

## **Everybody's monkey is important: LEGO® Serious Play® as a methodology for enabling equality of voice within diverse groups**

This paper explores the theoretical underpinning of the LEGO® Serious Play® methodology and highlights the affordances of the method in the context of eliciting thoughts and views within groups made up of a range of stakeholders. It provides insight into how LEGO® Serious Play® can be integrated into discursive research practices amongst stakeholders, in this case for International Education. The work reports on the application of the method in a workshop with participants, diverse in terms of gender, age, national and linguistic background, professional experience and seniority. The workshop explored and developed conceptions of International Education. The LEGO® Serious Play® method is shown to overcome some of the hierarchies and hegemonies, which can exist in such contexts, allowing equality of voice amongst participants, such that each expresses their views or opinions, which are given equal consideration and legitimacy. This resulted in high levels of engagement, which enabled the presentation, and inclusion, of a broad spectrum of ideas, as well as the development of a shared vision of research in the field of International Education. Findings in this paper show that the LEGO® Serious Play® method has enabled imaginative conceptualisations of the rationale, role and potential for research in International Education.

Keywords: LEGO® Serious Play®, Metaphor, International Education. Play, Creativity, Innovation

### **Introduction**

There is a quote, often attributed to Einstein, that “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result”. Whilst this is clearly untrue, insanity is a much more nuanced and complex concept, it does at least demonstrate the problem with continuing to explore contested topics, in this case International Education (IE), within the contexts, methods and structures which we have been using

for many years. If we want to gain new insights, we need to look for new methods of discourse, which engage all stakeholders in ways that challenge hegemonies (Gorski, 2008) instead of perpetuating old power structures.

Conventional collaborative group discussion environments, such as meetings or focus groups, can reproduce pre-existing dynamics and interactions. Clavering and McLaughlin (2007) discuss the fact that that much of the guidance on the use of focus groups suggests selecting participants to reduce hierarchies and cultural differences as a means of encouraging interaction. Barbour (2005) suggests that “homogeneous groups offer participants a relatively safe environment in which to share their experiences” (p. 743).

However, the very nature of exploring multi-faceted concepts, such as IE, requires that groups are not homogenous, by way of sex, age, national context or cultural background. As such, conventional approaches raise the paradox of trying to gain insights into individual views and experiences of a variety of stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, within the constraint of a methodological context which emphasises homogeneity. (Morgan, 1996a, McLafferty, 2004)

Focus groups are well established as a research method within educational research and the social sciences. They are particularly powerful for discourses, themes or identities constructed jointly by participants, in a group context (Hollander 2004; Morgan, 1996b; Munday, 2006). They are not, however, unproblematic. Sim (1998) considers the difficulty of inferring consensus from focus groups as any conformity might be seen as an emergent behaviour born of the group dynamic, and Hollander (2004) argues that focus groups are shaped by a number of social drivers which can lead to a lack of disclosure or strategic framing of narratives.

The aim of the LEGO® Serious Play® methodology is to change the nature of group interactions, to overcome the practices which present barriers to valorising the contributions of all participants in a way which promotes equality and demands that each stakeholder is heard. It provides an alternative method of eliciting opinions and perspectives, thereby avoiding some of the problems of more traditional groups identified earlier.

This paper will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the LEGO® Serious Play® method and its relevance in the current context. It will describe the method and its adaptation for IE, results will be presented and discussed in terms of what the LEGO® Serious Play® method brings to the discussions surrounding IE. The paper will make the case for LEGO® Serious Play® as a facilitation tool in contexts where more established discursive techniques are likely to lead to little new knowledge. The proposition within this paper is that the LEGO® Serious Play® method allows equality of voice amongst all participants in the process, resulting in high level of engagement, enabling the presentation and inclusion of a broad spectrum of ideas.

## **Background**

The methodology of LEGO® Serious Play® relies upon a number of theoretical underpinnings. It calls upon Seymour Papert's ideas of Constructionism (Papert, 1986), Vygotsky's (1962) ideas of language and thought, whilst also using ideas of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Schon, 1993), and expanding upon ideas of play and Serious Play. In this paper, these various concepts are combined to address the issue of eliciting authentic thoughts and ideas from a diverse group of participants when exploring the challenging topic of International Education (IE)

## ***Constructionism***

Constructionism shares with Piagetian Constructivism (Piaget, 1937), the idea that learning is developed through the building of knowledge structures and that the personal construction of understanding occurs through engagement with experiences. However, Papert's Constructionism extends this to the building of artefacts in the public domain, be they physical or theoretical (Papert and Harel, 1991).

There is recognition that the use of such an approach to learning and understanding may not suit all people. The current study accepts the Piagetian view that some people are better suited towards mentally manipulating symbolic objects in hypothetical environments rather than through the physical manipulation of artefacts. Nevertheless, Papert claims that there are those who are more likely to play with images or representations of their ideas, in-situ, connected, rather than abstracted from the ideas under consideration. For him, the projection of inner feelings is key to learning (Ackermann, 2001). LEGO® Serious Play® presents the opportunity for people to construct tangible, individual and shared understandings of complex ideas in an immersive and engaging environment, which helps shape their ideas and allows these to be communicated.

## ***Language and Thought***

The Vygotskian support for LEGO® Serious Play® is apparent in the domain of language and thinking (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The social-constructivist tradition stresses the importance of cultural artefacts, including most notably language, in developing cognitive potential. Language is seen as closely linked to thought, the development of each, in children, being interlinked. Language is presented as a symbolic system which helps with understanding of the world and which plays an important role in the development of thinking. From this perspective, the LEGO®

Serious Play® environment creates a context in which the language of thinking is changed from one's own language to a common language of LEGO® in a playful environment, with a renegotiation of the social rules allowing the emergence of a more reflective inner voice.

The playfulness of LSP is not to be neglected. When the child is at play, they are often in dialogue with themselves or others. In most circumstances such dialogue amongst adults is not sanctioned and the benefits of 'thinking aloud' are rarely realised.

### ***Play and Serious Play***

Serious play techniques have been introduced as research methodology over many years (Bekebrede, Lo and Lukosch, 2014; Evans and Palmer, 1989; Geithner and Menzel, 2016). Some techniques, such as role-play (O'Sullivan, 2011), are more established than others, although the extent to which they achieve the intention of unfettered play as 'serious play' is questionable as they can become formulaic whilst others, such as dance (Bagley and Cancienne, 2001), present an innovative shift in data representation. Such 'serious play' methods have been shown to elicit narratives and expressions not usually available using established methodologies (Gauntlett, 2007, McCusker, 2014, Nerantzi et al, 2015).

Serious play has been established as a set of activities and process which engender creativity and innovation (Gee, 2004; Stephenson, 1988). However, it is conceptualised in different ways across disparate domains, from business through to clowning (Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014; Peacock, 2009; Schrage, 1999). The way serious play is applied varies across these domains, it is presented by Schrage (1999) as a tool for innovation through rapid prototyping and modelling. Peacock (2009) talks of clowning as serious play, and Sylvander(1984), describes the process of searching for the 'inner clown' as an expression of inner feelings, echoing Papert's view of 'inner

voice'. Robert Rasmussen, an originator of LEGO® Serious Play®, presents it as a process of bringing the creativity and vitality within play, to serious matters (Rasmussen Consulting, 2012). Whilst these appear to present different versions of the idea of Serious play, they have commonality in that they all recognise the importance of play as a method of achieving a greater degree of authenticity, through a connection with emotions or intuitions. For young children, playing in ways which are unbounded by ego or social norms seems to be a simple and trivial exercise, for adults with their various constraints, this is a 'serious' task.

One of the underlying principles of the techniques of LEGO® Serious Play® is in creating a play state which allows authentic voices to emerge and be heard. To achieve this, LEGO® Serious Play® attempts to engender the child-like state of play, which is without boundary or ego and unconstrained by social norms or expectation (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). Serious play techniques require participants to put aside the usual barriers to expression and respond in a more uninhibited and unconstrained way. In LEGO® Serious Play®, this is expressed through establishing a 'flow' state of effortless engagement or action (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), where participants are building metaphorical models representing their experience or ideas (McCusker, 2014). This flow state, which the LEGO® Serious Play® method tries to create, is one in which the participant is fully absorbed in an activity to the extent that other concerns such as time, self-consciousness, or even hunger are of less significance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is through the loss of self-consciousness and immersion in the process that LEGO® Serious Play® workshops aim to elicit authentic opinions, ideas and identities for consideration and reflection within a wider group.

For some, the prescriptive approach to LEGO® Serious Play® workshops is seen as a contrast to play, as activities are rule bound and less aligned with ideas of free

play. However, whilst Huizinga (2014) makes the claim that freedom is a characteristic of play, he also recognises that play is intrinsically linked to rules and a challenging objective. As such, there is no conflict between these ideas of play and the activities which take place within a LEGO® Serious Play® workshop.

### ***Conceptual Metaphors***

Metaphor plays an important role in shaping the way we think about and describe difficult concepts. These can be particularly useful when considering things which we are trying to understand, in terms of things with which we are more familiar (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This shapes the language we use, the way we think and the possibilities we imagine, within what Schon (1993) calls 'generative metaphor'. However, this can also restrict our thinking especially where the metaphors are implicit or uncritical (Felouzis, Maroy and van Zanten, 2013; Robison, Schmid and Siles, 2002) and, as such, we end up with conceptual limitations associated with the metaphor rather than the issue at hand (e.g., historical conceptions of the brain as hydraulic, clockwork or electronic machine). Many of the issues surrounding consensus or resolution of complex social problems are embedded in the tacit and sometimes conflicting, metaphors which frame the thinking of various stakeholders. Participants may enter a discussion to address an issue which they do not all view in the same way. As such, they are in effect trying to find a single solution to a variety of different problems. Morgan (1997) suggests that organisations might use metaphors in design, planning and understanding as a means to uncover solutions 'we may not have thought possible before' (p.13) and that many of the concepts we hold are metaphorical in nature, even if we do not recognise them as such. The issue here then, is not with problem solving, but with problem setting (Schon, 1993).

One of the strengths of LEGO® Serious Play® is in its contribution to this problem setting. LEGO® Serious Play® invites participants to build physical representations of their ideas and place them within a landscape along with the models of their fellow participants. This allows metaphors to be made explicit and shared, therefore the relationships between ideas can be seen and made solid. The sharing process of the LEGO® Serious Play® method provides the opportunity for the reciprocal understanding of these metaphorical frames and allows diverse and discrete ideas to be brought together within the same space so that models can be united to create a single shared metaphor, in which all participants feel they have a stake. Thus, when they set about problem solving, they are at least addressing a problem which all participants recognise.

### ***International Education***

There is broad consensus on the need for International Education (IE), for a variety of reasons; including the diversity of educational drivers around the world, globalisation and increasing mobility and recognition of the importance of global perspectives in the social sciences (Crossley and Watson, 2009; Hoelscher, 2017; Takayama et al, 2017). However, despite this need and current measures being taken to meet it, there is yet an unclear conceptualisation of the idea and purpose of IE (Altbach and Knight, 2007). Current pedagogical practices in IE are diverse and do little to address this problem. Critics have noted they tend to perpetuate existing hierarchies and power dynamics (Gorski, 2008), so that the same dominant voices are most often heard and as such there is little development or discussion of the scope and purpose of IE.

### ***LEGO® Serious Play®***

Lego® Serious Play® is a strategic thinking tool, which creates a collaborative



communicative environment, which provides participants with the opportunity to express, share and develop their ideas. It was developed by the LEGO® organisation as a response to its need for creativity and imaginative thinking within their own business practices. Following a period of adaptation and development (Rasmussen Consulting, 2015), the method and associated techniques were put into the public domain as open-source material. This has led to a variety of implementations in a range of contexts.

There is a long running proposition in the social sciences that creative and visual methods have the potential to overcome the limitations of talk-based methods such as interviews and focus groups (Buckingham, 2009; Gattegno, 1969; Margolis and Pauwels, 2011). The motivation behind the development of at least some of these newer methods was to get beyond the unconsidered ‘set’ answers which participants are inclined to give in these environments, which do not allow time for reflective expressions (Gauntlett, 2007).

It is argued here that the openness of the LEGO® Serious Play® methodology allows participants’ equality of voice in an environment which encourages listening and the valorisation of diverse opinions. Within the current research, it is suggested that LEGO® Serious Play® as a research tool has the potential to support thinking and reflection in a non-hierarchical and participant-centered way (James, 2013), to elicit new narratives and facilitate new approaches to capacity building and agenda development in IE research.

The S-Play White Paper (Frick et al., 2013), provided a review of the practice of LEGO® Serious Play® within Europe at that time, in which it was apparent that despite its educational underpinnings, with some notable exceptions (James,2013; Nolan 2010), most of the reporting and research in the use of LEGO® Serious Play® was within commercial rather than educational environments. More recently, there has been

increased interest from academics and educators, with an emphasis on creative and innovative teaching methods and a more academic consideration of LEGO® Serious Play® in educational contexts (Barton and James, 2017; Nerantzi and McCusker, 2014; Hayes, 2016). Most often this is within Higher Education, perhaps reflecting a view that children are less adept at the use of metaphor (Cameron, 1996) as required by the LEGO® Serious Play® process.

### **Context of the Study**

The LEGO® Serious Play® workshop discussed here was held at a Comparative and International Education conference in North America, where questions about the role of IE were at the forefront of discussions. The challenge of the workshop was to elicit from participants, their views on the role and purpose of IE and IE research and for them to share these views and combine them into single shared models on which they could all agree. There are a small number of studies where LEGO® Serious Play® is used with multicultural groups, to develop teams (Gavrilova, 2015), but in none of these is it specifically used to as a means to overcome cultural divides or explore conceptions of the international.

### **Workshop principles**

Whilst the play aspect of LEGO® Serious Play® is an important component for successful workshops, this must also include an appropriate level of challenge. This balance of challenge and fun accords with much of the theory supporting game design and the use of games in education. Papert (2002) proposes the idea of ‘hard fun’ in which things are enjoyable precisely because they provide a challenge which is commensurate with the skills of the participants, such that interest and engagement are maintained. The LEGO® Serious Play® workshop is predicated on a cycle of allowing

participants to develop their skills, then face challenges, maintaining the interplay between challenge and boredom. This allows a rapid development of skill, facilitating the modelling of complex ideas and concepts within a relatively short time. This environment recreates those which are shown to allow learners to engage with play at a deep level (Jones 1998; Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004; Malone 1980) and creates the ‘flow’ state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In this state, participants are immersed in a ‘play’ environment which suspends many of the social and hierarchical constraints of their everyday environment.

Although all participants were familiar with building with LEGO®, their level of experience and familiarity was variable. However, the LEGO® Serious Play® workshops are structured, through a series of skills-building tasks, to constantly challenge the participants and in so doing maintain the tension between skills and challenge, central to the flow process. Initial warm up routines lead participants from basic building tasks (e.g. build a tower) through to more complex higher order tasks of building symbolic and metaphorical representations (e.g. build a model of how you see yourself as a researcher). The skills developed in the preliminary tasks are essential to main body of the workshops, where LEGO® is used to allow participants to build physical, three-dimensional, representations of intangible beliefs, conceptions, thoughts and perceptions.

Gauntlett and Thomson (2013) claim that within multicultural and multilingual environments, such as those explored in this study, LEGO® serves as a “universal bridge across language”, suggesting that some of the status or conversational barriers might be addressed. The principles of a LEGO® Serious Play® workshop require that everybody participates and that everybody is heard and, furthermore, when constructing a shared model, everybody’s thoughts are represented in the resulting model

(McCusker, 2014). These principles provide a particularly appropriate framework for the current workshop which involved a diversity of participants at an international conference for Comparative and International Education

## **Method**

### ***Workshop design***

The workshop consisted of 9 participants who volunteered to take part in a pre-conference workshop for a Comparative and International Education conference with a theme based on the consolidation of progress in the field and consideration of future developments. Participants were 3 men and 6 women and represented an internationally and linguistically diverse group of professional adults, working at different levels of seniority within a range of organisations associated with IE, including NGOs, educational institutions and the private sector.

It is recognised that this group was selective in terms of the section of educational and social privilege which resulted in their attendance at international conference and no claim is made that this represented a true cross-section of all stakeholders. Whilst this was a small, self-selecting sample, interested in the idea of the workshop and as such might raise issues of typicality. However, Alexander (2000) makes the point that if the research processes are sufficiently probing, then such samples have the potential to tell us much about the wider context. The level of insight which LEGO® Serious Play® affords supports this proposition with this sample, giving insight into a diverse population of those invested in research and development in International Education.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the workshop, the associated research programme and the level of anonymity which would be afforded. Consent was

sought from all participants for the use of the research data presented here and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage.

Given the range of perspectives of IE identified by Altbach and Knight (2007), the aim of the first part of the workshop was to elicit ideas of International Education and find a way of combining these ideas into a single shared narrative. From this, the second part of the workshop was aimed at developing a shared vision of the future of research in IE. The workshop was designed followed a structure outlined by McCusker and Swan (2018). One of the key principles within this structure, was that the models and metaphors belonged to the builder. As such, whilst other participants were allowed to ask questions about the model, they were not allowed to imply or infer any meaning of the model other than that which the builder stated. Questions were restricted to the model rather than the individual and the builder only spoke about the model. This structure serves to physically shift the centre of the discussion away from the speaker, which often allowed a less self-conscious narrative to emerge.

Participants went through a series of increasingly conceptually complex 'skills building' tasks, from building a tower, through to the more abstract challenge of building a model which represented their identity as a researcher. At each stage, the participants developed their skills required for participation in the workshop. These include the technical building skill, the skill of building abstract ideas and the skills of sharing ideas through a creative narrative, which can be shown to be beneficial in the story sharing process Ohler (2008).

### ***Workshop Part 1 – The role of IE***

Within the context of the conference, participants were challenged to consider the role of IE and its future. Beyond the skills building the workshop, participants were asked to build a model which represented 'the role of international education'. This was

deliberately, slightly vague, to create an environment of 'generative ambiguity' where participants were able to interpret ideas of 'role' according to their own conceptions.

### *Individual narratives*

Three typical models from the workshop are shown in Figures 1-3



Figure 1: Standing on the shoulders of giants

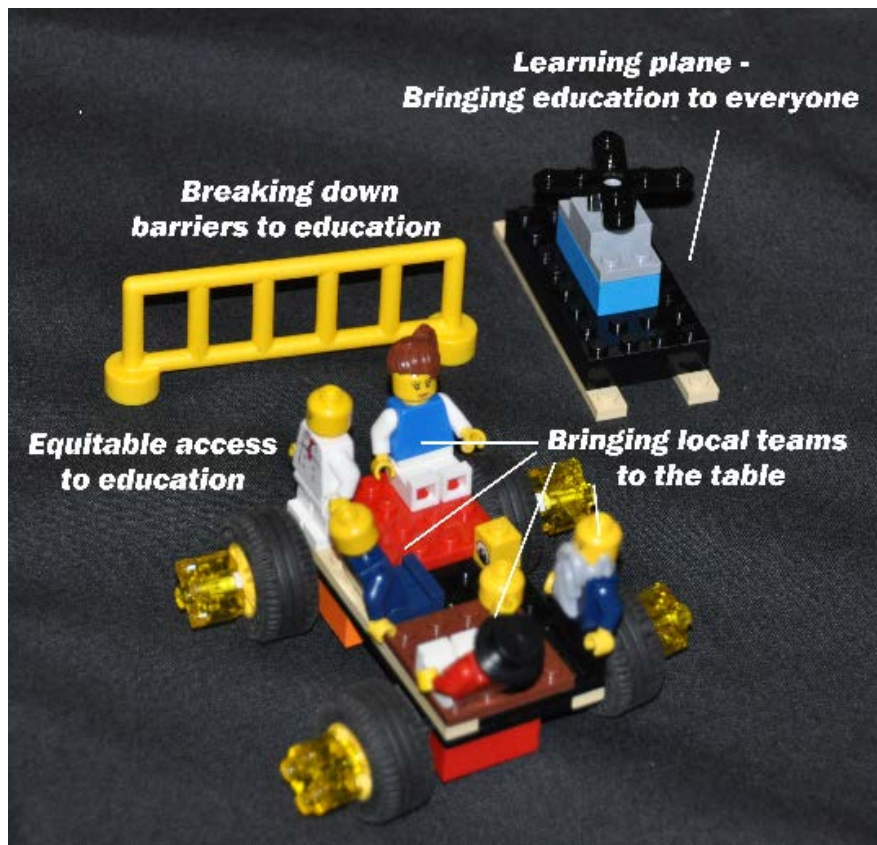


Figure 2: Bringing education to everyone

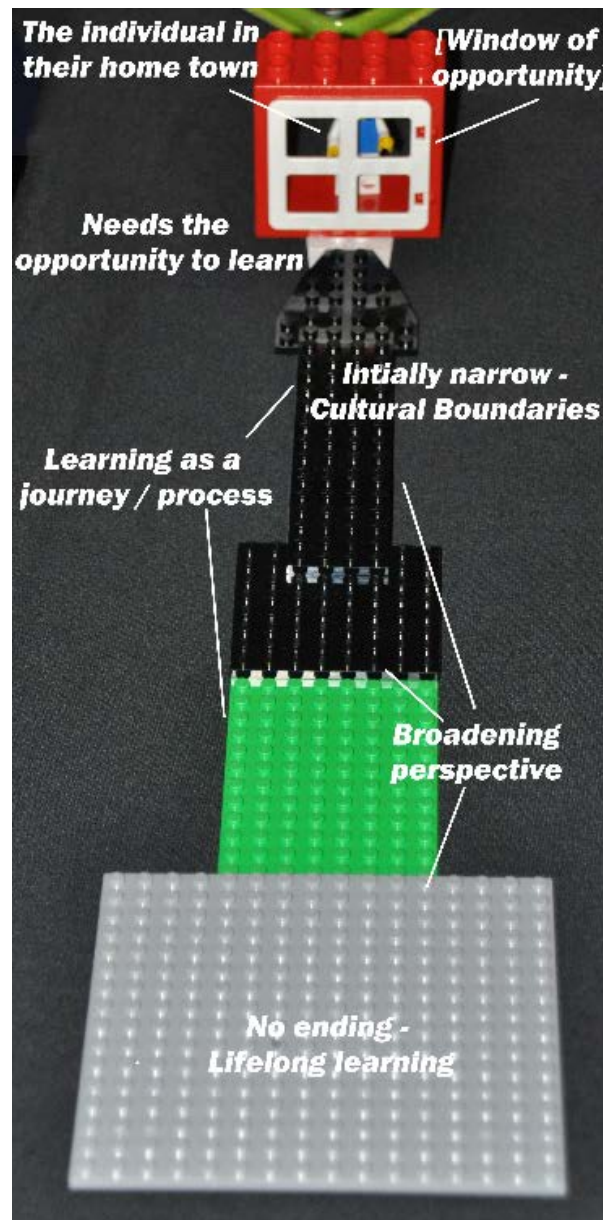


Figure 3: Broadening Perspective

Individual responses, in the form of models represented a diverse range of ideas about the role of International Education. Ideas were represented through a variety of metaphors, some used platforms or tables to represent bringing stakeholders together, demonstrating the need for complementarity of ideas. Education was represented variously as a journey or a bridge between cultures and practices. Commonly, colours and shapes were used to represent diversity. These ideas were not necessarily



contradictory or misaligned, but neither were they homogenous and the sense of 'role' was not necessarily interpreted in the same way by all participants.

Each participant was asked to identify the aspect of their models which they thought essential i.e. the aspect of the role of IE on which they would not compromise. The aspects which they considered essential are listed below and represent a concise summary of the more complex and extended full responses:

- Evidence informed guidelines for basic standards of worthwhile practice and quality of research
- Openness and accessibility 'Open door policy'
- Content must be inclusive and created with (local) stakeholders
- Practice and vision of IE
- Interconnectedness / exchange between nations
- Striving to find the middle ground
- The middle
- Make life better for people
- Open communication open and strong interconnectedness

Clearly some themes emerge, those of interconnectedness, shared endeavour and effective practice. The strength of LEGO® Serious Play® is that, having built the models and shared their ideas, participants now had physical artefacts, imbued with meaning, which could be manipulated and positioned in relation to each other.

The participants were asked to combine their models in a way which represented all their views and create a single model of a shared vision of the role of IE. This required that their diverse metaphors and ideas needed to be integrated into a single vision that gave all participants some representation, yet presented a vision with which

all participants were content. To achieve this, participants were asked to position and connect the models in such a way which represented the relationship of ideas and to create a single narrative which explained the shared model. To begin, each member of the group restated the meaning of their model to correct any misinterpretations of meaning or how it fit into the overall picture, and each participant contributed to the shared narrative, ensuring that their model was included in the description. Throughout this iterative process, a definitive shared vision was agreed upon.

### *Shared narrative*

The aim of the exercise was for participants to arrive at a shared vision for the endeavour of IE. The result of this process was the shared and inclusive narrative below, as co-constructed through the positioning and clustering of models as ideas and representing a consensus view of the role of IE. This presents a considerable challenge, given the diverse range of cultural, educational and professional perspectives of the group. Nevertheless, LEGO® Serious Play® allowed the various discrete representations to be combined and related to each other in a way which presented a single coherent story, shown below, about the role of International Education, one with which all participants were in accord and felt represented:

“The window represents openness and opportunities. There are two barriers, one represents the barriers we need to break down, an example could be equitable access for boys and girls. The other barrier represents minimum standards, to go forwards and not backwards. The bridge represents the connection between two cultures, two nations, the international perspective. The cogs represent smooth cooperation. The elephant represents multiple perspectives, looking at the big picture in small snapshots, but keeping your mind on the bigger picture. The bat and the monkey and the globe represent

balance and how we should strive for the middle ground and the flower represents knowledge and growth.”

It is significant that the narrative and the model represent a shared view of the role of IE, created in a way which did not reinforce any of the usual hierarchies or hegemonies associated with such a diverse group of participants. It created a view, in which all 9 participants were engaged, involved and represented. The shared model included the essential elements of all the individual models, without the dominance of any single component.

### ***Workshop part 2 – The future for research in IE***

The second stage of the workshop asked participants to consider the future direction of research within the field of IE. This followed the same procedure as the first stage, participants built individual models, shared ideas and reflected on their own models and those of other participants.

The specific challenge in this case was to build a model which represented “an important area for research in International Education”. Again, a certain vagueness and ‘generative ambiguity’ was built into the question, to leave some scope for participants’ interpretation.

As before, participants were asked to share their narratives about what they considered to be important areas for research within IE. These models represented diverse visions of the role of research in IE, expressed in various metaphorical and symbolic representations. Examples are shown in Figures 4-6.

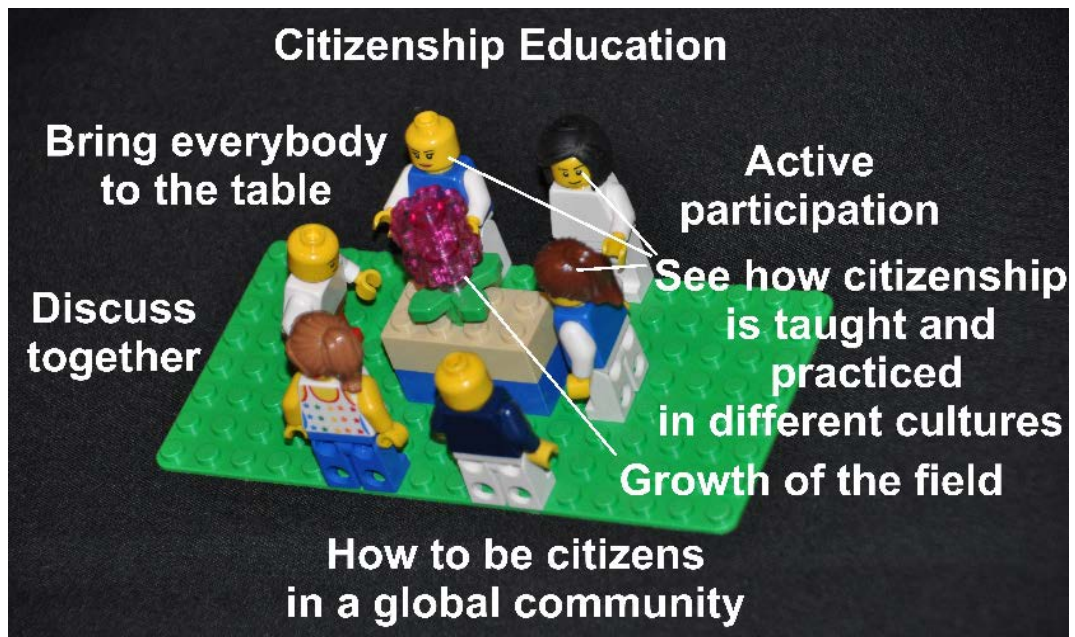


Figure 4: Bringing everyone to the table

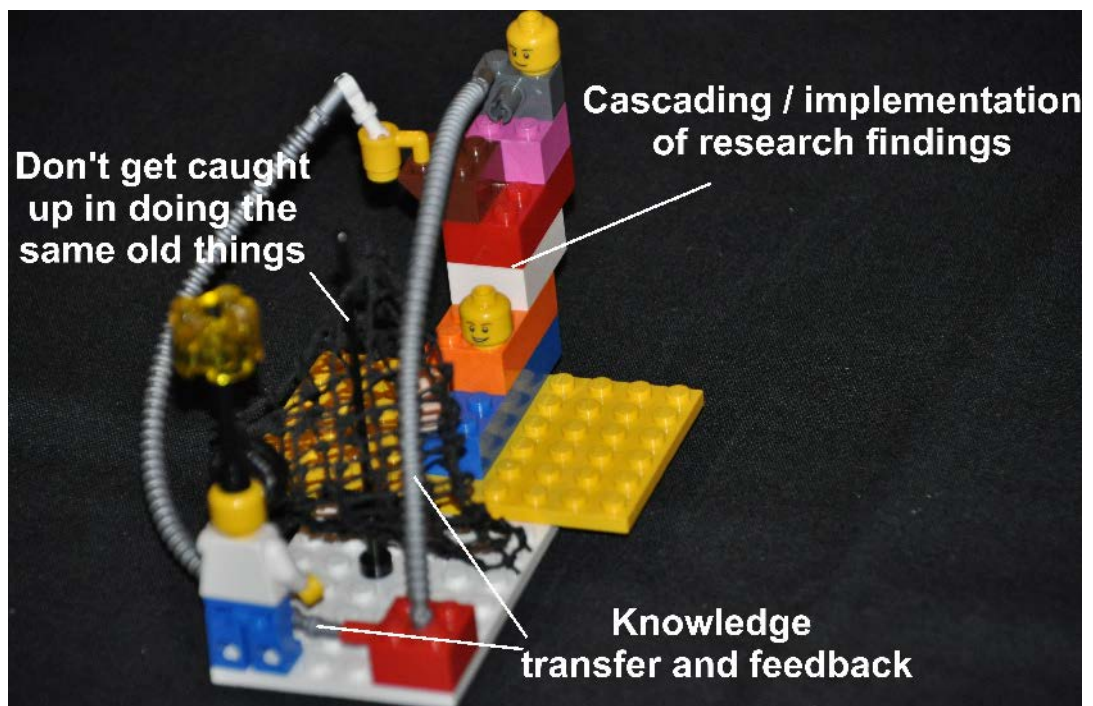


Figure 5: 2-way transfer of knowledge



Figure 6: Creating a safe environment

### *Individual narratives*

The first model (Figure 4) showed IE as a central table around which participants could gather as equals, at the centre of the table was a plant, which for the builder represented the growth of the field.

The model shown in Figure 5, used two figures at different heights. The builder talked about how knowledge was shown to move between the figures in a 2-way 'cascade' of transfer and feedback, between the figures was a net, used to represent 'not getting caught in old ways of doing things'.

In another model (Figure 6), the builder described using a 'natural' environment, on one side plants, animals and people to represent a comforting environment with supportive adults. Amongst this environment were figures representing happy children. On the other side dark blocks were used to show adversity such as war, poverty and child marriage. These adversities connected to a model of tubes and connections representing the children's brains and that the adversity would have a negative effect on these. The children were placed within the safe environment protecting them from the adversity and its negative effects.

Other models included one showing a boat between Africa and Europe, at once described as representing the lack of research in migrant and refugee education and highlighting the need for IE to provide a connection between the two communities. Another showed IE as a bridge to link academia to the communities which it is trying to reach, clearly marked as a two-way process of research-informed practice and practice-informed research, pink bricks were used to demonstrate the potential this had for creativity. Different sized 'people' figures were grouped to demonstrate that both 'big' and 'small' knowledge needed to be shared, and that there was no place to 'sit' in the middle of one's own knowledge. One more model showed IE on an elevated platform reaching out, particularly to girls. On the far side of the model was a girl on a bicycle moving toward the IE figure but separated by a gap. The physical gap represented the gaps and barriers that prevent girls from reaching the enabling environment that was on the side of the IE figure. Another model showed a lion and an elephant facing each other on either side of a portal surrounding by many loose bricks. The lion represented African countries and the elephant, Asian countries. The fact the animals were facing each other represented attempts to communicate and the jumble of loose bricks represented the failed attempts at communication across the cultural divide represented

by the portal. IE was represented as needing to break down the barriers of cultural misunderstanding between the lion and the elephant. One model used differently coloured 'pillars' to show different education system. Gathered around the middle of these pillars, varied figures represented people from different cultures coming together around a thin central pillar topped by a decorative disc representing the shared creation of a more elegant outcome, built from people from each of the existing discrete systems. Finally, a model showed a figure lying on a web with a tube connected to its head connected to a 'machine', which fed back through a different route to the figure. Connected to this model was a separate red and blue block construction, representing a happy home. This home was seen as the desired outcome of IE achieved by the cycle of understanding the psychology of people. The web represented that this could be achieved through the medium of the internet.

What is apparent in these representations is that not only did participants see different roles for research in IE in the future, they also conceived of IE in a variety of different ways. Some saw it as a rallying point, where stakeholders are brought together on equal terms to create something together. Others saw IE as having a bridging role, to close the divides between the educational 'haves' and 'have nots'. Still others saw IE as having a role in knowledge transfer and communication, that the role of IE was to facilitate this two-way flow of expertise and experience. It is not claimed that participants could only conceive of one of these conceptualisations. However, when pushed to produce a single representation of their ideas, a variety of different metaphors emerged

### *Shared narrative*

The final stage of the workshop asked the participants to work together to combine their models of the research imperatives for IE with their shared vision of the role of IE. They

were asked to cluster models according to the alignment or similarity of ideas. They were given connecting pieces of LEGO® to allow them to build connections between concepts and to consider how their overall visions of research and role of IE fit together. Each person was asked to make a connection between the two most relevant related components in the model. The final challenge was to explain the model which represented how research should influence what they wanted to have happening in IE, it represented an aspirational map of how research in IE could help to shape what they wanted to see in practice in IE. The image in Figure 7 shows the resultant shared model, with annotation to highlight some of the key aspects of the individual models.

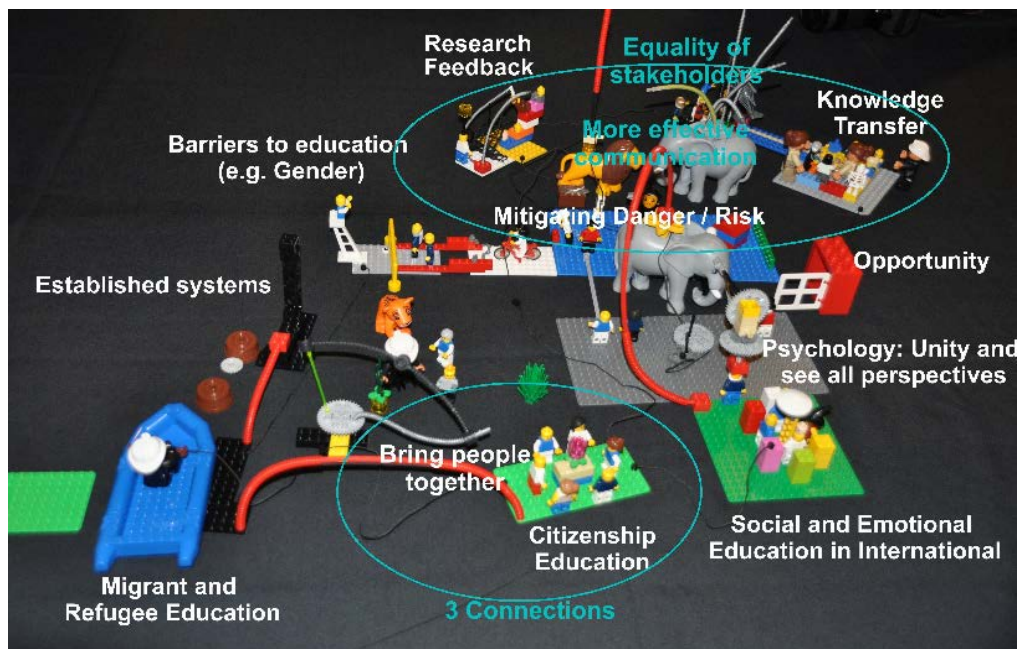


Figure 7: Shared vision of the future of Research in International Education

The shared narrative was built through discussion and negotiation amongst the participants, but by no means was this a simple process which they got ‘right first time’. Typically, each narrator tended to provide a more faithful analysis of their own areas of the model, often still misinterpreting components with which they were less familiar.

A typical narrative round is shown below



**Participant 1:** 'We are striving for connectedness and a sort of spirit of collaboration between the different levels in development and IE. Research can inform these goals by looking at the relationship between academia and practice better than it has before. It can also develop interconnectedness by researching how to educate for global citizenship and how to educate those who have to adapt or are forced to adapt to something new. How that affects those that are already there and supposedly don't have to adapt (referring to those in the host communities) but in practice do. One more thing about interconnectedness, we tend to look at it from a very geographical perspective, people come from here to there and they need to connect because they are from different cultures, but there are barriers like the gender barrier, which makes it very hard to connect and build a global self-sufficiency.'

**Facilitator:** 'Did anyone feel their story wasn't told?'

**Participant 2:** 'My monkey feels important.'

**Facilitator:** 'Tell me.'

**Participant 2:** 'I'd go a step further, why do we want interconnectedness and bridges? Because we are motivated at the end of the day by our emotions, so we go for what we want and that involves a balance of you getting what you want and me getting what I want in an interpersonal relationship. The reason for interconnectedness is to create a safe home for children and development which leads to social and emotional understanding which leads to better education which leads to opportunity. We have all this research, but it is not getting transferred properly to communities and because of that, maybe there is research on some of these things, but it still hasn't been funneled properly into culture which comes into this. Maybe the research community is explaining something wonderfully but it's not getting communicated properly. Or one culture is trying to explain something to the other and the other culture is just not getting it. What is important is that research needs to go back into the communities to carry on the process'.

As can be seen, the first participant, highlights the idea of interconnectedness, which

appears to be central to the shared vision. However, they do not place emphasis on the components of the model which address the psychological, emotional and social needs of the target group for IE. The second participant carries on the theme of interconnectedness, paying particular attention to the people it touches.

These two narratives are not incompatible, they merely emphasise different parts of the overall picture. Further iterations in the process result in improved narratives which include all components until all participants feel that their ideas have been represented equitably.

### **Workshop Outcomes**

One of the strong themes that emerged in the workshop was the centrality of the need for a global approach to citizenship education. This part of the shared model was that which carried the most connections to the wider model, reflecting the importance of this within the overall conceptual map. An important part of this was that the model for citizenship should be one which was created by the equal inclusion of all stakeholders and beneficiaries. An important focus for the field of IE was identified as finding how to achieve that goal. Part of the imperative for this was so that the needs of an increasing population of migrants and refugees could be met, particularly with regard to the trauma, not necessarily rooted in conflict, which this group might have suffered and to ensure that the social and emotional aspects of their habilitation were not neglected. The role which research plays in achieving these goals was seen to be connected in many ways, with parallel imperatives. There was a central theme of inclusion of all stakeholders and beneficiaries on an equal footing. There was demand that the perceived beneficiaries need to be equal participants in the research and that better lines of communication between the research and practice needed to be established. This was portrayed as a feedback loop of research-informed practice and practice-informed

research. The theme of equity between research partners was heavily stressed, with a middle ground between the drivers and demands of the research community and those of the communities perceived as the beneficiaries. It was portrayed that the solution for the challenges for IE would need to be created through an equitable partnership between all stakeholders, overcoming the hierarchies of educational neo-colonialism. The non-hierarchical connectedness between all parts of the IE community was promoted as being the most important aspect of both research and practice.

## **Conclusions**

The LEGO® Serious Play® workshop brought together a group of diverse participants of different ages, linguistic backgrounds, professional experience and involvement in the endeavour of International Education. The challenge of the workshop was to arrive at a shared view of the future direction of research in IE, to shape the practice of IE to meet the needs of today's international environment. The barriers to such a task would usually be in trying to achieve a consensus view that accorded equal voice to all participants, without perpetuating the usual group dynamics and hierarchies, which often result in the voice of a few being passed off as representative of the whole.

Given the different conceptualisations of the role and purpose of IE, demonstrated in the individual models, it is not surprising that Altbach and Knight (2007) found that there is unclear conceptualisation of the purpose of International Education. However, the process of building, sharing and connecting with LEGO® in this workshop allowed participants to express their vision and, importantly, to listen to that of others. Furthermore, the process allowed participants to explore the ways in which their conceptualisations related and connected to each other, such that all ideas could be combined to create a single shared vision of IE. The resulting single model combined individual metaphors to accommodate and integrate the perspectives of all

participants, whilst avoiding the perpetuation of some of the existing hierarchies and power dynamics and creating a single shared vision.

Nevertheless, there is some cause to be measured about the results presented here. Firstly, as stated earlier, the participants were constituted of a selective section of the IE community, representing the educationally and financially privileged, in the wider context. As a result, the shared visions which emerged cannot be claimed to be a construction which overcomes all the hierarchies within the field. However, the LEGO® Serious Play® process gave every participant equal space to express their views and conceptions, mediated by LEGO®. The insistence that participants focused their narratives on their models often meant that any tendency to shyness was overcome as speakers needed to address their models rather than face the wider audience.

Admittedly, the change in dynamics promoted by the use of LEGO®, may have in turn generated new hierarchies based on familiarity with LEGO®, though this may be moderated by the ‘high floor and low ceiling’ of technical expertise, proposed by McCusker (2014). Each participant was required to build their model and formulate their thoughts and ideas before presenting them to the group, this countered the tendency for individuals to conform to previous expressions and thoughts, arriving at some group construction, as highlighted in the focus group literature, instead of presenting their own ideas.

Furthermore, as each participant spoke about their model and were censured against passing comments on each other’s models, the speaker was positioned as the expert on that subject and could speak confidently without fear of reproach. This accommodated the variability in experience and skill in LEGO® building as each builder was able to determine the representation and meaning of their model. The elements of fun and play were emphasised in the early stages of the workshop, to

encourage less constrained expressions of ideas and identities. The resulting, shared model was created through a discussion in which all participants were heavily engaged. The role of individual expert was maintained throughout the group work, thus ensuring that ownership of models was maintained and that certain voices did not dominate. The shared model represented a rare outcome, a view created by 9 separate participants, in which all felt they had some ownership, with which they could all agree, with no conceptual disagreements between any participants. This idea of 9 people coming together to produce a shared vision in which each reports feeling equally represented is no small achievement, indeed it is a rarity in the experience of most of these involved in meetings or committees.

The LEGO® Serious Play® method allowed this vision to be created in a way in which many barriers were brushed aside and effective, authentic communication was achieved. Whilst much of the rhetoric of IE is the demand for effective international and intercultural communication, as reinforced by the models in this study, few techniques or practices allow this to be achieved. LEGO® Serious Play® has, in this case, demonstrated a method of achieving authentic, non-hierarchical communication, with LEGO® as a bridging medium across cultures and languages. Of course, as with all research which relies upon self-reporting, co-construction and personal narratives, there is the caveat that all reports are only those of what participants have said, rather than any claims that these are reliable representations of some truth. This also includes participants narratives about the extent they felt included and represented as no more can be safely inferred from such self-reporting.

There is additional support for some of the underpinning theories of LEGO® Serious Play®, adding empirical evidence to the case for the power of constructionism, metaphor and play and there has been some evidence of the benefits of creating

artefacts as a common 'language' to understand the world. The LEGO® Serious Play® methodology has proved its value, in the environment of IE, which by its very nature requires dialogue between and within diverse groups. The results presented here have shown that innovative and creative methods of dialogue have the potential to facilitate the discussions necessary in this field, in a way which leads to new insights and opens debate in ways which have not been available through conventional approaches. This particular example has shown that LEGO® Serious Play® can lead us to express ideas that might not be usually expressed and, therefore, to engage with ideas we would not usually consider, so changing and diversifying our conversations to address the issues we consider to be most important to International Education.

### ***Reflection***

Throughout the workshop participants, including those without English as a first language, continued to mediate their discussions through the LEGO® models, supporting the Vygotskian view of LEGO® as language. In building the representative models and metaphors of their ideas, participants came to better understand their own thoughts and those of their colleagues. As Schon (1993) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) envisaged, these metaphors supported understanding and led to new insights enabled by the explicit framing of the metaphors. They also highlighted the limitations of some metaphorical concepts. The scope to position and connect the physical manifestations of abstract ideas allowed the similarities and differences in conceptualisations to be explored and challenged in the context of existing ideas, supporting the role of constructionism (Papert and Harel, 1991) within LEGO® Serious Play®. Through this manipulation of models and metaphors we see the case for LEGO® as a language. As with a Vygotskian view of language, LEGO® is used as a symbolic system to help

with understanding of the world and plays an important role in the development of thinking.

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