"All Work and No Play" Reconsidered: The Use of Games to Promote Motivation and Engagement in Instruction

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Description of the Research

This study examined the role of games in graduate-level instructional technology courses, where the students are often full-time working K-12 teachers who are only able to attend evening classes. Courses in such programs may be beset by a range of challenges, including (a) late-night fatigue and hunger among students; (b) rigorous technical, often abstract course content; (c) stress caused by lack of little prior knowledge or experience in the subject area; (d) stress among commuting students who may lack access to course tools outside of class; and (e) lack of intrinsic motivation in the subject area.

As former U.S. Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell once remarked, “there are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation” (Ford, Alber, & Heward, 2006, p.1). This study focused on seeking answers to the following research question: “How might educational games be used to help make graduate-level instructional technology learning experiences more interactive, engaging, and motivating?”

A game can be defined as a structured or semi-structured activity, usually undertaken for enjoyment, and also sometimes undertaken for educational purposes. Key components of games are goals, rules, challenge, and interactivity. Games are known to have been played as far back as prehistoric times; are considered to be a universal part of human experience; and are present in all cultures.

Games come in a variety of formats, including board games, card games, fantasy games, physical games, simulation games, and computer/video-based games. When used for educational purposes in the classroom, games can serve a number of important purposes: (1) they can be used for pedagogical purposes—to teach new information, and/or to review previously instructed content; (2) they can be used for socialization purposes, helping students—often in a relatively short period of time—to get to know one another and build the foundations of a classroom community spirit; and (3) they can help to attract and maintain learners’ attention and motivation to learn. It is this last function upon which this study was largely focused.

A qualitative approach was used in the study, relying on classroom observations of student behavior (recorded by digital photographs), informal student verbal comments, formal written feedback, and analysis of student game projects, as sources of data. Student subjects had the opportunity to serve in one or both roles of ‘educational game player’ and ‘educational game designer’. Study findings reveal that games can be very useful in the classroom, helping to stimulate student active participation in the learning process.

A complete article describing this presentation is available in the January 2009 edition of the International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (IJ-SoTL) at: http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijsotl/v3n1.html.