Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology
Gamification: What, Why, and How (Part 3)

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In two previous columns, I have written about gamification and how it is defined as an application of game-like elements to non-gaming contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). I have also emphasized that it goes beyond just including games in a class. In the first column, I discussed how gamification is being used in different types of courses and at different levels. In the second column, I examined gamification in language courses and specifically gave an experience of its use at my own university.

In this third and final column, I will explain how you can gamify some of your class actitivies. I realize that not everyone has the liberty to totally change their learning materials and methods. The suggestions here are designed to replace and/or add to some of the activities we normally use in the classroom, such as reading or speaking.

One of the most important elements of gamification is the sense of competition. Teachers create a leaderboard with the names of the students. They receive points for doing certain activities. Some are worth few points, and some are worth more. After a few classes, it is easy to see who is surging ahead and who is being left behind. Another important element is the use of badges. In my institution, we use stickers for badges. Students receive badges for accomplishing tasks. After a certain number of stickers, students pass to another level.

Students receive a few points and badges for everyday activities, such as arriving on time to class, or speaking English. It is been interesting to see how motivating this is. The first days, there are a few stragglers walking in late, but after a few classes, the teacher arrives to find a full classroom. The badges are also strangely satisfying, even for older students. The first time they get one, they may not think much of it, but as their collection of badges grows, they begin to show them off.

Some people criticize gamification because of these two elements: the leaderboard and the badges. They do not believe that these will help students learn. I agree; points and badges are designed to help engage the students and motivate them. What helps them learn is actually the activities we do in class.

Here are four examples of gamification activities.

1) The classes usually begin with a riddle. The teacher writes the riddle on the whiteboard, and as students are settling down, they look at it and try to solve it. The riddle is worth a lot of points, so it is worthwhile. You might want to assign the riddle in pairs, to get more interaction out of it. The following is a sample riddle:

> *You are driving down the road in your car on a wild, stormy night when you pass by a bus stop and you see three people waiting for the bus:*
> *1. An old lady who looks very ill.*
> *2. An old friend who once saved your life.*
> *3. The perfect partner you have been dreaming about.*
> *Knowing that there can only be one passenger in your car, whom would you choose?*

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2) Traditionally, a Pecha Kucha is a presentation where you show 20 slides for 20 seconds each. I have modified them to make them easier for students. The rules are simple: 10 slides, 10 seconds each, no text, only images.We assign a topic for the presentation such as your last vacation or a dream trip. The students prepare their presentations and get up to speak. If you can use PowerPoint in your classroom, then it is very easy to program the slides to change automatically after 10 seconds. If not, you can have the students prepare their images on a poster and count the time. Pecha Kuchas have their point value, as well. It is important to make sure the students follow the instructions. If they go off topic, if they go over time, or if they use text, you can decide to either take points off, or not accept the presentation and give zero points. When students see that they are falling behind in points for not following instructions, they will learn to do so.

3) Jigsaw readings are a fairly common activity in language classes. You divide a reading in paragraphs and assign the different paragraphs to different students. They work together to recreate the story. A suggested change is to work with two or three stories. Copy them onto paper and cut them up by paragraphs. Hand them out to students. They not only have to recreate the stories, but they have to find out which story their paragraph belongs to. Points are assigned to the first team that finishes. When they have finished, the teams pass to the front and read their stories aloud.

4) Another example is a long project. Students are assigned projects to do throughout the course. They work in teams and are assigned time in class to work on these projects. They typically include problem solving or creating something, and require some kind of research on the students' part. A teacher in my institution has asked the students to use everyday objects to create musical instruments. The instructions state that the creations have to be musical. That is, you can not just bang on a coffee can and say it is a drum. You need to make sure that it sounds nice. You may yourself ask what creating musical instruments has to do with language learning, yet that is not the point. The aim is that students are reading, listening, and talking as they carry out their research and finish the projects.

As you can see from these examples, gamification works with the same activities we use in class all the time, yet the difference is the element of fun. By assigning points for different kinds of activities, you give weaker students the opportunity to compete as well. Some people may be uncomfortable with this. They may feel that giving points to weak students will help them pass the course when they would do better to repeat it. I offer two suggestions here. The first is to simply offer more points for language activities, and fewer points for extras such as homework and punctuality. The second suggestion is to not include the points in the final grade. Offer some kind of prize (food, goodies) to the leaders in points, but keep that separate from the grade.

I hope you can give these activities a try. If you are interested in the solution to the riddle, send me mail and I will give you the solution!

References

Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining "gamification". *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic Mindtrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments,* 9-15.