Book Review

The Librarians' Book on Teaching through Games and Play
Andrew Walsh
Innovative Libraries, 2018
Review by Anne Lawrence

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Learning through play is a great trend in education, enabling learners to be liberated from the static and flat teaching and embrace fun techniques for learning new skills and information. This is not to say that this playful learning is not meaningful; on the contrary, it can be much more meaningful than traditional delivery can bestow. However, it is not just about turning up to a session and playing a few games, and the book by Andrew Walsh details the effort and skill it requires to be able to teach through play well.

The book starts off by detailing why playfulness should matter, citing active learning, exploring ideas in a safe environment and increasing engagement as the main reasons. The familiarity, variety and flexibility of the method also mean that it fits quite well in an educational environment. The author details that he teaches people from a range of backgrounds and academic levels, demonstrating the adaptability of the method, and that it can be utilised for introductory purposes, or to teach in-depth and advanced skills.

Quite often we librarians teach one-off sessions, or try to teach content that users may not see the wider benefit from. For example, information literacy skills seem a lot less relatable to students than the idea of teaching them the specific resources they need to answer a particular assignment. This book aims to make those one off sessions more memorable, relatable and consequently more useful than a flat lecture-style session, which the author (and a lot of us in the profession) find to be "unsatisfactory" (Walsh, 2018, p. 7).

Trying to use play as a method is not something you can just do without planning and development, it is a skill itself that needs to be honed and practised. But, the book itself is very practical and advisory in nature, aiming to give the reader real inspiration to start using play in their teaching, not just discuss the theory and leave the reader enthused but not knowing where to start. It details the whole process, from learning outcome to utilisation in reality, and allows the reader to comprehend what they need to do in order to plan and use play in a session.

Included in the introductory sections is a concentrated discussion of the theories of active learning and game based play, all of which signpost to further in-depth reading if required, but really details the basics of why these theories apply and work in an educational setting, and how the group dynamics play out in a session like this – essentially showing why when running a session using play you need to create a space that gives the participant permission to play. These discussions are very straightforward and really make the academically heavier sections of the book easy to digest.

The book has a simple but effective structure, flow and style that makes it a pleasure to read. For the more practical natured, it is a great book as the majority of the content is not about 'why' but about 'how' to go about introducing play into your practice. When discussing a technique, it has advice not only on what the game aims to achieve, but also how big a group is advised, what time is needed, what resources are required and further details about how best to run the game through. The reader benefits from the experience of the author about what works and what pitfalls to avoid when planning and running a play session.

Ultimately, as a practical and open to new techniques librarian, I found this book thoroughly enjoyable, as well as fundamentally useful and beneficial to my practice. I would heartily recommend it to any librarian (or anyone in a teaching position with a bit of flexible thinking) who wants to try a new a fun way of teaching their students.