



The Serious Business of Playing with Lego

There are few emotions that equal the excitement of sitting before a mountain of Lego bricks. I can see them now – bright and glinting in the midday sun. A pile of potential. An afternoon well spent. I'll build castles and flowers and treehouses, using bricks of all shapes, sizes, and colours. But I must confess I've never thought about the potential utility of Lego as a tool for promoting positive research culture.

The Lego Serious Play taster session during the week of Research Culture celebrations at the University of Cambridge, might have just been my favourite event. There is something so incredibly disarming and comforting about sitting in a room of people you don't know with a pile of Lego to absent-mindedly play with. Our first challenge was simply to build a tower. Whatever tower we liked. Then we talked through our towers, throwing in some details like our names and job titles along the way. This got our creative juices flowing and prepared us for the slightly more involved questions. **Can you build a model to show your favourite part of your job? Can you build a model to show what toxic research culture looks like? Can you talk us through the things you've built?**

Lego Serious Play is based on the concepts of play, constructionism, hand–mind connection, and imagination¹. The idea is to construct in Lego while simultaneously deconstructing our own values and beliefs on complex topics like research culture. To use storytelling and metaphor to gain insight into our own thoughts and patterns of behaviour. When constructing a model to show toxic research culture I found myself building something small, an almost prison-like cell with one person stuck in the middle while eyes looked every way except at one another; a quite literal depiction of the phrase “not seeing eye to eye”. A model to highlight the isolation that can come when no-one in a lab feels connected, either academically or socially, meaning that good people and good ideas get ignored. If you had simply asked me what I think makes bad research culture,

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I'd have rhymed off all the reasons I know from academic texts. But I didn't build any of those. Instead, I built something that in retrospect seems surprising personal. And I did it comfortably in a room full of strangers. Why?

Well for starters because **I wasn't discussing the academic and sometimes intense subject of research culture. I was just building Lego.** That small switch made the conversation feel less like a competition for who could generate the optimal definition of research culture and find a fix to make all labs everywhere a heavenly place to work, and more like an exploration of my own opinions. No-one was aiming for technically accurate definitions, or pithy fixes, because we were constrained first and foremost by having to build something. This wasn't an essay or seminar. It was a low-pressure way to ensure everyone's personal thoughts and opinions could be heard and explored. It was a focus shift away from large and nebulous research culture topics to something smaller, more concrete, and perhaps no less impactful. The focus was also shifted to examine the models, rather than the people who built them. Everyone looked at my Lego when I spoke, and so I felt safely decentred even when discussing topics that were deeply personal. A focus on examining individual opinions on research culture in an environment where people felt safe to do so behind a tower of Lego that stood as a metaphor for their reflections.

Sadly, the taster session was over all too quickly, but **full-length sessions are now available** for free to labs working within the university. Half-day and full-day workshops are up for grabs if you'd like to take a slightly more playful approach to discussing research culture in your team. It might sound like fun and games, and it is, but as any toddler will remind you – it's a serious business playing with Lego.

Register your interest in a Lego Play session at [this link](#)



References

1. Harn, P.-L. & Hsiao, C.-C. A Preliminary Study on LEGO®-Based Workplace Stress Reduction with Six Bricks and LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® in Taiwan. *SERIOUS PLAY* 6, (2018).

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