Chapter 3

Breakout of a Traditional Classroom Reality With Game-Based Learning Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Play in learning can enhance student engagement with course content. One way to integrate play into learning environments is through game-based activities. As College of Education instructors, the authors want to engage learners and also model resources that their students can use when they become professionals teaching their own students. Breakout EDU is a game-based educational translation of the popular immersive entertainment experience of escape rooms. In this chapter, the authors will explore how Breakout EDU can be used in online and face-to-face higher education courses to engage students in learning and model a resource that pre-service teachers can use in their future teaching.

INTRODUCTION: PLAY AND “BREAKING OUT”

The human desire for play has been discussed in multiple contexts, and the concept of play has further implied a metaphorical or actual “breaking out” of our taken-for-granted world. Kuhn (1962), for example, described the paradigm-shattering effects of play, when simple acts of toying with possibilities have led to monumental changes like the scientific revolution. Turner’s (1969) concept of liminality and communitas suggests that “play” has an important role in social groups, for good or ill. The term “liminal space” has been used to describe that “betwixt and between” experience where traditional social conventions do not have the same meaning or influence - where play can safely take place. More recently, Whitton (2018) employs Huitzinga’s (1955) term “magic circle” to describe a “safe” space “where the rules of the real world do not directly apply; where different norms and codes of practice emerge; and where new rules of behaviour, belief, and interaction are possible” (Whitton, 2018, para. 6).

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A deeper discussion of the theory of play is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we contend this basic human tendency ought to inform efforts to introduce games into learning and instruction. That is, the play is important for both teachers and students, face-to-face or online. Our discussion presents an example of how we have collaboratively tried to break out of traditional teaching by bringing a spirit of play to serious topics in an online environment and face-to-face teaching.

When thinking about play in this manner, game-based learning tools are a way into using play in a classroom setting. As instructors in a College of Education, we value modeling technologies and other teaching and learning tools that our future teachers will be able to use in their own classrooms. This need to model means that our selection of gaming/play resources is not necessarily from the tools provided by our University but instead may be tools that will enhance the learning of our higher education students in their content areas while modeling innovative K-12 teaching tools. For example, in our Learning Management System, Moodle, our University technology team has developed a gamification module. Instructors can use this module to add points to assignments, create leaderboards to show student performance, create friendly course competition, and so on. While this gamification is of value, we are looking for gaming tools that students will be able to use when they become teachers and most will not have access to Moodle. Therefore, when thinking about bringing play through game-based learning into our classes, we looked for existing programs and resources that were free and appropriate for K-12 students as well as for college-aged students. We selected the Breakout EDU platform because it is appropriate for elementary and secondary students, can be used by teachers without paying a fee, and is very flexible in terms of content creation. In this chapter, we will explain the uses of Breakout EDU and how this game-based “tool” can be used to enhance the playful but meaningful learning experiences of college students.

BACKGROUND

Before explaining the practicalities of using gaming and technology tools in higher education, we want to explore our reasoning behind using these teaching methods. In his critique of “surface-level” digital pedagogy, Monreal (2016), uses a fictional composite narrative where hypothetical tenth graders respond to the use of digital tools: “She made use of something called an LMS or something. It basically just controlled what we had to learn. She thought it was like way different, but really it was just like being in desks surrounded by the four walls of the classroom.” “...sometimes you all think you are impressing us with all this new shiny stuff. It might grab our attention for a second before we realize that it is usually just the same old, same old. My math teacher tries to get us to use this app, but really it’s just a colorful worksheet” (para. 12). Monreal closes his article with the question: “why is there not a bigger call for critical digital pedagogy in our schools of education?” (para. 23). It is difficult to dismiss Monreal’s critique as hypothetical when we have heard our own teacher education students complain about the lack of depth in online discussion forums and other LMS tools. Moreover, “flawed engagement” may not only teach little, but students will lose interest “when they recognize that the technology is a mere trick and not actually adding value to their understanding of the content” (Kolb, 2017, p. 2). While there might be questions about the depth of learning in technology-based instruction, even from the students themselves, it would appear that such instruction is going to be a part of education in the future (Gabriel, 2011). Moreover, our “reality” - our conception of what constitutes good instruction - may be wildly at odds with the ideas of our teacher education students - and their future students. But what if we