reframing workshop, as the workshop activity encouraged dialogue between the students and their module leader. Positive lecturer-student exchanges such as these have been shown to ‘profoundly influence student success’ (Pearce & Down 2011). According to McEwan (2017), this is particularly important for transitioning students who may not yet understand what their lecturers expect from their coursework submissions.

Bridges (2017) also explained how mutual learning, involving student cohorts working closely with their lecturer, is effective in promoting friendly interaction, learning about a subject, learning about others and opening the mind by considering other people’s views and opinions. This was particularly important for these first year students who may still be adjusting to new ways of studying, and others have found that a lack of clarification about what lecturers require of their students in assignments can be the most challenging aspect of transferring into higher education (Blair 2017). The Reframing workshop provided opportunities to identify and address such confusion. Although the LEGO Serious Play workshop was not focussed on a specific academic task, it was also clear that for some students the LEGO sets had provided a new and very visual approach to their thinking, which certainly appealed to students who were not as confident with the more traditional approaches.

The results from this research make a clear case for incorporating the workshops into modules and course curricula. Creative learning spaces are described by Jadav & Renuka (2018) as places to ‘focus on learning through discussion, inquiry, collaboration and/or practice... emphasising learning for understanding [rather than] content mastery’. Both of these workshops successfully achieved this focus for these students.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The feedback received from the participants was extremely positive. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, we conclude that incorporating these workshops into student curricula, when resources allow, would be beneficial for students. However, there were limitations which should be acknowledged and issues that arose that would merit further investigation.

Careful planning is needed to ensure the workshops are delivered at a time that works well for individual modules, while being mindful of students' other commitments, to encourage good levels of attendance. Therefore, in a further bid to encourage student participation, we recommend that lecturers explain the benefits of taking part to students and, in the case of the Reframing workshop, how much preparation is required to get the most benefit from it. Based on the attendance levels on the students' other modules, the workshop attendance was as expected during this study. However, we were made aware from the module leader that this may not have been the case with other student cohorts, and in such instances a better explanation about each of the workshops may have been helpful.

Module leaders should also ensure there are trained facilitators to run the workshops, which could have institutional policy implications in terms of training needs and facilitator availability. Indeed, any impact of workshops or activities such as these will, in fact, be dependent on the willingness of the institution to adapt its procedures and processes accordingly (Carey 2013).

Both of these workshops were led by an experienced facilitator. If the workshops were to be incorporated across the institution, facilitator training would be required. Consequently, cost and time factors could be a potentially limiting factor. Therefore, we recommend further investigation into assessing the practicalities of offering such guidance. Our study was limited to one module within one University faculty. It would be prudent, therefore, to pilot the workshops across other modules and faculties to test their transferability to different contexts. Similarly, it would be interesting to investigate how responses differ between year groups or when the workshops had a mix of students from different courses in any one session.

The results suggested that it would be prudent to consider the composition of the small groups of 4–6 students within the workshops. For the LEGO Serious Play workshops, the groups seemed to be particularly effective when comprised of students who do not know each other very well, or when they are not sat within an already established friendship group. This is because the activity encourages students to talk to each other about their feelings and experiences, which could open up new and lasting connections for them as commonalities emerge. Conversely, for the Reframing workshop, which focussed more on the specific coursework task of essay writing, the suggestion is that it would be more beneficial for students to use the technique with people they know who are working on the same essay question or a similar topic.

Our research has shown the workshop interventions to be highly effective in addressing the participants' academic and personal concerns. Therefore, we recommend further testing across other subject areas and cohorts of students, and cautiously recommend this approach as a positive intervention for helping students beginning their student journey to adjust to University life.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Reeve, J, Jindal, R, Bartle, C and Stokes, N. 2021. Using Creative and Contemplative Pedagogy to Promote Learning Efficacy and Wellbeing within First-Year, Undergraduate Students. *Gateway Papers*, 2(1): 5, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.34>

Submitted: 11 March 2021

Accepted: 01 July 2021

Published: 17 August 2021

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