The Serious Use of Play and Metaphor: Legos and Labyrinths

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors wish to examine kinesthetic forms of learning involving the body and the physical realm. The authors look at two particular techniques: using Legos to build metaphorical models and living the physical experience of metaphors in the shape of labyrinth-walking and its attendant activities. The authors begin by discussing their experiences using LEGO building bricks as a reflective tool. While LEGO lends itself particularly effectively to metaphorical modeling (not least through its status as a globally known iconic toy and connection to childhood) the process can take place using any set of objects that are used to represent something other than their real nature. This will be apparent to anyone who has sat at in a restaurant and used the salt and pepper cellars to describe a relationship, car maneuver, choice between two options, altercation or offside rule in Soccer. Buttons, sticks, candles, pots, peas, matches, or any other assortment of items which the user finds sufficiently rich to embody their ideas and convey their intentions work just as well. The point is that the user assigns specific meanings to the materials to illustrate some sort of process or relationship.

Keywords: Creativity, Legos, Labyrinths, Metaphor, Play, Reflection

THE CONCEPT OF LEGO SERIOUS PLAY

The name ‘LEGO’ is an abbreviation of the two Danish words “leg godt”, meaning “play well”, described on a Lego-related discussion list as the company’s name and ideal. Play is not just about amusing oneself but about developing understanding and communication. Developed in 1996 by Kjeld Kirk Kristiensen, the owner of LEGO, and Bart Victor and Johan Roos, professors at the Swiss business School IMD, Lego Serious Play’s (hereafter referred to as LSP) purpose was to generate more engagement, imagination and playfulness in staff meetings. Since then it has been adopted by numerous high profile organizations (Google, eBay, The International Red Cross, Roche and NASA are some examples) as a business development process and alternative to traditional planning meetings (see also Nolan, 2009).

An important distinction between traditional meetings and the Lego approach is that no business decisions are taken during the serious play. The operational side of matters is attended to outside the metaphorical modeling.
experience. In this way the creative engagement with the process – thinking outside the bricks, rather than the box, perhaps, or certainly through them – is not diluted or stunted by getting functional jobs done. In previous years the process was restricted to an official training course offered by LEGO in either Denmark or the USA that involved annual accreditation fees. More recently LEGO has made the LSP technique and sets of bricks available as open source materials for broader adoption. The intent is for the physical building process to unblock habitual thinking patterns that prevent solutions from emerging.

Serious play is not the building of literal models, but rather constructing metaphorical and symbolic creations that represent people, issues, events and moods, among other things. Of equal importance to building, and almost impossible to extricate from the activity, is the ensuing discussion of how different models connect with each other, and how they can be adjusted. It is important to build models with fingers first, rather than to design in your head and then build with fingers. As the nerve endings situated in your fingers send messages to your brain, you are literally thinking through your fingers during the building process.

There is a similarity here to creativity in music or art in which the physical enactment of the art (the feel of the brush on canvas or the fingers hitting the keyboard) is a crucial kinesthetic element of the craft. As a songwriter, Stephen finds songs are crafted as his fingers hit the guitar strings, the sounds of pickups and amps change, and his hands move around the fret board. He does not start with the song in mind – it emerges from the kinesthetic engagement with wood, wire and electricity. We learn through our senses and our thinking is formed through sensory engagement. When our senses are engaged differently, so our responses to the world change. In line with the learning-by-doing ethic in health care, engineering, sport, and creative arts, LSP posits that learning is deeper and more personal when we make something and that the mind learns best and retains more when people are actively engaged.

SERIOUS PLAY IN ACTION

Let’s turn to a concrete example of LSP in action for 130 international students on a Diploma course designed to prepare them for progression to a UK fashion course with a design, business or media orientation. In this introductory course LSP was used to help students make sense of the experience of studying abroad. It was part of an innovative program intended to engage students through drawing, visual research and professional practice, and to introduce them to concepts of cultural and historical theory as well as more traditional academic components of study. The overwhelming majority of students did not speak English as a first language, and they came from a broad range of countries – China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Korea, Europe, as well as the USA and Australia.

The context for the specific use of Lego building was a three-hour workshop run by Alison on personal and professional development, in which students reflected on how they had grown and changed during their study abroad, and how their abilities, dispositions and relationships had evolved. LSP was applied at a time of student transition when the participants were coming towards the end of their preparatory studies and needing to consider options and next steps.

Students were split into groups of 10-12 and the workshops ran over a period of five weeks, in a big studio in the East End of London. When students arrived in the studio a large oval table was set up with an array of colored bags with drawstrings, full of an assortment of every kind of Lego brick – straight, bendy, animal, vegetable, and mineral. Students were instantly drawn by a gentle rumbling in the corner to a large white portable Pod structure, which would be the home of their video reflections at the end of the workshop. They were intrigued by the strangeness of it all, with one or two looking a little apprehensive. As the workshop leader Alison was inevitably concerned with how using metaphor would work with different levels of English language capability, and how students might react to being thrust back to their
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