



**Hubris, Revelations and Creative Pedagogy: Transformation, Dialogue and Modelling 'Professional Love' with LEGO**

Journal:	<i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>
Manuscript ID	CJFH-2017-0197.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	Transformation, Discourse, 'Professional Love', Creativity, LEGO

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## **Hubris, Revelations and Creative Pedagogy: Transformation, Dialogue and Modelling ‘Professional Love’ with LEGO**

### **Abstract**

The paper demonstrates a successful approach to providing HE Youth & Community Work students with a learning experience that embraces the transformative agenda of their chosen profession. It adds to our understanding of the opportunities and limitations in crafting a learning environment and embedding a discursive pedagogy that draws on the creativity of both the lecturer and students.

Exploring different iterations of reflective sessions, it highlights how creative approaches can help students overcome barriers to their engagement with a particularly complex concept, namely the transformational capacity of ‘professional love’ within Youth and Community Work practice. The evaluation of these sessions generates broadly positive results, suggesting that creative methods are appropriate for addressing complex issues in the HE classroom. However, it also details how this approach proved profoundly upsetting for some participants, suggesting it should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all solution to overcoming barriers in teaching and learning.

**Key Words:** ‘professional love’, transformation, discourse, creativity, LEGO.

### **Introduction**

As an educator, I have always sought to inspire people to embrace new ideas, challenge received orthodoxies and generate their own understandings of the world around them, thereby helping to empower them to change their world. This

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3 philosophy has underpinned my practice, both as a community educator<sup>1</sup> and as a HE  
4 Lecturer, where I believe in the power of modelling ‘effective’ practice, particularly  
5 in relation to reflection (Taylor & Robinson, 2014).  
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10 Two central tenets of my practice – shaped by the professional values of community  
11 development and youth work (LLUK, 2009; IYW, 2013) – characterize education as a  
12 transformational process (Mezirow, 2000; Beck & Purcell, 2010) and as an “act of  
13 love” (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, I have always sought to use creative ways to  
14 introduce learners to new concepts, as this is an effective way to promote effective  
15 engagement in the learning process, especially as in relation to “politically-oriented  
16 pedagogies” such as community education (Clover, 2007).  
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26 This paper explores the application of these tenets by critiquing a developmental  
27 project designed to introduce the concept of ‘professional love’ to second year Youth  
28 & Community Work (YCW) students in one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in  
29 the north of England. It expands on the key principles underpinning my approach to  
30 teaching, and clarifies how I hope to encourage students to adopt these in their own  
31 practice. The paper focuses on sessions in which LEGO was used to facilitate  
32 students’ engagement with this concept, seeking to determine: (i) if this creative  
33 approach was effective in its aim to help students engage in discussion about the  
34 subject; and (ii) whether or not this approach facilitated a transformation in their  
35 understanding of the concept.  
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### 49 **Pedagogical Principles**

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55 <sup>1</sup> Community education is used as a ‘catch-all’ term for the related professional processes I have  
56 engaged in throughout my twenty years’ career: community education, informal education,  
57 community work, community development, youth & community work and youth work.  
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3 The key principles underpinning my work as a community educator and HE Lecturer  
4 are explored here, highlighting important aspects from the literature contributing to  
5 effective delivery of teaching and learning in formal, informal and non-formal  
6 settings (Jeffs & Smith, 2005; Moreland, 1999). These considerations have been  
7 shaped by my own practice in the community education profession, and in supporting  
8 the professional development of students on an undergraduate Youth & Community  
9 Work programme. These students have very diverse backgrounds, and draw from  
10 differing degree of experience in work with young people and communities. This  
11 means that it is important to shape learning opportunities to allow for all critical  
12 themes to be covered in ways that students with differing degrees of prior knowledge  
13 can engage (Shor, 1991; Brookfield, 1986).  
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### 26 27 ***Education as a Transformational Process*** 28

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31 Transformative education results in a “deep, structural shift in the basic premises of  
32 thought, feelings, and actions ... dramatically and irreversibly alter(ing) our way of  
33 being in the world” (O’Connor: 241, 2002). It is a “critical” mode of engagement for  
34 community education (Ledwith, 1997), reflecting community development’s aim to  
35 “address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice,  
36 equality and inclusion” (LLUK, 2009). This pedagogical approach is not limited to  
37 changing participants’ world-views or perceptions; instead, it requires change in  
38 actions and behaviours, and as such is uniquely relevant to the community education,  
39 which seeks to challenge existing power relations to bring about greater social justice  
40 and equality (Shaw, 2013; Mayo, 2004).  
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53 Teaching for transformation challenges participants to assess their value system and  
54 worldview, such that they are changed by the experience (Quinnan, 1997). It helps  
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3 participants identify “problematic” ideas, beliefs, values and feelings; critically assess  
4 their underlying assumptions; test their justification through “rational discourse”; and  
5 reach decisions through consensus-building (Mezirow, 2000). A transformative  
6 pedagogy is based primarily on dialogue and critical reflection on experiences (and  
7 associated feelings), leading to “perspective transformation” (*ibid*), where the  
8 learner’s worldview shifts, drawing on more diverse frames of reference; or  
9 “conscientization” (Freire, 1970), where learning is a critical process, aligned with  
10 action to address real problems.  
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21 Transformation arises from a context-specific form of critical pedagogy, in which the  
22 primary function of the educator is emancipatory: they create the conditions for  
23 students to “learn skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to  
24 examine critically the role that society has played in their self-formation” (Darder,  
25 1991: xvii). The aim of transformational pedagogy must be to cultivate students’  
26 critical consciousness and to help them recognize themselves as an agent of change  
27 (Kincheloe, 2008; Thompson, 1997; hooks, 1994).  
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37 Hence, the educator should draw on the perspectives and experiences of people  
38 traditionally marginalised and excluded from the classroom, promoting their critical  
39 faculties, and facilitating their collective construction of alternative possibilities  
40 (Nagda *et al*, 2003). This form of transformative practice should be about developing  
41 “pedagogic imaginations” or helping students to imagine new possibilities by  
42 changing their current frames of reference (Jackson, 2015: 6). Students are helped in  
43 this way to recognise the inherent value in themselves and each other, and to  
44 recognise how dominant discourses act to de-value them (Bernstein, 1996: 170). The  
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3 result should be that – through learning – students can “make and remake” themselves  
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5 and their world (Freire, 2004: 15).  
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8 Embracing a transformative pedagogy is not without its challenges, making it difficult  
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10 to anticipate the impact it may have on participants (Taylor, 2009). Specifically,  
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12 challenging one’s own underlying thoughts and assumptions can result in feelings of  
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14 discomfort, disorientation and even grief arising in the students’ mind (Moore, 2005).  
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16 This can arise from their natural tendency to suppress emotions publicly, as the  
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18 associated emotional turmoil can be difficult to deal with; something that can be  
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20 exacerbated in the confines of a classroom setting (*ibid*). Furthermore, learners run  
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22 the risk when exposing their deep-held emotional positions to losing the “support and  
23  
24 sustenance of intimates and friends” (Brookfield, 1991: 10).  
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28 It is vital, therefore, in ensuring one’s practice remains ethical, to be open with  
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30 learners about the intention to challenge the *status quo*, and thereby try to avoid  
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32 setting them up for personal and political damage (*ibid*: 9). Furthermore, linking  
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34 transformational pedagogy to professional love, Wink (2005: 167-8) asserts that the  
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36 educator should use “a caring heart” and “critical eyes” to ensure the welfare of the  
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38 learner are central in their classroom.  
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### 42 ***Dialogic Pedagogy***

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45 Dialogue is central to a transformative pedagogy, and may form the central medium  
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47 for teaching when learning is perceived as a process shaped by social relations  
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49 (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Here, dialogue is how a group constructs knowledge  
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51 through shared thinking, enabling learners to “share their conceptions, verify or test  
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53 their understandings, and identify areas of common knowledge or of difference” (*ibid*:  
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3 1103). Using dialogue reflects one of the educational principles underpinning  
4 practice in the YCW Subject Benchmark Statement: *critical collaborative enquiry*  
5 (QAA, 2017: 12).  
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10 A dialogical pedagogy allows students to interact with one another around a chosen  
11 theme, drawing on the interpretations they bring to the discussion to co-construct  
12 knowledge, rather than being given the ‘right’ answers (Mufti & Pearce, 2012). Here,  
13 argumentation is important in enabling learners to take ownership of their learning,  
14 and in particular on the “critical exploration, evaluation and synthesis of meanings  
15 that this entails” (*ibid*: 41).  
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24 In HE, dialogic pedagogy requires all participants – including the lecturer – to be  
25 open to the possibility of change in their perspectives and understandings, including  
26 occasional regression along the road to transformation (Kovbasyuk, 2011). The role  
27 of the lecturer remains, nevertheless, to encourage their students to be open to the  
28 possibility of change through meaningful engagement in discourse with their peers.  
29 Engaging in critical reflection and collaboration in this way enables them to “actively  
30 seek, express and negotiate meanings in dialogues” that can foster “value-oriented  
31 relationships and appreciation for the diversity of the world” (*ibid*: 11); both  
32 outcomes being consistent with community development values (LLUK, 2009).  
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44 The educator should demonstrate awareness of how language can be used to oppress  
45 and dominate, and enable students to re-frame their own use of language, so that it  
46 can be “claimed as a space of resistance” (hooks 1994: 69). The resulting “true  
47 speaking” is thus both an expression of creative power and – most importantly – a  
48 courageous act of resistance: a “political gesture that challenges politics of  
49 domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (hooks 1989: 8).  
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### ***Education as an Act of Love***

Freire asserts that education occurs only when the teacher stops making “individualistic gestures and risks an act of love” (1970: 35). Characterizing this ability to love as indispensable to the cause of liberation, Freire further posits that love and dialogue are inter-dependent: “dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (*ibid*: 77).

Love is central to ethical practice in community work (Westoby & Dowling, 2013). Humans can actively ‘love’ others in their community by seeking out their stories, and de-centering our concern for our own perspective so as to demonstrate the value we attach to others (Fromm, 1956). By ‘loving’ in this way, individuals can re-discover themselves as belonging to an extensive community, in which we are indebted to and contribute towards shared meanings and communal ties.

Page’s (2011) exploration of ‘professional love’ in early years offers a potential means to explore our practice as community educators. Here, “pedagogical loving” requires “deep motivational displacement and involves developing deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships” (*ibid*: 313). Children’s relationships with practitioners need to be based on quality and sensitivity, because other relationships in their lives are inadequate. Practitioners should become “sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they (can form) a deep and sustaining relationship” (Page, 2014: 123).

Similarly, community educators should model love in their practice by abandoning selfish interests and demonstrating genuine concern about others, recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and responding to their needs. This requires a focus on



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3 the inherent value of each individual as part of their community and on the quality of  
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5 the relationship between the worker and learners (Westoby & Dowling, 2013).  
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8 In light of concerns about self-preservation in an era where safeguarding is of  
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10 increasing concern, some educators can be forgiven for perceiving ‘love’ as an  
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12 element of the teacher-student relationship as taboo (hooks, 2013). Nevertheless, it  
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14 should be possible for them to demonstrate a “caring heart” by showing that they are  
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16 interested in the lives of their students, seeking to understand how students perceive  
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18 themselves and their social reality (Kincheloe, 2008). Furthermore, professionally  
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20 loving practitioners should embrace “kindness, empathy, intimacy, bonding, sacrifice,  
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22 and forgiveness” as part of the pedagogic relationship (Loreman, 2011).  
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### 26 ***Creativity in Higher Education***

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29 Echoing de Bono’s assertion (1993: 63) that creativity is “the most important human  
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31 resource of all”, both the HEA (2011) and the QAA (2017) stress the importance of  
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33 “dynamic” approaches to teaching and learning through creativity and innovation.  
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35 HE students require educators to help them understand and develop their creativity,  
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37 which “lies at the heart of performing, learning and developing in any contexts”  
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39 (Jackson, 2014: 8-9). Being creative is an integral part of each person’s make-up;  
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41 hence, HE should take a “lifeworld” approach, encouraging students’ creative  
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43 development as an integral part of their learning and development (*ibid*). Prompting  
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45 creative cognitive processes in their learning enables students to generate “higher  
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47 order” learning: synthesizing existing ideas and information into new and more  
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49 complex interpretations, and enhancing the retention and transfer of information  
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51 (Miller & Dumford, 2014: 289).  
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3 Highlighting the “subversive nature of creativity”, Gibson (2010: 607-8) claims that  
4 creative teaching offers advantages over “transmissive pedagogies” (consistent with  
5 the “conscientisation” propounded by Freire, 1970) in that it encourages boundary  
6 pushing, self-assurance and risk-taking. At the same time, creative approaches to  
7 teaching and learning ‘sensitive’ issues afford students the opportunity to devise and  
8 discuss more readily their own agendas for social change (Pilcher, 2017: 975).

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11 Deliberate creative processes are likely to be “more amenable to instruction” than  
12 intuitive processes (Miller & Dumford, 2014: 288), suggesting that educators should  
13 focus on these when promoting creativity in the HE classroom. Using “creative  
14 space” can enhance students’ engagement with these more challenging processes,  
15 helping students to make sense of complex issues by drawing on their experience of  
16 “novelty and surprise” to promote collaboration and interaction (Harper & Quaye,  
17 2009; Jankowska & Atlay, 2008). To capitalize on this, educators should provide the  
18 following catalysts for developing creativity in others: setting clear goals; allowing  
19 autonomy; providing resources and adequate time; offering help; learning from  
20 problems and successes; and allowing ideas to flow (Amabile & Kramer, 2012). We  
21 should accept that students are not ‘experts’, and focus instead on creative acts in their  
22 everyday contexts, as well as the ways in which they construct personal knowledge  
23 and understanding in their particular context (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009).

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26 Considering construction as a specific form of creativity, the HEA acknowledges that  
27 students learn best when they construct something (e.g. from LEGO), helping them to  
28 connect with each other (James, 2015). Creative approaches help students to value  
29 both the output and the newly created knowledge embodied therein, while metaphors  
30 help students structure conceptual systems through creating expressive imagery (*ibid*).

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3 Modelling allows participants to free up and use different neural pathways than they  
4 might otherwise if using purely didactic or discursive approaches (Nerantzi &  
5 Despard, 2014). Ideal for generating divergent responses and ideas, when used in a  
6 democratic and non-hierarchical manner, models such as LEGO can help overcome  
7 domination of classroom discussion by dominant speakers (*ibid*). Working with  
8 metaphor, symbolism and association, the process breaks down barriers and opens up  
9 possibilities; participants own the meaning in their models; and the ideas associated  
10 with their creations remain memorable (McCusker, 2014).

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21 Linked to this, encouraging students to tell stories based on their own creativity can  
22 help them to explore different points of view and approach dilemmas from alternative  
23 perspectives, thereby generating new understandings (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). This  
24 approach can allow students to be more authentic and (self-)critical in their  
25 discussions, and to feel more comfortable in displaying their own subjectivity  
26 (Skeggs, 2002: 973). Furthermore, while story-telling helps students to reflect on and  
27 transform their understanding of themselves, it also enhances their confidence through  
28 the sharing of these new understandings, thereby strengthening their sense of  
29 belonging to the group (Stanley, 1992).

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41 How much the educator is able to integrate creativity into their classroom-based  
42 practice is likely to be constrained by the culture of the HE institution within which  
43 they practice. Asserting that HEIs *should* provide “academic and social  
44 environments that favour the creativity of the human potential”, Mansouri (2015)  
45 argues that organizational culture often inhibits the creativity of staff. As well as  
46 appointing educators with creative characteristics (curiosity, energy, and intellectual  
47 honesty, good rapport, etc.), what is required in order for creativity to flourish in  
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3 HEIs are mechanisms promoting new ideas, a culture of cooperation and  
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5 collaboration and open appreciation and acknowledgement of creative  
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7 educators' practice (*ibid*).  
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### 10 **Conclusion**

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13 As demonstrated in this brief engagement with the literature, there is a clear synergy  
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15 between effective community education practice and the role of the critical,  
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17 transformative HE educator. In both cases, the educator seeks to facilitate a  
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19 transformation in understanding and action on the part of the learner. Dialogue is a  
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21 critical part of transformational pedagogy, and it is the educator's responsibility to  
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23 ensure discussions empower learners to generate deeper understandings of the issues  
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25 under consideration. This is particularly important when tackling complex concepts  
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27 such as 'professional love', which present the practitioner – both in the community  
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29 and the HE classroom – with profound challenges, as they occupy the affective realm  
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31 (and are, therefore, difficult to talk about) and are open to myriad interpretations,  
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33 making their translation into practice problematic (Sipsos, *et al*, 2008). The rest of  
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35 this paper tries to make sense of how embracing learners' creativity can help open up  
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37 these discussions and bring about transformation.  
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### 42 **Experimental Sessions Design Considerations**

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45 Throughout my HE teaching career, I have sought to include discussions with my  
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47 students about professionally loving practice as a part of the taught YCW curriculum.  
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49 I regularly refer to Freire's assertions about education being an act of love, illustrating  
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51 discussions with examples of what I consider to be loving forms of practice in my  
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53 own work (Author, 2018). However, these conversations are often stilted and one-  
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3 sided, as students feel uncomfortable exposing themselves to potential ridicule or  
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5 misunderstandings by their peers, possibly reflecting the fact that expression of love  
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7 for humanity is generally discouraged in modern western society (Henricks, 2016).  
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10 To overcome this obstacle, I wanted to develop an approach that would enable  
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12 students to better engage in difficult dialogues about this 'wicked' issue (Landis,  
13  
14 2008). My aim was to help transform their understanding of 'professional love', so  
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16 that their clients might benefit from the resulting change in their practice. I planned  
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18 to discuss this concept with second year (level five) students, acknowledging two  
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20 dynamics I have observed in the attitudes of these students in different cohorts over  
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22 the seven years I have been teaching Youth & Community Work. Firstly, they express  
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24 increasingly sympathetic interpretations of the causes of exclusion, and see the people  
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26 with whom they will work in future as deserving of their respect, understanding and  
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28 (maybe) even love, more than is usually the case in their first year. Furthermore,  
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30 students have usually developed a more sophisticated understanding of their own  
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32 practice by the second year, are open to challenge and exposure to different ways of  
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34 working with people, and seem capable of engaging in more challenging discussions  
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36 about the nature of their interventions in other people's lives.  
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41 Planning an experimental session in the taught curriculum dedicated solely to a  
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43 discussion about professionally loving practice, I sought to re-visit students'  
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45 motivations for securing professional status to practice as Youth & Community  
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47 Workers, focusing in particular on how their personal values reflect those of the  
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49 profession for which they are training (e.g. NYA, 2004; LLUK, 2009; IYW, 2013). I  
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51 saw an opportunity for the conversation to flow naturally from discussions on  
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3 translating values in practice to their perceptions of themselves as practitioners and  
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5 the importance of love as an integral element of their practice.  
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8 Hence, I aimed to devise a session in which I could demonstrate to students the power  
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10 of a transformative approach to teaching and learning, reflecting my perception of  
11  
12 them as change agents. Furthermore, I hoped to be able to demonstrate my  
13  
14 commitment to support their own transformation so that they could similarly support  
15  
16 change in others, using the educative process as a voyage of discovery for both the  
17  
18 educator and the student. The session sought to explore Freire's call to "humanise"  
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20 the educative process (1970), and how we might translate into practice his and Page's  
21  
22 (2011) notion of 'professional love'. As some of the techniques I used were new to  
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24 the students, I hoped they might also learn some new practical methods that they  
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26 could apply in their own practice.  
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### 30 **First Iteration**

#### 31 *Design & Implementation*

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34 The first iteration of the session was based around modeling with LEGO, starting with  
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36 a discussion around creativity in learning, and the use of metaphors as an aide to  
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38 communicating / understanding complex ideas. A diverse group of twenty students  
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40 attended the session (a third were under twenty years of age, the rest were aged up to  
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42 forty five; the cohort was ethnically diverse, and included students with different  
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44 sexual orientation; however, there were only three males<sup>2</sup>). Students were not  
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46 involved in the design of this first iteration, as I felt the subject matter might prove an  
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55 <sup>2</sup> This reflects trends in recruitment to YCW programmes, as the profession has become increasingly  
56 'feminised' over the past decade.  
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3 obstacle to discussions about the content. However, I involved them in evaluating the  
4 session, to help refine and improve its delivery in subsequent years.  
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8 Students were provided with a LEGO *Serious Play* kit (comprising 129 disparate  
9 pieces), and invited to engage in basic modeling (with some constraints) of a bridge  
10 (unlimited pieces / 7 minutes), and an animal (15 bricks / 7 minutes); which they were  
11 asked subsequently to modify, to represent an element of their personality. These  
12 activities were included to familiarize students with the modeling process, and to open  
13 up new ways of thinking. Subsequent tasks incorporated more complex concepts: the  
14 students were required to represent themselves / their professional philosophy [8  
15 minutes], and then ‘professional love’ in their practice (8 minutes). On completion of  
16 each challenge, I invited each student to explain their model to the group, and probed  
17 how it represented the concepts. In between the introductory and more advanced  
18 activities, I shared resources relating to the practice of informal education as an act of  
19 love (including images, music and printed sheets with quotes from the authors cited  
20 above), and led a discussion on these.  
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### 36 37 ***Stories & Metaphors*** 38

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40 The students told a host of stories when discussing their models, each one reflecting  
41 the personality and experiences of the individual. Tasks 1 and 2 were effective in  
42 engaging students in discussions about their models: they demonstrated enthusiasm, a  
43 breadth of imagination and humour in these discussions. They found the constraints  
44 both helpful and frustrating, with some students saying that limiting the number of  
45 bricks on the second task had made it more challenging, and therefore rewarding. It  
46 was the not knowing what the challenge was going to be that students seemed to find  
47 most frustrating: “I want to know what I have to do, so I can pick pieces to suit” being  
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3 one typical complaint. The animal exercise became particularly interesting when  
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5 students started to reveal elements of themselves in their models. For most students,  
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7 this activity focused on some physical attribute (e.g. being tall, “overweight”, wearing  
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9 black clothes), but some were able to extend the metaphor to use pieces as a prompt  
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11 for discussion about their personality.  
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14 When the constraint of number of pieces was removed, students’ ideas seemed to  
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16 flow more freely, and this is where the metaphors came to the fore. For example,  
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18 several students used a single piece (bag, case or box) to represent a “toolkit” of  
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20 activities that they could use to engage young people and members of the  
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22 communities in which they worked. Similarly, others constructed piles of pieces to  
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24 represent a range of different “tools”, and were able to discuss how each one could be  
25  
26 used in their work with young people and communities. A small proportion of the  
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28 students suspended the metaphor at this level: relating individual pieces to specific  
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30 artefacts they might use in their practice. However, several students incorporated a  
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32 more philosophical dimension to their discussions, using pieces to stimulate a  
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34 discussion of their approach to their work. For example, one student used pieces to  
35  
36 highlight the values underpinning his practice, specifically: a flag (“starting where  
37  
38 young people are at and cheering them on”); a few “royals” (“they’re the young  
39  
40 people, who demand my respect”); a big hand (“for lending to young people”); and a  
41  
42 small piece of fence (“managing my professional boundaries with young people ...  
43  
44 but I don’t want it too high, or we’ll never make connections”).  
45  
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50 Fencing featured in several models, representing “protection”, “safeguarding” and  
51  
52 “promoting young people’s wellbeing and safety”, rather than boundary management.  
53  
54 These themes recurred, using pieces including a bridge (“I want to help build a safe  
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3 way for young people's transition to adulthood") and a tree ("I can hold this over the  
4  
5 young person's head to protect them from whatever is falling down on them").  
6  
7

8 One student included keys in their model, suggesting they were "a kind of gatekeeper:  
9  
10 I don't have all the answers young people want, but I can open doors to help them  
11  
12 explore". Similar explanations were given for pieces used to represent a signpost and  
13  
14 a set of traffic lights. One student described his tableau as "a kind of boat, where  
15  
16 everybody on board (including me, the young person and other professionals) has a  
17  
18 role to play in steering this ship to harbour, whatever that means for each different  
19  
20 young person".  
21  
22

23  
24 I used prompts during the conversations with each student to explore the extent to  
25  
26 which 'transformation' featured in their perception of the YCW role. For many  
27  
28 students, this was implicit (e.g. the boat "journey" or the "bridge" crossing  
29  
30 representing some kind of practitioner-facilitated change). Only three students  
31  
32 highlighted transformation explicitly as part of their purpose as a practitioner. All  
33  
34 three had difficulty representing this in their model, but each one stressed the  
35  
36 importance of working with young people to raise their awareness of "how fucked up  
37  
38 the world is", and what they could do to "make things better for themselves and other  
39  
40 screwed people". Although not usually disposed to using profanities in class,  
41  
42 students' use of these in their discussions may have reflected two dynamics: the  
43  
44 passion they feel about the need for transformational change at a societal level; or/and  
45  
46 the 'changed' modes of thinking stimulated by the mechanical activity behind the  
47  
48 conversations.  
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52  
53 Discussing 'professional love' in metaphors proved challenging for the majority of  
54  
55 students. There was much discussion during this exercise, as students explored what  
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3 it might mean in practice, and searched out specific pieces to add to their models,  
4 several crafting hearts out of random pieces. It wasn't just the task of representing  
5 'love' in their models that proved challenging; students became less fluid in their  
6 discussion about this concept than previously. The key focus in these brief and  
7 stuttering discussions was on the challenge of bringing 'love' into professional  
8 relationships with young people, while managing appropriate boundaries between  
9 practitioners and young people.  
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18 Nevertheless, one student used two identical pink blocks, saying they didn't represent  
19 anything specific; what was more important to her was the fact that they were the  
20 same: "I wanted to show I could empathise with the young person, to show that I kind  
21 of know where they're coming from, and help them cope".  
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## 28 **Second Iteration**

### 29 *Design & Implementation*

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34 Scheduled exactly one year after the first session, and with the next year's cohort of  
35 YCW students, creativity remained central to the design of the second iteration of the  
36 session. This group was slightly smaller (seventeen participated), though its members  
37 exhibited a similarly diverse range of characteristics to the first cohort. As detailed  
38 below, the design incorporated changes to reflect the evaluation of the first session  
39 and to incorporate findings from my ongoing research into the concept of  
40 'professional love' in work with children and young people. A week before the  
41 session, students were provided with a copy of my forthcoming paper on the topic  
42 (Author, 2018), and were encouraged to read / critique the ideas it explored as part of  
43 their preparation for the session. The initial construction activities were less  
44 structured, allowing students to simply play with their stache of LEGO pieces to  
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3 allow each individual to develop a 'relationship' with their materials, and to free up  
4 their thought processes at their own speed. Other creative materials (including paper,  
5 felt pens, crayons, modelling clay, pipe cleaners, etc.) were made available to  
6 participants, to allow individuals who were uncomfortable using LEGO to access  
7 other media for the creative process.  
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13  
14 The rest of the session proceeded in much the same way as it had with the previous  
15 group, with students creating models and discussing with their peers the meanings  
16 they conveyed and the ideas they represented. My role was to facilitate dialogue, and  
17 to prompt / probe students when they struggled to articulate their ideas. I also  
18 captured images of their work and transcribed key elements of the dialogue. The  
19 discussion around the concept of 'professional love' was much more focused in the  
20 second iteration, as students had engaged in the reading and were able to reflect on  
21 how the ideas conveyed in the article related to their own practice. At the end of the  
22 second session, students were asked to complete a *pro forma*, containing a series of  
23 questions asking them to reflect more on what they thought about the concept and  
24 how it might be translated into practice in their work with children and young people.  
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### 39 ***Stories & Metaphors***

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42 As with the first session, the design and facilitation of this exploration of their views  
43 on themselves as individuals and practitioners was remarkably freeing for the  
44 students. As well as allowing space for all to contribute, the design of the session  
45 allowed students to 'be' and give of themselves to a much greater degree than I had  
46 witnessed in class over the preceding eighteen months during which I had facilitated  
47 and taught sessions with them.  
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3 Descriptions of their models of themselves were often self-declaratory: “There’s a  
4 flower on my head, coz I’m a bit of a plant pot”; “I’m reserved but a bit weird”; and  
5  
6  
7 “There’s a pineapple on my head coz I’m mad as a box of frogs” were typical of the  
8  
9 self-analysis on display during these discussions. Perhaps more significantly, another  
10  
11 student felt able to share something of herself that she had not previously shared with  
12  
13 her peers: “I’m a Princess *with Jesus on my shoulders*” (emphasis added). These  
14  
15 revelations opened up space for individuals to quiz one another on deeply rooted  
16  
17 convictions and aspirations, conversations these groups had not previously pursued,  
18  
19 and which helped strengthen bonds of mutual support and understanding.

20  
21 Specifically, it transpired that there are three members of the group for whom their  
22  
23 Christian faith is a primary motivation behind their decision to pursue a career in  
24  
25 supporting young people: they have subsequently organized regular get-togethers with  
26  
27 other similarly-motivated students from other years and courses.

28  
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30  
31 The use of modelling and application of metaphors allowed students to demonstrate  
32  
33 their profound awareness and understanding of the purpose of youth and community  
34  
35 work, in particular reflecting the interplay between their own personal values and  
36  
37 those of their chosen profession. One student’s words capture this particularly well:  
38  
39

40  
41 “Youth Work is about good strong foundations and values – your own and  
42  
43 those you help the young people to build to turn into “good young adults”  
44  
45 ... look at the contrast in the model: one has good foundations; one  
46  
47 doesn’t”  
48  
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50  
51 As the conversation progressed, and more voices and metaphors were heard, it  
52  
53 seemed that each new revelation opened up broader discussions about a host of  
54  
55 challenges and opportunities faced by all the students. It was evident, too, that  
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3 students were able to engage in greater depth in their discourse about their  
4  
5 professional practice. Ladders were again a repeating metaphor: “One step at a time  
6  
7 ... don’t rush them ... let them go at their own pace and a window of opportunity will  
8  
9 open up in the end”; “I’m at the bottom of the ladder, holding it up for the two young  
10  
11 people: encouraging and empowering them to reach their goals”; and “I don’t think I  
12  
13 have a clue: I take it a step at a time: sometimes you go up; sometimes you go back  
14  
15 down until you get to the top. Then you start again to try to inspire one more person”.  
16  
17 One student discussed an absent item to extend his boat metaphor: “Here it’s different  
18  
19 and safe ... though there is no lifejacket, meaning they can take risks”. Another  
20  
21 discussed two aspects of one piece of LEGO to emphasise different aspects of her  
22  
23 approach to working with young people: “My head’s in a bubble, coz you don’t  
24  
25 always understand young people’s troubles. It’s clear, to represent an open mind”.

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28  
29 The modelling and conversation around ‘professional love’ also reached greater  
30  
31 depth, as students (all of whom completed the session) seemed more comfortable than  
32  
33 their predecessors in tweaking their models to reflect the concept and in discussing it.  
34  
35 For example, one student explained her view that ‘love’ is an inevitable outcome of  
36  
37 the process of working with young people, asserting: “Once you’ve gone through  
38  
39 “this” with the young people there is some ‘professional love’ at the top of the stairs”.  
40  
41 Another argued that “Passing on your own building blocks to help young people build  
42  
43 their own foundations is itself an act of love”, clarifying further:  
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47  
48 “The light bulb represents all the ideas you need to share. The love heart  
49  
50 shows that love should be in your work always; and the person represents  
51  
52 a person-centred approach – you need to treat them as human. The light-  
53  
54 bulb, love heart and person all need to be linked”.

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3 During their discussion, two further students drew the following comments out of  
4 each other: “There’s always love there for everybody”; “Yeah ... love is the basis of  
5 everything”. Helping her to articulate the difficulty she had in locating ‘professional  
6 love’ in her model of her own practice, another student reflected what it transpired  
7 others were feeling: “Love made my ladder fall down”!  
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### 13 14 **Evaluation**

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17 This discussion draws from my observations made during the sessions, along with  
18 student feedback provided at the sessions’ end and in subsequent conversations. At  
19 the end of the first session, I used a simple evaluation sheet to elicit students’ views  
20 on: what learning they took for themselves; whether / how this approach enabled them  
21 to engage more easily in dialogue about challenging themes; and the extent to which  
22 they might use a similar approach in their own practice. The feedback sheet for the  
23 second session allowed for students to provide their views on two elements of the  
24 session: the potential value of LEGO as a transformational tool in their practice, based  
25 on their experience of using it in my session; and the impact of using LEGO to help in  
26 deepening their understanding of the application of ‘professional love’ in their  
27 practice.  
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42 Overall, the techniques appeared successful, particularly in helping students to  
43 articulate their thoughts about their practice in a more engaged manner than in  
44 traditional sessions. The majority of students engaged enthusiastically in the  
45 activities, and appeared to enjoy participating in the session. Having said this, of the  
46 twenty who started the first session, two left at the interval (one out of “boredom”, the  
47 other because of an “emergency”); three more found the process “uncomfortable”  
48 (more about this follows).  
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3 Students said they liked the fact the sessions were interactive, providing them with  
4 thinking time and covering a range of relevant topics. One student found their session  
5 “a little laborious at times, but well worth it”; another said their session was “fun and  
6 enjoyable, and was an awesome way of learning”; while yet another said the  
7 “different way of teaching got us to think about things more deeply”. This suggests  
8 using LEGO helped stimulate reflection; the following comments from different  
9 students suggest it was useful in facilitating students’ engagement in the dialogue:  
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18  
19 “I said things I probably would not of (sic) said if we were just sat in a  
20 circle”  
21  
22

23  
24 “The LEGO broke down some barriers in discussion and  
25 communication”  
26  
27

28  
29 “The process helped me to open up easily”  
30  
31

32  
33 “The session was intriguing ... it would be great for kinaesthetic  
34 learners”  
35  
36

37  
38 All students who enjoyed the sessions said they could see the potential for using  
39 LEGO in their own work with young people. For one, the session was “relevant to  
40 youth work” because it made them “think on your feet and go with the flow”; it  
41 enabled her to “make links without knowing”, and to “connect feelings”. Another  
42 thought it was helpful in challenging her to “think about why and how we work with  
43 young people”. Yet another thought this would be a “good tool to open up  
44 discussions”, as it was “young people friendly”.  
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54 Two students (both in the first session) struggled to complete the tasks. Having  
55 selected pieces, they were unable to connect them in the way they were asked, saying  
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3 they were unable to visualize fitting them together to make a representation of their  
4 thoughts. However, they both managed to engage in discussions about how they  
5 perceived themselves / their practice, and were able to use individual pieces to  
6 stimulate their input to these discussions.  
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11  
12 Another student in the first session was unable to complete any of the tasks, and could  
13 not to engage in discussions about how she perceived herself in her professional role.  
14 She broke down in tears afterwards when discussing her experience with me, saying:  
15 “I feel the session was great for others, but not for me. I don’t feel I am imaginative  
16 enough to work with LEGO ... I also found it difficult to discuss my practice and  
17 feelings through the LEGO as I struggled to use my imagination”. As we discussed  
18 her experience, it became apparent that this student had never played with any  
19 construction toys as a child, and found the whole process alien. I had not anticipated  
20 that anybody could find this form of playful activity stressful or alienating; in  
21 hindsight, I should have prepared other activities for students to complete in the event  
22 of their being uncomfortable with LEGO<sup>3</sup>.  
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37 As they concentrated on the exercises, some students revealed previously ‘hidden’  
38 and disturbing sides of their personality to their unsuspecting peers (particularly in  
39 session 2, which was a much more light-hearted affair); possibly reflecting claims  
40 about the opening up of new neural pathways. One usually mild-mannered student  
41 swore throughout the session: “the fucking legs keep breaking” was just one of many  
42 expletive-riddled outbursts she shared during the session. Claiming that she never  
43 normally swears, this student demonstrated how her self-awareness had grown during  
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54 <sup>3</sup> This was the reason I made more / different materials available for students participating in the  
55 second session. I wanted to be able to offer all students a creative means of engaging in the  
56 process, one that they could choose if LEGO didn’t work for them. It is possibly because of these  
57 changes that none of the second cohort of students left their session, or failed to engage.  
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3 the session, including “a potty for my bad language” in the model of herself as a  
4 practitioner. Her exclamation about the modelling collapsing generated the  
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6  
7 unsympathetic response: “I love it when people fail” from another student. Usually  
8  
9 the most caring member of the cohort, the other participants cheered her hubris soon  
10  
11 after, however, as her own model collapsed.  
12

### 13 14 **Conclusions & Recommendations**

15  
16  
17 In detailing and critiquing these sessions, I have demonstrated the potential  
18  
19 beneficial impact of using LEGO as a teaching tool, and in particular as an aid to  
20  
21 engendering transformational learning when addressing ‘wicked’ issues (such as  
22  
23 ‘professional love’) with *some* HE students. I have shown that by modelling and  
24  
25 discussing their creations and the ideas they encapsulate, these students are  
26  
27 empowered to articulate their ideas more effectively than with purely tutor-led  
28  
29 discursive approaches. Furthermore, as well as transforming students’ understanding  
30  
31 of the concept under consideration, this approach can also empower them to reflect  
32  
33 purposively on the extent to which their own practice facilitates transformation. Even  
34  
35 for students who may find LEGO alienating, the way in which sessions framed  
36  
37 around the modeling activity free up their peers’ discussion of the subject allows for  
38  
39 their views to emerge more fully-formed than might otherwise be the case.  
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43  
44 This work has shown that the discussions arising from creative modeling activities  
45  
46 can be more profound than those using traditional discursive pedagogy alone.

47  
48 Whether or not this is because of psychological effects (such as the opening up of  
49  
50 different neural pathways) is a matter for further scientific research; however, it is  
51  
52 clear – in some cases at least – that this approach can encourage radical changes in  
53  
54 students’ behaviour and language. If nothing else, students can appreciate that such  
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3 creative approaches to HE teaching transcend the limited transactional relationships  
4 characterizing the “banking” system of education, denounced as counter to the goal of  
5 transformation by Freire (1970).  
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10 The developmental work addressed in this paper has highlighted areas requiring  
11 further investigation. Of particular concern, having demonstrated that creativity is  
12 anathema to a minority of students, further work is required to identify ways to enable  
13 them to engage in whole-class discussions prompted by creative activities. Follow-up  
14 work is needed to explore the extent to which transformations elicited by these  
15 sessions are sustained in students’ practice on placement (something that can be  
16 investigated in their reflective recordings, for example). I also hope to develop  
17 further iterations of the teaching practice detailed here, to undertake further  
18 evaluations that will help me to refine my teaching practice, and to produce further  
19 findings and resources than might be beneficial to other community educators  
20 working in HE.  
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