

# Autoethnography, Storytelling and Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup>: Embracing the Subjectivity of Practice to Engage Students Within Academic Librarianship

**Abstract:** In this article Alan Wheeler advocates for academic librarians to employ the principles of autoethnography and storytelling within their practice, as a tactic for student engagement. As a librarian and researcher operating within Higher Education (HE), Alan has always illustrated his practice with personal accounts of how to operate effectively as a student. Here, he proposes that librarians in academia embrace the autoethnographic principles of vulnerability, uncertainty and subjectivity to explore their position within HE, but also as a teaching tool.

**Keywords:** legal research skills; law students; universities

## THE JOYS OF TAKING THE SCENIC RESEARCH ROUTE

The idea for this article came after an intense period of reflection, immediately following the facilitating of two Lego<sup>®</sup> Serious Play<sup>®</sup> (LSP) workshops at BIALL 2023 in Belfast. Originally, my plan was to write a fairly straightforward account of what happened in those workshops and what occurred in the immediate aftermath. But then things became complicated and I've ended up writing something more multifaceted and, hopefully, more interesting. As always, the reader will decide.

## LEGO<sup>®</sup> SERIOUS PLAY<sup>®</sup> WITHIN MY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The basic truth underpinning LSP is that human beings are naturally playful and creative.<sup>1</sup> All we require is an outlet to explore an innate desire to play. LSP in practice utilises Lego<sup>®</sup> as the literal building blocks with which to explore an issue or problem with a group of participants. The role of the facilitator is to design the structured plan of builds which the participants will be asked to individually construct. Workshops typically begin with simple models and progress to more complex designs and ideas. The cycle of the facilitator posing a question, participants building a model in response, participants explaining their models and a final round of reflection (collectively

known as the 'core process') continues throughout the workshop.<sup>2</sup>

## LEGO<sup>®</sup> AND ME

Lego<sup>®</sup> is the only toy I have played with my whole life. There have been decades where it was ignored in favour of other activities, but I have always returned to it. When I play, I am focussed. When I play, I am free. When I play, I feel engaged in a way that I have never been able to achieve via other means. And as a child, in a world prior to video games, Lego<sup>®</sup> provided me with the raw materials to build myself whatever fantasy world I desired. When I play with Lego<sup>®</sup> now, I am simultaneously playing as a child, a father, an uncle and a middle-aged adult.

Every previous experience I've had playing with Lego<sup>®</sup> informs how I feel when I build now. I have hundreds of happy memories of playing, either alone or with friends, but the overall feeling is one of quiet contentment. This strongly positive association has now been further bolstered from facilitating many LSP workshops.

So, in addition to my own memories of building, I have the pleasure of witnessing many hundreds of participants find joy in Lego<sup>®</sup>. This positive reinforcement is incredibly important in allowing me to have confidence in my practice and approach new workshops with a positive outlook.



*A pile of possibilities: Alan Wheeler is well known for his use of Lego® as a training aid*

## THE LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® WORKSHOPS AT BIALL '23

In Belfast at BIALL '23, the build plan I devised was as an accelerated introduction to demonstrate LSP. With less than an hour for each workshop (two hours is typically what I ask for if it's at Middlesex University) I knew that group activities were impractical, so the challenge was to create a trusting atmosphere quickly, where participants were comfortable enough to build and share their stories with strangers.

A good build plan will have a blend of practical models (towers, bridges and vehicles) and potentially more emotional subjects for building (memories, feelings and moments).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, if I am designing a build to potentially provoke an emotional response, there must be a rationale for it. For example, I would never ask participants to build anything that I knew would more than likely be upsetting. This is where the wording of a build task is key.

As an example, I have asked student groups to build a model to represent 'a moment where they felt like quitting'. The instructions I always give to participants is 'do not build anything that you're not okay with sharing'.

Once these models have been built, shared and reflected on, the next model asks students to build a model to represent 'why it didn't defeat them'. The final stage of this build is I ask participants to place the second model on top of the first, as a symbolic overcoming of the issue. All models are in essence short stories. The builder / author constructs their narrative and then vocalises the story of their model by highlighting the aspects of the build they consider most telling. This aspect of LSP,

the ability to tell the story of your model, is the key area of crossover with autoethnography.

The first few builds which I request participants to make are broadly the same from one workshop to another. I always begin by asking people to build a duck, as an opportunity to demonstrate the principle of subjectivity and ownership of experience, on which LSP is founded. The second task is usually to build a bridge or tower. The rationale here is to demonstrate the principle that size or complexity is not the point; a bridge that is twice as wide as another bridge, is not twice as effective as a bridge. The meaning to the builder is what matters.

From this gentle introduction, the aim is to slowly increase the complexity and breadth of concepts being built, until participants feel able to build representations of events, feelings and concepts. Sometimes, the key to unlocking the most meaningful responses in participants is to keep the build instructions as broad and interpretable as possible. The deliberate vagueness is a tactic which allows for a range of responses and avoids the scenario which results in 10 versions of similar things being shared.

From my perspective, the key build of my BIALL plan was approximately 40 minutes into both sessions when I asked participants to build a model in response to the question, 'why librarianship?'

When posing a question such as this in an LSP workshop, it is folly to try and predict what the response might be from participants. As the facilitator, all I hope for are some interesting details to punctuate the individual responses. In Belfast, three participants contacted me post-workshops to communicate how emotional and

enjoyable they had found the building and explaining of that model. This really pleased me. I would argue that a well-designed LSP workshop should ideally have these moments of elevated emotional engagement, alongside the playfulness and insight that arises from creativity and having fun.<sup>4</sup>

## MY FRUSTRATIONS WITH ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP

Academic librarianship is not known for its ready adoption of radical approaches to research.<sup>5</sup> Whilst you certainly can find library-focussed output which embraces more progressive investigative techniques, the majority of articles stick to mainstream qualitative and quantitative approaches.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, this article calls for librarians working within the academic sector to position themselves prominently within their practice and research output.

In my 23-year career in academic libraries I've met and been friends with many other librarians. As people, they are as varied in their hobbies and loves as any other employment sector. But one thing that I feel unites them is their love of stories. Whether those stories come via books, TV and film, oral traditions or theatre, librarians tend to really love a good tale, well told.

And yet, when it comes to librarians presenting lectures, workshops or conference talks, stories are often replaced by theories, personal experience by excessive references on Powerpoint. The first five minutes of a plenary will typically be an accelerated history of how the person progressed from entering the profession to being stood in front of this audience, but from there the person presenting will be subsumed beneath the broader topic, maybe to emerge again in the final five minutes before and during the Q and A.

The relationship that academic librarians are able to have with students is fundamentally different to that of lecturers. Lecturers will typically see students several times per term, whether that be in lectures, seminars or within the role of personal tutors. Librarians simply do not have that regular pattern of contact in order to incrementally build a relationship. Librarians may have one or two hours to cover all aspects of research and referencing, so it is hardly surprising that when we are presented with one opportunity to teach something to a cohort, a number of things often happen.

- 1) The librarian will talk too much. I have observed library inductions that have resembled contestants taking part in Radio 4's *Just a Minute*, where the trick is to keep talking without hesitation, repetition or deviation. As long as you keep going whilst leaving no gaps whatsoever, you've fulfilled the brief.
- 2) The librarian will try to tell students everything the library has to offer. And that's a lot. There is sometimes a fundamental mismatch between what students need to know at that juncture and what librarians want to tell them.

- 3) The librarian will tell you how to do something. They don't tend to explore what you already know, what you think about a topic or whether you're feeling confident in your own abilities. Librarians tend to instruct. They do this with 'click here', 'now click here', 'now here' and 'here's the (insert resource name)'.

For much of my career I have been guilty of some 1, a lot of 2 and still occasionally 3. However, I now want to explore the advantages that arise when using autoethnography and storytelling as a gambit to engage students. The additional benefit of which is to demonstrate to students the human side of their librarian as a fast-track to relationship building.

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS PLACE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP

There is a long history of ethnographic practice, beginning in anthropology and slowly spreading outwards into many social sciences. However, autoethnography was not so named until Heider published an investigation of the Dani from Papua New Guinea.<sup>7</sup> On its publication, it was remarkable because Heider made no attempt to interpret or interrogate the Dani's claims, but merely reported them, acknowledging they knew more about their lives than the sociologist, arriving and observing. Subsequent investigations, sometimes referred to as 'insider studies', made no attempt to distance the researcher from the research, instead making clear that they were invested in both process and outcome.

Autoethnography really began to gain some traction during the so-called crisis of representation in the '80s.<sup>8</sup> This crisis, again originating in the social sciences, began by researchers questioning the very truths they were attempting to find. It further questioned whether emotional engagement, localised knowledge, social identities (especially in the early examples of autoethnographic research, race, class and sexuality) should be folded into the research and made visible. These ideas challenged the traditional notion of an outsider entering a community to study it and never acknowledging their own positionality, before leaving again to write a report based solely on the author's own thoughts.

Autoethnography sought, through transparency, through stringent ethical concerns for the participants being studied, through acknowledging the imperfections of research, by aiming for readability and by laying out the relationship between author and text, to redefine the concept of bias and objectivity in published research.<sup>9</sup>

It would be wholly unfair of me to not point out that autoethnography has been attacked consistently, both since its early iterations in the 1970s and more recently with the continued success of the work of Tony E Adams, Caroline Ellis and Arthur Bochner.<sup>10</sup> Since the late '90s these three authors have popularised autoethnography,

leading to a steady increase in practitioners across all academic subjects. The attacks which have come typically focus on the approach, the ethical considerations, the implied solipsism of building your academic output around yourself and the lack of replicability.<sup>11</sup>

There is also an ongoing academic argument on how you define autoethnographic research; what are the components which need to be present before a work can be defined as autoethnography.<sup>12</sup> Within my own writing, I have chosen the criteria suggested by Le Roux, who in attempting to address the knotty issue of rigour in autoethnography, proposed five distinct, but often overlapping, criteria.<sup>13</sup>

**Subjectivity:** is the voice of the author present throughout the research? Typically, autoethnographic research is embarked on to help the author understand something about themselves before that understanding becomes of use to a wider learning community.

**Self-reflexivity:** is there evidence of self-awareness throughout the work? This awareness should be demonstrable through the expressed situatedness of the author.

**Resonance:** can the author engage with their audience? The writing should be such that the reader feels connected to the story both intellectually and emotionally.

**Credibility:** the reader needs to be able to trust the written account of the research. Therefore, credibility refers directly to the notion of verisimilitude; does the research account provide evidence of plausibility?

**Contribution:** simply, is the research shining a light on something new? Autoethnographic research is often being employed by so-called marginalised voices, therefore the question becomes 'has something new been expressed or shared', is there an argument being made to improve a situation?

Whilst attempting to write and present autoethnographically, I have found these five criteria invaluable. They are a reminder that librarianship and subjectivity are not in opposition and, crucially, they are an emboldening battle cry when I feel like hiding behind safer approaches.

You cannot employ autoethnography unless you are prepared to be vulnerable.<sup>14</sup> If the thought of feeling vulnerable in front of students makes you feel uncomfortable, then good – embrace it. If, however, it makes you feel physically ill, then this is probably not the approach for you. The feeling of vulnerability emanating from sharing things with an audience, in person or in print, can be powerful and disconcerting. The discomfort felt will depend on what is being shared, but the key aspect is what you and your audience gained and how that fits into the broader learning culture.<sup>15</sup>

In LSP, it is the role of the facilitator to pose the question to the participants, who in response will build individual or collective Lego® models which are then described by the builders. Whilst this type of workshop is not strictly autoethnographic, it is autobiographical, with participants often revealing remarkably intimate aspects of themselves.<sup>16</sup> This is certainly not typical of most library workshops.

Facilitating is not teaching or instructing. In my best facilitating moments, I will ask a participant the right question at the right time. Sometimes, the key is to give someone more time to come to terms with what they've built. Holding my nerve and doing nothing, when the urge to intervene is strong, are often the moments I am happiest with afterwards. Because, as librarians in HE, the default model is still to instruct and do *something*. If, in my practice, I got paid by the word, I would struggle to survive. My favourite moments in LSP workshops are typically interactions between participants, often where I've had no direct creative input whatsoever. In the best LSP workshops, participants ask each other the questions which I was considering myself. Whilst these moments are intermittent, they are glorious and show what the sharing of models and stories can achieve in a remarkably short space of time.

## WHEN THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE COLLIDE

As an example of how unplanned personal events can be incorporated into professional practice, I want to tell a story that happened last year (2023) when I responded to a private message on LinkedIn. The message came from someone calling themselves 'MP' and said, "we write research papers, assignments, dissertations, essays, thesis, case studies, and report writing for people who need it". I could see the potential in responding, considering that essay mills have been illegal in the UK since 2022 and that I deliver a range of workshops and lectures related to academic misconduct. Here was an opportunity to communicate directly with a company offering the exact service that undermines the endeavours of honest students trying to just do their best.

When I enquired as to whether they wrote PhDs for candidates the answer was an unequivocal "yes", along with the price and some details of the process.

To protect myself from any likelihood of future blackmailing by the essay mill company, I contacted my doctoral supervisors and line manager to make it very clear what I intended to do. I also bought and installed a VPN on my personal computer. With those safeguards in place, I began communicating with MP. They were remarkably forthcoming on their own history of cheating to achieve the necessary grades required to graduate in 2016. In their own words, "I need (sic) distinction quality. If I would do it myself I only get passing marks (laughing face emoji)".

During the course of a few weeks, I investigated different aspects of the company MP worked for, building up a picture of how essay mills operate in general. This information has proved invaluable in being able to write these experiences up as a story in order to discourage cheating in higher education. Primarily, because in choosing to interact with individuals, I managed to humanise the faceless notion of companies approaching students online. Statistics are useful, but I would argue that screenshots between myself and a former student and essay mill user, turned employee, tells a more interesting, resonant and emotional story than any statistic can.<sup>17</sup>

After a week of exchanges with MP, I was eventually passed on to someone calling themselves 'Dr R' to discuss details. Dr R as a character in this story did not disappoint, appearing to be unaware or unconcerned as to why I would ask him if his own PhD was on the subject of fraud. He also appeared oblivious to my concerns as to whether I had to understand what was being written on my behalf. Eventually, after some coaxing, he agreed to meet me on Zoom for a chat. Remarkably, he also allowed me to record it.<sup>18</sup> For nine minutes I managed to remain 'in character', asking him questions about the process whilst he explained that my 'job role' was to "sit back, relax and just read through". When I eventually broke cover and explained that I had no intention of using his services, rather than express annoyance he asked "why?" More incredibly still, his final offer to me was to get back in touch if I required help in the future.

A good story often requires a twist. In this case I had one ready to employ, but to do so meant I had to be open and vulnerable in front of students. Autoethnography attempts to shorten the emotional distance between the researcher and the audience. It requires that you present yourself as fallible, changeable and self-aware. Therefore, on the subject of plagiarism in higher education, it was fundamental that I told the whole story truthfully, including my own dalliance with attempting to pass off two sentences of text as my own words during my time as an undergraduate studying psychology. At the time, the fallout from this was tiny, the lecturer underlined the sentences and added "NOT YOUR WORDS" to the text in red pen. But the impact I felt from that feedback has endured throughout my career.

The rationale behind sharing this detail was two-fold; firstly, I wanted the students to know that even after 30 years had elapsed, I still regretted my actions. And secondly, I wished to demonstrate that even if you plagiarise once, this does not automatically mean you are destined

to cheat throughout your academic career. This story will form the cornerstone of workshops I intend to deliver this forthcoming academic year.

The final twist in the writing of this article came in November 2023 when a cancerous tumour was found in my bladder. Since then, I have undergone chemo and surgery and following the all-clear at my three-month scan, things are looking good. But from a research standpoint this has made things rather interesting!

My cancer diagnosis gives me a new area to explore and personalise when discussing information literacy with students. Ever since the pandemic, I have used conspiracy theories as a way in to discuss and explore the legitimacy of sources within academic writing. Since recovering from my diagnosis, the algorithm has offered me diet books to 'keep cancer at bay' and supplements to ensure 'that cancer never needs darken your door'. As a practitioner who is always looking to find new examples of pseudo-science to share with natural science students, these are perfect. It gives me a real-world reason to discuss the importance of peer-review, randomised control trials (RCTs) and the importance of authors' credentials, when choosing sources.

## WHEN THE PERSONAL IS JUST TOO PERSONAL

There is always going to be an emotional cost when choosing personal examples to share. Every practitioner has their own subjective line where real-life will cross into straightforward oversharing. Autoethnographic research acknowledges and respects the need for boundaries but does not tell the researcher where that line is. I fully acknowledge that my proposal of employing autoethnographic principles within selected settings in academic librarianship will be met with a firm 'no' by many librarians.

This is exactly as it should be. Knowing ourselves as practitioners is how we improve. Self-awareness is hopefully how we make the best of our talents as educators. What I am advocating for is courage for those practitioners who are considering trying to connect with their audience on a more personal level. Irrelevant of what our subject specialism may be, there is always scope to incorporate personal moments or stories to illustrate how research works. It is up to us as librarians to recognise and utilise those experiences to create educationally impactful moments for others.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>18</sup> Zoom recording with Alan Wheeler and Dr R. (March 15<sup>th</sup> 2023)

## Biography

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