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8 The Neurobiology of Flow 101

12 More than bricks

44 Playfulness, Seymour Papert and Paulo Freire!

56 Pictorial Guide no. 7





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MORE THAN BRICKS:

a gateway to joy and enthusiasm!

By **Nadia Benedetti**



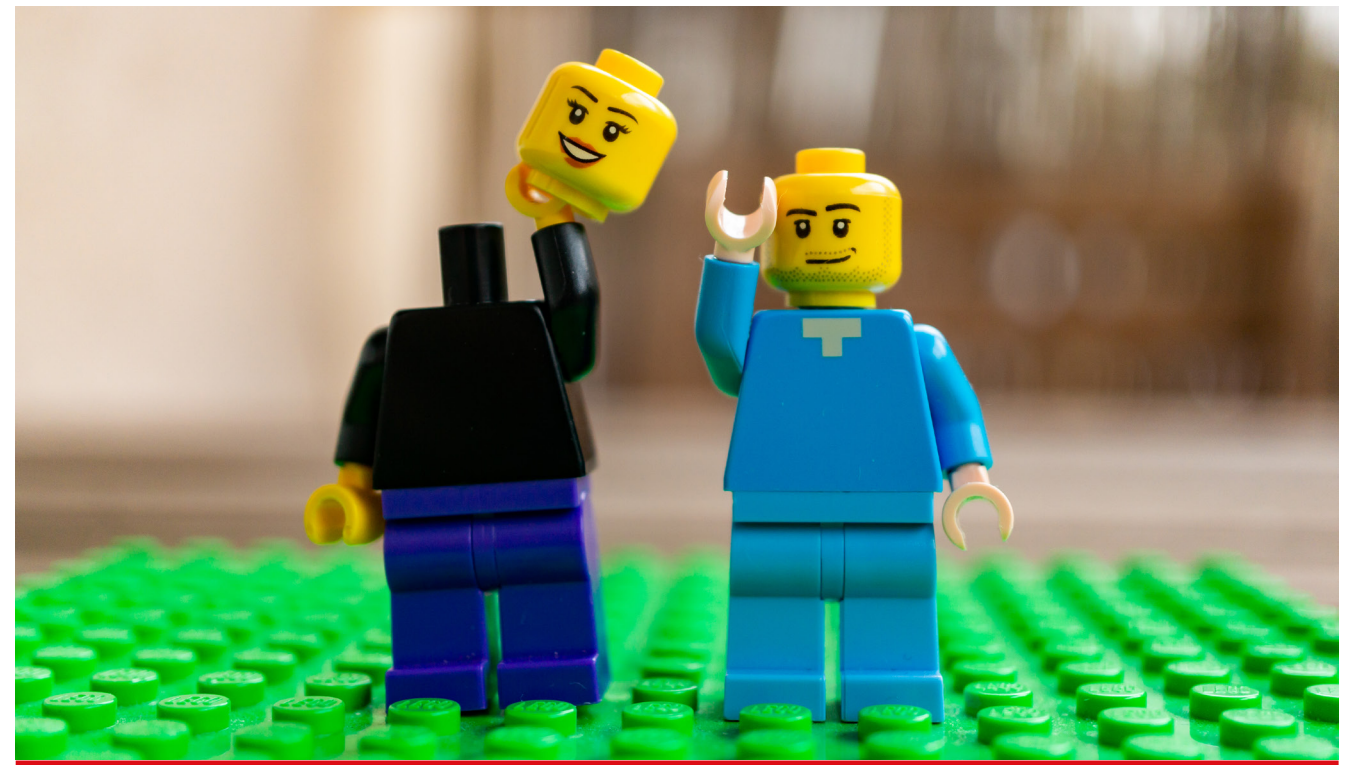
Nadia Benedetti

Unveiling the intrinsic joy of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® bricks

In the realm of corporate workshops, where learning intertwines with creativity, I have spent more than a decade experimenting with various playful materials: cards, puzzles, coloured plasticine, balls, dice, drawing, and more. When confronted with these materials a few people are excited, some raise an eyebrow, fearing a descent into childlike realms, many others remain apprehensive when presented with tools that seem far removed from their usual work habits.

Nevertheless, when faced with baskets brimming with little building blocks, the reaction is almost universally the same: people quickly approach with curiosity, their eyes lighting up, and a strong desire to plunge their hands into the bricks.

These iconic bricks, often dismissed as mere toys, possess an inherent power that transcends their physical form. Let's explore the unique features of LEGO® bricks that contribute to their unparalleled effectiveness in facilitation.



Joy and Enthusiasm

The aesthetics of joy unveiled by Ingrid Fetell Lee

After extensive exploration, I've concluded that the unique features of LEGO bricks tap into the aesthetics of joy, as beautifully articulated by designer and author Ingrid Fetell Lee in her book 'Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness.'

In this ground-breaking book, Ingrid Fetell Lee delves into the profound impact of design on our senses, exploring how everyday objects can generate joy. Some design elements resonate on a visceral level, triggering a spontaneous feeling of joy, well-being, or even euphoria, transcending cultural and societal boundaries. Lee eloquently outlines in the aesthetics of joy, the role of features like energy, abundance, harmony, playfulness, surprise, and freedom.

If we look at the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY kits, they embody all of them, more than any other stuff I use in my facilitation sessions.

ENERGY: the vibrant catalyst

Bright, vibrant colours, according to Lee, are a profound source of joy, impacting our mood and creating a positive psychological state. Think of the lively hues in children's playgrounds or the emotionally charged atmosphere of a candy shop. Colour is, for Lee, 'energy made visible... an indicator of the richness of our surroundings.'

The LEGO® bricks show a variety of vivid colours and the plastic material make them exceptionally bright, even in dark shades like black and brown. We can assert that the colourful nature of LEGO bricks immediately infuses a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and joy. The vivid colours of the bricks encourage usage, acting as eye stimulants and putting us in a positive psychological

state. It's no wonder that the lively hues of LEGO bricks set the stage for a positive mindset in facilitation sessions.

ABUNDANCE: more than meets the eye

Lee emphasises the joy derived from having more than one supports a concept deeply embedded in the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) experience. The sheer quantity of bricks available in these workshops evokes a sense of euphoria. Beyond quantity, it's the variety and multi-sensorial stimulation - shapes, colours, and even auditory elements - that contribute to the aesthetics of joy. Lee's notion of the aesthetics of abundance, defined by layering colours, textures, and patterns, comes to life in LEGO workshops, creating an environment that satisfies our 'sensory hunger' and intensifies joy and excitement.

HARMONY: connecting the dots

'Joy is free and wild, but also very organised,' says Lee. The brain, Gestalt psychology teaches us, tends to associate similar things, and look for recurrences and connections. The resulting feeling is precisely joy, which would be 'the brain's natural reward for paying attention to correlations and connections in the environment'. When using bricks, harmony results in the ability to connect similar shapes to create coherent, balanced ensembles, as well as the simple harmonious repetition of recurring shapes (think of basic bricks). This is an inherent factor in the potential combinations of bricks, and it is a factor capable of creating a feeling of excitement and joy, especially when complemented by abundance.

SURPRISE: unveiling the unusual

The human brain delights in perceiving the unusual, and the surprise effect can trigger joy. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY participants discover unique pieces in workshops, introducing unusual objects or figurines, such as shapes, gears, and connectors. The surprise effect inherent in the abundance of kits adds another layer to the aesthetics of joy. Participants are intrigued and inspired, relishing the exploration of bricks and their unexpected combinations.

PLAYFULNESS: where work meets play

Lee underscores the playful aspect as a key ingredient of joy. She also explains how playfulness is mainly conveyed by round shapes. LEGO bricks, though essentially angular, introduce an aesthetic reminiscent of play through the roundness of their tenons (studs on the bricks). The combination of angular shapes and round tenons avoids an infantilising effect and fosters a sense of security.

Playfulness is also inherent in the affordance, the implicit perception of multiple applications for use, and the freedom to play.

FREEDOM: A Symphony of Possibilities

The concept of freedom is intricately linked to the aesthetics of joy. 'Joy has a dynamism that does not tolerate restraint or repression' states Lee. Although invisible, our senses keenly discern the presence or absence of a certain sense of freedom. This notion finds expression in the use of LEGO bricks, where we experience a sense of freedom intertwined with the millions of possible combinations they can create.

Mitchel Resnick, a professor at the MIT Media Lab sheds light on this aspect. In his book and course 'Lifelong Kindergarten: Cultivating Creativity through Projects, Passion, Peers, and Play,' he firmly states that certain games, more than others, foster experiences of free and creative learning, both in children and adults. These games are likened to a house with 'low floors, high ceilings, and wide walls.'

The concept of 'low floors' denotes experiences that are easily accessible, with few barriers to entry, enabling even beginners to embark on a new activity without feeling overwhelmed. LEGO bricks exemplify this accessibility, catering to those who have never engaged with them. Learning to assemble the simplest shapes, such as generic bricks and Minifigures, is a rapid process.

The notion of 'high ceilings' pertains to allowing personalised progression towards more advanced aspects of a topic or skill, irrespective of one's starting point. Opportunities for challenge and continuous growth should be available, accommodating both beginners progressing through the workshop and experts evolving towards more complex constructions and sophisticated thinking.

The metaphorical 'wide walls' symbolise the idea that the experience should support a broad range of diverse themes, allowing everyone to pursue their unique curiosity regarding the subject. LEGO bricks, with their infinite combinations, empower participants to tackle themes of any kind personally, fostering the expression of individual interests related to the defined challenge.

It is no coincidence that Resnick specifically cites LEGO bricks as an example of a gaming experience that promotes learning and creativity. This generates personal satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and joy, despite the effort involved, provided they are used not in a constraining and imitating manner, attempting to reproduce instructions, but liberally to express and build one's ideas and projects.

The customisation of the LEGO brick experience addresses another key aspect of the aesthetics of joy: freedom and personalisation.

In conclusion, the LEGO brick encapsulates specific characteristics of the aesthetics of joy, making it a source of enthusiasm. More than other materials, LEGO bricks implicitly predispose individuals to a positive attitude, ideal for fostering teamwork. The added factor of brand familiarity further explains why LEGO bricks rapidly instil a joyful and positive mood in facilitation sessions. So, when it comes to facilitation with the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY method, it's truly more than bricks - it's a pathway to joy, creativity, and collaborative success.

Cultivating Creativity

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