



Using mindful play to unlock creativity: A creative companion

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Abstract

In this 'creative companion' (a guide to my creative practice with IKEA manual-inspired illustrations) I explain the concept of 'mindful play', a fusion of playful and mindful learning and teaching, and how I harnessed it to design four creative interventions for use in the higher education classroom..

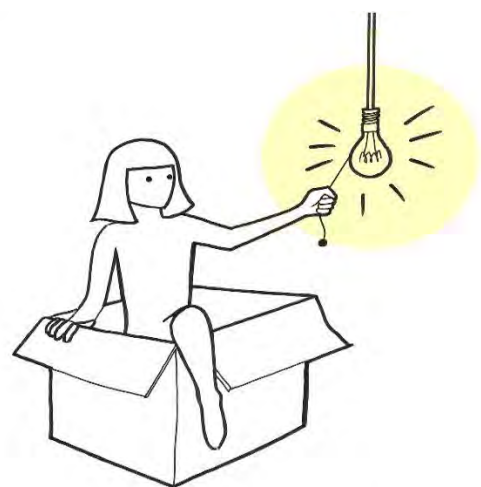
Keywords: Creativity; student-centred learning; creative teaching; mindfulness; playful learning

1. Introduction: A New Approach

Many lecturers appreciate that students' time at university will be less stressful and more productive if they can unlock, experience and develop their creativity. The pressure we all feel from quality assurance demands, managerialism and administration makes it particularly challenging to implement a creative approach to teaching and learning (Jackson, 2007) – and it may even dampen our creative selves. But the rewards for our students, and for us, as teachers, are too rich to ignore.

What started as a mission to help my journalism students develop employability skills, opened up my practice to the area of 'mindful play'. From this, I started to develop a creative, holistic and student-centred teaching and learning strategy, using simple, workable interventions to stimulate dialogic learning, strengthen trust, enhance creative confidence and transform the student experience on individual modules.

The subsequent interventions that I developed are adaptable and transferable, cost effective and designed to complement regular teaching practices, not to replace them. In this companion (intended to be creative in itself) I explain the theory behind my design, outline the activities and share the interventions, evaluations and outcomes of this creative practice.



① Teaching out of the box

2. Methodology: using action research in an autoethnographic study

Undertaking this work as a reflective practitioner, I wanted to boost my students' creative confidence in the classroom by bringing it into focus as a 'systematic enquiry' (Norton, 2009, p.4). I conducted action research in the form of designing, piloting and evaluating – through my own journal, questionnaires and guided conversations with students – which culminated to produce four 'mindful play' learning interventions.

The primary aim of this work was to help journalism students tap into their creative potential, using an autoethnographic approach as a 'qualitative, transformative research method' that embodied creativity and innovation (Custer, 2014, p1). My methodology was also informed by Whitehead and McNiff (2006), who position the 'integrated nature of living practice as a form of ongoing action-reflection' (p.155), and using a 'plan-act-observe-reflect' cycle to create 'practice-changing practice' (Kemmis, et al., 2014).

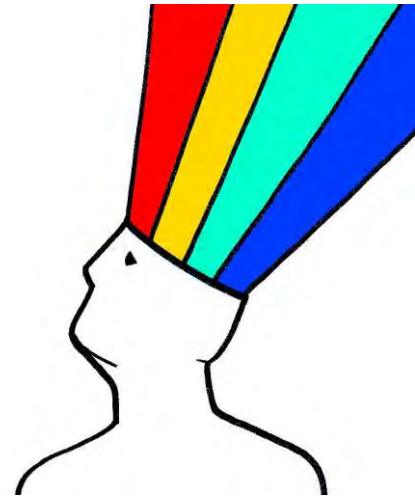
The qualitative nature of my research, particularly journaling my own experiences and engaging in guided conversations with a relatively small group of students, could be seen as 'storytelling', but Norton (2009) recognises that the aim of qualitative research is to acknowledge the 'subjective part played by the researcher', in collecting the data and its analysis and interpretation (p.116). My thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is based on my knowledge of the students' perspectives, our shared experiences in the classroom, and the discourse across the two modules I ran the interventions in.

Being involved in creative practice, and the promotion of creativity as a force for good within higher education and the journalism industry, I believe that keeping a reflexive account of my experience increased the rigour of my research process (Jootun, et al., 2009).

My biggest ethical concern was conducting action research with students whose work I was marking; it was made clear that the research was part of my own learning journey and that, whilst I hoped it would

enhance their learning, it was not directly connected to assessment.

I obtained informed written consent from every student involved in the project, and have the express permission of all participants to share the data I collected within this assessed project.



② Aiming to unlock creativity

3. Aims of the project

Encouraging students to explore, express and experiment with their creativity is undoubtedly a difficult outcome to measure, but the observations and anecdotal feedback shared within this companion hopefully makes a useful starting point, to generate further conversation and create the potential for wider developments around mindful play in higher education.

'Unlocking creativity' is an 'infinite' idea not only is it a challenging to measure, it is also problematic to pinpoint what 'creative confidence' might mean to and for students. Whilst designing the interventions (see below), I used literature, and my experience as a teacher and journalist, to identify five key objectives that might help to create the conditions for students to tap into their creative potential:

a. Fostering trust

Encourage students to trust me, and each other.



d. Increasing enjoyment

As active learning interventions, mindful play can make the lecture room more fun for students.



b. Empowering students

Encourage risk-taking through creative activity to help students grow in confidence.



e. Fostering trust

The mindful, playful spirit of the interventions affords students the chance to take a breath and feel less stressed.



c. Enhancing employability

Journalism students face an increasingly flexible, dynamic and innovative workplace - greater creative confidence can make them more employable.



4. Unlocking creativity: help your students find the key



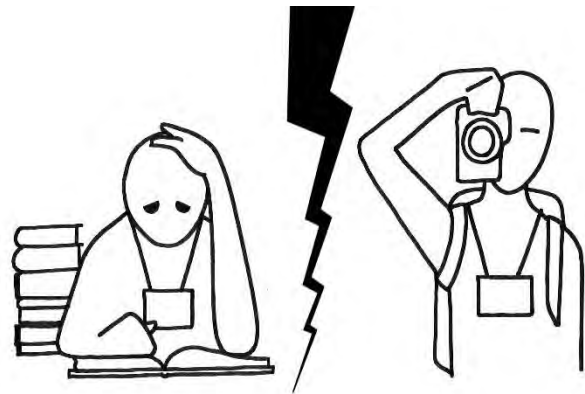
③ The path to locking creativity: childhood to university

Creativity has been the cornerstone of my working practice as a journalist and media professional. In the context of my work, I use Ken Robinson's (2017) definition: creativity is the process of 'applied imagination' to formulate original ideas with value. From working on the world's first biomedical website in 1996, to contributing to the UK's first blogging platform in 2003, I've been lucky enough to spend my working life immersed in innovative practice. In 2011, when I started lecturing in journalism, I instinctively brought creativity into the classroom – and was surprised to hear students say that my approach was 'refreshing'. Creativity, it seemed, was somewhat estranged from the higher education environment.

Employability was already a buzzword when I began teaching journalism, but there seemed to be fundamental discord in the way this was interpreted. The 'industry' that some university lecturers were preparing their undergraduates for, was on a downward trajectory. New literature started to appear that reflected the industry's increasing need for individuals with a command of their own creativity; an agile and flexible attitude, and a relentlessly entrepreneurial outlook (Breiner, 2018; Achtenhagen, 2017). However, this didn't seem to be being translated into the journalism classroom.

A deficit of creative ability (especially in journalism students arriving at university straight from secondary school) was clear to see. Knowing only how to navigate and pass the precise parameter of an exam, these young people had never really been encouraged to

release their creative potential. As such, they tend to be overwhelmed by the challenge of freethinking and creative practice. Although many live much of their lives in an evolving digital space, they don't appear to understand the concept of – or the creative thinking skills associated with – innovation. When presented with creative opportunities in the higher education context, the primary concern appears to be whether the task will help them to pass assessments.



④ Journalism education vs. journalism in action

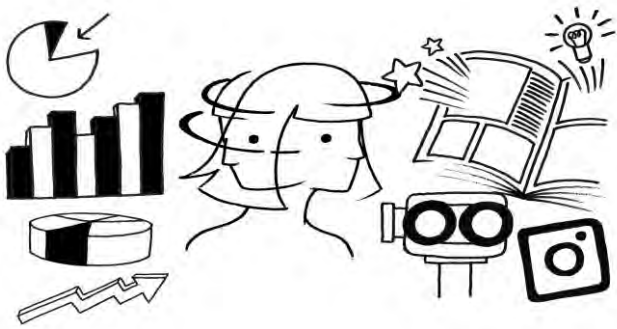
This presents a triple threat for a journalism lecturer: the journalism degree doesn't tend to facilitate or promote creativity, and the students on it don't identify as creative people; however, the industry that we are tasked with preparing them for becomes ever less industrialised, along with an increasing demand for creative agility. This does not seem to be unique to journalism. All disciplines, including STEM, the working world – and society – demands a workforce of 'makers, hackers and creative thinkers' to meet the business, technological and environmental challenges of the 21st century (Borghero, 2017).

Obstacles to creativity within higher education strengthen the argument for a new approach. Sophie Arndt (2013) says the 'creative space of tertiary teaching struggles with conflicting ideals', particularly the neoliberal social and political context. As market-driven machines, universities have so much focus on quality assurance (Gibbs, 2001), that creative expression is often suppressed. Referring to universities as 'memory institutions', Twidale and Nichols (2013) discuss 'inertial dampeners of innovation' including tradition, the size and

age of institutions and, most pertinently in terms of creative practice, issues around risk aversion (p. 41).

5. Out of the frying pan ...

In the past five years, my students have arrived with increasingly disparate experiences and academic abilities. While a diverse cohort of students could be a hugely positive asset, the inflexibility of the curriculum, established by power dynamics and fixed views of assessment leads to disillusionment, disappointment and – ultimately – low retention. I have seen students start journalism courses without any understanding of what the programme entails (no, they didn't read the course handbook and we should never assume that they do), or what will be expected of them. The tension this creates is palpable.



⑤ Teachers are caught between institutional metrics and the requirements of creative industries

Instead of redesigning curricula to suit the non-traditional, time-poor students we now recruit (Munro, 2011; Meuleman, et al., 2014; Wong and Chiu, 2019), participants are expected to 'catch-up' or develop fundamental skills (essay writing, for example) in their own time. Diane Reay (2001) wrote that 'emotionally charged' working class relationships with higher education were designed to 'serve middle-class interests', encouraging social mobility and disregarding the authenticity and validity of the working-class experience. Today, it can be distressing as an educator to see students, often recruited as part of widening participation initiatives, struggling with the meaning of university – and the very concept of learning – while tutors assume that they should have "known what they were letting themselves in for". This situation – described by Richard Hall (2019) as 'an anti-human

project devoid of hope' – creates an immediate strain between lecturer and student, anxiety and frustration within the student cohort, and barriers to a creative approach that, first and foremost, requires trust, but is inhibited when students are stressed-out by their circumstances.

And in this environment, with so many students from either a school system of rote learning, or non-traditional academic backgrounds, creativity is not only helpful ... it is essential.



⑥ The price of an 'anti human' project?

6. Going with the flow: the power of creativity

Before I attempted to 'unlock' creativity in my students, I felt it was crucial to understand exactly what I was trying to release – and why.



⑦ Creativity can lead to growth and transformation

Ken Robinson's (2011) belief that creativity is a practical process was the starting point for my concept map (see figure 1a below), which attempts to illustrate creativity in action. Robinson separates general (or global) creativity, which is the act of original thinking in any discipline, from personal (or individual) creativity, which he defines as a passion and / or talent for a particular material or medium, such as art, music or maths. Brandt & Eagleman (2017) and Gauntlett (2011) position creativity as an inherently social act, looking at it as connection and discussing the social capital of 'making and doing'.

Anna Craft's (1997) description of 'possibility thinking' as the basis of creativity, and Zohar and Marshall's (2001) definitions of creativity as human expression and the process of unitive thinking – an associative neural process that unifies the 'spiritual level of existence' (p. 24) – feeds into the authors' concept of 'spiritual intelligence' and shows the power of creativity on a global scale. On a personal level, our talents, interests, individual thoughts and actions may be enhanced by 'intuition' – or creativity on an unconscious level.

When creativity is in action, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes the process as 'flow'; consciousness does not distract and self-consciousness disappears. As shown on the map, and in line with Csikszentmihalyi's theory, 'flow' is an interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context. Although the creation of novel ideas happens within the process of flow, on the map (see figure 1a below) I have shown the 'results' of the creative process in much wider-ranging terms. As I have found in my research, supported by the literature, creativity leads to resilience, joy, self-efficacy and confidence: the outcome of this powerful, meaningful and multifaceted process is transformational, on an individual, collective - even planetary - level.

In the context of higher education, facilitating the process of creativity has profound implications. Helping students to get back in touch with their creative powers will certainly enhance their employability in the contemporary workplace, but it will also transform them as people, stimulating change - 'becoming' rather than just 'knowing' (Barnett, 2009) - and reinforcing the

sense that they have been 'inspired' during their time at university.

So, how do we approach the unlocking of this powerful creative process? With reference to the literature cited above, I identified four 'pillars' to launch creative thinking and doing in a learning context: play, trust, risk-taking and mindfulness. In the context of learning and teaching, all four take place in the social spaces and interactions shown on the map (see figures 1(a) and 1(b) below).

a. The Four Pillars: Trust

Taking inspiration from Curzon-Hobson's (2002) paper on a 'pedagogy of trust', I work with students from the initial session to (re)build the trust that has been disrupted by prior learning experiences, consciously breaking down traditional teacher-student power dynamics.

In this context, my definition of trust aligns with Curzon-Hobson's, in that trust should facilitate care, community, mutual respect and challenge. To action this trust requires honesty, transparency and authenticity. Adopting a 'student-centred' learning and teaching strategy can be hugely helpful at this stage. My own conceptual understanding of this process is not about letting a student cohort drive the curriculum – or even the biological presence of a student: my own student-centred teaching, derived from theoretical perspectives on unlocking creativity, is to direct my teaching, and my relationship with the students, towards the 'centre of the student, or centre of the self' (Payton, 2019). If you care for, respect and communicate with each student as a whole person, trust is established quickly, naturally and authentically.



⑧ A vision of student-centred learning & teaching

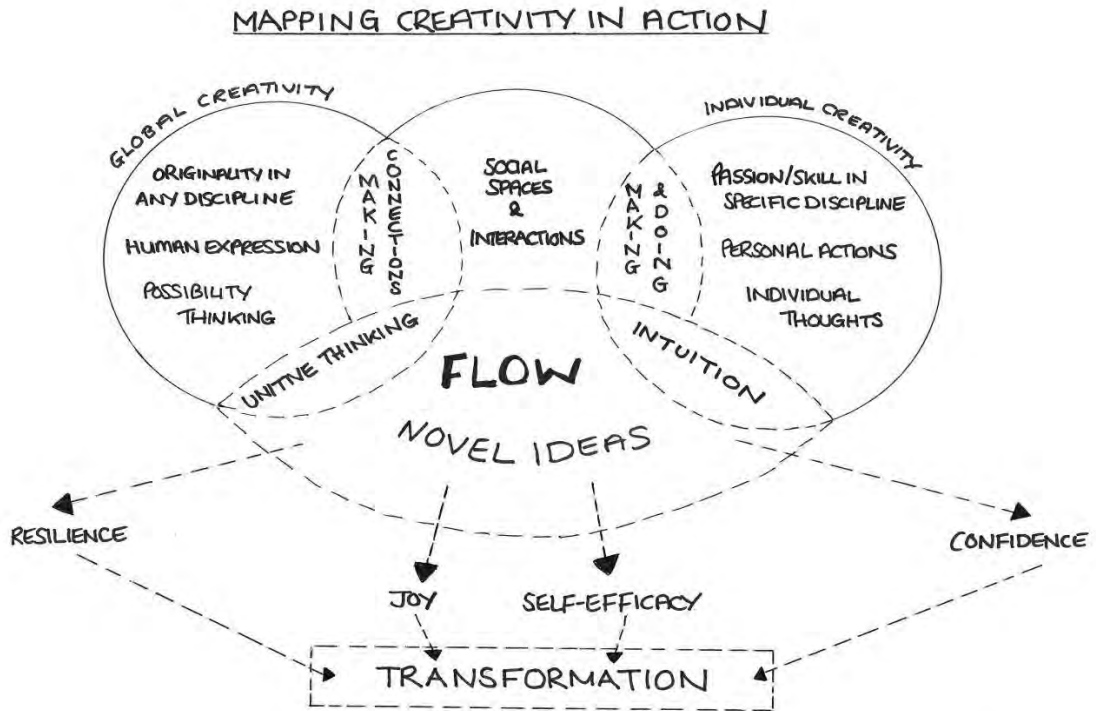


FIGURE 1 (a): Mapping creativity in action

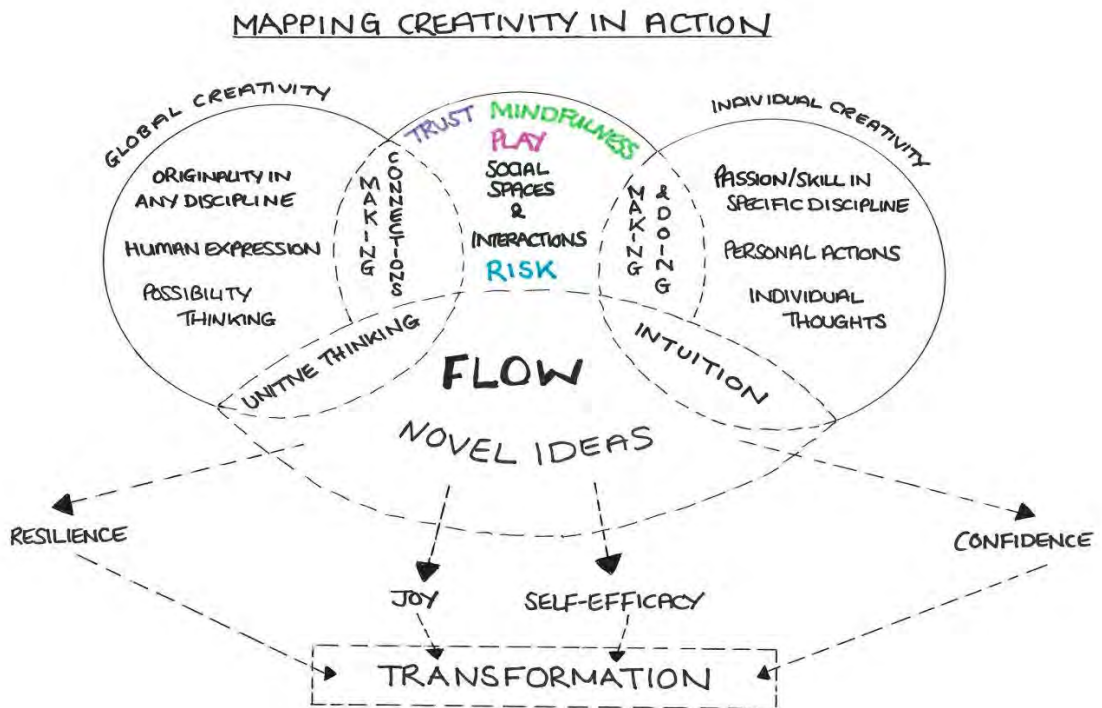


FIGURE 1 (b): Mapping creativity in action: four pillars to launch creative thinking & doing

Trust can therefore be harnessed to afford students a sense of freedom in which they can play and be present in the moment, mindful of their thoughts, actions, ideas and individual potential. Once levels of trust increase, play and mindfulness can be used as tools to encourage and facilitate risk, and launch the creative process. Experiences of play and mindfulness also help students build trust between each other, as well as trusting in themselves, and their own ideas.

b. The Four Pillars: Play

Using play in the higher education classroom can be a challenge; to completely adopt Stuart Brown's (2010) definition of a 'primal activity', or to embrace play without an intellectual framework can be met with resistance. Within institutions, students, colleagues and management may get nervous if play is initiated "for play's sake", without structure or purpose. (It is worth pointing out, though, that Alison James (2019) believes 'the tide is turning' (p.3) with regard to play in higher education.)

Brown stresses that play is fun, exciting, and a cure for boredom. It can prevent us from dwelling on worries or problems; it can also stop us 'thinking about the fact that we are thinking' (p.17). James suggests that 'experiences of playful activity are personal and subjective' (p. 4), and that any definition of play is 'wide open' to interpretation; this also means that it exposes us to new possibility or chance, and introduces new ways of doing things. To really feel playful, any activity should have an element of surprise, pleasure and curiosity.

In the design of the interventions, I consider play in three broad categories: object-based play, game-based play and imaginative play; however, these categories tend to be fluid and often overlap. Similarly, play can be defined as a social or solo activity, but can be both, simultaneously. For example, role-play can be a social and dialogic way of practicing a skill or task, but the ideas it conjures in the imagination can be stimulating or inspirational on a personal and internal level.

c. The Four Pillars: Mindfulness

In the context of unlocking creativity in higher education, Ellen Langer (2014) and Daniel J. Siegel's

(2007) mindfulness definitions are most relevant. In conversation with Krista Tippett, Langer defines mindfulness as 'the very simple process of actively noticing new things'. Siegel describes mindfulness as 'attending to the richness of our here and now experiences' (p. xiii).

Siegel acknowledges that mindfulness has many meanings across regions and cultures, but that they all tend to share the goal of helping people to appreciate – and develop their awareness of – the present moment. Siegel's general definition of mindfulness as 'waking up from a life on automatic and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences' (p. 5) chimes with Langer's idea that actively noticing new things and ideas 'puts you in the present [and] makes you sensitive to context'. Being more aware of our surroundings and experiences makes us 'mindfully aware'; also, when we reflect on the way that our mind is working, the possibility of change is enhanced.

Siegel's interpretation of 'mindful awareness' focuses on a healthy relationship between the individual and 'the self'; in the context of my work, I am also using mindfulness as a tool to encourage a healthy relationship between student and teacher, student and peers, and student and course content. By being fully aware of their experience in the classroom, without distraction (particularly from mobile phones), our students can tune in to their inner dialogue, as well as the possibilities of the imagination.

d. The Four Pillars: Risk

By having fun, feeling free, playing with ideas and being mindfully aware of their potential, students are much more likely to take the next step on the creative journey: risk.

Committing to play and mindful awareness is (in itself), a risk for many students. For some, letting go, losing their inhibitions and tuning in to the moment without distraction will require a leap of faith: but if you've established trust, even the more reserved students will *come along for the ride*. As they play, and feel their way through the moment, their ability and willingness to be bold, brave and risky will flourish.

In the context of unlocking creativity, risk is about sharing ideas; it is developing the ability to explore innovation without self-consciousness; it is being brave enough to propose something completely unique – even if one might be laughed at; it is about understanding that, without taking a risk, there is no creative reward.

7. Turn on, tune in: introducing ‘mindful play’

Inspired by Mirabai Bush’s writing on Mindfulness in Higher Education (2011), I contend that I haven’t developed playful and mindfulness activities; rather, I have designed interventions that harness play with a contemplative component. In other words, mindful play.

As I read Bush’s discussion of ‘first person’ approaches, with students engaging in contemplative practice as a complement to their regular course programmes, the benefits struck me as the same as the outcomes when using play. Within higher education, Bush talks about mindfulness having a calming and focusing effect, reducing stress and enhancing patience; it can improve attention and working memory, deepening understanding, cooperation and insight, and facilitate conceptual flexibility. Mindfulness has the potential to help students become ‘free’, become aware of different perspectives and to tune into the intuitive functions of the brain. Ultimately, mindfulness has the potential for ‘cognitive transformation’.

The benefits of play have striking similarities. Stuart Brown (2010) describes play activity as ‘helping to sculpt the brain’ (p.34), safely facilitating experimentation and imagining situations we have not yet encountered. New perspectives, and ‘cognitive connections’, are forged. Brown claims that adult streams of consciousness are enriched by imaginative play, just as they are by mindful awareness: Brown also draws parallels between REM sleep and play, considering them as ‘essential long-term organisers of brain development and adaptability’ (p. 42). Zohar and Marshall (2000) look in detail at brain function during REM sleep and how the brain is ‘attending to its own interior processes rather than to the outside world’ (p. 75). This is perhaps the most striking similarity between

the benefits of play and mindfulness: both activities may stimulate a similar neural process to dreaming sleep, where our brains have time and space to place our lives and actions in a context with meaning; to problem-solve the problems worth solving; to experience optimism, happiness and creativity.

And in terms of unitive thinking, the biological importance of play, and the traditions of playful activity passed down over centuries, echo the ancient history of mindful awareness, described by Daniel Siegel (2007) as ‘a universal goal across human cultures’ (p. xiii). Perhaps the natural ‘fit’ of these two fundamental human activities lies in their primordially, the familiar and timeless patterns of thinking they encourage and their dramatically positive effect on human creativity.

Playful activities with a mindful component can help students get the biggest benefits; they can be fully present when playing, wide open to the infinite possibilities that the playful activities present. They can be ‘chilled’ and more relaxed, more mindfully aware of what they are doing without the need for a tutor to be prescriptive, or to guide the play itself. They can be in a state of mind that is more amenable to the letting go of inhibitions. The mindful element of the activity is also an effective way of fusing a tangible sense of learning into the fun. Mindful play feels considered, calm and grown-up; it is also well suited to the higher education classroom.

8. Facing the fear: navigating controversy

In *The Power of Play in Higher Education*, Alison James (2019) discusses the tendency of academics to reject play unless it has a specific outcome. Colleagues or managers may fear ‘free play’, with its limitless outcomes and possibilities: this feeds into the neoliberal ethos that metrics, assessment and educational content must link directly to commerce. James pegs the tension perfectly as ‘purpose versus freedom’ (p. 11).

Mindfulness gets a similarly raw deal. Professors who ‘succumb to a pride of expertise’ and an ‘analytical habit of mind’ (Brendel & Cornett-Murtada, 2019, p.5) can struggle with a concept as abstract as mindfulness, where students benefit from a mindful awareness of

their own learning, experiences and potential, and not only the knowledge and experience of the teacher.



⑨ Taking the plunge: creative teaching & learning requires a leap of faith

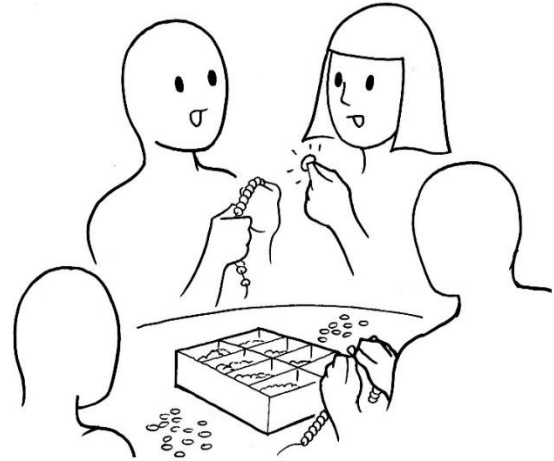
The mindful play interventions (set out below) navigate controversial waters. In fusing play and mindfulness, students are presented with an obvious context for mindful practice: a contemplative stage of ‘the game’ or activity, in which they come into the moment and approach the play with a calm, considered and open spirit.

In my own professional context, journalists have a tendency to jump straight from initial idea to execution - a habit that stems from fast-paced news environments, but can also lead to missing the bigger picture, or neglecting alternative story angles. Mindful play is a fantastic tool for encouraging journalists to slow down, to really explore an idea and its possibilities before taking action.

Although the outcomes of mindful play are never set or stringent, they are designed within the context of module content: they should spark dialogic learning around the subject matter; however, students have the freedom to take the play in any direction.

To really get the best out of these interventions, the practitioner must be prepared to *go along for the ride*. And with a little energy and enthusiasm, join in the fun of the learning journey with the students, playing alongside them and investing in the discussion. An effective mindful play practitioner can guide the students without compromising the principle of free play, and can (and should adapt) any course content

that has been planned and delivered in the same way over many academic cycles. The interventions (below) are designed to be flexible, adaptable and practical in terms of delivery. They can be easily linked to course content, which again can help students personally engage – and in the process, win over more sceptical colleagues, too.



⑩ Creating, learning, changing together

9. A short note on context

I trialed the intervention activities with two groups of students at two London universities between January and April 2019.

The first was a group of 18 third year students on a Fashion Journalism module. The majority were in their early-20s, with no mature students in the cohort and registered on the main Journalism programme. Many had been educated at private schools and started university at the age of 18. They were used to common academic practices, such as essay writing and reading academic texts, and included a mix of UK and overseas students.

The second was a group of first year students on a Fashion History module. 17 students were on the register and the group included Marketing & Journalism students from the UK and overseas. This group was diverse in terms of age, background and academic experience, including students who had been out of full time education for extended periods, along with students with young families.

10. Time to act: design & execution

For any readers interested in trying out the mindful play interventions, there are illustrated, step-by-step instructions (below) to provide a snapshot of how to approach this.

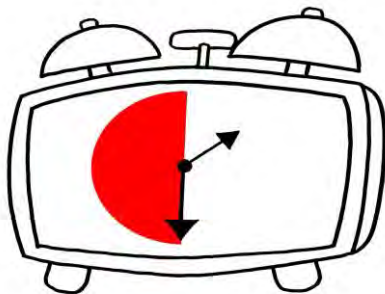
The four intervention activities are flexible; I applied them in slightly different ways to the two groups of students. For example, the first task, “colouring in”, was a 60s fashion-themed task for students on the Fashion History course; this was adapted to a food and travel theme for the Fashion Journalism students. Both variations corresponded with module topics. The shape and structure of the two activities were the same, however, the detail was/is customisable.



11. Mould and shape activities to suit your students

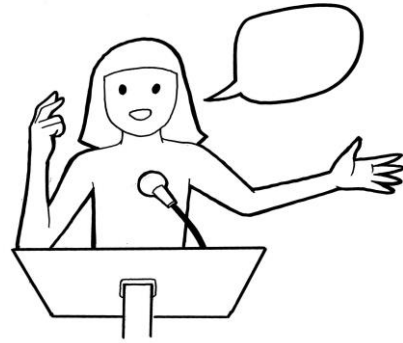
11. The interventions: structure & timing

The interventions with the two groups generally took place towards the end of each session, and about 30 minutes was allocated for the mindful play to take place.



12. Allow at least 30 minutes to explore and enjoy the activities

The structure of each session started with a ‘traditional’ lecture, or watching a relevant film / documentary on a current topic; this was followed by a class discussion. After a short break, we began the intervention.



13. There is still a role for the traditional lecture

I chose this type of delivery model so that the mindful play could operate in conjunction (and be embedded) with established learning materials, and to also stimulate dialogic learning after the delivery of the core module information. The model also afforded students time at the end of the class to wind down, and process what they had learned.



14. Dialogic learning is key

During each intervention, I would *work the room*, chat to students and answer any emerging questions. I was always careful not to ‘lead’ or control the mindful play: as this was their time and their creativity.

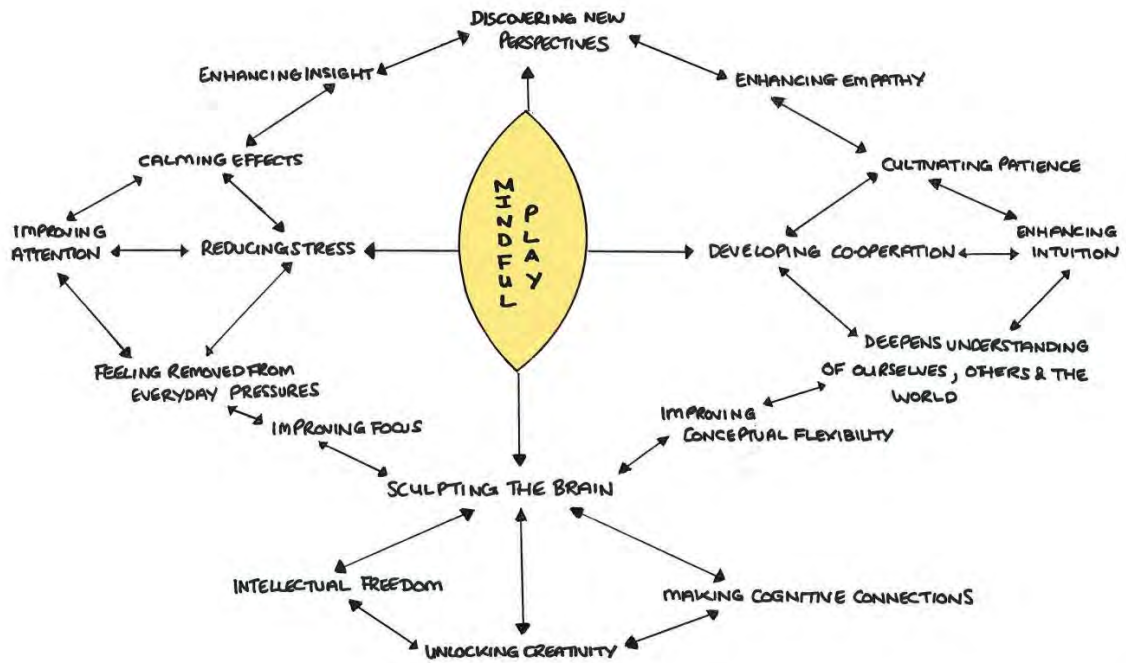



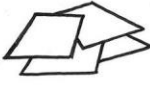
Figure 2: The benefits of mindful play

12. Intervention No.1


COLOURING IN




20x COLOURING SHEETS




50x PENS AND PENCILS




1x CLASSROOM WITH SOCIAL SPACES




1. DELIVER LECTURE



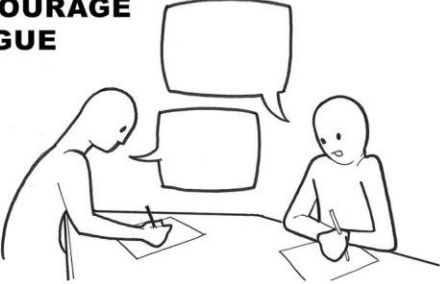
2. 3 MINS GUIDED MINDFULNESS



3. ALLOW STUDENTS TO CHOOSE SHEETS



4. ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE



HAPPY, PEACEFUL, CONSTRUCTIVE



a. Inspiration (intervention No.1)

Adult colouring-in is a popular pastime, there is evidence that it reduces depressive symptoms and anxiety (Flett et al., 2017), and increases the capacity for concentration and awareness (Dresler & Perera, 2019). A study assessing colouring-in events in a university library reports that students left the sessions 'a little bit happier' (Blackburn & Chamley, 2016).

b. Personalisation

The Fashion Journalism workshop was on fashion, food and travel, so the colouring pages reflected this. The week's topic for the Fashion History students was 1960s fashion, so I sourced colouring pages with 60s-style dresses and outfits.

c. Instructions

Students were instructed to put phones and other electronic devices away.

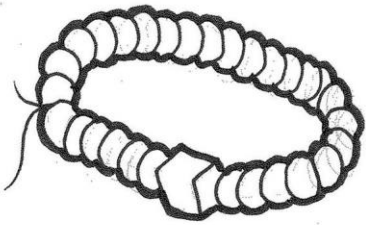
d. Observations

Anyone can colour. Students of any ability – and any level of creative confidence – can join in. The most creatively confident students can approach the task in innovative ways: some students created tattoo designs on the arms of the 60s characters. At the end of the task, the students are left with an original design. They see how different their page is to their peers, helping them to recognise that they have creative skills, even if they don't see themselves as creative. At the end of the task, students are invited to keep their colouring-in examples, and to take spare sheets away to colour-in at home.


Some students may struggle at first with the guided mindfulness – in the sessions that I delivered I could sense the discomfort of some, with one student refusing to close her eyes. In the next three interventions, I ensured that the mindfulness element was an intrinsic part of the activity.

13. Intervention No.2

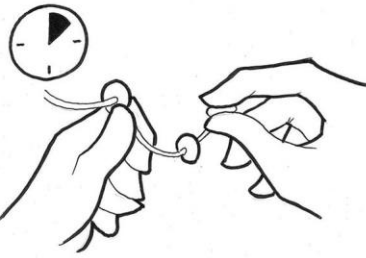
CREATING CONTENT



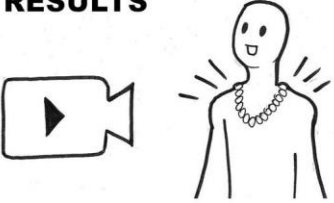
1. DELIVER LECTURE



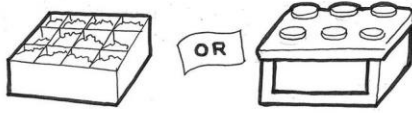
3. 5 MINS EXPLORING MATERIALS



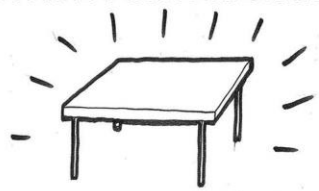
5. FILM/PHOTOGRAPH RESULTS



1x JEWELLERY MAKING KIT or BUILDING BLOCKS



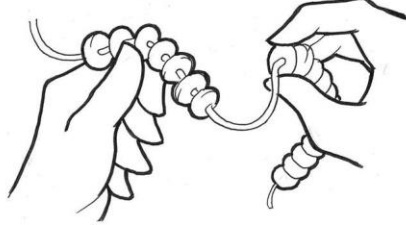
SPACE FOR BUILDING



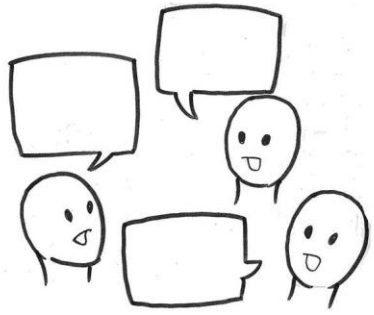
2. DISTRIBUTE BLOCKS/BEADS



4. BUILDING/MAKING RELATED TO LESSON CONTENT



6. DISCUSS CONTENT CREATED



a. Inspiration (intervention No.2)

This task was largely inspired by studies on Lego as a learning tool. Research has shown that Lego is a powerful tool for ideas and concept development, developing creativity and imagination and team building (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019; Havergal, 2015). I brought in children's jewellery making sets to the class as this provides a similarly informal 'building' experience to Lego; I felt that the alternative materials would be more relevant to fashion journalism modules.

b. Personalisation

The Fashion Journalism session was on blogging and social media influencers, so students used the jewellery-making task to create content for an Instagram post. The Fashion History topic was 1970s fashion, so they created jewellery inspired by that decade.

c. Instructions

Before playing, students were asked to study the beads on the table, feeling them between their fingers and closing their eyes so they could appreciate the curves, facets and shapes. They were invited to create jewellery inspired by the session theme. The students made rings, bracelets, necklaces, headbands and some used the beads in their hair.


d. Observations

This activity encouraged teamwork and stimulated dialogic learning. The students were completely immersed in the task and conversation. The task brought the module content to life in an immediate and tangible way and students also had a keepsake to take away after the class (this may not be possible if you use Lego, but you could encourage students to photograph or sketch their creations). Again, making something from nothing reinforces the point that all students possess creative skills and potential. Some students found the bead size 'fiddly', but enjoyed the results of the task. They shared photos and video footage of their creations on social media and took jewellery away for themselves, or as gifts for others.

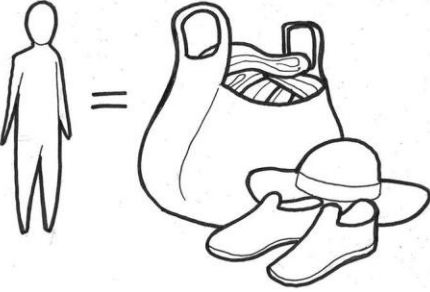
14. Intervention No.3

STYLE ON A DIME


OLD CLOTHES, SHOES AND ACCESSORIES




STUDENTS BRING IN ONE BAG EACH



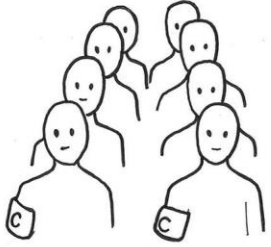
1. QUIZ ON LESSON CONTENT



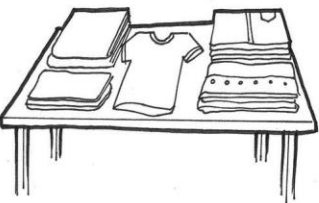
2. QUIZ WINNERS = TEAM CAPTAINS



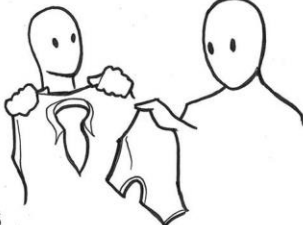
3. PICK TEAMS




4. SPREAD CLOTHES ON TABLE




5. TEAMS SPEND 5 MINS EXPLORING CLOTHES




6. TEAMS TAKE TURNS, CHOOSING ITEMS



7. TEAMS BUILD OUTFITS



8. PRESENT OUTFITS



a. Inspiration (intervention No.3)

This task was directly inspired by the popular reality TV show, RuPaul's Drag Race (Netflix, 2019). Each year, the first show of the season includes a styling challenge, *Drag on a Dime*, where contestants make outfits using trash, household objects or thrift store finds. Most of my students are familiar with Drag Race, so they love this task (and I can never resist using references that remind students we have shared cultural touch-points). This intervention also reinforces the idea of fashion as communication (Barnard, 2002).

b. Personalisation

It was 90s week for the Fashion History students, and they created 90s-inspired outfits with the clothes available. The Fashion Journalism group was asked to imagine a character that would wear the outfits they created and to tell us their story.

c. Instructions

As this was a team task, the students first took part in a Kahoot quiz (based on module content so far) to determine team captains. Before clothes were chosen, students quietly examined them, feeling the fabrics, and quietly discussing with teammates which items they'd like to use. Team captains then approached the desk, one at a time (winning team first), taking one item of clothing on each table visit, until all the clothes and accessories were gone. The students worked in separate spaces in the room to build their outfits (the students chose to construct the outfits on the floor or tables).

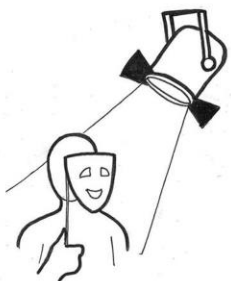
d. Observations

Dressing-up fits into the realm of imaginative play, and this activity has real-world resonance for fashion journalists, who may be styling magazine fashion shoots: it reminds students that 'work' can also be 'play'. We *all* wear clothes, and a task like this brings sustainability and recycling to life. It's also an excellent storytelling vehicle; just like Lego, clothes can be used to build ideas and communicate concepts. The Fashion History students took photos of their outfits and the task sparked a debate about recycling trends and sustainability. We had a guest speaker attending the Fashion Journalism class, to talk about vegan fashion


and sustainability, so the students presented their outfits when she arrived. This was a lovely segue into her presentation and reinforced the idea of recycling or reusing clothes as an act of sustainable living.

15. Intervention No.4

PLAYING YOUR PART

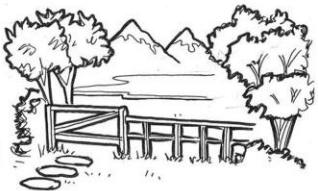


STUDENTS WRITE PRESS RELEASE FOR CHARACTER




CHOOSE DRAMA WARM UP GAMES

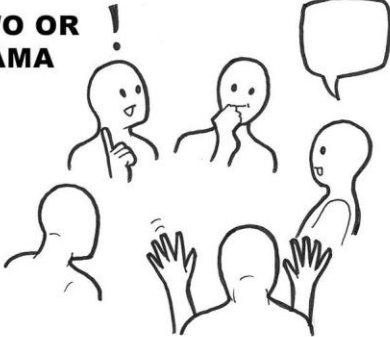
RELOCATE CLASS TO INSPIRING PLACE




1. TIME IN SPACE TO ADJUST TO SURROUNDINGS



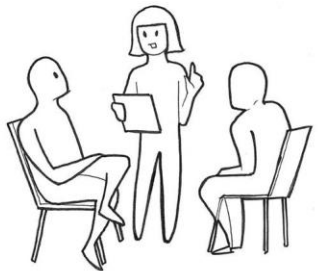
2. PLAY TWO OR THREE DRAMA GAMES TO WARM UP STUDENTS




3. STUDENTS ADOPT THE CHARACTER THEY CREATED AND INTERVIEW EACH OTHER



4. TUTOR PLAYS A PART



5. FINISH SESSION WITH IDEA GENERATION EXERCISE



a. Inspiration (intervention No.4)

Role-play can be used across disciplines, from therapy (Broggi, et al., 2016) to computing (Rao & Stupans, 2012); it can challenge existing views and help students to identify new perspectives and its use is increasing in the context of higher education. Using Rao and Stupans' (2012) proposed role-play typology, the intervention I designed fits with the 'acting' category as the students were practising their skills as interviewers, as well as letting their creativity flow when they were in the role of celebrity, rather than journalist.

b. Personalisation

For this final intervention, I took the students out of the classroom. My Fashion Journalism students travelled to a studio overlooking Tooting Bec Lido in south London for their workshop; my Fashion History students attended the V&A museum in Kensington. Before the activity, we played two classic drama games – acting out adverbs and 'there's only one liar'. This relaxed everybody, and added some mindfulness to the session, particularly as the second game takes place in silence. Then the students took it in turns playing the part of a journalist and a fashion-related fictional celebrity.

c. Instructions

A week before the role-play exercise, students were asked to prepare a 200-word biography of a fictional fashion personality (designers, bloggers, stylists or models). They knew they would be playing this person during the exercise, so they could prepare creatively, and 'get into character'. I led the drama games at the start of the session and then gave the students tasks to fulfil during the interviews (for example, to find out if rumours about the celebrities love lives were true). I then played the role of a PR, listening in to the interviews and trying to feed my 'clients' information, or to steer the conversation (this can happen to journalists in practice).

d. Observations

By role-playing alongside the students, I was able to learn and have fun alongside them. At the end of the session, the students sat quietly and brainstormed feature ideas inspired by the location. They shared

these ideas openly, happily and collaboratively; they appeared to have reached a new level of trust and teamwork, as well as coming up with original and compelling feature ideas that were exercising their creative muscle.

16. Impact on student learning: sharing evaluations

In order to evaluate the interventions I used anonymous questionnaires and feedback sheets; interviews; reflective journals (my own and student journals); observations and ongoing dialogue with students; and anonymous module evaluations.



⑮ A range of qualitative evaluation methodologies can be used for these interventions

The feedback was strikingly similar for the two student groups with the same themes and patterns emerging.

Most students felt curious, intrigued and eager to learn before interventions, but some shared feelings of stress, worry and anxiety; these students said they felt less able to take risks or be creative when they arrived in workshops. After the interventions had taken place, all the students reported feeling more relaxed, positive and creative, and this trend continued across all sessions.

In fact, the greatest impact seemed to be on students who were feeling stressed and anxious when they arrived for the classes. These students recorded the most dramatic results in terms of feeling more relaxed, happy and confident after participating in interventions. Energy levels also increased at the end of sessions, particularly for students who were feeling tired, low or stressed at the start. As well as talking

about feeling relaxed and more confident, students said the interventions 'took them back to their childhood' and helped them remember neglected skills, or activities they once enjoyed.

Feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. Many admitted they'd had doubts at first but that the interventions had encouraged 'collaborative teamwork'. One student reported that: 'It was a really cool way to work as a team, working towards a fun, common goal that isn't a competition'.

They spoke about the sense of freedom that they felt in the classes, by being allowed to do things their own way, without judgment. Another student reflected: 'You're immediately more confident around everyone else and you can relax'. Much of the student positivity, when reflecting on the interventions, focused on the fact that they could feel 'detached from everything else going on at that time'; 'I love having time to think and breathe'. One student said: 'It made me feel connected to the work we were doing, rather than just doing it with half a head.' Another said: 'It was nice to have time for conversation and distance yourself from the outside world'.

Describing the interventions as 'a new way of learning', the students at both universities agreed they would have liked to participate in creative activities from the beginning of their degree programmes. They expressed an interest in having more mindful play around the time of exams and assessment to help them cope.

The students recognised some of the stereotypes and stigma associated with mindfulness, one said she would have 'rolled her eyes' if I'd actually suggested we practice mindfulness in the classroom; another admitted that the guided mindfulness before the colouring-in session was 'too much' for her, and that she felt much more comfortable in the later sessions; (this was after I had integrated the mindfulness activities as part of the interventions).

In terms of trust and risk-taking, the students said that by the final intervention they felt much more comfortable around each other and could 'just trust each other more'. This developing sense of trust also helped them see new perspectives as they shared their ideas. Crucially, it gave them the confidence to take risks in their assessed presentations.

When speaking about assessed presentations, which took place during the period in which I was running the interventions, students said: 'It didn't feel daunting, where every other presentation I've been in did'; 'We felt like we were giving a presentation to a group of friends that are all in the same boat'; 'There had been such a drive for creativity, there was no embarrassment about being creative'; 'If I get in the real world now and need a presentation [I know how I] could make that more engaging with ways I'd never thought of before'; 'Everyone was just creative in their own way and we felt comfortable enough around each other to do something different, something a bit out of the ordinary'.

In terms of their constructive feedback, the students suggested that role-play sessions could take place earlier in a module ('at the beginning and the end to see how everyone changes'; 'I wish we did the role-playing exercise earlier...after that everyone is laughing and joking and comfortable') and they asked if Lego could be used rather than jewellery – or 'bigger beads' – as they found the small beads irritating. This is a great piece of feedback: if the purpose is to relax, play and inspire trust, the object-based play must facilitate – not frustrate – this process.

Students also stressed the value of relevance: they liked having a link with module content, using skills they could call upon in assessments and the workplace – one student said the activities provided 'scope to realise what you actually want to do'. Highlighting the relevance of employability is advisable. However, another student did suggest that 'learning for the sake of it' is what universities are 'supposed to be'.

During the research period, I reflected on the depth and authenticity of the conversations the students were having: the dialogic learning was one of the biggest benefits; the activities would tend to ignite positive, genuine and creative discussion.

I observed the energy in the classroom soar during activities and students displayed pride, excitement and optimism when they shared their work. Relationships seemed to strengthen, and the evaluations support this; a sense of trust, mutual support and understanding was established between peers.

Compared to Fashion Journalism and Fashion History classes I had taught in previous years, which had included sporadic creative exercises, but nothing as

carefully designed or theorised as the mindful play, my bond with the students, and their bonds as a group, were much stronger. I saw significant leaps in terms of innovation in their assessed work, with more originality, risk taking and confidence evident in their writing and use of visual media. Marks were higher compared to previous cohorts in the same modules and, while these sessions may be playful and creative, the students' regard for the structure of my classes was actually strengthened: in module evaluations, the students scored highly against questions such as, 'is the module well organised and running smoothly?'

My own confidence in using these interventions has soared as a result. I am currently running the Fashion Journalism module again; I started the creative interventions in week one, with an activity planned for every session. In the first week, when I told the students (who were busy colouring in fashion pages), that we were out of time, they groaned. What better reaction?

I keep in touch with many of the (now graduated) Fashion Journalism students on Instagram. They often say they miss the module, and offer examples of where the creativity they developed in the module has been helpful. One graduate asked for my feedback on a presentation she was developing for a job interview with a major fashion brand. She related her ideas to the work she had done on the module and her presentation was interactive, original and bold as a result. She got the job.

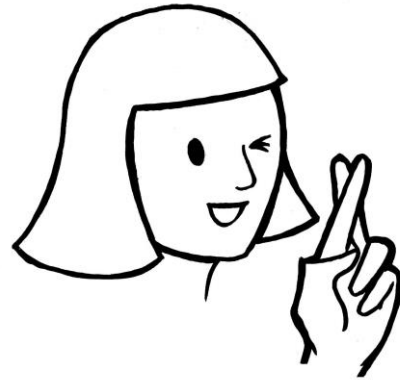
Anecdotal evidence from this research has been useful and inspiring, but there are limitations to facilitating learning in this way. It requires a teacher's own creativity, energy and enthusiasm, and although the equipment needed is minimal and low cost, it may still pose a budgetary issue. Some teachers may see the extra effort of organising mindful play within their sessions as prohibitive, particularly as it may be difficult to measure the impact of the interventions empirically, and many higher educators may therefore greet such creative teaching methods with scepticism. Although the majority of students in this study approached the concept of mindful play with open minds, some will have negative preconceptions that prove to be insurmountable: you cannot force a student to get on board.

In spite of the challenges, there is enough qualitative evidence to suggest that these fun and flexible learning

interventions merit a try. Further studies could investigate the longer-term benefits of mindful play and the enduring role it could have within the higher education curriculum.

17. In conclusion: wishing you luck

Mindful play is adaptable in any context, and activities that fuse the joy and discovery of play with a contemplative component could make a difference to any module. The most important thing is to own these activities: sculpt them so they suit the students, your teaching style and your course content.



When I shared these interventions with colleagues at an academic conference in June 2019, I invited the delegates to colour in during my presentation. Some gave me their finished colouring pages as a gift; others asked if they could keep on colouring during the next presentation. Mindful play in educational and professional settings really does cut through.

**

I intend to keep working on more interventions, weaving mindful play into my module planning and throwing myself into learning with my students. In January 2020, I introduced a 'mindful collage-making' session to the Fashion Journalism class using old fashion magazines; the results, covering everything from 'ombre' colour schemes to feminism in fashion, were proudly (and spontaneously) shared by the students across their Instagram stories.

Creativity is high on our students' list of priorities. As one of my students said at the start of the current Fashion Journalism course: "The first thing I would like to get out of this module is getting my creativity back." This is a request we need to heed now, more than ever. And I wish you lots of luck in trying mindful play in your classes.

18. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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