Learning Professional Techniques Through Play: Using Games in the Apparel Classroom

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All students have intrinsic motivations yet faculty members frequently lament the lack of intellectual curiosity exhibited by students. Students complain that course material is not immediately relevant to their lives or interests. Additionally, traditional college classrooms have become less effective at tapping into students' intrinsic motivations. Games are an often overlooked mechanism by which professors can appeal to intrinsic motivations of students. More than 100 million people in the United States play games regularly, suggesting intrinsic motivation is an effective method for encouraging students to engage with course material. (Rigby & Ryan, 2011.)

Innovative Approach or Practice that Merits Sharing with Others
"For years, most have assumed that the answer to 'why we play games' is self-evident: We play games because they are fun" (Rigby & Ryan, 2011.) Unfortunately, educational games have developed a negative stereotype as being inherently not fun. In fact, many colleges have developed a culture that suggests learning should not be fun. Fun is generally regarded as what happens after school work is completed. However, research suggests that "we become more successful when we are happier and more positive" (Achor, 2010.) In that case, can professors create a happier and more positive classroom through the use of game mechanics? The PENS model (Player Experience of Need Satisfaction) demonstrates games are "most successful, engaging, and fun when they are satisfying specific intrinsic needs: those of competence, autonomy, and relatedness" (Rigby & Ryan, 2011.) In addition, studies show "positive [emotions] broaden the amount of possibilities we process, making us more thoughtful, creative, and open to new ideas" (Achor, 2010.) When creating a game, then, it is important that it requires critical thinking in addition to being fun. Indeed, for many players, a fun gaming experience may be contingent upon an appropriate amount of required critical thinking.

Purpose for Identified Audience
There is an instructional opportunity to spark intellectual curiosity and tap into students' intrinsic motivations. This opportunity may be addressed through the design of a game that accomplishes two objectives. First, it appeals to the intrinsic desires to 'win' and 'have fun'. Second, it effectively relates course material to the student. Although the course material may not be immediately relevant to the lives or interests of students, they are motivated to grapple with course material because of intrinsic motivations to win the game. In addition, the game will encourage active practice of the skills learned throughout the course, rather than passive "understanding" of the skills.

Implementation of Practice Clearly Delineated

This course is specialized for the unique preparation necessary for entering the retail industry. Students learn vital transferrable skills that are applicable to their interests in the retail industry as well as their general education. A simple board game was presented to a class of 30 students. A student rolls a die and moves the appropriate number of spaces. The color of the space on the board correlates to the color of a stack of cards. The student chooses the correct color of card and performs the action stated on the card. For example, a card might read, "Answer the following question as you would in an interview… 'Tell me about a time you made a mistake. What did you learn from it?' Your peers will rate you on how well you answered the question and confident you appeared."

The intention of the game is to encourage student engagement and critical thinking. The game must be fun to play but also require the student to recognize problems, grapple with various solutions to that problem, and critique themselves through reflective exercises. The game offers the student opportunities to observe others practicing skills learned during the course and provide them criteria for evaluating their peers' performance of those skills. It encourages the student to practice speaking using professional language with accuracy and clarity, to draw conclusions about professional techniques and test those conclusions, and ultimately reconstruct their beliefs on professional behavior as they gain more experience using the skills learned in class.

Description of Success of Practice in Fostering Desired Learning Outcomes

The effectiveness of the game as an innovative and active learning strategy that promotes student engagement was assessed through a survey. Students answered a series of questions designed to measure their engagement in the material. The survey was administered to all students in the course and were submitted anonymously.

Results of the survey include positive responses to using games in class with 22 out of 30 students stating that they "agree" or "strongly agree" that they would like to play more games in class; 27 out of 30 students responding favorably to using games for other purposes in class such as exam review or projects. In addition, students responded favorably to the specific game introduced by the instructor with 71% of students agreeing that playing the game made them feel less intimidated by course content, 90% of students agreeing that the game was clearly connected to course goals, and 78% of students agreeing that playing this game will help them remember course material better.

Indication of Plans for Continuation, Revisions or Follow-Up

The instructor plans to continue her research of games in the classroom by collaborating on an interdisciplinary project with faculty from arts administration, library sciences, and philosophy. Through surveys and videos from a variety of game sessions and traditional classroom instruction the faculty group will encode and evaluate the results with the goal of measuring the influence of content versus play focus in game design on levels of engagement and learning.