

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Simon Osborne, 'Get me out of here! Why escape rooms have become a global craze', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/apr/01/get-out-how-escape-rooms-became-a-global-craze>

<sup>2</sup> Ina Pruegel, 'Cambridge Codebreakers: Developing a Codebreaking Adventure Across 4 Museums', University of Cambridge Museums & Botanic Garden Collections In Action blog: <https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2018/03/02/cambridge-codebreakers-developing-a-codebreaking-adventure-across-4-museums/>

## Biography

**Lizz Edwards-Waller** is a library assistant at the Squire Law Library, where she has worked since 2017, providing support and resources for students on the LLM and MCL course programmes. Prior to joining the Squire Law Library, Lizz completed a Graduate Traineeship at the University of Essex - Albert Sloman Library and worked for several years as a member of the Reader Services team at Cambridge University Library.

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# Using Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> in Higher Education with Law Students: Encouraging Playfulness and Creativity within Library Workshops

**Abstract:** The following article began life as a ten-minute presentation titled 'Building student engagement brick by brick; using Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> to explore subject engagement in HE', presented at BIALL's 2020 virtual conference on 12 June 2020. Since 2016 I have been incorporating Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> (LSP) within my practice as an academic librarian at Middlesex University. This article will explore how I have embedded LSP into workshops with students and staff, the tactics employed to gain acceptance for using LSP within academic settings and offering some tentative predictions on whether playful approaches will be successful in the current Higher Education (HE) landscape, dominated as we currently are by virtual learning and screen technologies.

**Keywords:** universities; law students; legal research skills

A history of Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> (LSP) will offer some insights as to how the approach came to be, alongside a personal account of what this could mean for more traditional approaches to academic librarianship and student learning.

## HOW DO YOU FANCY A DAY IN CAMBRIDGE?

In 2016 I had been working at Middlesex University for less than 6 months when my line manager drew my

attention to a day-long event being held at the University of Cambridge. The workshop was an exploration of playful techniques to engage students in HE. After the briefest of chats, it was settled and myself and two colleagues were confirmed to spend a pleasant day in Cambridge, using various mediums and being generally creative. A few weeks later I arrived at Cambridge, nervous but ready to engage. Eight hours later, heading home on the train, I can still recall scribbling down ideas for how I could use these freshly discovered creative approaches, enthused, wide-eyed and slightly wild-brained, but ready to try something genuinely new with students for the first time in a number of years. The first thing required to make this work was Lego<sup>®</sup>, and lots of it.

On returning to work it was rumoured that the university already had Lego<sup>®</sup> and this did indeed turn out to be true. I found boxes of the stuff, unopened in a small department that needed space and was therefore very happy for me to take it back to the library. The next step was to reflect on what I'd learned during the day in Cambridge and to formulate a plan for how I could make this work at Middlesex.

## WHAT HAD I LEARNED IN CAMBRIDGE?

The day had focussed on the use of Lego<sup>®</sup> within educational settings, more specifically introducing participants to a method called Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup>. At its simplest the method is built around a procedure called the 'Core Process'<sup>1</sup>. The 'Core Process' consists of four distinct phases or elements:

- The Challenge or Question; participants are posed a problem to which there is no one correct solution.
- Construction; using Lego<sup>®</sup> pieces, participants build a model, designed to answer the question posed.
- Sharing; in turn, participants explain what their model represents to the other participants, who can ask questions of the builder.
- Reflection; a final round of reflective insights is encouraged from the facilitator, who may ask follow up questions or highlight themes of the models being made.

All Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> workshops are constructed around this four-stage core process, although typically the questions posed for participants become more challenging as sessions progress. Nevertheless, the cycle of question, construct, share, reflect, is at the heart of the method<sup>2</sup>.

A time limit is enforced for each model or construction. The rationale for this is to simply make participants get on with the task, to not overthink it, or, as one facilitator put it, 'don't have a meeting with yourself'.

The increasing levels of complexity are systematised into seven distinct layers or 'Application Techniques (AT)'. These seven ATs include, at their simplest, the building of individual models, but can culminate with the

collective building of complicated systems, incorporating many individual models.

## YOU HAVE A QUALIFICATION IN LEGO<sup>®</sup>?

For the 12 months following my initial exposure to LSP, I conducted a few sporadic sessions with students studying science, education and translation at Middlesex University. The feedback was very encouraging, but I was aware that as facilitator, I was not really sure of whether I was doing this properly or not. I used YouTube as a source for 'how to facilitate an LSP session' but that felt somewhat limited so I applied to become a trained facilitator. At this point it is important to acknowledge the tremendous support I've received from the individuals who make up the library management team at Middlesex. Without their attitude of 'try it and see what happens', I would never have had the chance to explore this possibility in the first place. But I was fortunate and the week-long course was subsequently paid for, attended and passed. It remains one of the most extraordinary weeks of employment I've been lucky enough to experience: twelve-hour days, continual cross-examination of motives and meanings, many disagreements and ten forceful personalities in a small room. By the end of the final day I was exhausted but qualified as a Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> facilitator.

## WHAT IS THE RATIONALE BEHIND LSP?

LSP exploits a number of universal human characteristics and repurposes them towards a distinct creative output. The first of these is our love of narrative and storytelling. In LSP sessions, participants are encouraged to build models and then tell the story of those models. Metaphors and similes are encouraged but not insisted upon. Metaphor is often employed as a linguistic shortcut, a way to tell the story more directly<sup>3</sup>. However, it is made clear that a brick can represent anything that the builder wishes. It is entirely in the hands of the builder to define their own model; furthermore, discussion amongst participants as to what else the model could represent is not permitted. In my role as facilitator, I often find myself using the phrase 'it is what you say it is'. This is a key element of LSP; whereas asking questions of the builder is encouragement, counter definitions of the models are not. Through this, ownership of the ideas or thoughts, or feelings which the builder intended, becomes paramount.

A further important element of the perceived success of LSP is the notion of the flow state<sup>4</sup>. The concept of flow focusses on the idea of a task being designed for optimum engagement, where an activity is just hard enough to keep the learner fully directed and goal oriented. This flow state is what LSP aims to induce. If a task is too easy, the learner is insufficiently challenged; too hard and the learner becomes discouraged. Therefore, it is vital that the facilitator sets clear

instructions on what is expected, even though those instructions may be open to individual interpretation.

The last definable aspect of LSP concerns embodied cognition, or 'hand knowledge'<sup>5</sup>. At its simplest, this theorises that 'thinking' can take place in areas other than the brain. LSP repurposes this idea and suggests there are occasions when our hands are aware of our intentions prior to the conscious mind. The human hand is so supremely well designed to manipulate small objects and make things, that it is little surprise participants can build models within minutes, having never played with Lego<sup>®</sup> before<sup>6</sup>. Whilst acknowledging that embodied cognition feels counterintuitive, in LSP sessions this plays out when offering the instructions 'if you don't know what to build, build anyway'. In this way, participants are encouraged to just connect bricks until ideas form consciously. The idea of trusting your instincts is powerful when it becomes clear that a participant has moved from the intuitive or tentative stage to a purposeful, driven phase, clear in their mind what the model represents.

## ISN'T IT JUST PLAYING WITH BRICKS?

Well, yes and no. LSP is certainly playful and students often report that sessions are fun to take part in. But for a session to have succeeded, something new needs to have been learned. Play for the sake of play absolutely has its place, indeed some theorists would argue that pure 'play' is all that is required<sup>7</sup>. The difference between an LSP workshop and a more traditional library workshop is that the concept of learning is solely defined by the participants, not the person leading the session. Furthermore, LSP offers participants learning about self in addition to external factors. Many theorists have pointed out that learning, and play are not discrete entities and do in fact complement each other quite happily.

On discovering the existence of LSP, I quickly discovered that theories of play and playfulness were being employed in ever increasing numbers at a considerable number of institutions in the UK<sup>8</sup>. Academics were specialising in play and applying to particular areas of their practice<sup>9</sup>. Middlesex already had a vibrant approach to playful approaches and learning and almost without realising it, I had joined this community.

## WHAT DOES THE FACILITATOR DO?

Facilitating LSP workshops is the hardest task I've performed since becoming an academic librarian. It is also, by some distance, the most fun I've ever had since beginning my career in HE, 20 years ago. The facilitator is there to encourage certain behaviours and curtail others. Of the behaviours you wish to encourage, the most important is mutual respect and empathy for what your fellow participants are making. Without that respect, the sessions would not work. The facilitator can also ask

questions concerning what participants have made. This can take the form of general questions, 'is there any significance to the colour scheme of your model?' - to more specific enquiries, 'can you explain what this particular brick represents?' The skill comes in knowing when to probe for more details and when to desist questioning. I can only say that experience makes a better facilitator.

A further aspect of facilitating groups is trying to avoid the element of competition. The meaning behind a model is far more important than the apparent complexity of the finished build. I will explain how I address this issue shortly when I describe the models which participants build in a typical workshop.

## HOW DOES THIS WORK IN PRACTICE?

There is no universal process which leads to me facilitating law students in an LSP workshop. However, typically the process starts with an approach from a lecturer who has identified a problem or issue with a student cohort. This issue can be focussed around a particular forthcoming assignment, a general issue with engagement or a problem with group dynamics.

After my LSP facilitator short course, I was determined to repay the time and funding which had been offered, by organising workshops as soon as possible. With this in mind, I decided to engage the law department directly by organising an LSP workshop for lecturers. My approach was 'show them how it works, don't just tell them'. A few weeks later it was arranged for me to conduct a three-hour LSP workshop with 12 law lecturers in order to convince them the approach had merit. Whilst confidentiality precludes me from describing any of the models which were built, the lesson plan of builds I had compiled included 'build a model to represent your particular legal area of expertise', 'build a model to represent HE' and 'build a model to represent the ideal student'. The program of builds were designed to be playful, to provoke and to encourage the sharing of ideas.

The strategy broadly worked well. The lecturers really enjoyed seeing what each other had built and they appreciated the creativity of their colleagues. As an advertisement for the inherent nature of humans' ability to construct and tell stories, it was certainly a success. In the months that followed I was contacted by lecturers (some of whom were not at the workshop but had subsequently received positive reviews of the event) to conduct a number of sessions.

As many academic librarians will readily confirm, getting access to students in order to support them is often half the battle. The timetables are tight with little room for manoeuvre. My strategy, along with winning over the lecturers first, is to incorporate playfulness and play-focussed activity into every possible workshop or promotion opportunity where students are present.

For me, in a typical year, this starts as soon as term begins with Welcome Week. I introduce who I am during these introductory sessions by distributing small bags of

Lego® to random students in the lecture theatre. My instructions simply say 'build a duck' from the 7 bricks on offer. At the conclusion of my 10-minute introduction to library services, I collect the ducks and whilst parading them before the students, use the variability in the models as a metaphor for the variability in what they will ultimately produce in their work. This activity is not strictly LSP, but it is a reason to explain that I will work with them in workshops using Lego®, if they wish it. In these events, sowing the seeds that the library offers interesting learning opportunities counts as success.

## WHAT DO THE STUDENTS ACTUALLY DO IN A LEGO® WORKSHOP?

Following the initial discussion with the lecturer, I will spend some time constructing a draft of proposed models to build. The number of models in total and the eventual complexity hoped for, will be dictated by a number of distinct factors. These factors will include the following:

- The approximate number of participants
- The amount of time on offer
- The set-up of the room
- The hoped-for eventual outcome

In essence, those are the key ingredients when attempting to construct a successful LSP workshop. I need to expand on each point to fully explain their interconnected importance.

The first two points, time and the number of participants, are very closely related. The ideal number of participants for an LSP workshop is between 8 and 12. This number offers significant opportunity for interaction between participants, whilst maintaining a level of intimacy conducive to sharing. There have been a number of occasions where I've had to limit the number of participants to a workshop. This has often been a difficult conversation but it is important to acknowledge that LSP is not designed to work in a lecture theatre. It is, at its heart, a small group activity.

The length of time on offer for a workshop does dictate what can meaningfully be achieved. When first looking to promote LSP at Middlesex I said 'yes' to every available opportunity, even when the time slots on offer were unworkably short. Put simply, it is not possible to achieve anything significant with LSP in less than one hour. The reason for this is straightforward; it is a leisurely process which requires time to develop. You cannot ask participants to build complex ideas until they are comfortable with the basic principles. I have become adept at saying 'no' to requests for workshops, most often because the timeslot on offer would be counter-productive to any significant learning occurring.

The first thing I do after agreeing to a workshop is visit the room where it is to take place. Ideally the room needs to be larger than adequate with ample room for

participants to move around. Individual desks do not work so the furniture matters too; either one big table (these parameters may clearly need to change, post-COVID) or a series of island-style tables with 4–6 participants on each. Also, the fewer gaps between tables the better, as I spend a lot of time on my hands and knees picking up Lego®!

An intended prearranged outcome when using LSP is antithetical to the approach. The method offers opportunities for exploration, hypothesis testing or unexpected realisations. But LSP doesn't come with pre-stated learning aims, because fundamentally, the content is provided by the participants, not the facilitator. The facilitator may pose a question, such as 'build a model to represent something that prevented you from studying last year?' In building that model, the student may uncover new knowledge about themselves, providing an opportunity to learn and do things differently.

This uncertainty of outcomes is why negotiating with lecturers regarding content for workshops can occasionally be problematic. If lecturers have previous experience of being a participant in an LSP workshop, it is understood that pre-set learning outcomes are inconsistent with the approach being proposed. One major decision which does need to be addressed in the plan of what participants will build, is the question of whether the workshop will move from individual models, to participants building collectively. If time allows, asking participants to build a collective model in the later stages of a workshop, is a powerful tool. LSP states that 'when we build with our hands, we build with our minds'<sup>10</sup>. During feedback, students often state that physically connecting individual models together to create what LSP refers to as 'a landscape', is the enduring learning experience from workshops.

## HOW DO I BUILD A LEGO® DUCK?

The plan of builds themselves always starts the same way. Each participant is each given the same collection of bricks and asked to take no longer than 60 seconds to build a duck. I always start here because inevitably participants build different versions of ducks (some more obviously duck-like than others but that is irrelevant.) The message that I can convey via this task is that only the only opinion of the participant counts. Namely, it's a duck if you say it is.

Other early builds usually include building bridges or towers, primarily to demonstrate other aspects of LSP (size of build being unimportant compared to its meaning) before moving into builds which require a more metaphorical or story telling approach. It is usually at around 45 minutes into the session that the subject or task specific builds start to emerge. In the case of law this may involve asking participants to build a model to represent a particular area of law, the subject of their dissertation or something that they're struggling to understand. These broader themes will have been discussed with the module leader prior to the workshop being finalised.

A key aspect of any round of construction is the subsequent sharing of the meaning. Every participant, in

turn, will share what their model represents whilst everyone else listens. The sharing and listening element cannot be overstated in its importance. Indeed, some play theorists have stated that the need to connect with others is crucial<sup>11</sup>. For some students, this may be the first time they've ever spoken in class in front of their peers.

It is also important for me to set boundaries. Despite LSP being an emotional experience, I do need to make it clear that it is not therapy and I am not a therapist<sup>12</sup>. This is addressed via my instructions early on that if participants make something, they are expected to share its meaning. Oversharing of personal details is not encouraged. As non-traditional as LSP appears to be compared to other workshops, it is still an academically led learning experience and needs to be treated as such.

### THIS IS ALL VERY WELL BUT IS IT LIBRARIANSHIP?

I'm deliberately posing this question to expose one elephant, hiding within a full herd of elephants, that may be currently rampaging in the room. If your perception of academic librarianship is traditional; workshops are didactic, heavily structured, expert-led, then no, an LSP workshop is not librarianship. However, if your approach to learning is creative, egalitarian, messy and uncertain, then

I would offer a firm yes, creativity and playfulness being two sides of a beautifully imperfect coin.

I maintain that key point to make regarding creative approaches, whether they are escape rooms, artistic experiments or whatever currently unknown virtual developments inevitably emerge through enforced lockdown, is that students still need the 'traditional' help and support which librarians offer. LSP is a creative approach to problems, but it does not replace the requirement for students to know how to find cases or reference correctly. The investigative playfulness that LSP and associated approaches brings to the creative table are *as well as*, not *instead of*.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

The prospect of seeing a group of students sitting around the same table, building things and sharing Lego® bricks seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. Therefore, my current goal is to see whether virtual LSP is possible. The plan will involve a group Zoom, sterilised Lego® being posted to willing participants and a great deal of hope regarding wifi connections. The interesting thing for me will be to determine, through student feedback, whether the virtual experience can still create those positive feelings associated with sharing learning experiences.

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### Biography

**Alan Wheeler** began working in his first HE library in 2000 as a shelver. Since 2005 as a qualified librarian, he has supported many different subjects. At present, his duties are split between law and science at Middlesex University. Since 2017 he has been a Lego® Serious Play® facilitator and has presented workshops at universities and conferences, promoting playful approaches to learning and extolling the positives of creativity.