Chapter 8

Team-Based Learning and Team-Based Playing: How World of Warcraft and Similar Games Can Make Better Learners

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ABSTRACT

Certain aspects of the popular online game World of Warcraft embody the tenets of Larry Michaelsen’s team-based learning instructional method. However, team-based learning can fail when implemented incorrectly. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical basis for using World of Warcraft as an example of successful teamwork in order to better inform student understanding of collaborative, team-based learning, and introduce incoming college freshmen to the type of active, participatory learning that is critical to higher education. Through literature review and study of World of Warcraft itself, the author has established a framework for a future research avenue in unifying MUVEs and team-based learning. The author believes that using World of Warcraft as an introductory activity in a team-based learning style course can accelerate new team bonding, and can establish learning practices (such as individual accountability and preparedness for class) to benefit the entire college experience and subsequent professional career.

INTRODUCTION

Team-based learning, developed by Larry Michaelsen in 1979, is an instructional method designed with three purposes: to help facilitate learning in large classes, to allow students to take responsibility for their own learning, and to change the instructor’s focus from delivering content to demonstrating for students why their subjects are significant (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2004a). Team-based learning provides students opportunities to learn collaboratively and to teach each other, in order to facilitate deeper learning. It works on four tenets: (1) each group must be properly formed and managed, (2) students must be accountable for their work in and out of the group, (3) assignments must promote both

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learning and group development, and (4) students must receive frequent and timely feedback on their work (Michaelsen, 2004b).

Bad group experiences cause students and instructors to shy away from further attempts. Hard-working students dislike when they are forced to treat other students as obstacles to be overcome, or when the entire group gets the same grade for one student’s hard work. Shy or socially anxious students may dislike being forced to meet outside of class to complete a group project. Problems and uncomfortable experiences like these will cause students to dislike group learning, and can cause students to give instructors low student evaluation scores. It is therefore necessary, especially for first-year students, to introduce team-based learning properly and correctly.

The video game *World of Warcraft*, developed by Blizzard Entertainment and released in 2004, is classified as a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). It can also be classified as a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), a living online space in which players interact with each other in the virtual environment in real time (Qian, 2015). Although it is possible to play *World of Warcraft* alone, a great deal of content is designed for small player groups (up to five players), including specific zones of the game world called dungeons. These small player groups function best when adhering to the tenets of team-based learning: the groups must be formed carefully and managed well, each player must be accountable to themselves and to the group, the activities in the game must encourage team development as well as promote learning about the game itself, and players must receive frequent and timely feedback on what they are doing correctly or incorrectly.

Students enter the higher education environment unprepared for the style of learning employed there, as a result of being taught this “skill and drill” method of reciting information rather than critically engaging with it. As a result, they are often unprepared for the rigors and demands of higher education and its associated learning style. Team-based learning, when successfully and correctly implemented, can help to smooth this transition, and introduces the intrinsic skills students need to succeed in this environment. It is therefore possible to eradicate the ineffectual “skill and drill” K-12 learning style when students enter the college environment by employing *World of Warcraft* as a working example of how team-based learning can help them succeed. This chapter will outline a theoretical application of *World of Warcraft* as an introductory module or assignment for a course taught using the team-based learning method. It will address potential problems of the approach, as well as provide introductory information on team-based learning itself.

**BACKGROUND**

Jane McGonigal (2011), a proponent of using video game concepts to improve various nongaming processes (“gamifying”), calls games “hard work that we choose for ourselves” (p. 28) and breaks games down into four concepts: rules, a goal, a feedback system, and voluntary participation. These four concepts could also be used to describe a classroom, especially a classroom where team-based learning is utilized. Unlike the K-12 educational space, higher education is “hard work [students] choose for themselves” (McGonigal, 2011, p. 28). Higher education is a great expense, and the landscape of the “average college student” is rapidly changing (Freedman, 2013). A bachelor’s degree is no longer a guarantee of an entry-level position. Students need to possess a different set of skills in today’s job market: skills such as problem-solving and the ability to interact effectively (Fink, 2004). James Paul Gee (2014) argues that
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