

Lego® Serious Play® and higher education: encouraging creative learning in the academic library

Instructing students in how to utilize resources in an academic library is often considered a dry subject. Library induction is still primarily dominated by a didactic approach to learning, where the librarian shows the student how to do something correctly. In contrast, this article explores the methodology of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and its potential as an engaging and imaginative technique to explore student learning subjectively. In LSP workshops, participants are encouraged to build models of thoughts, issues or ideas, in an attempt to view a problem from a new perspective. In higher education, LSP is employed as a playful methodology in a wide range of educational scenarios, including group dynamics, assignment writing, academic integrity and dissertation planning. This article details how the author became an LSP facilitator and follows the subsequent development of a strategy to incorporate playful learning into his practice.

Keywords

Lego® Serious Play®, higher education, playfulness, information literacy, academic librarianship, creativity



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Introduction

The case for playfulness and creativity in library workshops

I have a sign in my home office, borrowed from the film adaptation of *Matilda* which reads, 'If you are having fun, you are not learning'.¹ On screen, this sign appears in the classroom of Miss Trunchbull, the odious teacher and ultimate exponent of didacticism. Whilst higher education (HE) is not highly populated by characters identifying with Trunchbull, the argument that creative enjoyment should be a linchpin to learning is not a given. Luckily, there is an evergrowing body of research making the argument for playfulness in HE.

In his seminal work *Homo Ludens*,² Huizinga lays out key characteristics of play; amongst these are 'play has rules', 'play creates order' and 'play is free'. At its heart, here is the tension within the concept of 'serious play'. A participant in a Lego® workshop has the freedom to create anything from the chaos potentialized in a pile of bricks, whilst adhering to the rules of the methodology. Theorists have challenged Huizinga's assertion that play must be ordered,³ instead highlighting the beauty of creative destruction. Having witnessed a number of participants deliberately smash their Lego® models, 'disorderly play' is clearly useful in some circumstances.

A number of theorists have focussed on investigating the supposed false dichotomy of work/play.⁴ All of them conclude that playful approaches to work-based problem-solving can be beneficial, further suggesting that establishing the difference between work and play is increasingly difficult.

'playful approaches to work-based problem-solving can be beneficial'

The origins of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP)

Originally proposed as an in-house development at Lego® to formulate new product ideas and company initiatives in the mid-1990s, LSP went through many iterations before settling into the version that has been available as an open-source development since 2010. In 1996

2 Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, then the president and CEO of the Lego® Group, encouraged the team of Johan Roos and Bart Victor to generate a methodology that could capture creativity, foster ideas from a diverse range of employees and present these ideas in a unique and easy to comprehend way.⁵ Roos and Victor, already exploring innovative techniques in other areas of business, asked the top 300 Lego® executives to take part in a series of workshops, using Lego® bricks to build representations of both the company structure and their place within it, but crucially to go beyond mere structure and build personal responses to their work environment.

The readings and approaches that Roos and Victor explored when formulating LSP, came from remarkably diverse places. They were particularly inspired by the twin approaches of constructionism and constructivism (similar sounding but very different in approach),⁶ alongside the work of key theorist in the construction of narrative, Joseph Campbell.⁷

Constructionism, as theorized by Harel and Papert, suggests that the embodied building of external 'things', provides the potential for deep engagement difficult to replicate by other means, that experiences are maximized when a physical element is added to the learning. By contrast, the Piagetian notion of constructivism emphasizes the deeply subjective nature and ongoing re-evaluation of all learning. Campbell, in his key post-World War II text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, attempts to establish the concept of the 'monomyth' (often characterized as the 'hero's journey') via a close reading of the similarities in many story conventions. The employment of a narrative structure and metaphor is often crucial in LSP workshops, when asking participants to make sense of their experiences. Adding further detail to the work of Campbell, Lakoff and Johnson provide a comprehensive enquiry into metaphor, highlighting the dual importance of the need to be understood by others and the need to make sense of ourselves.⁸

'inspired by the twin approaches of constructionism and constructivism'

How it happened for me at Middlesex

I first came across LSP in 2016 via a librarians' training day in Cambridge, which offered the opportunity to explore some creative approaches to information literacy. The advance information for the day did not explain fully the activities we would be doing, only that we would be exploring creative methodologies through construction, very much a 'doing day' and not a 'listening day'. Crucially, it also promised Lego® would be included in the mix and, as a lifelong fan, that was all I needed to hear.

What followed was a communal experience of building models and sharing their meaning, under the guidance of a facilitator who encouraged us to construct metaphorical models of feelings or experiences. I do not remember any individual models I built that day, but I do still have my rapidly scrawled and wildly enthusiastic notes from the train journey home. The main thrust of these notes was ideas for workshops, potential uses of LSP as an aid for student engagement and hastily expressed plans to improve the dynamics of group projects.

'exploring creative methodologies through construction'

In the weeks that followed I began to explore the background of the methodology in more detail. This came in the form of finding facilitators such as Marco Rillo and Robert Rasmussen on YouTube and exploring the wider community of playful learning via journal articles and book chapters.

This is where I must confess to being lucky; the librarians at Middlesex University (MDX) are encouraged by our managers to experiment, we are encouraged to take risks with new ideas for workshops and to think of ourselves as practitioners. This culture of trust is a vital safety net when trying something new.

'This culture of trust is a vital safety net when trying something new'

The key question was who to approach with this? Rather than attempt to win over whole departments, my answer was to target academics who I thought might be amenable to the approach, and many meetings were arranged to pitch LSP as a technique. The focus of the meetings depended on which modules the academics led, but typically discussions revolved

3 around a particular assignment or general academic issue. What is telling is that every academic who had already experienced LSP first hand, said, 'let's talk about how this can work'. Once an issue suitable for a workshop had been identified and dates had been set, the sessions could begin. The student feedback, obtained via the building of a model, was the best I had ever received. This feedback was clearly important as, over the course of the next year, I received requests for workshops from lecturers across the institution, who had shared students' positive reactions.

A year on, I began to investigate the possibility of attending the week-long LSP facilitators' training course. This is, once again, where I am lucky. MDX paid the not insubstantial fee and I spent an astonishing week being taught a range of application techniques and facilitation skills. If you can, I would wholeheartedly recommend attending the training course. Not only are you given excellent guidance on facilitation and workshop design, but it instantly provides you with a support network to develop ideas and share workshop experiences with.

The core process

Within the inherent creativity and chaotic playfulness of an LSP session, there is also structure. The key aspect of this structure revolves around a cycle of building and reflecting, referred to as 'the core process'. The four stages of the core process are as follows:

1. Firstly, the facilitator poses a question or problem which requires participants to build a model in response.
2. A time limit is imposed on every build to encourage participants to start building immediately, sometimes consciously aware of their end goal, sometimes not.
3. At the conclusion of the building phase, all participants are required to explain what their model represents, explicit aspects of the model may be examined and further questions may be asked by the facilitator.
4. The final stage is a reflective opportunity to ask a final round of questions before models are broken apart and a new question is posed.

'The key aspect of this structure revolves around a cycle of building and reflecting'

The role of the facilitator

To ensure a productive session, the strategies I employ as the facilitator must be flexible and nimble. Sensitivity towards participants is critical, although this is often tempered to avoid things becoming emotive in workshops.

The line between engaging participants emotionally and potentially upsetting them, is addressed periodically throughout a workshop with the reminder that a Lego® Serious Play® session is not therapy. This aspect of care for participants should never be underestimated and clearly differentiates an LSP session from the more 'typical' instructional library workshop.

The most prevalent role taken by the facilitator during workshops is that of explainer and upholder of the associated LSP etiquette. I prefer the word etiquette to rules, as many of the behaviours I am looking out for in workshops come from a place of politeness towards others. For example, wherever possible, I will remind participants not to contest the meaning of what each other has made. Questions about others' models are encouraged, but not the meaning of the model for the builder, which is central to the subjective nature of the methodology.

'A more playful aspect of the facilitator is that of provoker-in-chief'

A more playful aspect of the facilitator is that of provoker-in-chief. Knowing when to playfully goad a participant or a group comes with experience. The nature or tone of the provocation will depend on a number of interrelated factors; the task at hand and the perceived confidence/resilience of the participants being

- 4 just two. One example of this playfulness is an instance taken from a workshop exploring change management. I decided to alter the build instructions several times during a task to deliberately frustrate participants. The following build was to explore how that frustration felt. This is not the type of trick I would suggest anyone plays within the first hour of a workshop; that time should be spent establishing trust within the group, building models to explore LSP etiquette and allowing all participants to find their voices.

Planning the typical Lego® Serious Play® workshop in higher education

First things first, there is not a typical LSP workshop in HE, but in my experience, there are often similar occurrences in the planning stage. It starts, as all LSP sessions do, with the identifying of an issue. In most cases the issue or problem is identified by a lecturer working with a group. This issue could be related to group cohesion, a general lack of engagement with a topic, issues leading up to a particular assignment or used as a reflective tool following a difficult project.

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The next step is usually an approach from the lecturer to see if LSP is a good fit for the problem. I think it is important to point out that at the outset of my LSP career I never turned down any opportunity to see a group. This was sometimes to the detriment of the workshop's quality. If a lecturer said, 'you've got 30 minutes', I would still do it. If they said 'I want to be there', I would still do it. This is no longer the case. The time available is always linked to the week-to-week structure of the course. Timetables in HE are rigid (occasionally bordering on inflexible), making the scheduling of workshops akin to nailing jelly to the sky. If space is available, the typical LSP workshop should be a minimum of 90 minutes. The reason for this is straightforward, rushing through the early formative models to get to the 'issue builds' always impacts the ultimate depth of engagement. Csikszentmihalyi referred to 'flow' as a key concept within task engagement.⁹ Flow is the sweet spot, where a task is considered challenging but achievable, leading to a state of maximum concentration. Flow is achieved partly through correct pacing and giving people enough time on a task, enough time to reflect, question and reassess, and is simply not achievable if time is tight.

If both the lecturer and I are happy with time allocation, the next step is student numbers and room allocation. Both these factors are also key in achieving a successful workshop. The manageable number of participants for an LSP session with a single facilitator is between 6 and 18. Less than 6 can work fine, but more than 18 tends to become unwieldy, if not very carefully managed. It is about balancing the time in a session between building, sharing and reflecting. In my experience, ten people is the perfect number to achieve this three-way equilibrium. Assuming that the relatively small group size is not an issue, the final step is finding a good location. This is a bigger factor than you may think. Small tables of different heights are a problem, as is a room where the fixtures are designed to be rigidly hierarchical. The perfect set-up involves large circular tables, natural light and ample space for people to move around.

'ten people is the perfect number to achieve ... three-way equilibrium'

The final pre-workshop discussion comes down to the building plan. Depending on the relationship I already have with the academic, I may choose to draft a plan and send it to them for approval. If this is a session that has occurred previously, lecturers tend to note prior student feedback and allow me full autonomy. It often comes down to the level of trust that an academic already has in both me and the process.

Five special moments from LSP workshops

These moments have been selected to highlight the beautiful and unexpected that can occur during LSP workshops, individual instances of shared learning.

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1. I was invited to run a workshop for a group of students who had agreed to be Residence Assistants, looking out for other students who may be experiencing personal problems during their time at the university. The participants came from many different faculties, so I asked them to build a model that summed up their subject area. One participant constructed Britney Spears on stage at the MTV awards in 2007. When I asked them to explain their model, they described seeing the footage on TV when they were very young, of watching it over and over again and of trying to copy the dance moves. They concluded, in the telling of the model's story, this was a key moment in realising they wanted to be a professional dancer.
 2. In 2017 I ran a workshop with students reading politics. The rationale was to offer participants the opportunity to explore their feelings towards the topic. As a result, I asked them to build a model which reflected one aspect of a political issue that personally affected them. Until this moment, one member of the workshop had clearly been finding the experience uncomfortable, communicating very little with the rest of the group. In response to my request, the participant built a model which detailed the Black Lives Matter movement (the first time I heard the phrase), including their feelings of being thought of as less than the white students. When I later told the module leader of this moment, they were surprised, as that particular student had never spoken in class before.
 3. A university in London invited me to run a Lego® workshop during a law conference in 2019. The nature of the high numbers of participants and the steep lecture theatre where the workshop was taking place, meant that many of the usual LSP conventions were abandoned. I still really wanted the lawyers in attendance to have a shared experience, so I asked everyone to add one brick (the individual brick still had to represent something meaningful to the person adding it) to a model and pass it on to their neighbour, culminating in a model constructed by everyone. On completion of the model, I asked if anyone wanted to hold the object and explain their individual component. Each explanation was met with empathy and communal recognition.
 4. One workshop I have facilitated on multiple occasions occurs at the commencement of the final year for a politics group. The remit is to explore dissertation ideas with the group, encourage them to take the first steps towards building an idea and crucially to then incorporate the proposed methodology on to the model. The methodological build occurred at the culmination of a long workshop that had been particularly intense for some participants. All students had built their dissertation plans, but building the method of exploration was proving difficult. One participant, during the time given to build his method, slowly and methodically disassembled his previously built dissertation idea and left it in a pile in front of him. Before the final round of reflection began, I checked he was happy to describe what had just happened. He was, and then he meticulously recounted the process of realizing his dissertation idea was impractical. Therefore, the pulling apart of the physical model actually felt good before more time had been wasted.
 5. Whilst revealing highly personal details is not encouraged in LSP workshops, there have been occasions where the personal and professional have collided. In 2017, I was invited to run an LSP workshop with a group of nursing students who were struggling with a group project. The lecturer who contacted me suspected the problems were stemming from group dynamics within the cohort. Therefore, I devised a workshop where participants were asked to build aspects of themselves and relate this to their chosen career, in an attempt to encourage the sharing of personal details in a safe and supportive environment. One participant built a model of themselves as a figure with detachable hair. When demonstrating their model's meaning they proceeded to remove their own wig, before explaining they were recovering from a cancer diagnosis. The workshop was suspended for a few minutes to allow for everyone to offer sympathy to the participant, before I asked everyone to build models to express how they felt over

6 what had just happened. The nursing lecturer, although not privy to the events that had occurred, reported that the bonds within the group appeared to improve after their session.

Whilst these instances are very much their own moments, they all share crucial traits. Every one is a communal learning experience; although these models were mostly built by individuals, the learning gained went beyond the builder. Equally, all these moments were inspired by a problem; none of the responses were considered by the builders until the moment the question was posed. This spontaneity of response is key to how LSP provokes moments of communal learning.

The perceived drawbacks of LSP

I am always wary of supposed educational panaceas. Without naming any names, it is common for new theories or developments to arise every few years, garnering considerable publicity, leading to being lauded, overused and then abandoned in favour of the next fix-all. LSP (and gamification in a broader sense) is in danger of becoming perceived as a Swiss Army penknife for workshop ideas. The worst thing possible for LSP would be that it becomes thought of as just the next big thing.

The need to play, to fulfil a creative urge, to look at an idea from multiple positions, is a deep-seated human trait. But it is important to acknowledge that Serious Play® as a methodology and general playfulness when approaching a topic are not one and the same.

Onscreen versus in-person LSP

LSP was designed to happen in a room with groups of people sharing resources, air and social space. Furthermore, it has been argued that the selecting of bricks from a communal pile, the collective tactility of building an experience, is crucial to a successful workshop. Inevitably, the Covid-19 pandemic moved most HE learning online and in-person LSP became a casualty of the greater need to keep people safe. However, with surprising speed practitioners began experimenting with the concept of conducting workshops remotely, using the all-conquering Zoom to connect participants on screen.¹⁰

Furthermore, despite the restrictions in place, evidence that LSP was being used within new subjects continued, providing encouragement that LSP could be useful to areas traditionally considered as less creative.¹¹

My own doctorate, exploring the concept of learning gain through LSP, became a hybrid methodology incorporating visual ethnography, allowing me to explore what the presence of the screen and the reflective/reflexive therein was doing to both the participants and me. This analysis, which will be negotiated between all participants, is ongoing as I write this in August 2022.

Conclusion

When I first began working in HE libraries, a number of friends expressed surprise that it was for me. 'You're nothing like a librarian.', was the typical comment. As irritating as I found this, I could also see their point. I do not take undue pleasure from a reference list and I have no interest in whether someone is whispering in the silent study area. My interest is primarily in learning and helping others to understand and improve their own learning. Learning is messy, imprecise. It relies on your motivation, but it also relies on you not being hungry or tired or heartbroken. It is changeable and rather random. Exploring students' learning alongside them using LSP is a gloriously blurry undertaking, but also hopeful too. The methodology is trusting, already assuming that people have the capability to create

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7 knowledge. It also requires empathy for your participants and an acknowledgement that the experiences that have led them to your workshop are as individual as their fingerprints.

If you find the prospect of not knowing what will happen in a workshop exciting, then maybe consider LSP as a participant and eventually as a facilitator.

You have nothing to lose but your learning outcomes.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

'You have nothing to lose but your learning outcomes'

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