

The Use Of LEGO[®] SERIOUS PLAY[®] To Enable Learning Gain In Professional Actor Training

Anna Mcnamara

University of Surrey, United Kingdom

Abstract

This reflective paper considers the potential positive and facilitative role of LEGO[®] SERIOUS PLAY[®] in the active learning environment, not just as a pedagogic tool to enhance and enable student reflection, but also as a method by which to develop engagement and understanding of learning content, through the case studies of undergraduate Acting students at the Guildford School of Acting.

Keywords: Professional Actor Training, System of Acting, LEGO[®] SERIOUS PLAY[®], Student Engagement

“One thing for sure is that was the best lesson I’ve ever had, ever!”

First year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

When approached by colleagues to consider utilising LEGO as a pedagogic tool to enhance my delivery within actor training modules, I was intrigued. I am the Director of Learning and Teaching at the Guildford School of Acting (GSA) at the University of Surrey, teaching Contextual Studies to first and second year undergraduate students on a the BA (Hons) Acting programme. I have been delivering these schemes of work since 2015, working to refine and enhance both content and delivery annually through my own reflective practice, peer observation and student feedback, collected both informally (as quoted from below) and also formally through structured module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs). On examining schemes of work for these two cohorts, there seemed two appropriate points at which to utilise LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® within my delivery, for completely different purposes and outcomes for each cohort. I was curious to explore how LEGO, which is not a particularly conventional or perhaps seemingly relevant tool to the acting students in a professional conservatoire setting, might improve either the learning gain of the students and/or the nature of the learning environment itself (McCusker, 2014; Wiliam, 2014).

Contextual Studies modules within the BA (Hons) Acting programme at GSA exist to provide a broad contextual landscape and base that compliments the full time professional actor training processes undertaken by students. Students at GSA engage with a 30 hour week timetable, of which two hours are given over to these particular modules per year group each week. The working practices of the conservatoire necessitate a transactional and transformational approach to pedagogy (Horner, 1997). The developmental work of the actor in training is experiential and studio-based and cannot be undertaken through observation and by traditional modes of academic study alone (Kolb, 2015). By contrast, Contextual Studies is often delivered in a way that is more line with traditional university subjects. This can potentially lead to a disconnect of experience for the Acting student, who, in experiencing a contrasting, even conflicting style of delivery for a short two hour session each week, may compartmentalise and isolate the learning within the Contextual Studies module. This risks the learning and teaching of this module existing in a silo, independent of and distinct from all other aspects of the contemporary actor training experience. Therefore, in order to ensure that students fully engage with this module, and more importantly, draw links between the work undertaken through the Contextual Studies scheme of work and the wider practical work this module underpins, I have found it vitally beneficial to adopt a style of delivery that is more attuned to the learning and teaching environment of the acting studio, than that of the lecture hall (Kolb, 2015); Lage et al, 2000; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012).

At the University of Surrey, there are spaces defined and designed as Active, or more favourably, Flexible Learning Spaces. These rooms contain chairs and tables, but these are easily moved and in a large space, so that the room may be reconfigured for collaborative, student centred and student initiated group work (Lage et al, 2000; Mercer and Fisher, 1992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012). By using such teaching spaces to deliver Contextual Studies modules, it is my aim that the learning and teaching align

closely with the practical experiences of the actor in training, with a strong emphasis on active group work that scaffolds and enhances dialogic (Mercer and Fisher, 1992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012), transformational and transactional approaches to learning and teaching (Holzman, 2010).

My schemes of work follow a flipped delivery, with lower order, more easily accessible tasks completed as preparatory work ahead of each session (Krathwohl, 2002). These tasks may include selected or targeted input reading, resource collection or viewing information materials. Then, in class time, I utilise group work and teacher-led, student-centred dialogue to scaffold students (Holzman, 2010; Mercer and Fisher, 21992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012) toward accessing higher orders of learning, such as analysis and evaluation through collaborative tasks, negotiation, debate and creative outputs (Krathwohl, 2002). Thus, the notion of utilising LEGO® to enhance precisely this process seemed an exciting and promising proposal (McCusker, 2014). The integration and deployment of the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® structure was very different between the two year groups in terms of learning outcomes.

The first year cohort were following a ten lesson scheme of work on the famous twentieth century acting practitioner Constantin Stanislavski, debating and reflectively analysing their own discoveries of his actor training techniques through their personal application of the system as actors in training (William, 2014). The scheme of work concluded with an essay, where students were required to demonstrate their own understanding of one aspect of Stanislavski's System of Acting by demonstrating his direct influence upon another practitioner. Before students embarked on the independent essay task, I needed to be certain that the students had a secure grasp of the key techniques from a theoretical perspective (Krathwohl, 2002). Therefore, through model building, initially as a solo activity, progressing to pair work, into small groups of four, joining to become two groups of eight, the cohort of sixteen students eventually come together over the period of two hours to create a shared model that physically represented the breadth of Stanislavski's System of Acting (Lage et al, 2000, Tharp and Gallimore, 2012).

“I found this session very fun and helpful, as I tend to learn better when I am not focused on learning. I found it a lot easier to memorize the concepts, when I was discussing it with my friend as opposed to just reading them off a book. I enjoyed how we started off building the LEGO® structure individually, then in pairs and gradually combining all our individual pieces together as one massive piece as a class. In my head I could visualize all the individual concepts coming together to form a “method”. Overall I think it was a very engaging and fun lesson, and I think that this type of classes should be incorporated in other university lectures as well.”

First year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

This revision activity sought to reinforce the value of active collaboration to the students (Tharp and Gallimore, 2012) as they embarked on what can often be an isolated activity of essay writing (Lage et al, 2000, Mercer and Fisher, 1992). I found this activity to be a very productive and positive summary exercise to launch students onward into the next phase of their work.

“I feel like this task put a much greater focus on what one could remember, as a pose to what one couldn’t. Generally, I feel that revision exercises are designed to highlight areas for improvement, which is of course useful, however different from that of the LEGO® [sic] exercise. The capacity to be creative gave tremendous weight to celebrating information that one did know. Quite simply, every action was a positive and expressive one. An extension of this is that a community atmosphere was introduced; the task was not simply individualist, however, looked to allow individual celebration to inform and support that of others. It was through positive celebration that other people could fill the gaps in their own learning.”

First year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

However, it was the lesson with the second year cohort that proved most fruitful pedagogically.

Similarly to their first year counterparts, the second year cohort was in the middle of a ten week scheme of work, culminating in a written essay based assessment. Both cohorts utilised LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as a subject specific tool, rather than as a means by which to reflect on personal practice. However, unlike the revision work of the first year cohort, here I decided to employ LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as a delivery tool, rather than a reflective one (McCusker, 2014). This cohort was examining the influence of the Italian improvised traditions of Commedia Dell’Arte and Commedia Grave upon a number of texts across a 400 year period. In keeping with my usual flipped approach to lesson planning, students were asked to read Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* prior to the lesson. The lesson plan then followed the conventional LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® design, with students engaging with a simple, private solo reflection as an individual start activity (McCusker, 2014). For the purposes of this lesson, I tasked students with identifying a key theme of the play, a simple and accessible lower order activity (Krathwohl, 2002). Next, I asked students to work in partners and model how they understand this theme to link with key character(s) (Lage et al, 2000; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012). These initial steps were designed to move students through the lower orders of learning progressively in a structured way (Krathwohl, 2002). Following this, I asked the pairs to join as groups of four, to combine and expand these models, seeking points of intersection with multiple themes and characters (Tharp and Gallimore, 2012).

It had been my original intention for the work to become increasingly analytical and creative as I had envisaged the students progressing toward working in two groups of eight, using their co-designed models to link aspects of the play with Commedia Dell’Arte and Commedia Grave (Krathwohl, 2002). However, it became evident that a greater degree of differentiation was required in order to scaffold the individual learners toward successful outcomes here (Lage et al, 2000; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012).

One of the four groups had been able to progress to this higher order tasks and successfully make links between the preparatory reading text and the prescribed, pre-studied theatrical styles (Krathwohl, 2002). However, due to the evident slower

physical build of the models and greater use of questioning within the student dialogue, two of the groups were finding this more challenging, as their grasps of and therefore ability to confidently manipulate Commedia Dell'Arte and Commedia Grave as two distinct styles was not as well developed (Holzman, 2010; Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992). Finally, the progress of one group was visibly stalling, as their recall of the intricacies of the play's many subplots was not as securely developed as their fellow students.

“In order to justify the terms being applied to our creations, we had to 100% understand what they meant.”

First year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

The visual clues available to me, as a tutor 'helicoptering' the space, enabled me to swiftly identify these aspects that were limiting the progression of the LEGO® activity and therefore the students' progression through the intended learning journey (Holzman, 2010; Mercer and Fisher, 1992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012; Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992). As the intended learning outcomes of the lesson were linked to the students' secure understating of *The Comedy of Errors*, Commedia Dell'Arte and Commedia Grave, I was able to provide appropriate and differentiated scaffolding that supported successful outcomes for each group (Holzman, 2010; Mercer and Fisher, 1992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012), without exposing the differences between the groups' understanding in a public, isolating or negative fashion (Lage et al, 2000; Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992).

The nature of the small group collaborative task enabled me to discretely move each group onto an individualised line of questioning and modelling linked to their distinct learning needs (Holzman, 2010; Mercer and Fisher, 1992; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012; Wiliam, 2014). These became, respectively, to create a model of the elements of Commedia Dell'Arte versus Commedia Grave, to create a model of the social hierarchies of Commedia Dell'Arte and to create a model of the plot of *The Comedy of Errors*.

“I found it really effective to be able to visualise the concepts and construct something physically which you could pin the ideas to. I would definitely recommend doing it, it was a really good experience, who doesn't love LEGO®.”

Second year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

The students' engagement with the physical task of building a co-constructed model enabled sustained discussion of complex lines of debate and discourse as the physical model provided visual clues and enhancements to conceptual principals (Horner, 1997; Mercer and Fisher, 1992), facilitating a more secure progression and enhanced sense of student learning gain (Holzman, 2010; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012).

“Seeing how others defined and approached the different aspects of the method helped deepen my own understanding. Plus, playing with the LEGO is fun. It was a great class!”

Second year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

This was something also reported by the first year cohort:

“The LEGO® idea was really unique and aside from everything else it really enabled my imagination to flow and therefore while I was in this open and imaginative state, thinking about the [...] terms seemed to come much easier. It was also nice to have 'debates' or chats with peers and visually see what each term meant for them. [...] I also now have imagery and memories to draw upon when recalling terms, I did not realise that my brain worked well in this way before, usually just resulting to notes but I think that there was something for everyone to take from this, aside from it being so much more fun than sitting in a lecture!!”

First year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

As illustrated in this reflective paper, the engagement of the students, at both levels of study, with their peers allowed a safe space to be established. Playful exchange and exploration facilitated enhanced learning outcomes for the individual students within the group setting (Horner, 1997; Lage et al, 2000; Tharp and Gallimore, 2012; Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992). The use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® was observed to enable improved delivery and engagement with the learning content (McCusker, 2014). LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® is impactful in both commercial and educative worlds. Through active engagement with LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® it is indicated that students may be able to benefit from this tool, not only as a critically reflective device, but also as a means to focus on learning content and develop learning gain, particularly among groups calling for widely differentiated strategies. Further work will be required to establish validity across subject areas within the university sector.

“Personally I thought the LEGO® was a very unique and innovative idea - I loved it! It helped us all to be clear of the plot line, character relationships, themes, etc. There is no space for drifting off, the LEGO kept me completely engaged, inquisitive, and I wanted to play, create, explore, and develop our ideas further with the aid of LEGO®.”

Second year BA (Hons) Acting Student, 2018

The description of these activities represents observations of two groups of undergraduate students. The primary area under scrutiny is the students' engagement with subject specific content, as facilitated by the use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®. The findings from these observations, as illustrated in the students' feedback, excerpts of which are included above, are that students not only engaged with the activities, but also demonstrated clear and differentiated levels of competencies with the subject specific material. This differentiation was measured by outcomes demonstrated through completion or challenges faced in completing the physical and practical tasks involving the LEGO® materials. Where students were struggling to progress with the practical activities with the LEGO®, it was clearly indicated that they had not yet fully grasped the subject specific concepts of the lesson. As stated in the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, students will not be able to progress with confidence to evidencing higher orders of leaning, including application, analysis, evaluation and creation, if they have not yet consolidated a base layer of understanding and recall (Krathwohl, 2002).

The limitations of the findings of this exercise lie within the relatively small group samples of two groups of 30 students at levels 4 and 5 of an undergraduate programme of study. This narrow field drawn from one degree programme does not represent a wide sample of students at Higher Education. Additionally, the exercise draws on the observations of one tutor, who was invested in the successful outcomes of the sessions, having delivered the subject specific content that informed the activities. Feedback collected from the students, although anonymised, was sent directly to the tutor responsible for the teaching, so it is possible that the students were keen please their teacher. Both of these aspects of data collection introduce levels of unintentional and unconscious bias to the analysis of the outcomes and processes described above. Further broader and more impartial process of collecting data is therefore recommended if it is wished to draw to more universal and reliable findings from these exercises, which initially imply potential beneficial pedagogic outcomes from using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as a delivery and pedagogic tool to enhance and enable student reflection, as well as a method by which to develop engagement and understanding of learning content.

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