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It's like Jenga: A collaborative autoethnography study into facilitators' experiences of a person-centred community of practice, focused on critical thinking skills for counselling and psychotherapy students

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Abstract

Background: Communities and groups based on person-centred theoretical principles are often a core part of counselling and psychotherapy training within this modality, yet no research has been undertaken that considers these groups as a community of practice . Furthermore, no research has been undertaken that explores the impact of these groups when they are run alongside, rather than as part of, the curriculum.

Aims: This study explores our experiences of facilitating a community of practice for trainee personcentred/experiential therapists that focused on critical thinking skills. This community was established over a 12-week period and was attended by students from across 3-year groups.

Methods: Using collaborative autoethnography to explore these encounters, we identify four key aspects of our experience of this community.

Results: The following aspects were identified: (1) Fecund and Fruitful—A Space for Growth; (2) Freedom to Learn; (3) Jenga!—Navigating the Dimensions of Community Facilitator; and (4) Power and Control.

Discussion: This study centres on the idea of student-centred learning as a way of challenging hegemonic notions of education and learning within higher educational settings.

Conclusion: These findings could help others set up and facilitate other communities of practice based on person-centred principles, in counselling and psychotherapy training, or other associated fields of study.

KEYWORDS
collaborative autoethnography, community of practice, critical thinking, freedom to learn, person-centred, student-centred learning

1 | INTRODUCTION

'Communities of practice are voluntary groups of people who, sharing a common concern or a passion, come together to explore these concerns and ideas and share and grow their practice' (Mercieca, 2017, p. 50). Counsellors and psychotherapists have often developed communities within institutions like universities and training providers, through research conferences and within local therapists' communities (Bazzano, 2019; Haley & Yates, 2019; Motschnig, 2019; Ray, 2019; Rogers, 1970, 1972), in which therapists choose to get together to discuss aspects of their practice. These groups and gatherings may not have traditionally been labelled communities of practice, but they have had many of the same characteristics, including mutual engagement between community members, a sense of joint enterprise within the community and having a shared focus (Wenger, 1998). The role of these communities in counselling and psychotherapy education and professional development remains important. Yet, there is insufficient research exploring these types of communities.

Person-centred groups are usually underpinned by the six necessary and sufficient conditions of person-centred psychotherapy (Rogers, 1957) and endeavour to create a safe space for attendees so that they can engage in congruent relationships with other group members (Rogers, 1972). Whilst we have yet to see the literature relate the concepts of communities of practice and person-centred groups, there are clearly links to be made. The person-centred approach has a long history of communities based on its principles. For example, basic encounter groups and community groups (Bozarth, 1986; Haley & Yates, 2019; Rogers, 1970, 1972), which may also include different types of workshops or community activities (Wood, 1997), are all effectively the communities of practice based on person-centred principles (Hall & Blundell, 2024). These types of groups include one of the foundational premises of the person-centred approach—the dedication of facilitators to the natural growth process of individuals (Bozarth, 1986). A study into participants' experiences of person-centred community groups found interconnecting themes, in which individual and community factors both influenced the development of the group, as attendees initially struggled to organise and communicate their wants and needs to each other (Stubbs, 1992). Attendees then went through a process of 'freeing'; as they synthesised their own personal boundaries with that of the boundaries of the community group, they became more accepting, trusting and felt they belonged more and were empowered within the group. This process of change is not uncommon within person-centred community groups (Haley & Yates, 2019; Stillwell, 2019) and is underpinned by a commitment to non-directivity where no one person attempts to take control of the group, with decisions being made collectively. 'The facilitator's role in the person-centred group is that of creating an atmosphere in which members are able to discover their power and to discover their own inner sources of healing. The facilitator does not necessarily expect that any particular process will occur or attempt to accelerate any particular process' (Bozarth, 1986, p. 231).

Implications for Practice and Policy

- This study could be used to inform how future learning communities are developed and established, including those set up by students and/or tutors.
- This study also offers an exploration of facilitators' experiences of setting up and facilitating such communities; these insights could also inform the facilitation of similar communities.
- This study adds to the literature on student-led learning and teaching environments and challenges traditional notions of how students learn in higher educational spaces.

Whilst some have criticised using the word 'community' within adult educational spaces because it cannot fully describe what happens within those groups (Newman, 1983), the community of practice concept may offer a more comprehensive lens through which to consider the activities of person-centred groups within education. There have been insufficient links made between person-centred groups and communities of practice within the research literature. However, with the prevalence of person-centred counselling and psychotherapy courses in the UK, the high number of therapists who identify as person-centred, and the number of educational groups that use this approach to teaching, it is surprising that more research has not been undertaken into the development, experience and process of person-centred communities of practice within higher educational settings and training organisations. Objections to these types of groups within educational settings are often related to issues of dual roles and the power that facilitators (who are often tutors or lecturers) hold over students within those spaces (Ray, 2019). Of the studies that do explore person-centred groups in educational spaces, they tend to focus on communities that are *part of*, rather than *separate to*, the curriculum (e.g. Bazzano, 2019; Motschnig, 2019; Ray, 2019). This paper aimed to address this gap by exploring our experiences of facilitating a person-centred community of practice that focused on critical thinking skills that were established within a higher educational setting in the UK for students training to be person-centred counsellors and psychotherapists, and this community was student-led and established away from the regular course curriculum.

1.1 | Developing a person-centred community of practice based on critical thinking

We (Peter and Madeline) are the authors of this paper. We both facilitated the community of practice and are co-researchers for this project. Here, we introduce ourselves and the community of practice before discussing our approach to this research topic.

1.1.1 | Peter

I am a Senior Lecturer on the MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice at Liverpool John Moores University; this course enables students to work as a person-centred counsellor/psychotherapist in the UK once qualified. I teach across all 3 years of the course, which means I have relationships with students at different stages of development, including students awaiting to go into practice, out on placement, and those who have qualified and are completing research. I am interested in pedogeological innovations around developing counselling practice (see Blundell, Burke, Wilson, & Jones, 2022), researching counselling processes (Scott et al., 2023) and understanding boundaries in professional practice (Blundell, 2023, 2024; Blundell et al., 2022; Oakley et al., 2024). I have also set up and helped establish other communities of practice outside organisational settings (e.g. Blundell, 2021; Darley et al., 2024).

It was my initial idea to set up a community of practice for students who existed outside the usual format of lectures, skills practice and personal development groups. Students also reported a positive experience when meeting students from other year groups during workshops that were held as part of the course in previous years. The group was centred on critical thinking skills because this can be an area that students can struggle with in their assignments and is something students wished they had more time to do in class.

This was the first time that I had sought funding for a group like this, and I was apprehensive about how it would work and whether we would be able to achieve what was set out in the original proposal. I was going to be effectively line managing and/or mentoring the student interns who would be the facilitators of the group. This meant a change in role for me and them; although I was confident this could be managed, I was unsure what that would look like. I was keen to be involved with the group but at the same time wanted the students to make it their own. I was also worried about making sure the student interns had a good experience, and due to the limited time we had together, it was difficult to see how this would progress. The point of the group was to enable students to create and develop something of their own—which, ultimately, was about student-centred learning and so issues of power were front and centre from the start.

1.1.2 | Madeline

I am a neurodivergent, queer woman and a qualified person-centred counsellor/psychotherapist, group facilitator and sessional lecturer on the MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice at Liverpool John Moores University. However, when the community of practice was established, I was a second-year student building up clinical experience through my placement hours and was near qualification. I was one of three students who successfully applied for the paid internship advertised to set up and facilitate the critical thinking skills community.

With a background in the arts, alternative education and research, I have undertaken group facilitation in various settings and was very eager to test my skills in a role underpinned by person-centred values. Within the context of the wider MA programme, I was highly stimulated by the content of the lectures and felt the desire to explore topics in more depth; I wanted to hear the voices, ideas and experiences of my peers in a potentially more self-directed space outside the typical institutional environment. Also, from my perspective, the group represented a forum and community for collective learning, reflective practice, criticality, and, crucially, a space for bridging connection across the MA programme.

1.1.3 | The community

The community was established between 27 April 2022 and 13 July 2022. The community was held virtually for ease of access for students. There was potential for a maximum of 100 students to attend the group each week, but this was deemed unlikely. On average there were between 7 and 10 attendees each week, and attendees were spread across all 3 year groups. Overall, there were about 50 different students who attended the group over the 12-week period. The funding granted enabled the employment of three interns to organise and facilitate the group under Peter's supervision. Initially, it was agreed that Peter would be one of the facilitators but, as time progressed, it became clear from feedback that students could own the development of the group without a lecturer being present. At the start of the project, one of the interns needed to withdraw, which left two interns to organise and manage the project. Students were not required to attend the group or sign up for specific groups—so facilitators did not know how many people were going to show up on the day. The group developed a system for choosing discussion topics that involved attendees voting during the previous week's group. The design and delivery of the project were innovative and included a variety of different exercises organised and requested by students. For example, there was a guest lecture by a person-centred academic from another university, a lecture on academic writing skills, group discussions on person-centred theory, explorations of what is meant by critical thinking skills and workshops on how to apply them to practice, including discussions of podcasts and research articles. This paper reports on our experiences as facilitators of this community.

2 | METHOD

'Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic' (Lapadat, 2017, p. 17); ultimately, this means that the research focus, like autoethnography, is on self-interrogation, but it does this collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers who are also the study participants (Lapadat, 2017). The 'subjective and personal nature of autoethnography combined with a collaborative element also illuminates how partners or groups work together' (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 94), which was particularly useful for this research topic—the experiences of facilitators of a virtual

community of practice (CoP). CAE aims to address issues of power within research by moving away from research where participants are subjects of the research process and, instead, calls for them to be collaborators in the research process, including how the research is designed and data are gathered and interpreted (Chang et al., 2016; Lapadat, 2017). This felt particularly pertinent for this study because these research principles were aligned with the purpose of the community of practice itself, which was to challenge hegemonic notions of power within learning environments. Both endeavours, that is, undertaking the research and facilitating a community of practice, were underpinned by person-centred principles, which aligns with the modality that attendees of the CoP were being trained in (Rogers, 1957). This synchronicity between these three areas, research design, community development and practice development are evident throughout this paper.

The remit, rules and ethos of this study were developed using Chang et al.'s (2016) preparatory questions to developing a CAE study that was ethical and valuable. These questions helped to establish: (1) who the research team were (i.e. facilitators of the community of practice); (2) the focus of the research (i.e. our experiences of facilitation and attendance); (3) a collaborative way of working when undertaking and writing up the research; (4) agreeing and allocating the specific roles and boundaries of the research team (this was key as we [the researchers] also held dual relationships as students and tutors); and finally (5) outlining our key ethical principles (see ethics section later in the paper). Here, we were aiming to 'work in community to collect [our] autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret [our] data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in [our] autobiographical data' (Chang et al., 2016, pp. 23–24).

2.1 | Ethical principles agreed between coresearchers

It was important that we all felt comfortable within the research process and that there was sufficient space and opportunity to raise any issues about what we were comfortable sharing or what we didn't want to share. In this respect, at various stages of the research process we checked in with each other about what we had shared, written or captured within this paper to ensure that we were both happy with what was being shared and how. In addition, CAE can 'overcome the limitations of potentially self-absorbing AE while preserving the wealth of personal data inherent in autoethnographic research' (Chang et al., 2016, p. 21); and therefore, it was important to us that we did not dilute aspects of our experience through the search for themes. In our search for a shared ethical understanding, we centred on a form of relational ethics that is a 'critical, reflexive analysis of the tensions in the "with" in "research with, not on, people" and the "co" in "co-creating knowledge" into the research process' (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 763). This 'critical, reflexive analysis homes in on the processes of co-creating knowledge and establishing collaborative research relations through the tensional, power-infused co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities' (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 763). Ultimately, this meant embedding relational ethics and ethical coproduction within each stage of our decision-making processes (Finlay, 2019; Phillips et al., 2022).

The biggest ethical consideration for this study was understanding the impact of our dual relationships (i.e. student/lecturer, supervisor/intern, co-authors and co-researchers) on the research process. Whilst understanding the challenge of dual relationships in research (e.g. Bourdeau, 2000), they also enabled us to have an exploration of issues of power and positionality within our work. These issues are at the core of the research topic (i.e. our facilitation of a person-centred community of practice), and so rather than make attempts to sidestep any ethical issues that these dual relationships may cause, we have attempted to address these issues head-on throughout the research process. These reflections are threaded throughout this paper.

This study was granted ethical approval by the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (UREC).

2.2 | What we did

After establishing the principles within which we would undertake our research, we reflected on ways we could explore our experiences of facilitation. Using other examples of collaborative research to inspire our process (e.g. Blundell et al., 2022), we decided to write down our overall reflections about our experiences of facilitation and what we had learnt along the way. We restricted this to a maximum of 750 words, although both of us struggled to keep within this self-imposed limit. Once we had completed these reflections, we shared them with each other and met to discuss our thoughts. We met virtually for 90 min, and this meeting was recorded and transcribed for later analysis and reflection. At the start of the meeting, we agreed that we would try and have an open flow of conversation and not restrict ourselves in what we wanted to share; however, we agreed, as per our ethical principles, that we could edit, remove or redact anything that we wanted to. We agreed that we would only share or publish quotes that we were comfortable with and that also ensured confidentiality of any attendees of the community.

This was a collaborative and reflective process. 'This flipping of dynamics among researcher-participants puts all members of a research team on an even playing field' (Chang et al., 2016, p. 27), and this meant navigating and negotiating each step of the research process together. We identified an initial 15 themes that were pertinent to both of us within the data we had generated (the written and recorded accounts of our experiences). These 15 themes were reduced to four key areas that we feel represent our collective experiences of facilitating this community of practice and are discussed in the next section (see Figure 1). In addition to using quotes to help readers understand our experiences, we have also included drawings (see Figures 1 and 2) and collages (see Figures 3–6) that represent different aspects of our experience, which is in line with a collaborative autoethnographic approach to research. Furthermore, we developed a poem which aims to

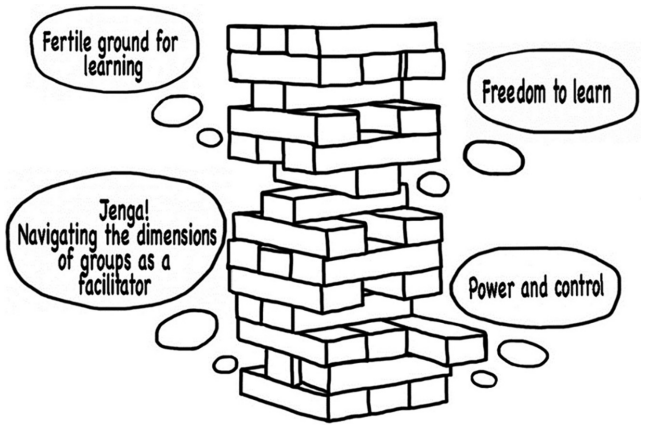

FIGURE 1 Ink and paper drawing of our collective themes.

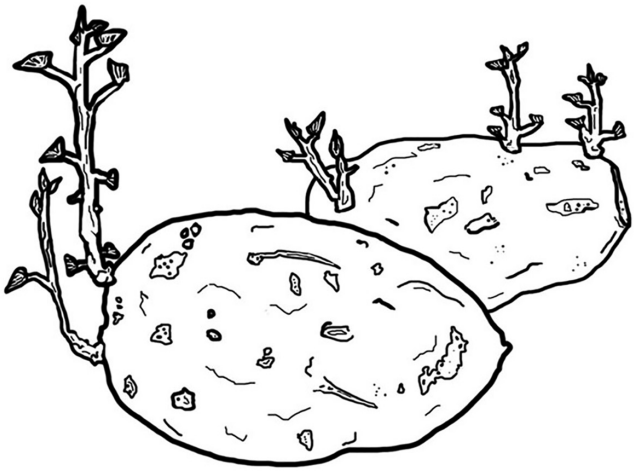

FIGURE 2 Ink and paper drawing of potatoes.

give an overarching sense of our experiences of facilitation. This poem was performed at the BACP Research Conference (Hall & Blundell, 2024), and whilst there is insufficient space to include it in this paper, a video recording of this presentation can be accessed online (Hall & Blundell, 2024).

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Madeline

With previous experience facilitating groups, I immediately noted subtle and critical differentiations to a person-centred group. To some extent, I underwent a process of unlearning. For instance, learning how to let go of the urge to plan content or prepare for specific dialogue in person-centred group work was very important to an effective group process. Rogers (1980, p. 129) explained that he was at his peak as a group facilitator when he was 'somehow in touch with the unknown' in himself. I reflected on this sentiment when preparing for the role, and as the group evolved, it became a sort of mantra. Over the course of the group, I developed greater trust in myself to be led by what was unfolding within the group moment-to-moment. There was always a sense that the direction of dialogue could go anywhere and my ability to sit comfortably with the unknown grew; eventually, being present and receptive to new possibilities became one of the most exciting qualities for me.

3.2 | Peter

Reflexivity and positionality are embedded within this course and rooted within each class and space. I am a white gay man who is in his early 40s. Aspects of my identity intersect between marginalisation and privilege. As an academic and tutor, I act as a gatekeeper between students and their qualification to practise and this creates an unequal power dynamic between us. This project was interesting in many ways because it shifted the power dynamics of my role as a tutor towards being a facilitator, participant and supervisor of a community of practice. This role shifted the boundaries and made me question my role, and what aspects of the space I did and didn't have control over. I was surprised by the impact of my role on the group, and quickly saw the benefits to students of taking less of a role within the community of practice space. This often resulted in removing myself from the space and leaving the student interns to facilitate the group.

3.3 | Themes

3.3.1 | Fecund and fruitful—a space for growth

We found that the community of practice created a space that had fertile ground for the personal growth and development of attendees, and we reflected on what made the group work, and we felt that we could see this process at work. We acknowledge that fertile ground could also be nurtured in other spaces on the course, such as lectures and other groups, but there was something about developing *this* community, away from the usual parameters (restrictions?) of the course, that seemed to add the required conditions for growth: the nutrients for critical thinking.

> Peter: I suppose as tutors, sometimes we see students well, just like you were describing in this sandwich of progression in terms of, oh, you're learning a way of being, then you go in with learning how to behave that way of being with clients, and then you move on to your research and the final year of employment or whatever. And so cross pollinating all those different experiences. So that actually you're learning about client work from people who are or who have just been in your position, like, you know, six months earlier or whatever. It's, it's amazing how much people got from it, it wasn't just like, 'Oh, that's interesting. And it will be useful when I go on placement'. But actually, 'This is changing, like, my understanding of the theory and the concepts that we've been talking about for the past 12 months'.

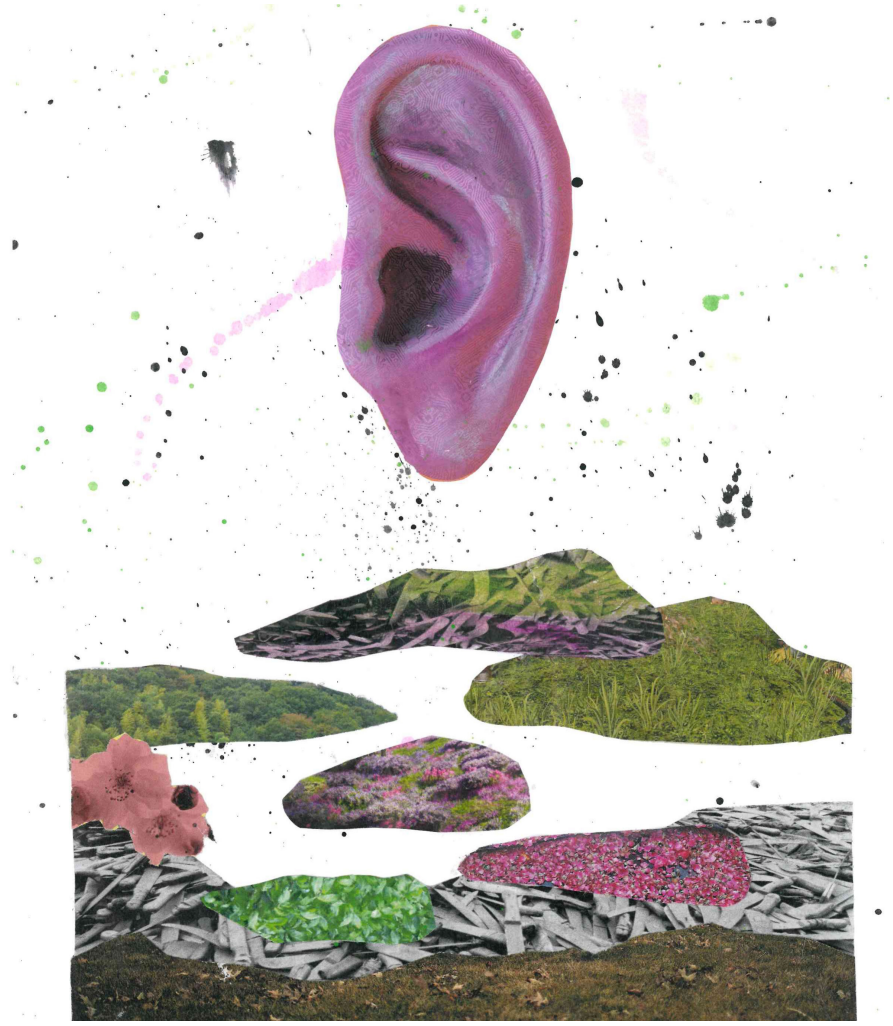

FIGURE 3 Fecund and fruitful.

FIGURE 4 Freedom to learn.

There is an obvious link here between how Rogers (1979) used the metaphor of a potato to help understand the drive of a person to change and develop (see Figure 2), suggesting that their actualising tendency (i.e. a human being's natural and inherent flow of movement towards constructive fulfilment) could not be diminished unless the organism itself was destroyed. Ultimately, Rogers argued

FIGURE 5 Jenga.

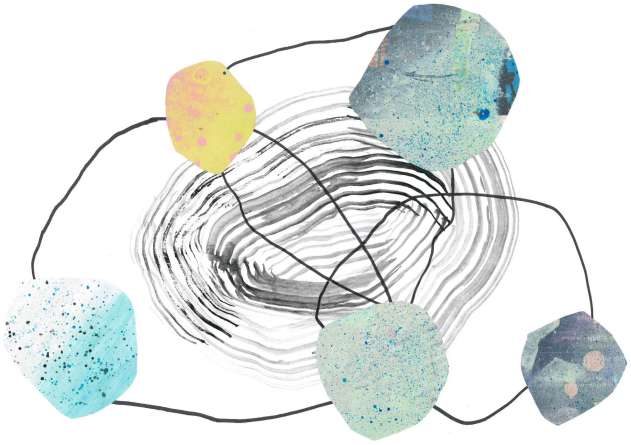

FIGURE 6 Power and control.

that it was the conditions that needed to be right for the potato (or person) to activate this tendency and grow, and it 'is this potent constructive tendency which is an underlying basis of the person-centred approach' (Rogers, 1979, p. 2).

In our community, we found that growth was encouraged through cross-pollination. Attendees meeting and listening to students from different year groups developed an interweaving pattern of pollination through shared knowledge and experiences. It was both the conditions *and* the people that made this a fecund and fruitful space for growth (see Figure 3).

3.3.2 | Freedom to learn

As we reflected on the conditions created within our community, we pondered over what made *this* space feel so different compared with other spaces we had shared. It became apparent that there were a variety of factors that led to a greater freedom to learn.

> Madeline: I think that there was much more room for honesty amongst peers about the, you know, the lived experience aspect of training. And I don't think you would, unless it was someone who's incredibly congruent, you know, I just don't see that happening in the context of a lecture space, because of the power dynamics, with again, it's going back to that lecture, lecturer, student power dynamic. I just think that, you know, people, people really kind of shared more aspects of their training experience, and also their opinion about some of the theory that we were learning … that questioning that you might get a little bit in a lecture context, but not, not at a very deep level.

> Peter: I thought that was one of the things you've mentioned when I was looking at your reflections was, how different ideas came up outside the lecture space, which is just what you were talking about there. And I was thinking about the richness of that, and actually how sometimes we're trying to facilitate these educational spaces, but actually what we might, I mean, I'm thinking we do do that. But also, we might lose something because of how a lecture is structured, or how a class is structured, or the power dynamics within the room like there is opportunity to have other… maybe there is an opportunity to have other types of learning spaces that might be quite useful for students.

It became clear to us through our deliberations, that freedom, in this space, for many attendees was that it was a space created and

owned by them (the students), rather than something that was set up by the tutors. Attendees had a choice whether to attend or not. This led to new awareness through attendees feeling freer to ask questions and share perspectives (see Figure 4).

> Madeline: Asking questions has been really enlightening and opened my eyes to new awarenesses that they would never have, you know, they would not have thought about it, so I think that's about for me, that's about a first year looking at the experiences of a second and third year and shedding light and giving more colour to know their, you know, their knowledge, but also just awareness of what is it, what it's like to do placement, what it's like to do a dissertation. So, and I think the knowledge thing is just that's me, that's, that do you know what I mean? Because it's just a different type of knowledge, isn't it?

We realised, between us, that, on occasion, a tutor being present within the community space created a blockage to the group process rather than acting as a facilitative force. This wasn't about the personality of the tutor but the imagined *and* real power that such a person holds within a learning space, even when the dynamics of that are mitigated in some way.

We reflected on the different types of learning that were created through the community, and whilst the course has tried to recreate this, the course, we feel, will always be restricted by the learning outcomes and university requirements. The course, ultimately, is not a free space to learn but a structured environment focused on the areas that *need* to be learnt, to meet course and professional obligations. We felt that there is only so much un-structuredness that could be contained within a structured learning space. Content of the group was therefore directed by the voices and needs of group members. The unstructured, non-directive culture fostered in the group created a sense of freedom that seemed to support a willingness to share ideas and experience and enhance this learning and growth.

> Madeline: I think the benefits are really clear to me. And it's like that, that shared unstructured, mostly unstructured space.

3.3.3 | Jenga!—navigating the dimensions of community facilitator

As we explored our experiences of facilitation within this group (and other groups), we settled on the metaphor of Jenga to represent what that feels like to us (see Figure 5). Jenga is a game of skill where players take turns removing pieces one at a time from a tower of blocks. As we had this discussion, we were looking at each other (virtually) using our hands to represent imaginary balls of emotions and feelings that represented the game of Jenga within the community space. It felt like a moment of deep understanding between us that is hard to fully encapsulate within this paper. Maybe our discussion will help the reader understand.

> Madeline: That's moving in between, that, navigating all the structural material. I don't know what that bit is. It was, I thought of it. It's kind of layers, but it's not layers, because it's in my head, it's three dimensional. And it's like, it's like an actual navigation.
>
> Peter: I'm thinking of Jenga, yes. But maybe I'm also putting pieces in as well as taking them out. I've took a bit out here and put it back in here. I always feel like…
>
> Madeline: There's a synthesis of all of those things.
>
> Peter: Yeah.
>
> Madeline: Like that. That would be how I'd kind of explain it in words. But structurally, it's a structure and you're moving things out, and you're trying to work out, and essentially kind of just see how things are falling and landing at different levels. So the, the Jenga and the delicate, the delicate balance of a Jenga, that works because it is quite delicate, because you can't go, you can't pull something too fast, because then you won't understand, you know, the rest of the understanding will fall. Does that make sense?
>
> Peter: It does make sense to me. And that's the one of the things that you might experience this now and in the other groups that you facilitate, but when I'm in an encounter group, say, for example, and I'm just turning up as me, and there's no expectations, I feel like I can be quite present in a group. And I do synthesise, but not as much, I don't have that sense of Jenga when I'm there as a participant in a group, compared to when I'm facilitating. And then I feel like there's all these other things that come into play that I'm trying to think about. So, it's just interesting that you talked about that.

We understood our facilitation as a form of dance. This meant a movement in and out of relationship with group members rather than something we were doing to or within the group.

> Madeline: So you know, that in/out dance that I was doing, yes, yeah, that's what it was for me is being able to be in touch with myself and then just kind of like, you know, in touch with myself, know where I'm feeling, kind of, feel comfortable with what I'm sharing, put the stuff aside, and then, and then have a more like, it was like a, it was definitely a move, I am finding it difficult to

> explain it. But it was a movement of kind of dipping in and out and going into kind of, I suppose a kind of a way of being that allowed me to kind of take in information from what was happening to the group, to understand what the dynamics of the group are, whilst being, you know, aware of what I was feeling in the moment, and that was a skill that you know we use in therapy a lot, it's just having that self-awareness, essentially. But also, being present and having a presence.

After presenting our research to attendees of the BACP Research Conference (Hall & Blundell, 2024), we were asked to expand on our experiences of Jenga as a metaphor for facilitation. Each of us gave a different answer. For Madeline, the metaphor represented the delicate navigation of group dynamics and the holding presence of a group facilitator, which involved the processing and negotiation of different experiential and relational 'pieces'. Whereas Peter recognised his desire for control in balancing the Jenga pieces, he wanted to be part of the group and make sure that the pieces did not fall, but, ultimately, he was required to step away and trust that the group could manage. Whilst the game of Jenga could be viewed as one of precariousness, it is also about balance and making sure that the right piece is moved at the right time. For our game of Jenga, it was important that we also put pieces back in, which helped the group sustain for longer.

3.3.4 | Power and control

The issues of power and control have been a thread throughout our reflective processes within this research but also throughout the initiation of this project.

> Madeline: At the beginning, I remember feeling like knowing that I needed to give up the control, and that being quite an intimidating prospect. But then, then realising that it was quite a liberating thing. But that taking some time, I can't remember how many weeks that took …. And so that letting go process, that **was** a process. It wasn't an immediate for me at all.

We hoped to undertake research into attendees' experiences of this community but were unable to organise this research in a reasonable time from when the community ended. We realised that to understand the power dynamics within this community at a deeper level, we would need to include more voices and perspectives. We do not have access, in this paper, to all facilitator experiences on this project, never mind all attendees.

> Peter: I think it's a shame that we didn't [have more voices] and possibly we could have facilitated this to have more of a discussion about that, about what, about that dynamic, one of the things that I've thought about is, as would come up anyway, but like the issues of like, power and control, and just how many multiple roles there were. So even, like, getting ethical approval for this, trying to explain who everybody was, and what relationships we had or didn't currently have with each other was, that's what they struggled with the most, the ethics panel was trying to figure that out.

We approached this community (and this research) understanding the dual roles that exist between us as student/teacher, supervisor/intern, co-facilitators and co-researchers. We have had to build up trust within our relationship so that we can be honest with one another about the impact of our ways of relating to each other or community members, or our approaches to facilitation and/or supervision (see Figure 6). Through this process, we have tried to honestly capture what we have learnt so that others may benefit from our reflections.

> Madeline: I am aware of the time, so one last thing, I'll just say one more thing about facilitation is the tutors have very different approaches to facilitation and my approach to facilitation is very different to the way it was in the community of practice with the therapy groups I run now, like, I've settled into my style and not worried about the control anymore, and, you know, those sorts of things, but you know, from the tutors, everyone's style of facilitation is quite radically different. So, that in itself is quite interesting.

We acknowledged a flexibility to our interpersonal boundaries that was necessary to occupy such a fluid community space; however, we were both taken aback by some attendees rejecting some of the usual course boundaries within the community space. On reflection, we understand how this happened, as attendees developed this space within *their* set of rules and requirements—it challenged us as facilitators to reflect on our understanding of whose space this was. For example, we were forced to reflect on whether the funding for the internships, software to hold the space and other resources made this a *university*-owned community (and therefore had associated limitations or requirements placed on it), or whether this was a *student*-owned space with boundaries being set by them. We agreed that more thought would go into these issues before holding any other type of community space such as this. We have refrained from detailing the boundary issues experienced to ensure the confidentiality of community members.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our experiences of facilitating this community of practice have helped us to develop our facilitative skills in other groups and communities, as we have challenged our notions of what 'good'

facilitation looks like. The idea of an unstructured space has taken on more meaning to us as this community was held away from the course curriculum and allowed students to develop the space how they wished. This, ultimately, challenged and transgressed traditional notions of student-tutor boundaries and what makes an effective learning environment. Rogers' seminal text, *Freedom to Learn*, argues for the importance of a learning environment that is guided by the people who want to learn. Similarly, communities of practice are centred on a shared topic and contributions from members who all want to develop their practice in some way. The voluntary nature and attendance of such groups and communities is what makes them effective, as attendees are active participants within their learning. The challenge, as we see it, is how much learning can be student-centred when the educational spaces within which students learn are upheld by hegemonic ideas around teaching and learning.

The virtual nature of the project certainly influenced the development of the culture within this community. Providing more flexibility in terms of time commitment and location, attendees typically accessed the group from their personal space; this nurtured a sense of ownership and control, and perhaps contributed to the development of differing boundaries between the community and the course.

We both agreed that the timescales for this project felt intense, and the bonding that happened between group members was real; however, it felt like the experience was dynamic and quick rather than built up over time. Funding requirements meant we needed to hold it weekly, and this probably helped attendees get to know each other quickly, but generally, feedback was that a monthly meeting would have been more useful, allowing students time to process their experiences in between sessions.

Whilst we attempted to underpin this community with person-centred principles, we acknowledge that we sometimes felt restricted in terms of what we could or couldn't do. For example, as facilitators, we set the time and day of the meeting to fit in with our schedules and we estimated when most students might be available. However, some students were unable to attend at those times or felt they could not commit the time when they were already struggling to write their assignments and complete their placement hours. If we were to attempt further communities in the future, then we would look towards the community members to establish meeting times and other structural and boundary issues to make the community work for as many people as possible.

We hope our experiences as facilitators and our descriptions of this community inspire others to develop extracurricular communities alongside their training courses to add additional and potentially transformative learning opportunities to their development as trainee therapists. This community was, in part, a collaboration between students and tutors, although there is no reason why students could not set up communities on their own if they wished.

Overall, we have found the CAE a useful method for researching our experiences and this has been an explorative learning experience for us both. There feels like a genuine power-sharing among us as researcher-participants, which has added a depth to our own learning. The interdependency required of CAE between researchers around managing the logistics of the research process meant that we were unable to include all facilitators within this study, which, ultimately, is a shame. As researchers, we both felt the inclusion of the third facilitator could have added a different perspective to our findings, which would have added additional value beyond the perspectives of only two of us. We also missed their presence.

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on the findings from a collaborative autoethnography study that explored our experiences as facilitators of a community of practice for trainee person-centred/experiential therapists in a Higher Education setting in the UK. This study challenged our notion of what a student-centred learning space could look like and enabled us to explore and address issues of power when facilitating community spaces. Future research could explore the experiences of both facilitators *and* attendees of other communities of practice, adding a more diverse range of voices to the research literature.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was ethically approved by Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)—reference: 23/PSY/023.

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