



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

PLAY? ARE YOU SERIOUS?

When the hands are engaged, so goes the mind.

A recent innovation in business and industry is now making its way into American classrooms. Based on research findings relative to the psychology of learning, LEGO Serious Play® is a methodology that can work with almost all types of learners in almost all types of situations because it combines cognitive vision and storytelling—a true experiential process.

Using the familiar Lego manipulatives in a college classroom might seem strange at first. However, this methodology is proving to be a hands-on, minds-on activity that produces deeper and meaningful understanding of a subject, situation, and/or problem to the learner.

The Lego approach uses imagination and play. It is based on social constructivism, a psychological concept of how one makes meaning of knowledge within a social context—a recognized aid to learning.

Psychologists working to advance research and theory about the use of visuals and manipulatives have found that using both augments knowledge and helps us decide on our actions. For example, studies have discovered that, even with eyes closed, people can remember visual and spatial representations, manipulate them, and make decisions about them.

Faculty, Staff, and Students

Lego methodology is a unique approach to opening learners' minds—helping students think about theoretical issues, share personal perspectives, master problems, and find a strategy for addressing those problems. College students who bring special challenges into the classroom can have unique experiences. "I have a learning disability; and when I'm using my Legos to understand, things become so clear to me now," said one student participating in a classroom demonstration in our Bridge Learning Community, an academic experience designed for first-semester, nontraditional adults seeking higher education.

Academic learning communities, like the one we have created here, need instructional models for

nontraditional students that are not intimidating and do not reflect negative experiences of their past. This technique benefits college learning communities because it essentially is "play," and play creates a sense of belonging and identity, emotional connections and shared experiences, and influence. As well, it fulfills individual needs of discovery.

Play is scientifically studied as a learning methodology at the beginning of life. Movement and object play are embedded in our being. Social connections (like friendships) and a sense of belonging are crucial to healthy growth and development. Play is also rough and tumble, celebratory and ritualistic. Storytelling and narrative make this technique integrative and creative. Students can enthusiastically think through theoretical issues and share personal perspectives by telling their own stories through visual engagement. The aim of any classroom project can be to introduce, experiment, develop self-awareness, and foster students' creative abilities in their complex worlds.

The Lego approach includes the principles of adult learning because it involves adults who:

- are free to direct themselves
- can connect their prior experiences to their learning
- clearly define goals
- see a reason for learning
- see how to apply knowledge and
- share respect about life experiences with others.

Inclusion and meaning are among the motivational conditions that research has shown can enhance adult motivation to learn. Students and their instructors are respected by and connected to one another by telling and hearing their stories.

What Is Your Biggest Need?

As faculty members, we have a long list of needs for making our classrooms more interesting and the experiences more valuable. The Lego methodology can help us journey into the world of metaphors. We can ask questions, challenge students to build metaphorical stories about issues, or work on concept mastery by



building metaphorical stories with LEGO bricks. So, for example, students can build their own metaphors (no copying allowed), give meaning to the models they create, and share the stories of their models with their classmates. In sharing aloud, students raise more questions, encourage individual students to dive deeper into their stories, provide further insight into the subject at hand, and perhaps move on to identifying patterns of thinking that might have to be modified.

Technique in Action

There are several ways to implement the Lego theory. One example of a useful activity is offered here.

Each person begins by building a tower that represents a visual of *success*, then explains to the group his or her definition of success and how this is represented by the tower. After all participants have told their stories, they dismantle their creations and rebuild them. This time each builds a model that shows where barriers or roadblocks that threaten success may be and what needs to be done about them in order to achieve success.

Students and staff find it helpful to take pictures of each step in the process to remind them of the process they created. After sharing and picture taking, participants build a model of what they think they need to eliminate the roadblocks and barriers to success. Then, after sharing and picture taking again, participants are asked to build a final model of their future without the roadblocks and barriers.

This methodology is based on the belief that there is a vast supply of untapped human potential in organizations and schools. Individuals living and working in them must develop the skills necessary for resolving many of the most serious issues they face through imaginative play.

Renee Shull, *Adjunct Professor, Organizational Behavior*
Charlene A. Lutes, *Director, Bridge Learning Community*

For further information, contact Renee Shull at Western Michigan University, 2200 Dendrinos Drive, Suite 200-H, Traverse City, MI 49684; or Dr. Charlene Lutes at Northwestern Michigan College, 1701 E. Front Street, Traverse City, MI 49686. Emails: renee.shull@wmich.edu and clutes@nmc.edu