Teaching Referencing And Plagiarism Awareness Using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®

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Abstract:
In this article I reflect on my use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as a teaching intervention in sessions on referencing and plagiarism awareness. Building on a paper I presented at the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) in early 2018 (Bond, 2018), I explore how I use LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® to build student understanding of the reasons why referencing is important as an academic practice. I discuss my experiences of using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® in referencing classes and finally, propose ways I can expand on its use and effectiveness.

Keywords: Teaching Referencing, Plagiarism Awareness, Student Engagement, Peer Learning

1. Introduction

Over the past two years, I used LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® to teach referencing with a range of students. The students were mainly from the engineering faculty of a large modern university. They were undergraduate and postgraduate, home and international, and a range of ages. Some students had prior experience of using a referencing system, but most did not. The main learning outcome for these sessions was that the students understood what referencing is and why it is important. A second outcome was for them to understand the conventions of the specific Harvard style used by the university.

2. Teaching Students How to Reference

Plagiarism and referencing perhaps do not seem natural fits with LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®. To me, LEGO® invokes childhood play, whereas plagiarism is often associated with harsh consequences, and referencing seen as the final chore before work is handed in. As I started to teach referencing in my role as a librarian, I was influenced by these feelings of negativity and this was reflected in the way I designed my classes.

The classes felt procedural, with a focus on the conventions of the referencing style rather than the underlying reasons for referencing. This made me increasingly uncomfortable as I grew as a teacher and reflected on my practice. Librarians mainly teach standalone sessions, either embedded into a course or offered as extracurricular classes. Thus we may only see a student once or twice during an academic year, so these interactions need to be impactful. With this in mind, I started to be influenced by active learning techniques and encountered playful learning. Andrew Walsh of the University of Huddersfield Library was influential to my thinking as he is a leading proponent of playful learning in libraries, having trained as a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® trainer and published on the topic of 'playful' information literacy (Walsh, 2015).

As I learned more about Walsh's approach to the use of play in an information literacy context, I was prompted to think further about my teaching philosophy and query the techniques I had been using. I realised I had taken the techniques used by my predecessor and immediate library colleagues and applied them with only minor amendments. Walsh's approach and ideas thus seemed like an antidote to the procedural, presentation-focussed way I had learned to teach. I felt I had been given permission to approach my class design in a different way.

In further exploring playful learning, I encountered Carina Buckley's work at Southampton Solent University, pioneering the use of LEGO® to teach citation and plagiarism awareness (2015). Buckley uses a playful LEGO® model building activity to help students understand the nature of these academic practices. Her approach is to ask students to build a model of an animal, using pieces of LEGO® from different boxes. These models are then set aside for the bulk of the session. They are reintroduced at the end when students are asked which box they got a key piece of their model from. If they are unable to answer, the piece is taken from their model.

Buckley (2015: 355) describes "horrified gasps" from students as pieces are removed, showing the emotional connections that are built between creator and model.

However, whilst the LEGO® is a part of these sessions, for me they are missing a key aspect of serious play – storytelling. As noted by Richards et al. (2017), students articulate what they have built out of LEGO® is a crucial part of creating in-depth understanding – a goal of any session I teach. I felt that the articulation noted by Richards et al. (2017) was a key to bridging the gap between Walsh and Buckley's work and creating a truly playful activity for a referencing session.

3. From presentation-based to playful learning

Prior to introducing LEGO® to my class, I had taught presentation-based sessions that focussed on the correct construction of a citation. I felt dissatisfied with this approach and its emphasis on the process rather than the meaningfulness of referencing practice. Chandrasoma et al. (2004) support this position, arguing that a focus on the mechanics of referencing is unlikely to have more than surface-level impact. In addition, I was personally bored when presenting this session and felt that it did not impact on students, either. Little was said about the reasons why we reference, when I felt this was perhaps the most important part for students to connect with.

Introducing LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® was aligned with my thoughts that perhaps taking a positive approach to referencing would help shift perception of it. As a playful learning technique, it could help emphasise the "fun" of belonging to a wider academic tradition and body of knowledge rather than focussing solely on the conventions of this practice. Walsh (2015: 89) notes that many of the games used in teaching around plagiarism awareness, citation and referencing are "mechanical" in nature and thus unlikely to be impactful for students. I felt that building models would allow students to be creative rather than mechanical in their understanding of referencing.

In addition, the storytelling or articulation aspect of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® allows for powerful peer learning to take place. Instead of me telling the students why referencing is important, they get to engage in with the reasons in a truly hands-on way – by building models that represent their thinking and explaining their thoughts to others.

4. The activity

I developed the following activity for students. I use the activity near the start of the session, after a simple explanation of what referencing is. It takes around 15-20 minutes of a 50 minute class to complete this activity, dependent on how many students are in the class.

Students are instructed to build a model explaining why they think referencing is important. They are told they must use at least one piece of LEGO® from each pile in front of them (3 piles of LEGO® per table). The piles include a range of pieces, from standard bricks to mini figures and larger plates. However, instead of a

representational model as used by Buckley (ibid), they build a metaphorical model. This allows for students to be more creative whilst keeping the emotional attachment referred to by Buckley.

Students are instructed that they can work alone, in pairs, or in a team as I want to give them the freedom to collaborate or not as they choose. Many choose to work in small groups – this allows them to discuss both the model they are building, and the reasons why they think referencing is important. It also allows for students to look up vocabulary, if needed. This is particularly important for speakers of English as a second language, who may need time to articulate what they are thinking.

Whilst students are building their models, I interact with them to learn more about their process as well as to prompt them with a reminder of the reason for the activity. Sometimes students will be too excited about using the LEGO® to remember to connect it to referencing. I prompt individuals and groups as well as giving the whole class a countdown warning with a reminder that they need to explain the model they have built.

I allocate 5-10 minutes for building models. At the end of this time I ask for a volunteer to discuss what they have built. Usually there is at least one student who is excited to show their model to the class. The main challenge of this activity is in interpreting the stories students tell about their models. As the models are metaphorical, they do not necessarily look like anything recognisable but do hold meaning for the creator. Similarly, the stories students tell about their model may not be recognisably about the reasons why we reference. I have often had to pick out elements of a story and interpret them into relevant language, so that each student feels they have contributed to overall understanding. This also allows for stories to build upon each other though, and emphasise key points. It is also important to note that whether this session was run with 3 or 30 students, we always reached the point of having fully explored the reasons referencing is important. This is emphasised with a slide showing the reasons which I discuss with reference to students who have made the point.

Following this activity, the session reverts to using a presentation-based approach to highlight key aspects of referencing conventions. I also incorporate a quiz to check knowledge of citation practices. I have sometimes used Buckley's (2015) approach of checking traceability at the end of the session, but found that it did not elicit the same reaction. In general, students are able to immediately identify which pile of bricks their piece came from and did not seem to need the point to be reinforced in this way.

5. Conclusion

The use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as a teaching intervention has been transformative from a personal perspective. It is a session I now look forward to teaching so I can share in students' excitement as they first see and then get to play with the LEGO® pieces. In every session I am surprised and delighted by the excellent models and interpretations the students offer and how different they are from the

previous ones I have seen and heard. I feel that my session has turned what could have been a boring standalone interaction with their librarian into something impactful and memorable for the students.

I trialled this session with a range of students, only some of whom had prior experience of referencing. The majority were able to engage in the LEGO® activity I have described and expressed enthusiasm to share the story of their model. Some stories have brought humour to this otherwise dry subject. Others have made connections between their story and those of other students. Whilst I have not actively evaluated this session from a student perspective, I feel that students are more engaged with the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® activity than they are throughout the rest of the class, which is more conventionally presentation-based. To me, this makes the intervention a success as students are learning from each other and actively connecting with something they may otherwise view as a procedural hurdle to completing assessments. It also perhaps achieves my aim of shifting perceptions away from referencing as a task that is negative/procedural to being 'fun'.

As noted, I have not fully assessed this intervention from a student perspective, so my reflections are necessarily from my own perspective. In future I aim to assess the impact the intervention has on referencing practices and student understanding of plagiarism.

6. Future directions

Following the pilot of this session and seeing how the modelling activity engaged students, I am interested in further developing this session to incorporate LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® throughout the rest of the class. The peak of excitement seen when students first see, and then engage with the LEGO® has potential to be carried through the rest of the session, consolidating learning and ensuring that referencing is seen in a positive, rather than negative/procedural way. Some ideas for extending the LEGO® metaphorical model-building technique include:

- An activity that reinforces traceability of sources by asking students to replicate a model another student has built
- An activity that asks students to construct a reference (for example, a book reference) using different coloured LEGO® bricks to represent different sections of the reference (e.g. yellow is the author)

In addition, some adjustments to the activity could be made to ensure it is inclusive for all students– for example, instead of asking them to explain their model to the room, they could explain it to the students on their table. The group of students could then list points to give to the session leader. Alternatives to using LEGO® could also be introduced, which may be helpful for students with disabilities.

Finally, some evaluation of the impact of this session is required. This could take the form of checking student understanding of key concepts before and after the session,

or perhaps a content analysis of referencing used in assignments before and after students attends the session.

7. References

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