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Lectures and Legoland®: Recapturing the excitement of learning

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Special issue on co-creation – invited opinion piece

In May 2017, I visited Billund in Denmark in order to attend the Danish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education (DUN) Conference at the Vingsted Conference Centre. Billund is famous all over the world as the home of the original Legoland®. As a child I had never visited and so despite being a bit older than the usual Lego enthusiast I took the opportunity to go. I arrived at the front gates fifteen minutes before the park opened at 10:00, and there were already masses of children accompanied by parents and teachers running around and playing outside the entrance. The entrance consists of a set of turnstiles and an outer metal ‘curtain’ barrier which has holes in it so you can glimpse the park beyond. At 09:55 a princess in a pink gown and several official looking staff appeared on the other side of the turnstiles: there was a palpable sense of excitement amongst the children. They were jumping up and down, they were talking, they couldn’t keep still and most of them moved closer to the entrance. As the metal barrier started to rise at 10:00, children were ducking underneath to try to get into the park faster.

I reflected on what should be a similar scene at 08:55 on a Monday morning outside most lecture theatres in universities around the world. I think it is fair to say that it is perhaps less common to see students demonstrating palpable excitement to enter the room. So are we doing something wrong? Why are students less excited by the learning experiences on offer in our higher education institutions? It made me consider why the children were so excited at Legoland®. First I think children expect Legoland® to be *fun*. They enjoy playing with Lego at home, and the idea of a whole park that is dedicated to the themes of their favourite Lego is exciting. Second, Lego is a *creative* toy. Bricks can be built into the model suggested on the front of the box, it can be built, rebuilt and built again so they can continue to enjoy their toy. But perhaps one of the key success features of Lego is that it can be built into whatever you want it to be built into, so you get to use your creativity. The park has the excitement of promising many possibilities and ideas of how you could use your Lego. Third, Legoland® offers a sense of *the unexpected*. You may have seen brochures or adverts for Legoland®, but you are unlikely to have seen all that is on offer. Most people find unexpected fun and creative experiences to be positive and enjoyable. The park is designed so that you never know what is around the corner; will it be live penguins, a water ride or the Millennium Falcon from Star Wars? Fourth, most children realize before they get to Legoland® that they will have an *opportunity to participate and interact*; they get to do stuff. There are areas where you can play with Lego, you can go on exciting rollercoasters, you can have your photo taken with your favourite Lego character. It’s all the more interesting because you don’t just look at the displays, you take part and interact with them in different ways. Finally, it is worth remembering that Legoland® is *designed with a specific audience in mind*. Legoland® is tailor-made to appeal to children of specific ages, with different Lego ranges and themes targeted at particular groups.

If we take these five success features of Legoland® - 1) fun; 2) creative; 3) the unexpected; 4) opportunity to participate and interact; and 5) designed with a specific audience in mind - let us

reconsider the lecture scenario in contrast. Some lecturers do an excellent job and students enjoy attending their lectures. Students may not always be so excited that they cannot wait to get through the door of the lecture theatre, but there are some lecturers who make their teaching fun, creative, include the unexpected, offer possibilities for interaction and participation and make learning relevant to students. However, I suspect that few lectures offer all of these features and that fun lectures are probably not in the majority. We seem to have lost the idea that learning at university can be fun and creative. I think we are particularly bad at creating any sense of the unexpected; in contrast we often institutionalize students from first year into a weary familiarity with large lectures that focus on transmission of information with no, or little, interaction. I am also not convinced that we know all of our students well enough, or that we design lectures in a way that all students find relevant or engaging.

However, perhaps not everything is so negative. There are some good examples of students interacting and participating in lectures such as the new trend for flipped classrooms. In flipped classrooms, much of the original content material is available online for students to study before the lecture, and this frees up valuable time for teacher-student interaction in class focused on the more interesting or more difficult aspects of the subject (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Crouch & Mazur, 2011). There is also evidence that many students appreciate and benefit from interactive lectures (Huxham, 2005; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). Other lecturers are using electronic voting systems (Bates, Howie & Murphy, 2006), social media (Ross, 2016) and 'technology enhanced active learning spaces' (Roger, Ney & Liote, 2016) to enhance the lecture learning experience and to promote paired and small group working in large classes. Indeed, many staff recognize the need for variation in approaches to teaching in order to appeal to a diversity of learners, as well as understanding the value of energy and enthusiasm in maintaining engagement.

Taking these enhancements further, some staff are now using co-creation or active student participation in lectures as a way to enhance engagement, adopt more democratic educational approaches and to increase the opportunities for students to learn through meaningful contributions to their own and others' learning experience. 'Co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches' (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 196). I believe that the range of approaches staff and students are using to co-create lectures offers opportunities to bring some Legoland® excitement to the lecture theatre.

At University College Dublin, Ireland several years ago, Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry and Dr Mary Gilmartin taught a large first year geography class of 400 students. They worked with a small group of three students who had previously studied the first year course to redesign the virtual learning environment to make it more appealing, *fun* and *creative*. The 400 students then worked together, *interacting* in small groups of approximately eight students to complete set tasks online in between lectures each week. The lecturers then used several examples of good work from the groups as part of the curriculum for the following class. The use of students' work made the experience more *relevant* for students (see Bovill, 2014 for further information).

Dr Julie Williamson in Computing Science at the University of Glasgow, Scotland teaches software testing in a lecture to approximately 90 students. She spends about fifteen minutes setting the scene, but she then asks the students to form groups of five (in a lecture theatre with fixed seating this means some students turn around to speak to those in the row behind). She gives the students 20 minutes and sets up a real life scenario with a software problem that is *designed*

with the students' future careers in mind. She asks the students to identify where the specific problems arose and what their solutions would be. After 10 minutes of group working, in an *unexpected* announcement, she warns the students that the Director of the company has found out about the problems and wants to be briefed in 5 minutes. This changes the pace of the group work and focuses the students on clearly *interacting* to finalize identification of the problems and solutions. She then asks for two students from each group to come to the front of the classroom. That's about 36 students stood at the front. She then randomly selects three pairs to ask for their problems and solutions and asks the other groups if they have any alternative solutions they wish to add. Once the students return to their seats, she ties up any unfinished issues that have been raised before moving to complete the lecture by covering further relevant material. The room is energetic and the students are focused and engaged.

Dr Ignacio Canales taught an Entrepreneurship and Business Planning course at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In this course, students were required to undertake a group project to *create a relevant* business idea that they developed to the point that it could be ready to launch. He asked his students to collaborate and *interact* in presenting and discussing key readings and identifying key concepts and content needed during the course in order to be able to fulfil their group project requirements. All students were expected to read several relevant articles from the reading list for every lecture. Each group was then given 30 minutes to present the assigned reading to the rest of the class. All students were encouraged to ensure that their presentations were *fun* and engaging and that they highlighted key points of interest from the literature. Groups were also encouraged to facilitate an engaging learning activity based on the readings. Meanwhile, Canales asked students to identify topics about which they needed more information and support to be able to successfully complete their group project. He then adapted his lectures to focus on the student-identified topics and concepts. This meant that the students had to actively engage in identifying the content they needed in order to develop their group business plans (See Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014 for further information).

In an initiative at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Dr Mary Gilmartin (having moved from University College Dublin) teaches geography and asks her students to undertake a *fun, creative* and *relevant* task outside of lectures. She asks them to take photographs that sum up their vision of contemporary social and cultural geography in the 21st century. Gilmartin then compiles the photos taken by the students, removing student names and other identifiable material. She then asks students to vote for their favourite four pictures. These pictures are then used as prompts for discussions in a class focused on contemporary social and cultural geography. In an *unexpected* twist she also selects one of four winning student photographs to use as part of a prompt for an essay question in the students' final class exam. This is a way of trying to engage the students more deeply in the topic, but also is a way of emphasizing the legitimacy of students' own contributions and perspectives within the curriculum (See Cook-Sather et al., 2014 for further information).

These examples are just a tiny sample of the rich array of co-created and interactive lectures that are taking place. Each of these examples demonstrates a different form of co-creation that is possible, and each supports a different range of the Legoland® features (fun, creative, sense of the unexpected, interaction, relevant). They show us just what is possible, even in large lectures and how we can try to recapture some of the fun and excitement of learning. In short, let's make every Monday morning at university more like a Legoland® morning.

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