

LEGO® Education StoryStarter

By Jetro

Pictures by LEGO Education

LEGO® Education is putting the finishing touches to a brand new product, designed as a hands-on approach to creative writing and storytelling.

Once upon a time... four easy words to get a story started, but they are only the beginning. I still remember the horrible moments that seemed to stretch out to an eternity whenever we got a writing assignment in primary school and I simply didn't have a clue as to how to get the story going. So how do you get a story started, and, of equal importance, how do you give it a good ending? LEGO Education has the answer and it's called StoryStarter.

Teaching with LEGO bricks.

In previous issues of HispaBrick Magazine® we have written about the use of LEGO in teaching Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), for instance on the legospace.com website which features experiments with LEGO constructions that are carried out on the International Space Station [1], but this is not the only field LEGO Education is active in. There are many other areas of education where a hands-on approach can stimulate students to take a bigger interest in the subject and have fun learning. It is all about creating an engaging learning experience and what better tool to use than a product many students already have a great affinity with: LEGO bricks.

One of these areas is literacy, an important part of which is related to being able to get ideas and thoughts across both verbally and on paper. Creating stories is an important step in the development of these skills. LEGO Education did research into using LEGO Bricks to teach storytelling. A story is more than a collection of words. It needs a plot, a structure and other elements, and the groundwork for all of these can be made using LEGO elements. The result of this research was then further developed by LEGO Education into a set made up of an ample collection of LEGO elements (1147 in total in the starter pack), a curriculum including lesson plans, story topics and reading material and a software program with which the students can turn their ideas into nicely presented stories.

Building the story.

Any story consists of several clearly identified elements: a beginning, middle and an end. Using StoryStarter to create a story students will work together in groups to build these three (or up to five [2]) stages of the story, each on their own baseplate. By putting bricks into the hands of the students the story turns from something abstract in their minds to something tangible to build and expand on. The science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov quoted to have said: "Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers". StoryStarter aims to be a tool to help students do just that.



But what if you get stuck? What if you don't know where to take the story? The StoryStarter set comes with another plate on which a cardboard decision card can be placed. With the help of a spinner the card can help decide if the story takes place in the countryside or in the city or whether a character feels sad or confused after a certain incident.

After building the story as a group, each student writes his own version of the story, and since each one chooses his own point of view this may result in very different stories based on the same builds. As a final step students can use the web-based program StoryVisualizer to publish their story, importing pictures of the builds and choosing different layouts to give it a nice look [3].

The results

StoryStarter was tested in 50 schools across the USA. The feedback from those trials was very positive. Take for example Mary Walser, a 3rd Grade Teacher at Fairview Elementary School (High Point, NC): "Since my students thought of it as fun, many of them didn't realize they were learning throughout the process. For students who do not usually think of themselves as good writers, StoryStarter acted as a springboard into a part of themselves they didn't know was



there". Her words are typical for the feeling the product generates among both students and teachers. The former are especially excited by the use of LEGO® bricks which they are often already familiar with and feel inspired by the fact that rather than having to work out a story all by themselves, creating a story now becomes a playful and collaborative problem-solving task. The latter are stimulated by the fact that their students not only perform better, but are actually looking forward to classes they used to dread.

It's no wonder then that there is a growing interest in StoryStarter, which was officially launched in the USA and Russia in January 2013. And the product will not be limited to those two markets. It is programmed to be released on the European and Asian markets in early 2014 and will be available in a dozen languages, including Spanish, German, French and the Scandinavian languages for Europe, and Japanese and Chinese for Asia.

The AFOL point of view

LEGO Education products are a very specific segment that many AFOLs don't usually pay much attention to. The specific

nature of the products, which are often presented in a much less glamorous way than retail sets, and the different pricing, partly due to the fact that rather than a construction set you get a teaching solution, often result in little interest from AFOLs. However, when you have a closer look at the inventory (like the different Community Worker sets that contained 30+ minifigs) or when the set is made up of specific elements that can only be obtained from LEGO Education (like the 9688 Renewable Energy Add-On Set which contained elements like the E-Motor, Energy Display and Solar Panel), some sets are real gems for AFOLs.

The StoryStarter set has two strong points from the AFOL point of view. The set comes in a practical storage bin with two extractable trays, providing a LEGO solution to the ever present sorting dilemma of many AFOLs (how I wish those boxes were available separately!). It also contains a large variety of specialty bricks: minifigs, animals, complements, trees and plants, etc. in multiples of five to ensure you can include every element in each of the up to 5 stages of the story. [4]

In the end of course it comes down to the excuse you find to buy the set you know you want. I'm sticking with the fact that my kids would really benefit from having this valuable educational material available at home. Whether I'll actually allow them to play with it (unsupervised) remains to be seen...



- [1] See the article LEGO in Space in HBM011
- [2] A 5 scene structure would consist of: beginning, building up, climax, building down and end.
- [3] StoryVisualizer takes its inspiration from the Comic Builder application available for many of the LEGO themes on the official LEGO website, like the City Comic builder at <http://city.lego.com/en-us/comicbuilder/intro.aspx>
- [4] You can find the BOM of this set ("element survey" in LEGOspeak) on the product page at http://www.legoeducation.us/eng/product/storystarter_core_set/2457

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