

4.4 Making space; Making self: Using LEGO® figures and creative practice to facilitate queer early career researchers' academic development

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LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®/LEGO® application

In an online Zoom event aimed at queer Early Career Researchers (ECR) we used LEGO® and craft boxes sent to attendees to think through how to make space for ourselves in academia. This facilitated conversations on how it is we make space for ourselves, and find others, in academic contexts and how those external contexts shape those experiences. We were destabilising linear notions of 'career trajectories' – that there is a right way to get into academia, a right way to stay, or milestones attendees (and ourselves as queer ECR facilitators) should have achieved by now. We asked attendees to decorate their box-spaces to represent and express themselves using craft supplies we provided including stickers, craft materials, and magazine cuttings. We also asked them to represent what might facilitate them staying in academia. This created a space for them to place their LEGO® figure. We provided LEGO® body parts to help them create a representation of themselves for this space, as well as colleagues, collaborators or supporters to show other relationships that helped them stay in academia. This allowed them to highlight important relationships in these contexts. All attendees were currently employed in higher education (HE) or current PhD students. Many of the attendees were precariously employed on temporary, short-term or fractional contracts reflecting wider issues in academia (Butler-Rees and Robinson, 2020; Rao, Hosein and Raaper, 2021). This work facilitated the work of researcher development as a form of learning and teaching practice in HE. For us, researcher development as early career researchers is linked to research culture within institutions and across the networks and groups we forge for ourselves outside of our own institutions. Researcher development is the work of HEIs, through their learning and teaching practice as well as through research commitments, but it is also the work of wider networks filling the gaps where contracts and precarity mean some of us are left out of development schemes. This work of academic development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic meant the use of Zoom and online interactive spaces (Jamboards for sharing images of LEGO® selves and boxes) were essential for this researcher development work and broader researcher community development work. This also offers an example of thinking through online technologies as well as creative practice for the development of inclusive research cultures.

Outcome

The fast pace of academia often means that individuals do not get time to be mindful about the decisions they are making in their everyday academic practice, and instead are driven by the practicalities of day-to-day teaching and research or institutional timeframes and milestones which can exclude a diversity of researchers, participants and students (Humphrey and Coleman-Fountain, forthcoming). This event gave participants a dedicated time and space to slow down, pause and reflect on their academic practices, optimistically re-imagining what academia could be in a

future we could create. The collective practices of reflecting and reimagining were supported through the use of LEGO®, cardboard boxes and crafting supplies. Their use gave the event a playful feel, which we used to try and rekindle and nurture optimism amongst participants for the possibilities of what academia could be in the future, which was particularly important in light of the exclusions that have been faced by queer, and particularly trans, academics in UK Higher Education (Pearce, 2020; Slater and Liddiard, 2018; Vincent, Erikainen and Pearce, 2020). Many of our conversations focused on big picture, future-oriented, imagining academia and our future places in it, because many of us were on fixed-term contracts and imagining a different future felt like an important challenge in the face of that precarity. A different cohort of attendees may have focused on different areas and the challenges faced by queer and trans academics do not evaporate once a permanent post has been secured.

These activities also allowed us to bring an element of joy to a topic that can be hard to talk about: the ways in which queer academics can be excluded within normative academic spheres (Taylor, 2016). For example, as noted by Taylor, there can be complex relationships between research, researcher and researched and queer academics may occupy multiple positions across these. These situations are not unique to queer academics and others occupy insider/outsider positionalities. However, in recent years there has been a rising hostility toward trans academics, and their allies, across a range of disciplines (Hines, 2021; Pearce et al. 2020; Slater and Liddiard, 2018). As early career researchers, many of whom were trans, our attendees faced struggles with the normative academic activities expected of them such as knowing which conferences and publications would welcome their work and knowing which academic departments would welcome them as colleagues. For many of us these are ongoing concerns. In designing these activities however, we were mindful that whilst using arts-based methods are praised for being able to get people to think differently about their experiences and express feelings where words fail, they can also be intimidating if the activities are not designed for people with a range of creative abilities in mind (Cuthbert, 2021). By using LEGO® figures and collage techniques to represent participants' experiences and express their feelings, we were able to facilitate the participation of both people who were confident and comfortable using arts and crafts and those who were less confident about their creative abilities. This facilitated the expression of difficult feelings of isolation, exclusion and sadness, as well as more joyful reflections on the ways in which participants had proactively and creatively forged connections, communities and collaborations.

It was through this process of individually creating our box-spaces in small groups and then digitally sharing them with all participants using the digital sharing space on Google Jamboard, that new connections within the group were able to be built on the foundations of shared experiences. For us as facilitators, the forging of these connections was a key aim of the session. Many of the participants had started new studies or new job roles during the pandemic, which has involved extensive working from home and absence of the types of informal networking that had previously been provided in 'over the kettle' conversations in one's department or in the breaks at face-to-face conferences. This event therefore tried to be explicit in its aim to connect participants who could be facing additional pandemic-related, work-place isolation with one another, transcending institutional and disciplinary boundaries, to

create supportive communities for sustainable collaborations, connections and support.

Possible changes

We allocated one hour to the 'Making Space, Making Self: academia in and out of the box' activity. However, given the time it took to explain the activity, construct box-spaces and share them by photographing, uploading, and discussing them, it was clear that additional time would be beneficial. We also provided all workshop materials used by post, and due to budgetary constraints we were only able to provide a small amount of LEGO® to each participant. In future, we would provide additional LEGO® components to allow participants to represent a wider range of people in their box-spaces if desired. Using LEGO® meant people could represent themselves with a LEGO® figure even if they didn't feel creative. This included more people and opened up the accessibility of the event to a range of ECRs with different relationships to creativity.

New ideas for the future

Since this event Dr Harvey Humphrey has used LEGO® to facilitate writing planning sessions for ECRs and PhD students. Harvey is currently developing this work as part of work on researcher development and creative academic practice. They plan to use LEGO® figures as an accessible way to represent the self in writing and research for a range of researchers that may feel under-represented in academia. They recently ran a session for this queer ECR group on using LEGO® figures to plan writing. Following that session, their future plans involve thinking through the use of LEGO® to represent ideas in writing.

References

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