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## Talking to myself: reflections on Reframing A conversation reflecting on my experiences of using creative practice (specifically the Reframing technique) within a STEM context

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### ABSTRACT

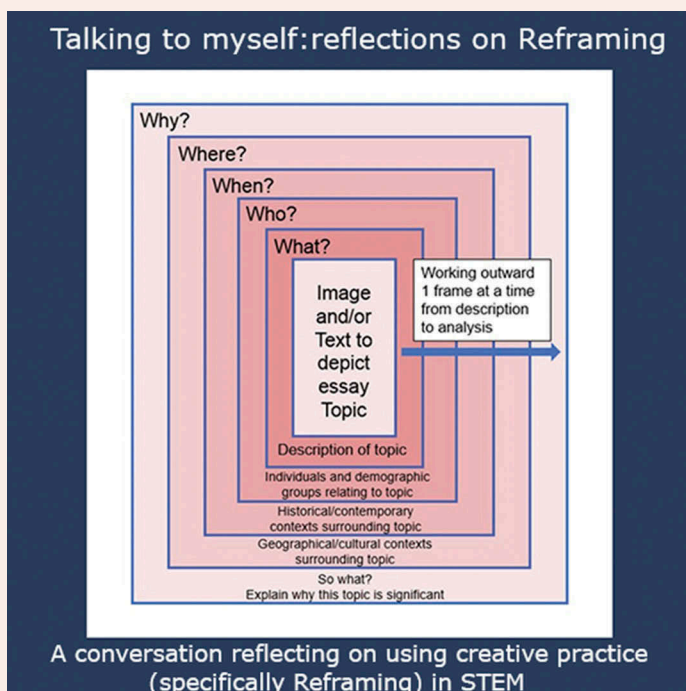
This self-reflective conversation looks back on my experiences as an Art & Design practitioner delivering a workshop at the HEA STEM Conference. The focus is on one technique, Reframing, as part of a wider discussion of the way that creative practice can enhance student engagement. The conversation explores different applications of the Reframing method across disciplinary boundaries, and refers to academics who have inspired my work. I reflect on the way that my experiences at the conference have impacted on my pedagogic practice, philosophy and identity, using a non-traditional and light-hearted format designed to encourage both my own reflective process and reader engagement.


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## Method

The format for this reflective piece was inspired by the work of Fiona English (2011). Fiona discovered that when her students ‘regenred’ their essays into a less ‘academic’ genre such as a play, story or interview ‘a new and more personally reflexive understanding of the issues under discussion.’ (English, 2011, p. 200) was evident. I chose the interview genre, and rather than write a more typically academic piece first, dived straight in: a dialogue-based writing genre can free up ideas and encourage a reflective approach, while (I hope!) engaging the reader.

## Interview

### *Q. indicates the interviewer, and A. the interviewee (both are myself)*

- Q. Today I’m chatting with the author and asking her to reflect on her experiences at the HEA STEM conference, with a focus on creativity for engagement. I meet the author in her rather untidy office where she is surrounded by Lego bricks, felt pens and glue sticks. . .
- Q. Hello, nice to meet you, mind if I move this pile of, erm, stuff?
- A. Oops, sorry – yes, of course – don’t want you sitting on my next project!
- Q. Thanks for agreeing to do this interview, it shouldn’t take too long.
- A. No problem, where would you like to start?
- Q. Well, I see that your workshop at the HEA STEM conference back in January 2018 focussed on creative pedagogies – can you tell me where your interest in this started?
- A. Yes, that’s an easy one! My original discipline is fashion design, so I come from a ‘hands-on’ practitioner background. When I started teaching contextual studies it seemed like a no-brainer to utilise the fashion students’ innate interest in and talent for creative practice to overcome barriers to engagement with written work.
- Q. So, how did you go about it?
- A. Well, to cut a very long story short, I established the [author]... (moves to the computer to show me the EMWPblog on screen <http://writingpad.our.dmu.ac.uk>).
- Q. You think that there’s a real link between creative practice and student engagement then?
- A. Absolutely! And not just for students in Art & Design disciplines either. I completely agree with Alison James and Stephen D. Brookfield (grabs a book brimming with post-it notes): ‘the broader the range of imaginative activities we’re involved in, the more engaged we are with learning.’ (2014, p. 4). I have found this to be true across subjects and levels of study. Just to give you one example, the Reframing technique used in the HEA STEM workshop has been used in many different contexts. . . (stops to rummage around in a pile of folders, finally extracting some rather dog-eared photos. . .).
- Q. So what exactly is Reframing? (Looking puzzled).
- A. It’s probably best explained if I sketch it for you (grabs pen and scrap of paper). Reframing is basically a way of ‘digging into’ a topic through a series of visual ‘frames’ surrounding the topic on a sheet of paper (holds up sketch).
- Q.

Oh, I think I'm getting it now...how did you adapt this for the HEA STEM audience?

- A. Well I used postcards (thanks to my co-presenter Mhairi Morris!) containing fairly abstract science-related imagery in the centre of each frame. The idea was to encourage divergent thinking sparked by the image, then draw this out further using prompt questions for each frame.
- Q. Hmm – what did HEA STEM attendees make of it?
- A. They tackled the task with gusto, and produced some varied and detailed responses to the images...(more photos)
- Q. Did it go the way you expected it to?
- A. I expected participants to be more hesitant or resistant to the process – I have to confess I had some rather unhelpful (and it turns out inaccurate) preconceptions about (whispers) 'boring scientists', but in fact participants were enthusiastic and engaged. Max Adams' preceding workshop: 'Never mind the story: who's the protagonist', with its application of screenwriting approaches to scientific writing, underlined the arts/science synergy.
- Q. Mmm – I notice that in your earlier article (Reeve, 2014) you describe this method as Reframing Research rather than just Reframing – why was this?
- A. Well spotted! I suppose that I initially saw this technique as a starting point for research (for example, for 3rd year dissertations) as it provided key words and alternative contexts around a topic that could be used as a basis for information gathering...
- Q. Sounds sensible, so why drop the 'Research' bit?
- A. I think it's because I've seen that the mix of divergent and convergent thinking prompted by this technique has applications that extend beyond purely initiating the research process...
- Q. Can you give me an example?
- A. Mmm, let's see – ok, yes – for example, students in Design Crafts used reframing in small groups to analyse a piece of text...
- Q. Ok, sounds interesting, any others?
- A. Yep, I've recently run Reframing workshops for staff, and through this academics have used Reframing as a tool for developing module content...
- Q. So it's quite a versatile method then?
- A. Yes, I'm sure there are many more applications of Reframing to be discovered... oh, that reminds me, I'm thinking of creating a digital version using Mind Genius software where students can develop their frames further, adding links, etc...
- Q. That's all very well, but how does all this relate to student engagement?
- A. Oh yes, I'd forgotten about that bit – well, as a 'way in' to a piece of writing, Reframing offers students a number of benefits (counts these off on fingers). 1. It builds confidence by making existing knowledge and ideas concrete, 2. It fosters reflection, both in and on action and 3. It provokes both critical and creative thinking: all these contribute to enhanced engagement with the topic or assignment at hand. Like David Gauntlett who says that when 'going through the thoughtful, physical process of making something... an individual is given the opportunity to reflect, and to make their thoughts, feelings or experiences manifest and tangible.' (2011, p. 4) I see the 'hands-on' nature of Reframing as having a direct link to enhanced engagement.

- Q. But what does Reframing offer that's different to a more usual learning and teaching activity, say a seminar discussion?
- A. Ah, good question! Well, for one thing, the environment is different. Reframing workshops (along with all other workshops I deliver) take place in an informal space – I try to create, what the excellent Amy Burvall and Dan Ryder call 'a learning environment more akin to an artist's studio than a classroom stereotype.' (2017, p. 33).
- Q. How does that enhance engagement then?
- A. The relaxed atmosphere and tactile nature of the activity provides a new way of approaching study, taking learners out of their usual learning environment and experience: as one of the HEA STEM workshop participants put it, the best things about the workshop were 'creative/visual ways to address a dry topic.' (HEA STEM feedback 2018).
- Q. So, did your views about creativity in STEM change because of the workshop?
- A. Yes, definitely! To be honest, I felt like a fish out of water to begin with! There was a display of posters at the conference, and I found these (with a few notable exceptions such as the colourful poster depicting 'Student experience of patchwork assessment in a postgraduate public health policy module') with their highly textual nature difficult to connect to. After the workshop though, I felt quite ashamed of myself, having heard about lots of creative learning and teaching initiatives that were going on around the world...have you seen these fabulous cards, for example? (Passes a pack of 'Play Your Cards Right' STEM careers cards from the University of Queensland).
- Q. Hmm, nice resource! How did your experiences at the conference affect your views on the relationship between the arts and the sciences?
- A. I've been interested for a while in the synergy that seems to exist there, fuelled by my working partnership with a scientist colleague and my own contrasting background in fashion design. Following the conference I felt that the boundaries that I had seen between 'creative' and 'non-creative' disciplines were really self-limiting and unrealistic – basically, I had rather more to learn from STEM colleagues rather than they had from me...(blushes and looks a bit embarrassed).
- Q. How has the experience of delivering the workshop at the HEA STEM conference impacted upon your practice since?
- A. I think it's had a big impact in a number of ways (starts counting on fingers again...).
1. Engaging with the STEM community took me out of my comfort zone and increased my confidence in applying what I do in new contexts.
  2. I realised that creativity in learning and teaching is absolutely not the prerogative of those in the arts (obvious, I know, but the conference did bring this point home to me).
  3. I was able to reach a wider audience through doing a blog post for the HEA (not to mention this rather rambling piece of writing!).
  5. It taught me to trust my instincts – I didn't get funding to attend the conference, but decided to go anyway, and being taken seriously outside my own discipline was something of a breakthrough moment!
- Q. Yes, but what about your actual practice?
- A. Oh yes – sorry, I was getting a bit carried away there wasn't I? Well, there have been some more tangible outcomes: there are plans in the pipeline for a Reframing workshop for research students, a Reframing workshop for staff is now part of the staff development programme at my institution and the Art/Science collaborations between myself and my colleague continue...

- Q. Oh? What have you been up to since?
- A. We recently worked together on a LEGO © SERIOUS PLAY © workshop as part of a symposium that my colleague organised...once again I was surprised at how engaged this group of GPs, surgeons and clinicians were, although the task was completely new to them...I also had a fascinating conversation with a surgeon about the similarities between surgery and stitching garments: the creative conversations continue...
- Q. Ok, coming back to the HEA STEM workshop, what was the main thing you learnt from this experience?
- A. That I originally held some rather arrogant views about 'creatives' versus scientists, but of course, to quote Ken Robinson, 'creativity is not confined to the arts.' (2011, p. 3) and the Art/Science divide is really not that big a deal – there are more commonalities than differences between practitioners from both areas.
- Q. Ok, (looking at watch) one final question, what's the most effective way to enhance student engagement in STEM subjects?
- A. Exactly the same way as for any other subject! Offering safe, playful, multi-modal learning experiences that are designed to foster a strong sense of personal connection to the subject matter, build confidence, allow space for experimentation and reflection, getting out of the head and doing something physical...
- Q. Got it! (Jumping up, and nearly tripping over a pile of brightly-coloured bricks). Good to meet you, must be off and get this typed up...
- A. You too! If you get time, perhaps you could represent this interview in Lego? Or as a haiku? Or maybe...
- Q. Bye! (Door closes).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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