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Use of LEGO® Serious Play® :
a novel research method for exploring the lived
experience of volunteers and paid staff within a
professional workplace.

2016 VSSN Conference : New Researchers

Liz Dixon

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Teacher
Educator

PhD student

Hospice
director



Hospice
volunteer

Trained nurse

Interest in
participatory
research

Overview

- Background to my research study
- Key research aims and questions
- Characteristics of hospices
- Volunteers in hospices
- Methodological approach
- **Methods used**
- **Metaphorical modelling using Lego Serious Play (LSP)**
- **Emerging themes**

Background to my research

- Year 3 of a PhD
- Research is looking at the everyday work of volunteers and paid staff in a hospice.
- Ethnographic case study : mixed methods
 - Observation and shadowing within the hospice
 - Field notes
 - Formal and informal interviews
 - Attending hospice meetings
 - **Metaphorical modelling : group sessions based on the principles of LEGO[®] Serious Play[®]**

Key research questions

- What contribution do volunteers make within a hospice?
- How is the volunteer role perceived by volunteers and by paid staff?
- What is the nature of the working relationship between paid staff and volunteers?

Research ethos

The research is designed to:

- Actively encourage staff and volunteers to share in the research process
- Create a 'communicative space' across the organisation. (Kemmis, 2001)
- Support the development of a research culture in the hospice.

Methodology: Why an Ethnography ?

- The researcher immerses [herself]in the natural setting for long periods of time to gain a deeper understanding of people's lives.

(Buch and Staller 2013).

- Find out about both the lived experiences of individual volunteers and the institutional and cultural processes which shape those experiences.

Case study : Hospice details

- Situated in North of England, opened in 1981
- Purpose built 12 bedded In-Patient Unit (IPU) and Day Hospice opened in 1995
- Currently 492 volunteers registered with the hospice
- Roles include: IPU, Day hospice, Drivers, Receptionists, Gardening, Fundraising, Charity Shops, Board of Directors
- In the setting: 66,420 volunteering hours last year with an equivalent salary cost, based on the minimum wage, of half a million pounds per year.

Development of the hospice movement

- 1967 : World's first modern hospice - St Christopher's, London
- Network of independent hospices within the UK providing holistic, palliative care to people in the final stages of life
- Within the charitable sector with both volunteers and paid staff in all aspects of the service they provide
- Palliative end of life care now a complex medical specialism in its own right
- Increasing demand for volunteers as hospices expand their services.

The Lego Process



Examples of my earlier work using LSP in other settings.



Rationale for using LSP

- My own prior experience using the technique
- Advantages
 - Combines individual responses as in interviews, with group interactions characteristic of focus groups
 - More considered, expansive responses
 - Hearing the stories of others – organisational development
 - Novelty – can encourage participation
 - Staff gain experience of a technique which might then be used more widely in the hospice.

This is the first time I have used the technique in a workplace setting

Research methods and hospice volunteers

- Previous studies of hospice volunteers : traditional data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires to collect qualitative data.
- End of life care research using creative, representational methods to enable self-expression is underdeveloped.
(Goodman, Froggatt and Mathie 2012)
- Most approaches to social research requires participants to produce *instant* descriptions of their views, opinions or responses, in language.....Most people can't really provide accurate descriptions of why they do things, or like things - let alone their identities and motivations - as soon as you ask them.

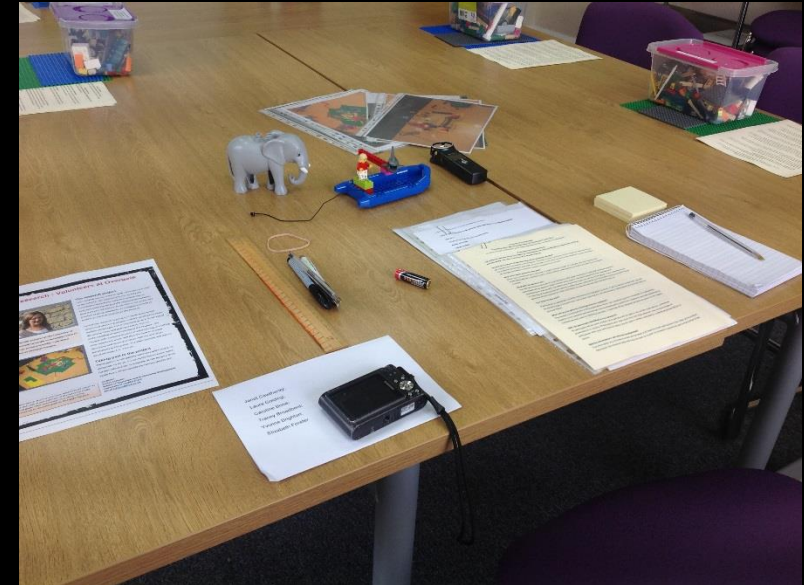
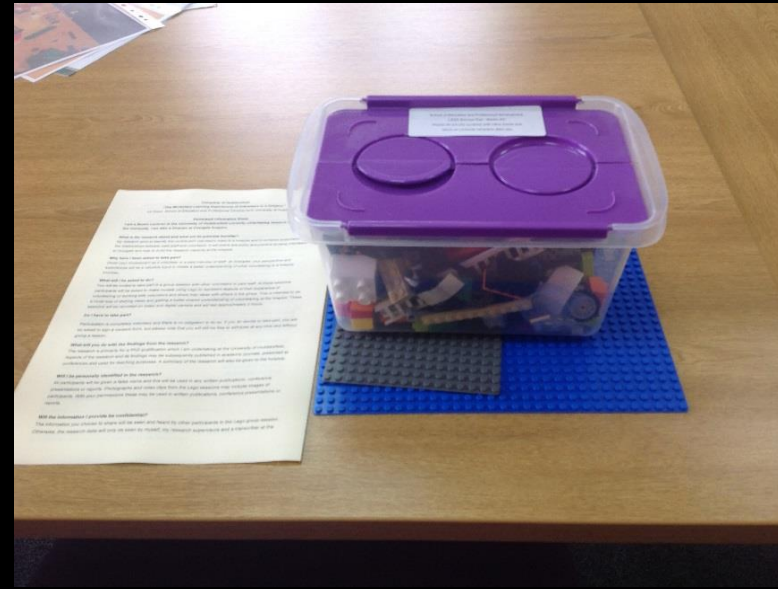
(Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006)

LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) as a research method

- Groups of 4-6 participants build Lego models to represent concepts and ideas using the principles of LEGO® Serious Play® .
- The principles of LSP are being applied to capture data both individually and jointly from groups of staff and volunteers.
- Lego models are used as a focus for conversation and discussion and to explore together the key research questions.
- An informal and unstructured exchange of ideas as opposed to a highly structured and one-way extraction of information.

(Henn, Weinstein & Foard 2006:189)

Important stages in the process: Preparation



Important preliminary stages



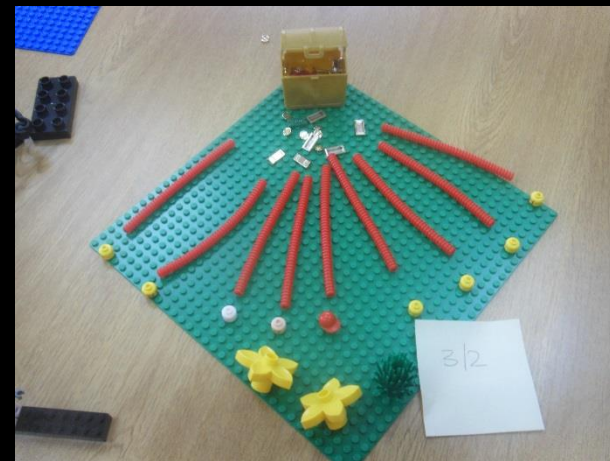
Introduce metaphors with examples



Playtime with the materials

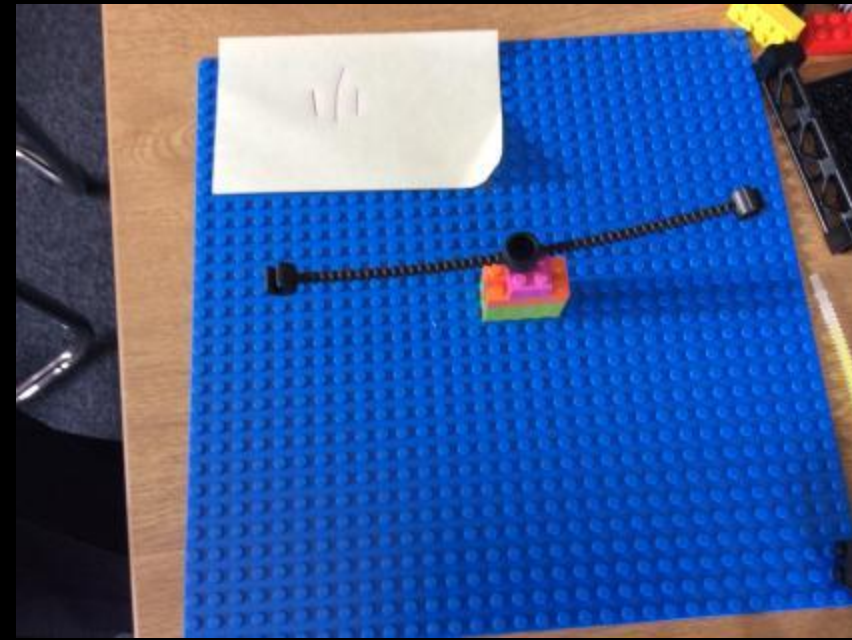
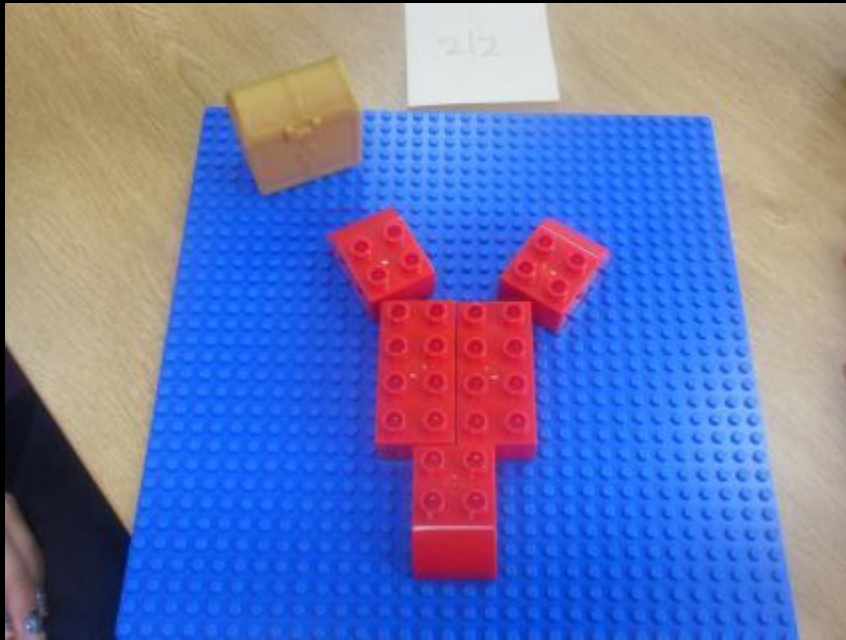


Make something simple eg a creature



Move into making more complex representations

Individual models



Individual models





Focus on detail, return to particular points

Collaborative models

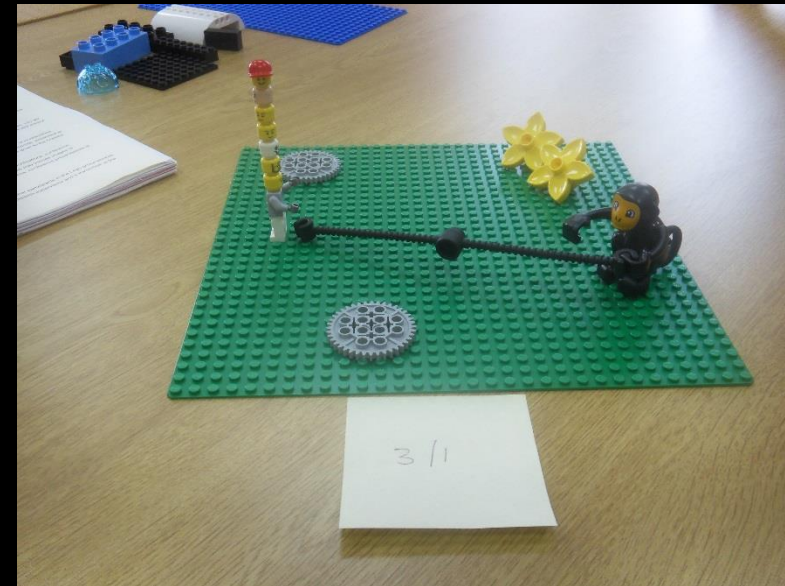
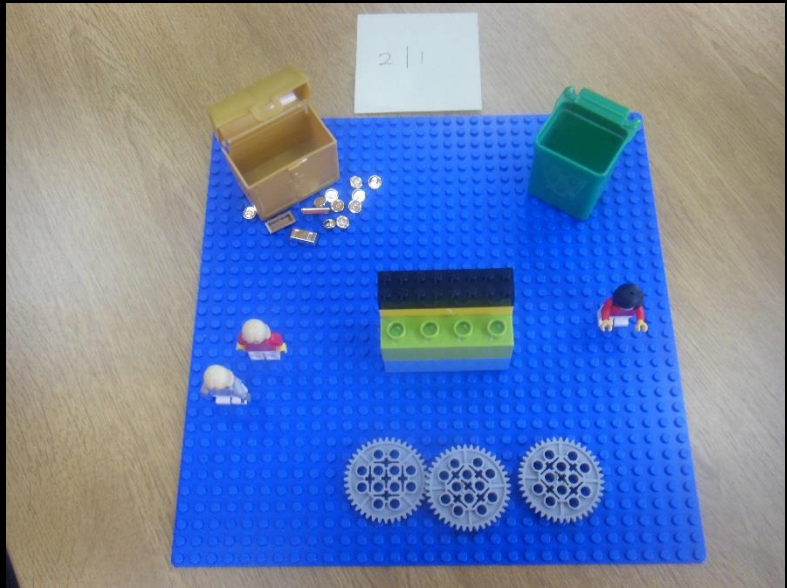


Group builds – vision of hospice development and volunteers

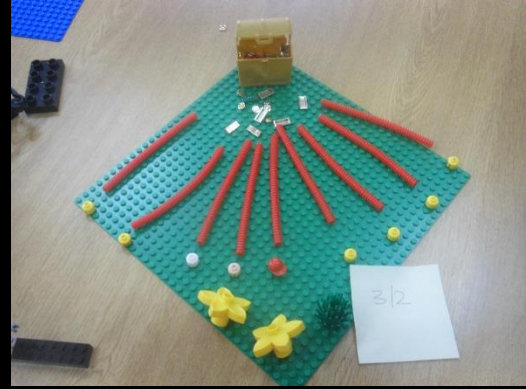


- Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss aspects of the research questions together, especially when it enabled them to consider future development of the hospice.
- Opportunities for extending provision of hospice services
- Perceived and actual risks

Metaphors provide useful windows into participants' ideas and experiences.....



Emerging themes



- LSP sessions and other data indicated the **sybiotic relationships** between volunteers and paid staff.
- Metaphors such as ‘gems’, ‘gifts’ ‘backbone’ and ‘treasure’ were commonly used.
- *“A tower of strength **supporting us and bringing time and generosity.** They want to come...they’re a right tonic.”* (Volunteer Co-ordinator)
- *‘It’s the little things ...you don't realise how good they are until they’re not there....they do such a good job so when they’re not there...**they’re just part of what’s normal...and they do give you a lift.**’* (IPU Nurse)

Family metaphor: support and development

- **'It's our responsibility that we are seen to be supportiveit is your family isn't it?.....There's nothing more satisfying than seeing a volunteer striding round the hospice like it's their home....like they belong here. What a difference the hospice can make to them and how they flourish. We see such a massive change in some volunteers.'**
(IPU Staff nurse)
-
- **'I mean I think it rescued me in a way, and I think, you know, I think it does for a lot of people. But oh yeah, I mean they'll have to take me out in my box, you know, but yeah, if I can keep trundling in.'**
(Volunteer Receptionist)

Working together and the complexity of the volunteer role

- *We [paid staff] never go to the patient's home anymore. So **they [the volunteers] see things we don't see.** And you know, sit in that car for that journey and they're sharing so much more. What we do is support volunteers more, particularly if they're bereaved because they probably feel grief as well.*
- *They [the volunteers] probably know a lot more than sometimes that patient shares with us, and also we've had a few where, you know, they're going to the home situation, it's a bit of a crisis point, because our patients are poorly a bit of a 999 situation. So it's reassuring the volunteers we're there. **But they're fantastic, couldn't do without them.** (Day Hospice nurse)*

Challenging or negative aspects of the relationships between staff and volunteers

- Sharks
- Models with prickles and spikes
- Weighing scales : the fine balancing act of managing individuals and groups of volunteers.

*'Occasionally we do have some volunteers that need more managing than others....**Sometimes they want to get too involved** ..management side of things and want to know a bit too much.. so **I do find some volunteers challenging, same as staff really.**' (Day Hospice nurse)*

'Managing' volunteers

- 'Messy to Manage'
- Volunteers, unlike paid staff can to an extent 'work' on their own terms in relation to: availability; time; ways of working; and can say 'no'.
- Fitting volunteering in with other commitments such as: holidays, family and work which in some cases take priority.
- Volunteers can have agency and arguably be more difficult to 'control' which requires sensitivity, tolerance and more creative approaches to management from individual staff and managers who cannot naturally assume conformity and performativity from volunteers.

Emerging themes of the study to follow up

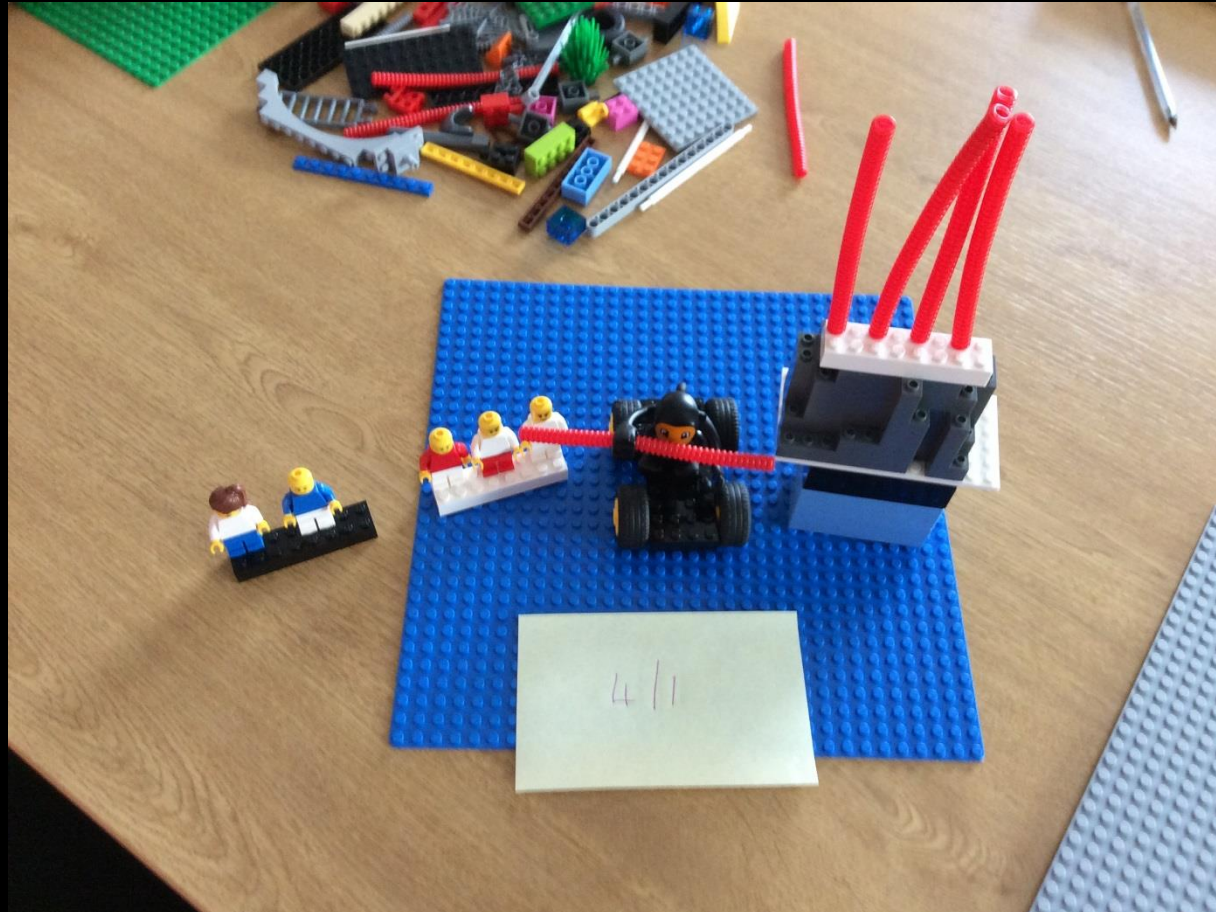
Complexity of 'simple'
roles

Management
Support / Control

Hybrid organisations
'Losing their souls'?
(Billis 2010)



LSP in practice as a research tool



Explaining the approach to prospective participants

- Novel and unfamiliar research method : finding participants for the group sessions was challenging.
- Started with individuals previously interviewed
- Word of mouth based on experience
- Volunteers' meetings as a 'gateway'
 - My role and the research
 - Photos of Lego sessions
 - Profile of the participants
 - Participatory, fun nature of the sessions
- Difficult to get participants to 'opt in' without some personal contact

LSP : Limitations

- ‘Selling’ the idea to participants
- Not a panacea for all – participants may find the activity challenging in the same way as some are uncomfortable in an interview or focus group.
- Participants who see themselves as ‘not creative’ might be constrained by the method.
- Danger that ‘style and the look’ may take precedence over content, meaning and message

LSP : Dealing with the unexpected

- Group dynamic
- Group mix – volunteers, staff, roles within the organisation
- Participants' response to the technique
- Management of any organisational issues that emerge
- Emotional responses

LSP : Practical considerations

- Time and space available in a workplace setting
- Labelling models : point of reference, anonymity
- Recording and transcribing
- Skills and experience of the researcher in facilitating LSP sessions
- Private becomes public : “ Stuttering interpretations”

LSP: positive outcomes



- The Lego models can act as prompt to aide recall and develop ideas.
- Opportunity to ‘work through’ responses
- Less formal and different means of communication
- Stimulus to aid discussion / organizational development
- Sharing of ideas within the group but unlike a focus group key points are not determined by individuals who may then influence the direction of the discussion.
- Most participants seem to enjoy the ‘return to childhood’ and the opportunity to play.
- Works well if used in conjunction with other research methods.

Final thoughts

Q . What would the hospice be like without volunteers?

A. *Beige. It'd be boring.*

Sometimes my job would be a lot easier. I could be firmer with paid staff and they'd be in every day – but it would be a much sadder place. The extra sparkle – we'd lose so much.

(Fundraising and retail manager)

Conclusion

Lego sessions :

- Actively encourage staff and volunteers to share in the research process
- Create a 'communicative space' across the organisation.
- Support the development of a research culture in the hospice.

Thank you for listening – any questions?



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