Innovative pedagogies series: Innovating in the Creative Arts with LEGO

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Introduction

Since my first post in a Creative Arts institution (teaching modern foreign languages) I have been fascinated by the use of play, objects and multisensory approaches for learning. In this report I will focus on how activities inspired by the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®[1] methodology have become central to my learning, teaching and research.

I am constantly struck by the inventiveness, dynamism and imagination of the practitioners and teachers who work in Creative Arts education. I am amazed by their vision and ability to see the world in different ways and come up with something new. However, the fact that our disciplines are creative does not mean that we always teach creatively. In this report I look at ways that building metaphorically with LEGO can enhance learning[2]. In looking at the theory informing my practice, I suggest that we need to play more in higher education and bring that playfulness into our teaching too. I outline five case studies that show this playfulness in action and offer simple structures and suggestions for you to design your own activities. Finally, at the end of this report, I mention the creation of a new 'LEGO in HE Community', which is open to all. You might feel like joining in!

Once upon a time...

In 2009 Etienne Wenger came to the University of the Arts London (UAL) to advise a group of us on using his Communities of Practice framework. Our particular challenge was to apply it to small-scale projects in Creative Arts teaching. Mine was about exploring how students might usefully reflect on their own communities: Who is in their support networks, how do they present themselves in different groups or move between these, and why? After an introductory day with Etienne we were told to present our projects at a second event.

At 6pm the night before presenting, I fished out the brief to check for crucial information (which room we were in, and whether there was coffee). I found that, in true student fashion, I had not read it properly. I had completely overlooked the requirement to create an A1 visual to accompany my talk. It is fair to say I panicked. Then, mindful that I always exhort students to have a 'Plan B', I ran upstairs. There, I raided the – redundant but thankfully rammed – toy cupboard. I dragged out the family LEGO and decided that the only thing I could do was build my reflective community of practice in bricks. (I would, of course, pretend I had meant to all along.) This took me until 11 o'clock at night.

The next morning I carried my (large) LEGO model wrapped in a bin liner on a train and Tube in the rush hour. Trying not to lose bits in the melee was somewhat stressful. However, it proved worth it as the idea of representing project progress in bricks was enthusiastically received. It was to open up for me a whole new world of pedagogic practice.

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[1] LEGO® and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® are trademarks and/or copyrights of the LEGO Group. The author has no commercial affiliation with either LEGO® or LEGO SERIOUS PLAY®.

[2] By this I mean using the physical LEGO model as a metaphor or symbol to signify something deeper. The concept is described more fully in this online article: http://www.lego.com/en-gb/seriousplay/the-method.

How this practice evolved

My LEGO model of a reflective community of practice was a rudimentary and literal representation of what I was testing out in my project. A colleague who saw it suggested I might like to investigate other ways of using LEGO in my teaching and educational development. Thanks to him, I learned that LEGO was being widely used to make symbolic representations of other things: most systematically elaborated in the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® methodology. As a result, in 2010, I invited an accredited facilitator (and magician), Stuart Nolan, to lead a series of workshops on team identity. His use of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY was so well received and so powerful that I started to think of other ways in which I could use it. With him as my mentor, I designed some workshops of my own: little by little word spread, and invitations to do more came my way.

I have now been using LEGO and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY for six years and became an accredited facilitator in 2013. Looking back, in 2009 I could not have imagined asking my institution to pay for large quantities of bricks and formal training. The territory was too unfamiliar and, for us, untried and there were other, greater financial priorities. However, the strength of student enthusiasm and staff curiosity helped build evidence and an argument for investing in the approach. Using LEGO became a real 'ground up' adventure, with substantial feedback showing student engagement and positive impact. A few statistics may back this up: at the time of writing over 1,000 international students have used LEGO to evaluate their personal development planning; around 170 doctoral students have visualized their topic in bricks; 48 staff have taken part in team identity workshops; around 90 students have attended stuckness workshops; 80 more have attended progression workshops. Countless others have used the methods for learning and the numbers are continually rising.

This shows how something unusual can become integrated into practice and normalised in a relatively short space of time. Such integration can only happen, however, if people in the institution and in roles of power are receptive and willing to give things a go. Where we fail to innovate it is often because sufficient belief and/or nerve is lacking. Newness can only be embraced if people try things with an open mind and become convinced of their value and potential.

How this practice is situated theoretically

My last minute model building with LEGO brought home to me the importance of using objects, toys and artefacts in higher education (HE). In particular, there seemed to be scope for them to be used for 'learning how to learn', bringing theory alive and relating it to practice (In Cultural and Historical Studies objects and artefacts can illustrate issues such as gender, politics, identity, style and subculture). Gauntlett (2011) argues (among many other things) that, through making things, people connect with each other, which certainly happens in workshops using LEGO. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY training materials state that building metaphorical models with LEGO embodies Papert's constructionist principle (Papert and Harel 1991). Papert advocated we learn best through constructing something. The value is twofold: the learner makes an item or output, and at the same time creates new knowledge about all kinds of things.

Other theoretical positions can be detected in LEGO SERIOUS PLAY activities (Barton and James, forthcoming) and I will elaborate a few briefly here. Arnheim's (2004) argument that visual thinking should be as valued as cognitive processing is upheld by the meaningful and memorable nature of models created. In Vygotsky's (1978) work on the development of higher psychological processes, his emphasis on the importance of social interaction is relevant. Central to building is Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that metaphors are not simply linguistic features but the structures of our conceptual system. By taking one thing to represent another we create expressive imagery, which is not just communicative, but which informs our beliefs and values.

In the third iteration of his 'Activity Theory' Engeström focuses on the creation of mediating artefacts which can used to aid dialogue, share perspectives and understand concepts within a framework of activity systems

(1999). This mirrors the function performed by the creation, sharing, assembling and connecting of LEGO models by workshop participants. We have found that Mezirow's seven stages of awareness and purpose map neatly onto the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY process. The first of these is the simple state of *reflectivity*, or becoming aware, after which other states may emerge: *affective*, or emotional; *discriminant*, judging how we view and do things; *judgemental*, being aware of our value judgements; *conceptual*, how we reappraise our assessment of others; *psychic*, our realisation of why we draw conclusions about people; and *theoretical*, where we identify how our responses to things are shaped by ideologies and conditioning (Mezirow 1991). Finally, Csikszenmihalyi's (1990) concept of 'flow', or the joy, focus and sense of timelessness we experience when absorbed in doing something we love. This has also been seen in workshops, especially when the minds and hearts of participants are completely invested in the activity.

My illustrations of the case studies will hopefully make evident the links between theory and practice in action. Before moving onto these, however, I would like to say a word about creative teaching and the place of play in HE. I am conscious, at this point, that there has been a lot of theory and background thus far. (If you are feeling you have had a surfeit of explanation and want to skip straight to the case studies, please do. However, for me the next section offers some important context for why I do what I do. Once you are feeling refreshed I hope you will come back and catch up on this bit later.)

Creative arts and creative teaching

The building and sharing of metaphorical LEGO models lends itself to any complex topic or questions to which there is no single, clear answer. This makes it pretty ideal for the Creative Arts, which pride themselves on their ability to generate divergent responses and ideas. Countless examples exist of inventive, involving and inspiring teaching practices devised by creative practitioners. Jeffrey and Craft (2004) argue that teaching for creativity and teaching creatively are integral, one to the other. I agree, however, we can all come up with examples when we do not do the second of these. Sometimes we stick to expected formulae or the tried-and-tested safe options when the time to design inventive ones is lacking. The crit[3] is a case in point. It is a tradition through which creative work is examined, but it is often not creatively facilitated. Blair (2006a, 2006b) has written in detail about experiences of the crit and its impact on those who go through it. In another example large group lectures are often seen as the only economical means of getting content covered due to time and resource constraints (well-designed and delivered lectures which are interactive and inspiring are not a problem; it's the ones that aren't). Sometimes, the subject itself challenges us: one colleague came to me for advice, as he despaired of ever managing to "make statistics sexy."

I am obviously not suggesting that LEGO is the solution to these, or every, teaching challenge. However, his struggle is one we have all faced when trying to think of ways to teach more creatively. A pithy definition of what this means is "using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting and effective" (Robinson 1999, p. 89; in Jeffrey and Craft 2004, p. 1). We know too there are distinctive features of learning and teaching in the Creative Arts that have been outlined in several reports (including Thomson *et al*. 2012; Sims 2008; Shreeve, Wareing and Drew 2008). I will not go into these here. However, the *Signature Pedagogies Project Report* (Thomson *et al.* 2012) collates definitions of pedagogy that align with the Creative Arts. These suggest pedagogy is more than method, curriculum and assessment: it encompasses relationships, dialogue and learning to be in a disciplinary context.

This view of pedagogy in now enshrined in the tenets of learning to know, do, be, and live together, embodied within models such as the 'four pillars of learning' (Delors 1996). These tenets are echoed within a

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[3] The crit is a model of learning where artists present their work to a group in order to gain feedback on how that work is being interpreted and identify ways in which they might develop it further. Crits are a part of numerous FE and HE art courses in the UK.

model of culture revised and re-presented in the *Cultures of Creativity* report (Gauntlett and Stjerne Thomsen 2012). Building and sharing activities of the kind I will describe are powerful ways of learning to know, do, be, and live together in a short space of time.

The importance of play in higher education

A good way of learning to know someone or something is through play. However, in HE while certain words appear to be 'in' – creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, and imagination – others get a mixed reception. 'Play' is one of them. In our edition (Issue 2) of the online magazine *Creative Academic*[4], Chrissi Nerantzi and I argue for the need for universities to rethink their stance on play. As the issue is dedicated to exploring play with an abundance of rich ideas and practice, this suggests not everyone needs persuading. However, play still suffers from being associated with triviality, frivolity, and dumbing down, with suspicion displayed as to its value in HE. A narrowness of thinking can sometimes be detected with regard to what it actually is. Reading Johan Huizinga (1949), Brian Sutton-Smith (2001), Diane Ackermann (2014), Pat Kane (2004), or other respected writers and theorists on play can swiftly dispel this. They make clear that play is essential to coming to know a subject, situation, person, and society. In the next section, I will look at how LEGO-related activities can help this process.

How others might adapt or adopt this practice

The use of LEGO and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY in education

"I do that Lego stuff," said a new colleague when we were introduced. However, it was clear that we understood very different things by "that Lego stuff" and how it might be applied. With this in mind, it is worth making a few distinctions as to how LEGO is used in educational and corporate development contexts.

LEGO

The name LEGO comes from a combination of the first two letters each of the Danish words '*leg godt*' meaning 'play well', signifying understanding and communicating, not just having fun. The product is globally famous: a historic and iconic toy, which, in February 2015, was identified as the top worldwide brand, overtaking Ferrari. LEGO seems to find its way into everything (and not just our hoovers): it populates department stores; appears in movies, furniture and clothing lines; insinuates itself into street art and many other forms of popular culture. The primary and secondary school sectors use LEGO in a variety of forms for, including LEGO® MINDSTORMS® and a multiplicity of games and exercises. Among a plethora of resources for school-age children, the LEGO Foundation produced the *Six Bricks Booklet*, with an array of activities using these few bricks. While this is for younger children, there is no reason why adult users of LEGO could not use a similar number of bricks to denote a concept, thought, idea, or relationship. Such activities lend themselves to adaptation across ages.

LEGO SERIOUS PLAY

The LEGO SERIOUS PLAY methodology was created in 1996 for a different kind of learning and development – that designed to support business growth and idea fruition in the corporate sector. A potted explanation of its premise follows, while fuller accounts of its purpose and genesis can be found in several places (including Gauntlett 2007, 2011; Nolan 2010; James and Brookfield 2014; Kristiansen and Rasmussen 2014).

Since its development, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY has been used with major organisations across the world including Google, eBay, NASA, the International Red Cross, and many others. It is also successfully used by

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[4] See: **http://www.creativeacademic.uk/**

business consultancies as a means of enabling clients to tackle big issues and thorny problems. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY facilitator training offers a systematic set of applications, with scripts, stages and detailed guidance. These provide a structure for workshops on specific topics such as team identity, strategy, and the enterprise. Since 2010 the methodology has become available through an open source model of access, described as a 'community approach'. (The open source guide can be downloaded from this link: http://davidgauntlett.com/portfolio/lego-collaborations/.)

In recent years, others and I have been using its techniques in higher education settings for diverse purposes. These include: teaching subjects, forging relationships, understanding and resolving issues, visualizing outcomes, gaining views, and thinking strategically. While my workshops draw heavily on LEGO SERIOUS PLAY applications, they are variations of these and do not mimic them exactly. They should therefore be considered to be examples created in the spirit of the community approach: deeply rooted in and influenced by LEGO SERIOUS PLAY, but adapted to suit the HE context.

How building metaphorically with LEGO works

LEGO SERIOUS PLAY techniques stimulate ideas and creativity, and offer an antidote to Powerpoint-led seminars. They work with metaphor, symbolism and association. (Its method is described in this online article http://www.lego.com/en-gb/seriousplay/the-method.) These three elements are powerful actors in other playful or innovative pedagogies too: Jan Sellers, in her work on labyrinths (2012), talks about the physical shape of the labyrinth as a metaphor for a journey, either through life or for learning.

LEGO SERIOUS PLAY is highly democratic and non-hierarchical with its mantra "everybody builds, everybody shares, everybody speaks." This helps avoid problems with dominant speakers who overwhelm or undermine, and encourages the quiet person whose input might otherwise be missed. Participants own the meaning in the model and it is not for others to tell them what they wanted to say. They may observe, comment or question but not interpret. Building activities help break down barriers and silos, upend routines, and open up closed or limited possibilities. The diversity of bricks available these days allows builders to incorporate colour, texture, shape, size and scale into their constructions. All of these elements help deepen awareness and increase the memorability and potency of the ideas embodied in these structures.

The most important thing in building metaphorical models with LEGO SERIOUS PLAY is getting the questions right. This is because even subtle changes in the structure of a question may affect how people respond to them. In training sessions and a personal communication to me, Per Kristiansen, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY master trainer, has described the best ones as being "low threshold, high ceiling." This refers to questions that everyone can swiftly relate to, but which can be rich in meaning, interpretation, and scope. The design of the questions is fundamental to the success of subsequent building and sharing activities. Having said this, it is not possible to prepare for everything people might build or say, despite experience and meticulous preparation. Some images, metaphors or bricks may, with experience, start to recur in certain guises (boats for mobility, or being anchor-less, ladders for progress, flags and crowns for success and so on), however, the ingenuity of some builders and their imaginative interpretations can always surprise. As a result, constructing and discussing metaphorical models requires deep attention and full presence from participants and facilitator throughout. This, at a time when academics and students alike often complain of the passivity or apathy discernible in some classrooms, is essential for student engagement and – dare I say it – satisfaction.

Skeleton workshop structure

The skeleton outline below offers a synthesis of the kinds of building and sharing activities that may populate a workshop. Its actual design will depend on the focus of enquiry, time available, participants, purpose, environment, intentions of the workshop, and so on. As with any good teaching, unexpected props that happen to be in the space on the day can also prove excellent additions. On one occasion some life-size mannequins came in very handy for helping us discuss opposing views that had been represented in models.

In addition to my examples and references, many other resources are available to help you develop your own applications or uses. These include the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY facilitator website. See:
http://www.seriousplaypro.com

LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshops, as described in the accredited facilitator training, typically last a day, or even two. Having a whole day is incredibly beneficial in times of depth of exploration and insight. Unfortunately, with the constraints of timetabling, staff and student availability, this is a luxury we cannot always afford in HE. Many of my workshops have had to be much shorter than this, lasting three to four hours. Some have had to be scaled back further to two hours. This limits what you can do, but does not mean useful enquiry and insights are impossible. Ideally too, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshops include eight to ten participants – another luxury – however, there are ways around this, such as sequential timetabling of groups. Otherwise, using multiple facilitators and helpers so that participants can still work in groups around tables and have someone to encourage conversation is helpful. Another solution is selecting specific activities that can be conducted in large group sessions. Fellow facilitators and I have used variants of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY techniques with anything from 40 to 250 people. What can be achieved in such a group compared to a much smaller one will obviously vary considerably.

An important element of the workshop is ensuring sufficient time to get participants used to "being present" (attentive, no phones, emails, distractions) and comfortable with building metaphorically. Participants warm up by building towers, bridges, things with four legs and a face, interpreting Monday morning, and so on. They need to get used to thinking as they build, as a result of rummaging through the bricks, rather than planning out their model in their heads first. This embraces Papert's constructionist principle outlined earlier. The time for building is quite brief – from three to 15 minutes depending on the activity or question, while time for discussing and exploring models needs to allow for everyone to have their say. This can either be as one small group or in in pairs depending on numbers.

Here, then, is an outline for a typical session, although given the preceding paragraphs the word 'typical' should be interpreted loosely.

> introductory and warm up activities, which emphasise expressing yourself metaphorically rather than literally (a train might be someone with unstoppable energy, rather than a mode of transport);
> solo builds, followed by sharing, on a given theme or in response to a particular question;
> follow-up builds, perhaps developing an under-explained aspect of the model, area for development, practice to build on;
> building connections of various kinds between models;
> flagging up areas for attention or celebration;
> adding missing details to models;
> building what else may be in the surrounding environment to the issue in question (people, influences, factors, constraints, helping hands, tangible and intangible);
> building 'what if' scenarios, playing out their consequences through the models, and embodying potential effects by physical and spatial changes to the models and their configuration.

There are particular aspects to the whole LEGO SERIOUS PLAY-style process that are particularly valuable to, and valued by, Creative Arts students and their tutors:

> the techniques are simple to acquire, inclusive, and there is no right or wrong way to build, which builds confidence;
> as the participants decide what their model stands for this helps with trust and ownership;
> building is visual and tactile and therefore more memorable than just using words;
> building together boosts participation, peer-assistance and collaboration;
> students like the spatial dimension to the activities – being able to use distance, size, and scale to reinforce meaning in their models (models under tables, in corners, hanging off light fittings – but all in line with health and safety regulations, of course ...);
> models travel from offline to online: photos of their models and reflections on them appear in social media, and are referred to in projects and feedback;

> through building metaphorical models with LEGO students become better listeners and better at giving peer feedback;
> they help reinforce aspects of good reflective practice – questioning and exploring aspects of models helps learners deepen their analysis and drill into specifics;
> it underlines the creative interest in process, not just product. The importance is not making a visually pleasing model (though this often happens), nor is it about making something someone else can interpret.

(For a variation of this list see also James 2014).

Examples of practice using metaphorical models

These, then, are five mini case studies of ways in which I use LEGO SERIOUS PLAY-related techniques with students at different levels of study. The workshops I discuss here are typically one-offs although repeat or sequential/regular use of LEGO SERIOUS PLAY techniques also has rich possibilities because, once the techniques and principles have been understood, they become a learning resource and the student may find them even more useful with frequent use.

a) Stuckness in learning and threshold concepts

My colleague Graham Barton, Academic Support Co-ordinator at UAL and I use LEGO SERIOUS PLAY within a voluntary programme of academic support. This operates in line with a University strategy to help students enhance their own "learning abilities, strategies and knowledges that underpin progress, achievement and future success" (Christie 2013, p.1). Since 2013 we have offered regular half-day workshops on 'stuckness', or how to get yourself out of learning ruts and past obstacles. These workshops have been particularly popular with postgraduate students, although they have been attended by foundation degree, as well as doctoral, students.

Using the first five stages of the skeleton framework I outlined earlier, we invite participants to take a closer look at their stuckness. Where is it coming from? What does it look and feel like? What factors might be contributing to it? They respond to such questions through building and sharing models, in the hope of making some inroads into the problems. We also include a solution-finding exercise that involves building options for themselves and others.

Our sessions originated from Graham's interest in threshold concepts: how students might be helped to identify and grasp these in their creative disciplines, and to what end. Our attempts to explore stuckness in relation to threshold concepts led Graham and I to identify a gap in the thresholds literature that intrigued us (Barton and James, forthcoming). We found that hitherto, most discussion had concentrated on written or visual explorations of threshold concepts rather than three-dimensional ones. We felt excited to find that using LEGO SERIOUS PLAY to explore threshold concepts could add something to new to the field.

We had anticipated that participants would identify particular subjects, concepts, or technical skills as the cause of their stuckness. However, in the vast majority of cases they were struggling with broader, more abstract issues of "learning to become" in the practice area they had chosen. Some also felt trapped by course design issues, such as too much or too little freedom. A number of students on different courses spoke of the pressure they felt at having to respond creatively to an open brief. Having conducted our workshops, we have been able to clearly see how building models of stuckness proved an invaluable 'unblocker' for students. What we also discovered, to our surprise, was that issues of liminality troubled most of them. In particular, they felt caught between old and new ways of knowing, thinking, and practising, unable to venture forward. This might be illustrated metaphorically in terms of the sense of having left a safe haven (former certainty) and not quite having reached a solid shore or horizon (revised thinking, new clarity). To help with this, we devised activities that helped participants re-imagine the problem as a natural stage of the process, not just as a negative.

In feedback forms, students remarked that they had been able to "gather things that don't normally mesh together" and had become "more aware of why/where creative blocks happen." In addition, they talked about the value of having "a dialogue with the 'problem' rather than trying to run away from it" and using physical media (LEGO) unrelated to their subject to see where else it took them. I mentioned earlier the need to build by rummaging through the bricks, rather than planning in advance, to see what ideas were triggered. As a result (in these and other workshops), what students thought they might do, and what they actually built and said, often took them by surprise. This same kind of surprise helped them feel their way – literally and metaphorically – towards freeing themselves from stuckness.

b) Doctoral student induction

This three-hour session is run with two groups of 30 in a week-long programme for new PhD students. Situated towards the end of the week, it introduces them to the requirement for personal development planning as part of the PhD and the Researcher Development Framework. The session is effectively in two parts (although strong connections are made between the two), starting with a mixture of approaches to, and resources for, professional development planning (PDP). Then we move into constructing metaphorical models with LEGO in order to explore ideas around research and metacognition. Here I will concentrate on the second half of the workshop.

I foster the metaphorical mood by inviting participants to map out how they got here in literal and metaphorical senses: their actual journey to the session and the life-route that led them to their PhD. (This mapping activity has been gratefully adapted from a 'Creative Research Methods' workshop in London, attended in 2013). We consider why and how metaphors might be useful in the research process, that is, for helping students to interrogate, view, and configure their data in different ways. To illustrate Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) point that metaphor is the stuff of the everyday, we generate endless research metaphors: drilling into data, plotting, mapping the territory, uncovering stuff, fine tuning our questions, exploring uncharted waters, and putting markers in the sand. Other metaphors have a PDP inflection – the need to hone skills, clear heads, weigh up options, juggle competing interests and hope for at least one light-bulb moment. The whole experience of writing/producing the PhD is already feeling to most of them like a mountain to climb, bridge to cross, window of opportunity. Having embedded this sense of the metaphorical, participants build in response to one of a series of questions, such as:

> What would you like to have achieved with your PhD by the time it is finished?
> How can you envisage what you would like your research to be like (three dimensionally)?
> What is concerning you most at this point in time (or absorbing your attention) with regard to your PhD?
> Why is it important to you to be embarking on your PhD, and what in particular matters the most to you at this point in time?
> How do you feel about your research question/topic?
> What worries/excites you most about taking on this question?

What is interesting about feedback received to date is what it tells us about learner expectations. Although all participants on this course are embarking on a Creative Arts PhD, using LEGO to explore their thinking comes as something of a shock. Even though they already use visual and tactile techniques to their creative practice, applying them to review plans and progress was new. Evaluations emphasised the novelty of the approach in terms of exploring creativity, and visualizing projects and intentions. It also helped them understand how PDP relates to the PhD and also with increasing confidence. At this level of study there is a risk that something playful or outside the perceived norms might appear patronising. This risk is greater in that only half the time is dedicated to building, which could negatively impact on insight, depth and relevance. It is, however, possible to manage this successfully, as the following feedback shows:

> Excellent background, great informed, fun delivery, but weighted in strong theory so very enlightening

> …I was very surprised about the efficacy of visualizing issues and creating LEGO models based on them.

> Found it to be a powerful experience … really great at demonstrating how useful and important it is to look at problems from different perspectives and tackle them in creative ways.

c) EMBA consultancy project

Another example of using LEGO at postgraduate level is a workshop as part of an Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA, Fashion). The course handbook describes this as "aimed at senior managers/executives currently working in fashion and related industries and designed around the developmental needs of the individual." It operates on a low-residency model of delivery, which means short, intensive blocks of face-to-face tuition interspersed with longer periods of online and independent study. The final unit of the course is a 60-credit consultancy project, and the basis on which the qualification is awarded. It focuses on research or an in-depth enquiry into a specific organization, integrating advanced levels of academic knowledge and professional management thinking.

A three-hour LEGO workshop was introduced to give participants creative space to think about how they might bring their project proposals to fruition. In the session they constructed models of their project and identified challenges, opportunities and risks. They were able to map out a landscape that included people and factors influencing their success, and visualise the client relationship. A note here: the course recruits participants internationally who are already performing high-level professional roles concurrently with study. While their project is clearly highly relevant, it is feasible that they might have found a half-day with LEGO a strange use of their time. Instead, they found it provided an essential space to share their proposals collaboratively and benefit from each other's observations and input. They also appreciated the chance to voice any of the concerns, hopes or speculations they had about their endeavours. This shows that you can combine playful methods with high-stakes activity, but not at the expense of high standards or the credibility of the academic level.

d) Make it at LCF

This course is a ten-day transition course designed by my colleagues Terry Finnigan and Diana Aronstam to support students progressing from London College of Fashion (LCF) further education (FE) courses onto our degrees. It includes activities to help participants flex their study muscles in terms of working in teams and presenting a group project (a customer profile for perfume). However, the main purpose of the programme is to make a social bridge between the FE and HE experiences. The LEGO workshop is an essential means of helping the students feel comfortable meeting, talking to, and working with, new people. Its democratic structure helps them realize that everyone has something to contribute. It is deliberately timetabled on the first day, before the dust has settled on their enrolment papers, and helps with the transition into the unknown of HE. They can construct models of their expectations of university, their hopes and fears, and of what they think they can offer. Feedback from participants has emphasized how helpful it has been as both an ice breaker (in the more profound sense of the term) for meeting their group members, but also finding the confidence to build, share and speak with next to no warning.

Each course has somewhere between 35 and 45 participants, working in groups of eight or so around large tables. While I lead the workshop I draft in and brief helpers, as, while I can give directions from the front, I cannot join every conversation. The helpers each look after a table, listen to the stories, encourage questions and help keep listening and attention focused. An important point to make for this and other workshops is that building and sharing LEGO models is often an emotional experience. This does not mean everyone cries, although tears are known, but a whole gamut of emotions may surface. This is because people are talking

about things that really matter to them. The first year this course ran was notable for the lack of confidence and uncertainty many of the participants demonstrated. They built and shared models that expressed, frankly, their fear and bewilderment on the brink of their tertiary education. Many of them confessed to their sneaking suspicion that they had either been accepted in error or were not up to the task. (Stephen Brookfield (2006) has written eloquently of his own sense of impostership, despite a consistently outstanding career.) Working through these feelings through building can be highly cathartic, and with the focus on the model not the person, can offer detachment from difficult issues.

e) Personal and professional development (PPD)/reflection

I have written about this workshop in greater detail in chapter six of *Engaging imagination: helping students become creative and reflective thinkers* (James and Brookfield 2014). However, I want to include it as, thanks to some brave course leaders who were keen to experiment, it started the ball rolling. In brief, this half-day session, timetabled at the end of the academic year, is part of a three-prong 'attack' on reflection. It runs with year zero international students taking a preparatory fashion course, as a progression route to undergraduate study. The first prong is a LEGO workshop where students evaluate their learning year; they construct newness, change, culture shock, challenges, skills, attributes and much more. The second prong is a video diary in which they review the workshop using Brookfield's (2014) Critical Incident Questionnaire (at the end of the LEGO session). The third prong is a summative written evaluation, completed two weeks later. The combination of the reflective elements has proved a powerful tool for helping students grasp – and even enjoy – the process of reflecting and deepen the quality of their thinking, whether articulated verbally or in writing.

Its success also reiterates my earlier point about creative teaching and the Creative Arts. In our creative practice we expect to work with multisensory and multimodal approaches; yet when we ask students to reflect we tend to insist on writing (James 2013; James and Brookfield 2014). I am not in the least anti-writing. Many students write wonderful, thoughtful, honest reflections, but a number of them do not. We know that reflection is often the part of their courses that our students are least inspired by. Some of their self-appraisals are half-hearted or cynical, scribbled out with minimum energy and interest. Their practice is what truly inspires and energises them and evaluating their learning seems a tedious activity to keep their tutors quiet. If we believe, and I do, that reflecting effectively and meaningfully on learning is an enriching process, then we have to find ways to make it so. There are many creative approaches to reflection – annotated sketchbooks, decorated blogs, collages, films and so on (James and Brookfield 2014). However, I believe we can still do more to motivate students by ensuring it is taught creatively.

Using LEGO and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY techniques has helped make this happen. It has made them better at drilling into observations rather than contenting themselves with generic statements about personal growth and learning gains. At first their model may be described too simply: a bridge over water from one land to another with sharks circling underneath may be labelled 'my journey from there to here'. However, it can easily be elaborated through probing (but gentle) questioning. These might cover what the sharks signify, the nature of the bridge, the look and feel of the water, the differences between the two kinds of land, the bricks and colours chosen, and so on. If important realisations have been left out of the model first time around, these can be coaxed out and the details added in. Students have found discussing models helpful in terms of language acquisition but also of confidence, as the focus is on the model, not on them speaking.

Pitfalls and prizes

I hope by this stage in the report that I have made the potential of these activities clear. To me, the prizes include good group interaction, bonding, problem-solving, pleasure, fresh possibilities, motivation, clear and re-energised thinking. In every workshop I do, the act of building and sharing serves to bring people together, forge bonds and make connections in some way (not always, and not everyone, in case this sounds too evangelical). However, an impact in terms of positive relationships, improved understanding as to where

someone is coming from or what is important to him or her is visible and marked. These and other benefits outweigh any difficulties, however some can present themselves, and they need to be managed.

Where problems occur they are most likely to involve resistance of some kind (James and Brookfield 2014). This may be because of:

> a lack of choice in attending (most participants who are obliged to attend come round to the idea but occasionally one or two will not);
> a fear that it will be a waste of time (and there are too many other pressing things to attend to);
> self-consciousness or a fear of being made to look silly (building with children's toys may sound inappropriate for HE);
> a lack of confidence in their own creativity and being judged on it (having had my own creativity squashed at secondary school I can relate to this, even though it was revived eventually).

As with any good facilitation or teaching, most of these concerns can be addressed. Fears about judgement and looking silly are dispelled by reassurance that no one can do it wrong. The models are the medium, but the ideas, conversations and connections are the important things. (The models do appeal too.) Getting involved in the activities so that they speak for themselves is often the swiftest way to convince people that they have value. The 'serious' part of the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY title helps – finding that the activities are useful for real needs and big issues. Sometimes it is helpful to explain some of the broader pictures (high profile users) or provide examples of where they have been used successfully. All of these things help people who have been told to attend get past any resentment. Infrequently, one or two participants have remained unmoved by the experience. However, this has not stopped them seeing how much others have got out of it. One of them still asks me to run workshops for her students as, "they love it even if I don't."

There are two further points for facilitators to consider. One is about timing. I have learned to my cost if I try to fit in a LEGO activity in too short a space of time, it may not be insightful. In such a situation participants may leave happy but unaware that the process can be much more profound and rewarding. So I have learned to tailor activities carefully, and turn down invitations to do "tasters". The other relates to the potential for powerful conversations to trigger emotional responses in participants. I am often asked if I have encountered behaviours or situations (perhaps with vulnerable individuals) that I am not equipped to address. To date this has not been my experience, perhaps because no one is ever asked to build or share anything they do not want to reveal. The ownership of topic as well as meaning resides entirely with the builder.

Conclusion

I am conscious as I close this report that it has been impossible to fully cover all aspects of my practice. I have tried to balance the theoretical, generic and specific to make a robust case for how these activities might contribute to transformative student experiences. With only five examples I have given the merest suggestion of what might be attempted but hope they will set you on the road. If you think you have a complex subject or question that might lend itself to a LEGO-based enquiry, I would advise you to try it out. You will need to plan out carefully how you might explore it, and why, remembering how important the design of your questions will be. If possible, I would recommend undertaking facilitator training. However, this report, its resources, and others that are available to you should enable you to design activities with LEGO and derive benefit from them. If its contents interest you, you can also join the LEGO in HE Community which has been launched this year and which can be found here: **https://plus.google.com/communities/103994615424006154336**. I hope to see you there.

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