10 Tips for Gamifying the Curriculum

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"*It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them." -Dr. Leo Buscaglia*

Introduction

A pre-service teacher once told me recently that his cooperating teacher discouraged his use of the words "fun" and "play" after he implemented a gamified activity in a Social Science lesson that had all the students motivated and engaged with the subject matter content. For many educators, fun and play are not often associated with meaningful learning. However, many educators struggle to keep their students interested in courses with which they find a lack of personal investment. When 21st century learners are able to find information at a moment's notice in the age of Google, educators remain challenged to compete for the attention of their students as young learners are constantly being bombarded with digital stimuli from the Internet, social media, and online games.

Some educators have even more of a right to be concerned since most foreign language, art, and music courses offered are often considered electives in many school districts that do not stress the importance of such curricula or find them essential to a student's overall course requirements. Today's cultural and societal trends tend to place a greater emphasis on STEM subjects rather than on the humanities and language learning, leaving elective courses an afterthought for many students when preparing homework or attempting high-stakes testing including SAT-II and Advanced Placement exams.

Gamification is the use of game elements in non-game environments (Erenli, 2013). In academic settings, gamification serves as the skeletal framework of a curriculum that applies game-like aspects without jeopardizing the rigor of a curriculum. Through utilizing incentives driven to develop intrinsic motivation for increased student production, gamified methods tap into the game-like mentality for students, thereby keeping aspects of fun and game play present in the background of academic learning. Many elective teachers may find themselves in a unique position as they teach language, culture, and paint a picture of societies and people often misunderstood by the students in their classes. When culture and language learning is simply not enough to incentivize students of world languages, art, music, and other core classes, gamification lends itself to increasing student motivation.

While incorporating gamification can assist many educators deal with issues of disinterest, demotivation, and disengagement in their classes, the question of how to get started with gamifying one's curriculum remains for many teachers. Provided here are ten simple tips when considering gamifying one's curriculum.

Step out of the box. Applying gamification methods to an academic curriculum is a major step toward an innovative way to teach content. Since gamified methodology is such a paradigm shift

in the way many educators view teaching, it can be somewhat difficult to embrace and get comfortable with at first for all involved (e.g., teachers, students, parents, administrators). By recognizing the educational paradigm shift in the ways that 21st century learners seek, find, and produce information differently from previous generations, educators step out of the traditional box of how to teach their students.

Agency is an instrumental aspect in motivating players of games. Agency provides students a greater choice as to how they wish to engage in the gamified course. For example, teachers might give students the choice of homework activities to complete by requiring three out of five weekly exercises, and students can earn extra points for doing more than required. Educators might also offer earned homework passes or provide "extra lives" (i.e., bonus points) for surpassing expectations on projects or presentations that students decide when to use. Additionally, teachers can devise a list of incentives that students could "purchase" with earned experience points from demonstrating positive behavior or completing coursework.

The what leads to the how. It is important for teachers who are gamifying to reflect on where their students are academically, and where they want their *student-players* to be at the end of their game. By identifying *what* gamification is being used for, it will be easier for educators to determine *how* their gamified framework should be set up. For example, a language teacher having difficulties with classroom management might establish a gamified framework with incentives that focus heavily on classroom behavior modification. How a gamified framework is established depends on teachers' pedagogical needs and objectives.

Consider your student population. It is important to know the curricular needs and motivations of the student populations for whom the gamified framework is created. One framework may not be effective for all student populations which is why teachers should consider the types of incentives to offer student-players. While some teachers may need to provide more tangible rewards for greater immediacy (e.g., choice of seat, extra bathroom pass, extra computer time, or edible treats) to better deal with disciplinary issues, others are apt to implement more intangible rewards (e.g., homework passes or extra experience points) for student-players who are more academically motivated and concerned with how the gamified framework will affect their overall grades. Incorporating a bit of both tangible and intangible rewards will help address a diverse class population.

Create a theme. Students know when teachers enjoy teaching the class, and they are more likely to be interested in a curriculum where teachers create a storyline or follow a particular theme. Thematizing the curriculum demonstrates the instructors' imaginative side and their willingness to create an interesting platform for the course content. Educators could consider themes such as different time periods in history (i.e., artistic, philosophical, or literary movements, various feudal systems, or succession of kings and queens) to represent units in the course or cultural (super)hero themes such as Belgium's Tintin, France's *Asterix et Obélix*, or any number of the DC or Marvel Comic heros in which student-players must face challenges (e.g., projects, dialogues in the target language, oral presentations, literary analyses, or assessments of different sorts) and defeat the threat of villains who deter their success in the game. Moreover, themes may arise from popular culture and what students are interested in at the time (e.g., various team

sports, popular television programs, characters from *manga*—Japanese comics, or icons of *k-pop*—Korean pop music).

Change your vocabulary. Once a theme for the course is chosen, associated vocabulary is essential for student buy-in. Homework, quizzes, and tests are negatively correlated by many students. To help increase student buy-in, consider creating more positive associations with these activities. Additionally, when introduced in the target language, World Language and English Language Development educators expose new vocabulary to student-players that may never surface otherwise. Homework can be a quest or an adventure. Quizzes might be missions, and tests could become challenges or operations. Projects might be considered ventures or exploits, and students are players.

Vocabulary changes for negatively associated activities help students to immerse themselves in the teacher's envisioned gamified theme for the course. However, it will take students some time to adjust to these new vocabulary associations, and student buy-in is impeded if they are not referred to often. Hence, when teachers decide to implement new vocabulary references for particular activities in their frameworks, it is important to commit to continually referencing the new terms. Newly adopted terminology that helps build upon the theme of a gamified framework is quickly forgotten, along with the benefits of the established framework when not reinforced by the system creator.

Make the game doable. In the game world, there exists some very complex games with highly involved storylines, themes, and plot twists that offer a plethora of incentives for successful engagement. However, such models may not be ideal for creating a curricularly gamified framework. It is imperative to consider the time and effort needed, not only to build the curricular framework, but to upkeep it. If the gamified system is too complex, it becomes a burden to play for both teacher and student-player alike. If the game is too complex, students will become confused and perhaps lose interest early on. Plus, teachers will need to upkeep the records of the game; therefore, the game should be manageable, and not be tedious and take too much time—the game is meant to enhance the curriculum, not burden teachers.

Incentivize early on. Successful games promote opportunities to earn incentives early on as a hook to entice player buy-in. Without buy-in early on in games, a player will quickly lose interest and give up. A successful curricular gamified framework starts with a simple reward that compels the student-player to continue engaging within the gamified system. Rewards would then exponentially increase in worth and become more difficult to attain as the gamified curriculum progresses.

Leveling up is a gamified method that provides game players incentives for completing certain levels or achieving the indicated amount of experience points. Once that level is achieved, players may access the associated rewards for that level which may be used when they choose. However, players must be strategic when utilizing their rewards since each reward is only accessible once. To increase class collegiality, teachers may allow student-players to gift one of their rewards to another classmate. With multiple choices embedded in the gamified framework, student-players need to be cognizant of *how* and *when* they will use their earned rewards to enhance their academic experience.

Be consistent. Gamified frameworks are only motivating to student-players when played. If the game is not referenced or played regularly where students witness their own success within the game system, they will forget about it and lose touch with the initial motivation that the gamified system offered in the first place. Therefore, once teachers have developed their gamified framework with themes, associated vocabulary, and incentives, they should have written explanations of the gamified system, how student-players can earn rewards throughout the course, and a way for them to track their own scores along the way. This affords student-players more responsibility and accountability for their own gamified experience when engaging with the course curriculum.

Be flexible. Keep in mind that most games are not stagnant and evolve with the players. Educators may find that they need to switch things up and change elements of their gamified frameworks to address the needs of the student-players. By being flexible to changes with the applied game elements, teachers are more likely to address the academic needs of their population and keep students interested and engaged with the gamified curriculum. Adjusting point distributions, setting new rules of engagement, and adding or eliminating certain rewards based on what incentivizes their students are all ways of adapting to the student-player population. In addition, teachers may wish to limit their curricular games to academic quarters, trimesters, or semesters to allow for modifications at the end of grading periods, as well as afford student-players to evaluate their previous game play, provide helpful feedback to teachers, and start anew for another grading period.

Technology is just a tool. While using technology can greatly enhance the experience of a gamified framework, it remains a tool through which curricular instruction is transmitted. Some educators may feel more comfortable manipulating various technologies or have better tech access with their student-players than others, depending on school resources and the student populations with which they work. Linking the results from activities of pre-existing gamified Internet tools such as Quizlet Live or Quizizz to a gamified curriculum enhances the variety of game-like opportunities for academic success.

Technology is not a requirement for implementing successful academic gamification. Teachers can set up leaderboards that use newly adopted gamified vocabulary to dress the walls of their classrooms. Leaderboards demonstrate physical representation of each student-player and their progression through the gamified course. Using avatars to represent student-players includes an additional element of personal creativity and imagination to the gamified curriculum, certainly when student-players are able to accessorize and manipulate their own avatars.

Conclusion

Academic gamification, or the use of game elements applied to academic settings and curricula, provides educators of all levels opportunities to increase student motivation and maximize student engagement in their content area. The above tips on gamifying the curriculum can help teachers entice future student-players to continue learning their subject matter through a gameful curricular platform that is not afraid of mixing challenging academic learning with fun and play.

References

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About the Author:

Jon McFarland has been an educator for over two decades and has worked at multiple levels in public and private education. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Stanislaus State with research interests including the utilization of gamification in academic settings, issues of student motivation and engagement, effective uses of educational technology, and matters of equity and diversity in secondary schools.