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Creative Coaching Methods in Career Transition: Exploring Reflection and Meaning-Making Through LEGO® Serious Play® and Collage

Briony Supple

Abstract

This study explores how creative coaching methods may help support reflection and insight in the context of career transition. Eight participants engaged in a facilitated workshop using LEGO® Serious Play® and collage to explore experiences of career change and uncertainty. These methods enabled engagement with physical and visual materials to support reflection and meaning-making. Data was collected through pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, photographs of creative artefacts, reflective memos and researcher field notes. Findings suggest that creative methods may enable a nuanced exploration of identity, priorities and future directions and support meaning-making and re-interpretation of perspectives pertaining to career options.

Keywords: LEGO® Serious Play®, collage, creativity, career, coaching

Introduction

Career transitions are often characterised by uncertainty, shifting priorities and the need to reconsider established identities and future directions. In such contexts, individuals are required not only to make decisions about their working lives but to make sense of their experiences in ways that support movement and change. Coaching is widely used as an approach to support this process, providing a space for reflection, exploration and the development of new perspectives.

However, much of this work remains grounded in dialogue, which can limit how individuals engage with experiences that are difficult to articulate. A growing body of qualitative research suggests that creative and arts-based methods can extend reflective practice in these contexts. Studies across coaching, counselling and adult education indicate that approaches such as LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP), collage and visual methods support deeper reflection, insight and meaning-making. For example, creating artefacts has been associated with critical reflection and ‘aha’ moments (Van Coller-Peter & Olinger, 2022), while LSP-based coaching has been linked

to increased awareness, emotional safety and insight (Quinn et al., 2021). Related work highlights enhanced group cohesion and meaning-making (Peabody & Noyes, 2017), transformative learning through collage (Simpson, 2007) and increased rapport and reflective dialogue through visual methods (Rainford, 2020). While this evidence base is predominantly qualitative and small-scale, it consistently points to the potential of material and visual approaches to support reflection where language alone may be insufficient.

This study contributes to understanding how creative coaching methods may support reflection and insight, how meaning-making might be shaped through LSP and collage and how individuals represent and re-interpret their career situations through engagement with these approaches.

Literature Review

Coaching is widely understood as a reflective practice that supports the exploration and interpretation of experience (Grant et al., 2024; Jackson, 2004). Rather than uncovering fixed truths, coaching involves collaboratively constructing meaning in ways that open new possibilities for action. This process is particularly significant during periods of career transition, when individuals are re-evaluating identity, direction and possible futures.

Career transition can be understood not simply as occupational movement but as a process of identity construction and narrative meaning-making (Hazen & Steckler, 2024). Career construction theory suggests that individuals actively shape vocational identities through reflection on experience and the imagining of possible futures (Savickas, 2019). From this perspective, navigating career decisions involves reinterpreting past roles, clarifying values and articulating preferred trajectories.

While coaching typically facilitates this work through dialogue, creative methods offer an alternative mode of engagement by making thinking visible and tangible. A growing body of work has explored the use of creative approaches within coaching, including drawing, collage and other forms of artmaking, both as tools to support client insight and as prompts for practitioner reflection (e.g., Ahmann et al., 2025; Lucas, 2023; Maisel, 2020; Sheather, 2019, 2022; Watts, 2023).

One such creative approach is LSP, a facilitated methodology in which participants build three-dimensional metaphorical models using standard LEGO® bricks to represent their experiences and ideas. Participants explain the meaning of their own models through storytelling and dialogue, using them as a basis for reflection and exploration within the coaching conversation (Bab & Boniwell, 2016; Moore & O'Sullivan, 2023).

Research examining LSP and other creative methods suggests that these approaches may help support reflection and insight, although the evidence base remains predominantly qualitative and small-scale. Studies indicate that creating artefacts can prompt critical reflection and moments of insight (Van Coller-Peter & Olinger, 2022), while LSP-based coaching has been associated with increased awareness, insight and emotional engagement (Quinn et al., 2021; Peabody & Noyes, 2017). Research on collage and visual methods similarly highlights their potential to support exploration of complex or difficult-to-articulate experiences (Ahmann et al., 2025; Simpson, 2007; Rainford, 2020).

Within coaching, the value of these approaches lies not in the artefacts themselves but in the reflective processes they facilitate. In LSP, participants construct metaphorical models and explain their meaning through storytelling and dialogue, creating opportunities to externalise and re-interpret their experiences (Harn & Hsiao, 2018; Moore & O'Sullivan, 2023). Collage similarly supports reflection through the selection, arrangement and discussion of images, enabling participants to explore tacit and affective dimensions of experience (Sheather, 2019, 2022; Watts, 2023).

Recent empirical work begins to illustrate how these processes unfold in practice. Ahmann et al. (2025), in a phenomenological study of intuitive collage in coaching, describe a progression in which individuals move from experiences of constraint or feeling 'boxed-in', through a process of 'unlocking', towards accessing deeper aspects of the self. This process is facilitated through visual and symbolic representation, enabling engagement with aspects of experience that are not easily articulated through language alone.

Across these approaches, creative methods may support reflection through mechanisms such as externalisation, metaphor and material engagement. By altering how individuals engage with their experience, they may create conditions for more deliberate and exploratory forms of meaning-making within the coaching process. Although emerging research suggests that creative methods can support reflection and insight, considerably less is understood about how these processes unfold in practice, particularly during career transition and across different creative approaches. In particular, there is limited understanding of how participants experience and make sense of LSP and collage as complementary methods within coaching. This study seeks to contribute to this area by exploring how participants experienced LSP and collage within a career coaching workshop.

Study Aim

This study contributes to understanding how creative coaching methods support reflection and insight, how meaning-making is shaped through LSP and collage and how individuals represent and re-interpret their career situations through engagement with these approaches. In doing so, it builds on existing work on reflection in coaching, career identity and creative methods and examines how these processes unfold in practice within a structured coaching workshop. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do creative coaching methods support reflection and insight when individuals are considering career transition/facing decisions regarding their careers?
2. How do LSP and collage support meaning-making in a coaching workshop?
3. How do individuals represent and re-interpret their career situations through creative coaching activities as part of a group workshop?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach, concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2024), with a focus on developing a rich, contextualised account of practice.

The study formed part of the author's postgraduate coaching research project at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee at UCC, in March 2026. All participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Eight participants were recruited through an expression of interest process following a post on LinkedIn. They represented a range of professional backgrounds, including education, nonprofit, corporate and self-employment contexts. Participant demographic information such as age and gender was not collected, as these variables were not considered central to the aims of the study. Instead, information relevant to the research context, including professional background, career stage and previous experience with creative approaches, was collected to provide contextual information about the participants. The majority identified as mid-career (n = 6), with two participants identifying as late-career. Most participants (n = 5) had not previously engaged with creative approaches such as LSP or collage, while three reported prior experience.

Workshop Design, Data Collection and Analysis

The three-hour workshop was structured around a sequence of creative activities designed to support reflection on current career situations and possible future directions. The table shows an overview of the different workshop activities, their purpose and the relevant data gathered at each stage (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the Workshop Sequence and Research Data Collection.

Stage	Activity	Purpose	Data
Introduction	Consent, participant information, research overview and pre-workshop survey.	Introduce the workshop and obtain informed consent.	Signed consent forms; pre-workshop survey
LEGO® Serious Play® orientation	Introduction to the LEGO® Serious Play® process and a short warm-up build (not analysed).	Familiarise participants with metaphorical building.	None
LEGO® Serious Play® Activity 1	Build a model representing the current work/career situation, followed by facilitated reflection.	Explore participants' current career experiences.	Photographs of artefacts; written reflections; field notes
LEGO® Serious Play® Activity 2	Build a model representing a desired future work/career direction, followed by facilitated reflection.	Explore future aspirations and possibilities.	Photographs of artefacts; written reflections; field notes
Collage	Create a collage representing strengths, skills and supports for future career development, followed by optional sharing.	Extend reflection through visual meaning-making.	Photographs of artefacts; written reflections; field notes
Closing	Identify one future action and complete the post-workshop survey.	Consolidate learning and capture participant feedback.	Post-workshop survey

Participants completed a brief pre-workshop survey and a post-workshop survey. The pre-workshop survey gathered contextual information about participants' career stage, work industry, previous experience with creative methods, current feelings about their career and expectations for the workshop. The post-workshop survey explored participants' perceptions of the creative methods, the extent to which they supported reflection, any new insights gained and invited additional comments about their experience. Both surveys included a combination of closed- and open-ended questions.

Following a short presentation outlining the study, the coaching context and the use of creative methods, participants engaged in an LSP activity in response to the prompt: Build a model that represents your current work or career situation ('Model 1 – State of the Actual'), followed by a second build prompted by: Build a model that represents where you would like your work or

career to move in the future ('Model 2 – Visions of the Possible'). These activities followed a structured process of building, sharing and reflection.

The final creative activity involved an individual collage exercise informed by Watts (2023) coaching with a collage approach. Participants were provided with a selection of magazines, newspapers, scissors, glue and either A3- or A4-sized paper and invited to create a collage representing their future career direction. They then completed a written reflection and discussed their work with a partner. Participants were asked to create a collage representing the strengths, supports and qualities that could support movement from their current situation towards their desired future. The collage activity emphasised exploration rather than planning, allowing participants to select images, words and symbols that resonated with them.

Participants completed a guided reflection sheet containing brief prompts to support written reflection before, during and after the creative activities. The prompts encouraged participants to record interpretations of their artefacts, emerging insights, perceived future directions and final reflections. Completion was voluntary, and participants could write as much or as little as they wished.

The sequence of activities was intentionally designed to scaffold participants' engagement with different creative materials. Based on the author's facilitation experience, participants typically become comfortable more readily with the structured and familiar nature of LEGO® bricks before engaging with the greater openness and interpretive possibilities of collage. The workshop therefore progressed from the more structured LSP activities to collage, providing a gradual transition from guided metaphorical modelling to more open-ended creative reflection.

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2022). The dataset comprised pre- and post-workshop surveys, guided reflection sheets, photographs of the creative artefacts, the author's field notes and quantitative post-workshop survey items participants' describing experiences of the workshop. Participants were assigned anonymised codes (P1–P8), which were used consistently across all data sources. Handwritten notes and reflections were transcribed into digital format. Microsoft Word was used to collate

and organise the dataset, while Microsoft Excel was used to manage the coding process, compare patterns across participants and data sources and support the iterative development of themes. Initial familiarisation involved repeated reading of the complete dataset and the development of participant profiles that brought together all available data for each participant. All data was coded by the author using an inductive, iterative process undertaken over three rounds of coding and theme development. The first round involved generating initial codes across the dataset.

During the second round, related codes were reviewed, refined and clustered into candidate themes through ongoing comparison across participants and data sources. The third round involved reviewing the candidate themes against the original data, refining theme boundaries and definitions and developing the final themes presented in the findings. Throughout this process, themes were developed across the complete dataset through comparison of patterns across participants and data sources, rather than being organised according to individual workshop activities or prompts. Photographs of the LEGO® models and collages were used to support and contextualise participants' written reflections and the author's field notes, with interpretation grounded in the meanings participants attributed to their creations.

As the workshop designer and facilitator, the author recognised the potential for prior knowledge of the intervention and expectations of the creative methods to influence interpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the study to capture observations, assumptions, facilitation reflections, and emerging interpretations. To enhance reflexivity and reduce the influence of these assumptions, coding and theme development remained grounded in participants' survey responses, written reflections, photographs of the creative artefacts, and the author's field notes, with repeated reference to the original data throughout the analytic process. Analytic notes and summary tables were maintained to document the development and refinement of codes and themes.

Results

Analysis generated three themes that capture participants' experiences across the workshop. These reflect a progression from initial experiences of constraint and uncertainty, through the imagining of possible futures, to the identification of sup- ports and conditions for change.

Together, the themes illustrate how reflection and meaning-making unfolded across the sequence of creative activities.

Theme 1: Experiences of Uncertainty, Constraint and Limited Agency

When asked to describe their current career situation as part of pre-workshop reflections, participants used words and phrases such as *stuck*, *unmotivated*, *uncertain*, *tired*, *overwhelmed*, and *needing direction*. Even where optimism or possibility was present, it was often paired with ambiguity or a lack of clarity about next steps. These descriptions pointed to a shared experience of tension between current circumstances and an unclear future direction.

This sense of constraint was reinforced in the first LSP activity. Participants' initial models frequently depicted pressure, obstacles, and fragmentation, being pulled in multiple directions, constrained by organisational structures, or uncertain about how to move forward. The models tended to foreground difficulty and tension rather than momentum or clarity, suggesting that participants were beginning the workshop from a position of limited agency or uncertainty about direction. Two participants' builds in Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate this theme particularly clearly and both also express a surprise at their own insights.

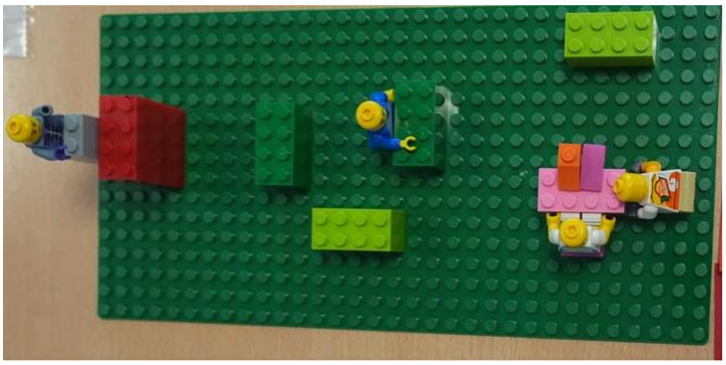


Figure 1. Participant 1, LSP Build 1 – State of the Actual.

My current workplace – large organisation/ many desks. I'm [minifigure on the far right] hitting my head off the desk unseen – manager working away. Would like to attain a position of responsibility where I can contribute. Surprised at how alone I am in my situation i.e., no ally in the workplace (Figure 1).



Figure 2. Participant 7, LSP Build 1 – State of the Actual.

I am the figure in the middle, dealing with a complex and messy task and trying to build new processes, while fires burn around me. Reports line up looking for my attention and my manager is distant with her back turned. I was surprised I added my manager – maybe she is on my mind more than I thought (Figure 2).

Theme 2: Re-framing and Imagining Possible Futures

In contrast to the first LEGO® builds, which foregrounded constraint and uncertainty, the second round of building prompted participants to shift their attention towards future possibilities. While uncertainty did not disappear, participants began to represent alternative directions, desired changes and more purposeful positioning within their career contexts. In their written reflections, participants used language such as direction, possibility, confidence, momentum and growth when describing their imagined future state. The second models often included elements symbolising movement, connection or new pathways, suggesting an emergent capacity to think beyond current constraints. Several participants represented themselves as moving towards new roles, developing new skills or seeking environments more aligned with their values and aspirations. Rather than resolving all uncertainty, the builds suggested a shift in orientation: from feeling stuck within existing circumstances towards imagining ways forward. Participants began to identify resources, relationships and actions that might support movement, indicating an early re-framing of their situation and an increased ability to envisage alternative futures.

Two participants' builds in Figure 3 and Figure 4 exemplify this shift clearly. Their models and accompanying explanations illustrate how participants began to imagine new possibilities and articulate preferred future directions.



Figure 3. Participant 5, LSP Build 2 – Visions of the possible.

Growing, process, opportunities. At first I added the flowers and plants as a way to symbolise the growth I've seen in the young people, but it also means my own growth. Finding balance to do the things that I want. Remember the purpose work to live not live to work. I've made huge efforts to grow and learn but I need to get to a place that gives me more balance (Figure 3).



Figure 4. Participant 8, LSP Build 2 – Visions of the possible.

Solid foundation (red brick) – wheels represent client groups and community peers, colleagues, who I learn from. Wheels also represent movement/change, green flags represent change/learning. Pink and red pieces are jewels from the co-created experience I work with (Figure 4).

Theme 3: Identifying Supports, Strengths and Conditions for Change

The collage activity shifted participants' attention from imagining possible futures to identifying the supports, qualities and conditions that might enable change. Across participants, the collages emphasised both internal resources and external supports, suggesting a growing sense of agency and recognition of what might facilitate movement forward. Participants frequently identified relational supports as important, including family support, collaboration, networking and the power of people. Others highlighted personal qualities such as resilience, determination, adaptability, curiosity and confidence in their own expertise. Several participants also referenced the importance of trusting themselves and those around them, and of cultivating environments that would allow them to grow and act with purpose.

In contrast to the earlier focus on constraints, the collages pointed towards more enabling orientations, including selfbelief, openness to trying new things, and the recognition that professional identity does not exist in isolation from wider life priorities. While uncertainty remained, participants' reflections indicated an emerging awareness of both the resources available to them and the personal qualities they could draw on in navigating change. Two collages illustrate this shift particularly clearly, highlighting the ways in which which

participants articulated both internal capacities and external supports as central to their movement forward.



Figure 5. Participant 2, Collage – Strengths, qualities, resources, opportunities.

My collage represents:

People – power of people, connections, networking, collaboration, support-giving, encouragement. Time – put the time in, plan well

Existing strengths and qualities:

Determination. People person, outgoing. Organised and tenacious (Figure 5)



Figure 6. Participant 4, Collage – Strengths, qualities, resources, opportunities.

My collage represents:

A journey that I'm at the beginning of. I have affirmations to instil belief ['Your journey is your power', 'Be fearless in becoming yourself', 'Let your inner voice guide you', 'Growth is found outside your comfort zone'] an open window which I feel I'm inside now and I hope to be on the outside in the future. Open to trying new things.

Existing strengths and qualities: Time and support (Figure 6)

Overall Impacts and Perceived Change

In the post-workshop survey, all participants reported gaining new insight or perspective from the workshop, with six out of eight reporting 'significant' insights. A recurring pattern was the recognition that they did not need to navigate change alone. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration and seeking support, with reflections such as 'need to be less isolated; need to purposefully leverage colleagues' (P1) and 'trying to do everything on your own is not the answer, collaboration and communication are key' (P2).

Several participants described a shift towards greater selfbelief and confidence in their own abilities, noting the need to 'believe in myself and stop doubting my abilities' (P6) and to 'listen to my needs more and value my skills and experience' (P5). Others emphasised the importance of giving time and intentionality to change, stating that they needed to 'give the space, time and thought to change – it won't happen without that' (P4) and recognising that 'change doesn't have to be big and sudden' but can be approached through consistent, incremental action (P7).

While participants acknowledged ongoing uncertainty, their reflections suggested an increased readiness to act, identify supports and approach career change with greater agency and clarity.

Discussion

The findings suggest a progression across the workshop, from constraint towards greater clarity, agency and identification of supports for change. This progression highlights not only that creative methods may support reflection but how these processes unfold in practice, as participants move from articulating constraint to imagining possibilities and identifying resources for change across the sequence of activities. The discussion that follows considers these findings in relation to the study's research questions.

How Creative Coaching Methods Supported Reflection and Insight (RQ1)

Participants' accounts suggest that the initial LSP activities enabled them to externalise their experiences, supporting reflection on their current career situations and illustrating how reflection is initiated through material engagement. Participants frequently reported surprise at what emerged through the LSP process, suggesting that material construction made previously implicit tensions and constraints visible. This aligns with work on reflection in coaching, which suggests that meaning-making is supported when individuals are able to examine their experience from a new vantage point (Jackson, 2004; McCormick & Forsyth, 2024).

The process also appeared to support reflective distance by enabling participants to articulate complex experiences indirectly, rather than through verbal explanation alone. This echoes research indicating that creative and visual methods can facilitate reflective engagement by supporting exploration of lived experience in ways that differ from purely verbal approaches (Quinn et al., 2021; Van Coller-Peter & Olinger, 2022).

How LSP and Collage Supported Meaning-Making (RQ2)

Across the workshop, the LSP and collage activities appeared to support meaning-making in complementary ways. The LSP activities enabled participants to construct tangible representations of both constraint and possibility, supporting exploration of current challenges and future aspirations. In line with constructionist perspectives, these artefacts functioned as mediating tools through which participants could re-interpret their experiences (Papert, 1986).

The collage activity extended this process by shifting attention towards strengths, supports and conditions for change. Participants used collage to represent relational resources, personal qualities and desired environments, reflecting a more resource-oriented perspective. These findings align with literature suggesting that creative methods support meaning-making through symbolic representation and engagement in the act of making (Rainford, 2020; Sheather, 2019, 2022).

These findings suggest that the activities may have done more than simply capture participants' thinking; they appeared to shape how experiences were interpreted across the sequence of activities. This is consistent with research highlighting the role of metaphor and material construction in supporting reflection and insight within LSP (Quinn et al., 2021).

These findings suggest that the creative methods may have supported participants through several related processes. Firstly, using LSP appeared to enable participants to externalise aspects of their career experiences, making abstract thoughts and feelings visible and available for reflection.

Secondly, explaining the meaning of their models and collages appeared to encourage participants to articulate and re-interpret these representations through dialogue and written reflection. Finally, engaging with physical and visual materials appeared to create reflective distance from immediate career concerns, allowing participants to consider alternative perspectives, future possibilities and the personal and relational resources available to support change.

How Participants Represented and Re-Interpreted Their Career Situations (RQ3)

Across the workshop, participants moved from articulating experiences of constraint towards recognising potential directions and resources for change. Initial reflections and LSP activities frequently surfaced feelings of being stuck, constrained or uncertain, while later activities highlighted supports, strengths and possible next steps. This progression demonstrates how meaning-making may unfold in practice, as participants move from describing current difficulties towards identifying possibilities and sources of agency.

This pattern resonates with understandings of career transition as an ongoing process of identity construction and narrative re-authoring rather than a discrete event (Savickas, 2019). The findings suggest that creative methods may support participants in re-framing their career narratives, identifying both internal and external resources and articulating intentions for change. While uncertainty remained, participants' reflections indicated increased clarity and a greater

sense of agency, consistent with perspectives on reflective practice and career development in coaching contexts (Bachkirova, 2011; Hazen & Steckler, 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored how creative methods support reflection and meaning-making in the context of career transition. Across the workshop, participants moved from articulating experiences of constraint and uncertainty towards identifying possible futures and the supports that might enable change. The use of LSP and collage appeared to support participants in externalising experience, re-framing aspects of their career situations and recognising personal and relational resources for movement.

The findings suggest that creative methods may extend conventional coaching approaches by enabling participants to engage with aspects of experience that are difficult to access through dialogue alone. Through metaphor, material construction and visual representation, participants were able to explore identity, priorities and potential future directions in ways that are more embodied, relational and generative. In this sense, creative methods may function not simply as reflective tools but as mechanisms through which participants construct meaning within the coaching process.

Despite the small sample size, these findings still have implications for coaching practice, theory and impact. They suggest that, in practice, integrating creative approaches may provide a structured way of supporting clients to engage with complex or uncertain situations, particularly where experiences are affective or not easily articulated. Theoretically, the findings contribute to a more expansive understanding of reflection in coaching, positioning it not solely as a cognitive or dialogic process but as one mediated through material and visual engagement, where interaction with artefacts plays an active role in meaning-making. In terms of impact, they highlight the potential that creative methods may have to support individuals in moving from experiences of constraint towards a greater sense of clarity and agency, suggesting their value in coaching contexts concerned with transition, identity and change.

While the workshop did not resolve participants' uncertainty, it created conditions for insight, reflection and the identification of possible next steps. As the workshop intentionally integrated facilitated discussion, written reflection, guided prompts and creative activities, it is not possible to attribute participants' reflections or insights solely to the creative methods. Rather, the findings suggest that LSP and collage formed important components of a broader reflective process experienced by participants. Given the small, exploratory nature of the study, the findings are not intended to be generalisable; however, they highlight the potential of creative methods to support meaning-making in contexts of transition and identity work. Future research could explore how these processes develop over time, including the extent to which insights generated through creative methods translate into sustained action and change.

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