

## USING PLAYFUL LEARNING TO ENHANCE EARLY BELONGING IN PHARMACY STUDENTS

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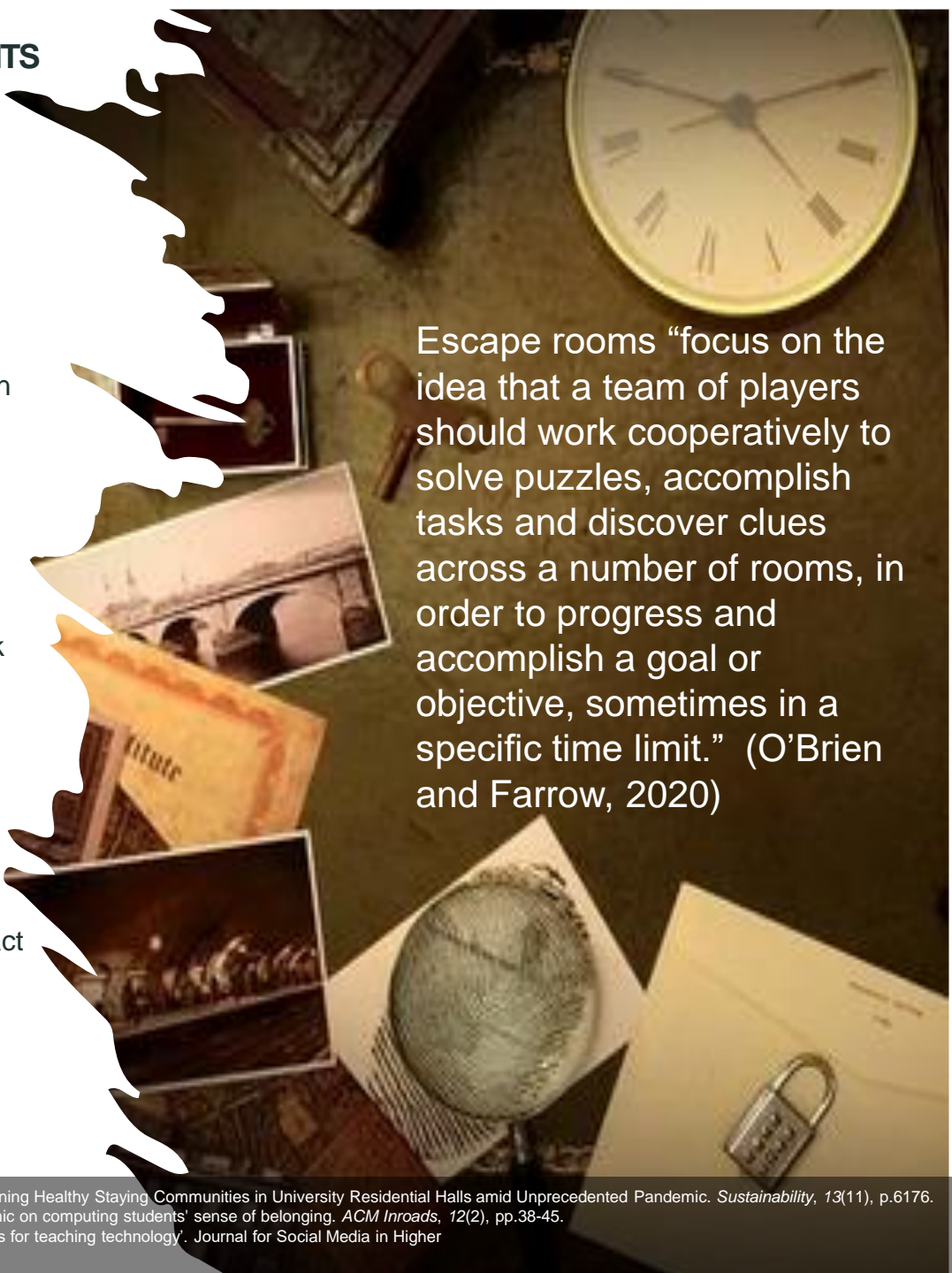
**Background:** The pandemic has presented many challenges to higher education, not least potentially hindering the early interaction of students. The online environment may also have an impact on the sense of belonging that develops for students (Cheng et al, 2021; Mooney, 2021). Recognising these factors, an online escape room activity was designed, using OneNote, to help address some of these challenges in the 2020-21 academic cycle.

**Study Objectives:** This initiative was introduced with the aim of encouraging early integration within the Year 1 Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) cohort. It was proposed that early integration would encourage positive feelings of belonging in the early transition phase.

**Method:** The cohort of 138 MPharm students were introduced to the online escape room in a synchronous session on Zoom on Day 1 of Induction Week. Once the introduction was complete, students were randomly allocated to one of nine breakout rooms, their task was to escape from the breakout room. A tutor was also allocated to each breakout room. The OneNote escape room was shared on the screen by the tutor. The students were asked to introduce themselves and then work together over Zoom to tackle each puzzle, with help from the tutor. The answer to each puzzle enabled the students to progress to the next 'room' which contained the next puzzle. The puzzles were generic and did not test pharmacy knowledge in order to avoid alienating students with limited confidence in pharmacy knowledge. Student groups were timed to add a competitive element and seven puzzles had to be completed to 'escape' from the breakout room.

**Conclusions and Future work:** The students reported very positive reactions to the escape room activity, for example: *"Very enjoyable, helped to interact with other people in the group by working together in a team. Great online environment."* In the future students will be asked to rank the impact of this initiative on their early sense of belonging.

The online escape room concept has been subsequently used by other Departments at the University of Hertfordshire - Sports Therapy, Dietetics, Nutrition, Business and Creative Arts to increase interaction and a sense of belonging in students.



Escape rooms "focus on the idea that a team of players should work cooperatively to solve puzzles, accomplish tasks and discover clues across a number of rooms, in order to progress and accomplish a goal or objective, sometimes in a specific time limit." (O'Brien and Farrow, 2020)