

Innovation and play to enhance learning in academic libraries

An interview of Andrew Walsh

Interview questions by Eerika Kiuru and Janika Asplund

Andrew Walsh visited Helsinki in March 2017 and organized a workshop “Making educational escape room style activities” for Finnish library professionals together with The Finnish Research Library Association (STKS) and its Information Literacy group. The day was full of fun and expertise.

“Enabling of better, stronger learners is what we should be doing in libraries”

Q. What are the benefits of creating escape room activities? Why should we create these kind of activities? How do escape room activities enhance learning?

The main benefit of escape room activities is their ability to signal and enable play for the participants. As soon as we get presented with an activity like this it gives us permission to step inside a different world, one in which the escape room presents different rules to our “normal” reality.

When we talk about play, something that often gets mentioned is the “magic circle” of play. This is the area in which play happens. It can be a physical location, but just as well a “virtual” location in the minds of the players. If we want to encourage people to play, the easier we can make it for people to fully enter the magic circle of play, the better.

I feel that escape rooms, whether they are in a dedicated room, or an escape room “in a box”, give lots of easy to understand cues to the people taking part, helping to move them from participants to players. The nature of an escape room, something that immediately looks like it is sepa-

rate from normal, everyday life, with its own self-contained story, puzzles and rules, clearly signals that to take part in it, moves you into a different world.

This different world, the playful environment of the escape room, gives similar benefits to any playful world. It allows players to try applying knowledge in different ways in a safe environment, as no real penalties apply to failure. It rewards exploration, discovery and inquisitiveness. It allows players to act as part of a story, potentially seeing problems and issues from different points of view. It encourages players to think with their hands and their bodies, rather than with the purely mental (and disembodied) approach of most classrooms. The rich environment, with story, puzzles, props, and possibly more, helps form strong memories, helping to enable recall of knowledge learnt within the escape room. It can provide all sorts of benefits tied up with play, with the most powerful being the opportunity to practice skills, to explore and learn new knowledge in a “safe” environment.

“Libraries should be one of the key places where we encounter information”

I don't think I answered the “why should we do this” part of the question above! I know the ques-

tion is meant as why should we create escape room activities, but I hope I can briefly answer it in a wider sense too. I strongly believe we should make libraries and education in general, more playful. Education should be transformational. Libraries should be one of the key places where we encounter information and be transformed by it. I see play as an incredibly powerful vehicle for delivering that transformation.

If we encourage play, encourage the benefits of play within our libraries or schools and universities, we create opportunities for transformational educational experiences. We let people safely explore and experiment with new knowledge. We give them experiences that involve new (to them) points of view. We allow them to change themselves and equip themselves with the attitudes, skills and knowledge to become better members of society. We let people safely explore and experiment with new knowledge. We give them experiences that involve new (to them) points of view. We allow them to change themselves and equip themselves with the attitudes, skills and knowledge to become better members of society. I think this enabling of better, stronger learners is what we should be doing in libraries, and within education in general, rather than being satisfied with only teaching a few soon forgotten facts to gain a qualification. Escape rooms can be a relatively simple part of this as they readily signal a playful environment to people, but they are only one way and I'd encourage librarians and educators to find their ways that best work for them.

“Fairly basic story of helping the good librarians to defeat the evil librarians...”

Q. Could you give us an example of creating escape room activities in your own library? How long have you done them and could you give us one example of a successful activity you have organized for your customers?

I've only been creating escape room activities for a couple of years, but these grew out of the other games and playful activities I'd already been using. So using escape rooms seemed a natural extension of things I was already doing, rather than something completely new. I blogged the puzzles for the first big escape room activity I did, so I'll use that as an example! The puzzles can be found at: <http://gamesforlibraries.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/puzzles>

This was an escape room in a box, with everything in a large wooden box I'd had specially made to experiment with these ideas! It switched our normal library induction from 30 minutes of me talking about the library, to 30 minutes of the players discovering these same basic facts themselves. It was only aimed at small numbers of people as an experimental activity, but went down well with every group we tried it with. The players had to solve a linear series of puzzles, each of which could be solved by finding out the same type of basic information they would normally be told (and forget!) in a normal induction. It came with a fairly basic story of helping the good librarians to defeat the evil librarians...

Q. What kind of teaching equipment do you need to create a successful escape room?

Nothing too fancy! At its most basic, you need some boxes or bags that can be locked using padlocks, an assortment of padlocks (numbers and letters) to use, and some basic materials like card and paper. I have a lovely box I had made (<http://gamesforlibraries.blogspot.co.uk/2016/05/a-new-box.html>) that I've used, but I also use bags and boxes I've bought for small amounts of money, including from "bargain" shops. The most important bit of teaching equipment you need is yourself – so give yourself permission to be creative and create something that immerses people effectively into the game.

Q. On March 2017 you facilitated a workshop for Finnish library professionals in a workshop organized by The Finnish Research Library Association and its Information literacy group. What were your experiences of Finnish library professionals creating escape room activities, how did we do?

I must admit, the language barrier worried me! When running workshops I rely on listening to judge how each group is doing, who is running into problems and needs help, who is getting to the end of an activity, etc. I was relieved that I could still judge this without understanding what you were all saying.

I really enjoyed facilitating the workshop. Whenever I've met Finnish library professionals elsewhere, I've been impressed with the attitude and creativeness they've shown and it's always a pleasure to talk to them. The workshop reinforced that, with everyone not only coping with my instructions in English, but creating some lovely prototype ideas in a short amount of time.

"We should be happy to fail more."

Q. You are interested in innovative practices within libraries. From your point of view, what does innovation mean in the library context, and do you have ideas on how could library professionals be more innovative, especially in academic libraries?

I see innovation as introducing ideas that are new to you or your library and which make a useful difference to you or your users. The ideas themselves don't have to be new (just new to you!), they don't have to use fancy technology, or be particularly ambitious in scope. To be innovative ideas, they just need to be different from what you are already doing and aimed at improving things.

The biggest thing library professionals could do to be more innovative is really hard to do, but really important. We should be happy to fail more. To fail ourselves when trying new things, and to allow people who work for us to fail more often. Failure is how we learn whether something will work! We should try new things that we think will make a difference. Most things won't work particularly well, but won't make things worse either. Some things will work brilliantly and make a massive difference. Very occasionally things will work so badly they make things worse (but we can stop doing them quickly!).

Everytime that we try a new innovation it can be a success in one of two ways. We've either improved things, or learnt something that we can build into our next attempt to innovate. Failure is necessary to learn, to improve, to build upon. Failure is what allows us to succeed.

Unfortunately, many librarians, especially library managers, are poor at accepting failure as a learning opportunity. I see this all the time, with poor practices continuing rather than risking change. Even when library professionals try new innovative practices, they are then expected to continue down that same route no matter what their experiences, and are deterred from admitting that something didn't work, not allowed to try something else.

So it is hard for us to be more innovative and something library managers need to help enable. Library managers need to encourage their staff to try new things and to fail. Then to repeatedly encourage them to try something else and to recognize the value of trying and failing.

I could get very carried away with this question, so I'll just finish with one illustration I see regularly of reluctance to innovate in information literacy teaching. I do a lot of work around improving how information skills are taught and people regularly tell me they are reluctant to try something new in case it doesn't work with their students. These same library staff tend to use didac-

tic, lecture style teaching methods, which don't work very well. So they are happy failing every day in their teaching because it is comfortable, "normal" failure that they expect to happen. If they tried something new it could be failure in a new, different, scary way. To help library professionals be more innovative we need to give people like this the support they need to try new types of failure (and eventually success) instead of sticking with their everyday failures.

Q. What are your future plans in developing library IL education?

I'm always getting enthusiastic with new ideas and plans for enabling people to develop their information literacy and for library professionals to teach these skills. My future plans involve creating a range of teaching packs for librarians. These "TeachKits" for librarians would include a set of materials around a topic area we often teach in libraries.

The TeachKits would have a mixture of teaching ideas (lesson plans, alternative uses for materials, etc) and games or other finished teaching interventions (things that could be got straight out and used in a class), aimed at different levels and settings. Each box would have a different theme with obvious ones being things like "search strategies", "referencing", "Sources of information" that lots of us teach, but also areas like "critical appraisal", "academic writing", "Open Access", "copyright". I took this idea to my favourite Information Literacy conference, LILAC (<http://www.lilacconference.com/>). The people we showed it to also suggested we build an online community around sharing ideas.

Brief Bio:

Andrew is a researcher and a practitioner, whose research has largely focused on improving the

teaching of information skills, especially via the development and introduction of innovative and original means of information literacy instruction. Andrew is particularly interested in information literacy, the use of active learning within library sessions, the application of mobile technologies within the library environment, and game based learning and play in libraries.

He publishes widely in trade publications as well as peer reviewed journals, has authored multiple books; edited books on Information Discovery Journeys and innovative library practices; written various book chapters, and is in demand as a keynote speaker internationally.

Andrew runs a small publishing house for affordable professional development books for LIS students and staff. He delivers workshops and talks on various topics, including creative teaching techniques and the use of games, play (and Lego) in teaching.

Andrew is a University teaching Fellow and a National Teaching Fellow, but according to his children, he is mainly "a librarian and teaches grown-ups how to play".

Andrew Walsh's website:
<http://innovativelibraries.org.uk/>

Andrew Walsh's blog:
<http://gamesforlibraries.blogspot.fi/>

Tietoa kirjoittajista:

*Eerika Kiuru
Informaatikko
Hämeen ammattikorkeakoulu,
Kirjasto- ja tietopalvelut
eerika.kiuru at hamk.fi*

*Janika Asplund
Tietoasiantuntija
Tampereen yliopiston kirjasto
janika.asplund@uta.fi*