Book review: The Librarians' Book on Teaching through Games and Play, by Andrew Walsh

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Review

Are you and your students stifled by your boring, run-of-the-mill induction sessions? Would you like to try something more engaging? Then you should seriously consider reading this book.

Needing such inspiration myself, I attended Andrew's training on constructing an escape room, which I subsequently put into practice at the beginning of the academic year just gone. So I jumped at the chance to review his latest work, *The Librarians' Book on Teaching through Games and Play*, which builds on this session, covering both the why and how of incorporating playful learning and games into library training sessions.

Drawing on his experience, Andrew Walsh, who is the academic Library community's answer to Saw's Jigsaw, presents a coherent approach to the implementation of games and play within library training. He has developed his approach over a number of years and is a recognised authority on the subject. Andrew is a University and National Teaching Fellow based at the University of Huddersfield, who also runs a consultancy on utilising his techniques, in addition to running the press that published this title and a number of others. But Andrew lists his most important job as being a "Playbrarian"- a description of his job coined by his daughter who was explaining his job to her friends- "a librarian who teaches grown-ups to play".

Reading the book is broadly a game of two halves. The first section explains the history of the use of games and play in prompting learning experiences, also encompassing the theory behind the use of this technique. Page 17 outlines the crux of the reasoning behind the use of play for the promotion of learning- and the importance of the transitional nature of play. This first section will be helpful when discussing implementation of such strategies with both senior management and faculty staff, as it signposts a wide array of evidence and theory regarding the value of play and games-based learning. This is supplemented by a reasonable list of references for further exploration.

Examples of many different types of games and playful interventions, along with practical help on how to go about implementing these techniques into your practice make up the second section. The expectation is that these activities can be utilised for training events with your students (e.g. induction), but I have found that selective use of some of these techniques can work just as well when dealing with staff workshops as well as for students. The provision of tried and tested outlines, and indeed links to files that you can customise for your own games, is a really helpful and practical way to encourage readers to attempt to create games – saving them money, time and minimising reputational risk. This includes a walk-through on how to create a library escape room, which having utilised, I can highly recommend.

Weaknesses should be examined in any review, and to be fair, I think there are some small ones. The first is that this work is very much the product of the UK HE system, and there is no exploration of individual differences that might impact on the play. When using the pass the parcel activity to feedback to other staff on some training I had attended, on explaining the rules it became apparent that many of my colleagues had not encountered this game as they do not come from the UK, so lack the cultural background to the whimsy of the play activity (although it still got rather competitive and staff reported that they had thoroughly enjoyed the report!). There is also no coverage of adapting games to accommodate students with additional needs such as dyslexia, although there is mention of those with mobility issues and sensory impairment. The section on such constraints could be usefully expanded, along with some suggestions on how such issues have been tackled in the past.

Play activities are quite personal, and I would hesitate personally to incorporate some of the examples into my practice (namely bubbles), but that's more a reflection on my personality, individual teaching style, the institutional culture and the students I teach, than a comment on the appropriateness of the technique. The book provides many examples, so there is likely to be something that appeals and suits every context.

Listed towards the back id a useful list of conferences and organisations, which provide further opportunities for the development of skills in playful learning. Throughout the book, there are also helpful signposts to suppliers such as printers for small runs, and brilliant cost-saving tips such as using business card printers for cheap print runs.

Andrew's style of writing is approachable and easily digestible, which makes the book a welcome easy read. The structure makes it easy to dip in and out as required, although I would advise for maximum benefit you initially read it cover-to-cover. I found an initial read led to the book finding its way onto my desk as a reference resource, as a companion volume to Andrew's *Making escape rooms for educational purposes: a workbook*.

You will also appreciate the practical nature of the advice when attempting to adopt these techniques. This includes details on prototyping and play testing, which are absolutely crucial to the success of those planning to utilise this approach.

On summarising, I personally found the book very enlightening and look forward to utilising some of the ideas to develop my teaching further. I can already attest the value of this approach, having run an escape room type game that worked really well with last year's induction, so I would thoroughly recommend exploring these techniques further.

Never one to let an opportunity go to waste, I have even incorporated a very simple puzzle in this review, to illustrate that play is always time well spent- a core theme of Andrew's book and a worthwhile lesson for life, in addition to being an excellent addition to the literature on information literacy!