ROLE-PLAYING AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: USING DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS TO TEACH MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

by John N. Harris, Georgia Southern University | R. Gabrielle Swab, Georgia Southern University | Ian S. Mercer, Fairleigh Dickinson University | David A. Tomczyk, Quinnipiac University

jharris@georgiasouthern.edu
rswab@georgiasouthern.edu
i.mercer@fdu.edu
david.tomczyk@quinnipiac.edu
Full paper
Experiential Track

ABSTRACT

In this manuscript, we discuss role-playing as a gamification activity. We introduce the creation of content-specific fictional characters, allowing management and leadership students to meaningfully engage with course material, while also stimulating students' creative and outside-the-box thinking. Further, the character-building classroom activity develops students' skills in decision making, the weighing and assessing of choices, and further, communicating those challenges all while engaging with the course content in a novel and interesting way. Though this activity can be applied to a range of courses, we highlight an example character-building activity in which students create their 'Ideal Leader' in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

Keywords: Management education; Leadership; Student experience; Experiential learning; Gamification; Role-playing

INTRODUCTION

Gamification is a form of experiential learning (EL) using game thinking and/or game mechanics in non-game scenarios to solve problems (Ergle, 2015). Gamification allows for long-term benefits through the enhancement of intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards, thus providing an opportunity for learners to find meaning in what they do (Nicholson, 2012; 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2010). In this manuscript, we discuss role-playing as a gamification activity which has been found to assist in a variety of learning styles in the Management classroom (e.g., Bull, Schaefer, & Crosswhite, 2018).

In a traditional role-playing game (further referred to as an RPG), the player assumes the role of a specific character or characters in a fictional or hypothetical setting or scenario. The process begins by providing the character with specific characteristics and abilities, and then the player makes decisions for their character's role within their larger narrative by playing an active role in choices affecting the story (Waskul & Lust, 2004). Regardless of whether these characters are be designed by each player or assigned, it is the intention in an RPG that players embody their characters in the context of the game, becoming them for all intents and purposes and interacting with the world as their character would rather than as they, the player, might in reality. This is through literal acting or through a structured process of decision making regarding and affecting the character's development (Cover, 2014). Further, the player succeeds or fails according to formal or informal guidelines according to the role in which the player exists (Tychensen et al., 2006).

RPGs give a sense of a narrative experience which incorporates the ideals of EL as these games provide students with opportunities to make decisions and reflect on the relative success or failure of their choices. By playing characters other than themselves, students can remove the self-consciousness regarding their own skills or environment. This gives them space to explore their interests, identity, and creativity in an imagined world. Further, RPGs provide opportunities to experience complex subjects within management education that may be difficult to capture or present through other methods (e.g., communication, decision making). In this paper, we focus on the character-building aspect of RPGs by highlighting how the specific activity was utilized in a Leadership course to improve student education and engagement.

Theoretical Foundation

There have long been calls for improving the leadership education of business graduates (e.g., Malone, 1995), though the complex nature of leadership education presents and enduring challenge for students and educators. Individuals, particularly adult learners, tend to block information contrary to their own view, but play is an ideal method of presentation to prevent this phenomenon (Mezirow, 1991). Gamification presents a valuable and fun method by which these concepts can be explored (Miller, 2013). RPGs have been explored for similar purposes (Cano, Lopez, & Posada, 2019), and they serve this purpose in

leadership by allowing students to truly take on the perspective of someone other than themselves in a novel and engaging environment. This requires the closer examination of both their own understanding of a situation and the diverse understandings of someone unlike themselves. Using an RPG as an activity is consistent with the Vygotskian perspective on social learning and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), and Ausubel's (2000) theory of meaningful learning. In conducting this exercise, we wished to explore two research questions – (1) Does the use of a character-building RPG influence students' perception of what it takes to be a leader? and (2) How does the use of a character-building RPG enrich learning experiences?

The learning objectives for the leadership classroom in which the activity took place is as follows:

Learning Objectives

1. Identify strengths and weaknesses of a leader with particular regard to traits, skills, abilities, and knowledge.
2. Understand and apply leadership theories.
3. Understand the relational nature of leadership with particular emphasis on Leader Member Exchange.
4. Recognize bias and stereotyping within leadership and demonstrate an awareness of issues relating to diversity and inclusion.

The character-building exercise was conducted in three classes at three large universities across the Eastern United States. One class consisted of traditional face-to-face instruction, one was presented in a synchronous online format, and one consisted of hybrid instruction. The classes were made of approximately 40 undergraduate students of which the majority were business management majors. The activities were presented intermittently through the course of the semester, with the initial character building exercise occurring in the first few weeks of class.

Character Building Exercise

The exercise began with students being briefed on the basic concept of character creation using the 'Dungeons & Dragons' (D&D) system as an example. The role-playing game D&D was mirrored as it is a well-established character generation system to build from. However, unlike the D&D in its traditional setting, in which fictional characters explore dungeons and slay dragons, the character generation was adapted to the management and leadership setting. Then, students identified and evaluated the key characteristics for successful leadership (rather than adventuring and dragon slaying).

Creating An Ideal Leader

Following the introduction, students considered their knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of a leader. Based on their understanding, and following the similar outline to D&D in which every character has a personal score in each of six core abilities (i.e., charisma, constitution, dexterity, intelligence, strength, wisdom) that represent the core competencies of that character, students picked six leadership-related characteristics for their character to possess. Students were encouraged to be creative, as long as these characteristics included traits, skills, or knowledge needed to be effective in their role as a leader.

With 36 points available, students assigned a numerical value to each characteristic. The higher the points allocated, the more skilled that character would be in situations involving use of that characteristic. For example, if they wanted their character to be balanced in all six traits, they could assign them each a six-point value (6 x 6=36), or they could make them have both higher and lower values (e.g., charismatic= 3; confidence=5, empathy=8, enthusiastic= 6, intelligent=7, and responsible=7; totaling 36). This limitation on the values to be assigned to each characteristic forced students to make decisions about their character and explore how they may value certain characteristics more highly than others. The assignment allowed students to explore leadership as they personally understood it and determine any six characteristics they deemed most critical to leadership.

Upon establishing their six characteristics and allocated scores, students gave their leader a name, demographic information (i.e., age, gender, race), and a background narrative. This allowed for more engagement and a more developed, "living" character for role-playing. Throughout the semester, students utilized, referred to, and revisited this character across three activities focused on leadership. These activities followed the creation of the character and occurred roughly every three to four weeks in the semester. In each activity, students were asked to consider how their created leader would behave and respond within each situation, giving them the opportunity to explore from perspectives other than their own.

Leadership-Based Activities

The first activity asked students to use the content of the course thus far to explore leadership development from the perspective of their created leader character. Students identified potential weaknesses or difficulties their leader character might face based on the points assigned to each of their chosen characteristics and worked to discuss ways in which their

character could work to improve in those identified areas. For example, a created leader with a lower score in communication might have resulted in a student describing hypothetical public speaking or acting classes that their leader might participate in to improve their skills. This allows students to work to develop a growth mindset of their own and consider development opportunities outside the classroom. The second activity, building on the inherently relational nature of leadership, tasked students with the job of creating a second character, a follower for their leader, in a similar format to their original creation and exploring the ways in which their leader and follower might relate, support, or challenge one another in their working relationship if this new person were hired by the created leader. The third activity had students examine their created leader through the lens of diversity, bias, and stereotypes related to leadership and further, how their character creation, particularly regarding the creation of the character's background and demographics, was reflective of this potential bias or how it can be used to better illustrate the value of diversity in leadership. These three activities move students through closely examining challenging areas of leadership (i.e., leader development, follower relationships, diversity and bias) that can be otherwise difficult to capture in traditional classroom contexts.

Students were given the opportunity to reflect on the exercise and the decisions they made, which is identified as a key learning component for EL (Kolb & Boyatzis, 2000; Reilly, 2018). While the leader creation and each of the three subsequent activities contained a written and graded component, further time was devoted to debriefing and discussing the outcomes of, and reactions to, these assignments. First, in class discussions among small groups, students were encouraged to explain their decisions and rationale for the ways in which they indicated their created leader would respond. Students largely found this component of the activity beneficial and thought-provoking, as they found that other students might consider and conceptualize each created leader differently than even the creator originally did, challenging preconceptions and further demonstrating the challenging complexity of understanding leadership. Instructors can also use this time to highlight particularly relevant course concepts, direct the conversation toward new ways of understanding leadership, or use the examples students created in their activities, essentially small case studies, to present material in an immediate, accessible, and impactful manner.

Next, students had the opportunity to complete three brief reflection assessments, which instructors may wish to do this as part of the assignment or for extra credit. While participation in the leader creation and activities were graded, students were not required to complete these supplemental reflections, though many did. In these reflections, students elaborated on their experience with the character-building activities. Example comments when asked what they enjoyed about the assignment included, "I enjoy these types of assignments because it forces me to self-reflect on skills that I use on a daily basis in the work place", "There are things that I certainly need to work on in order to grow as a person and become a more effective leader", "This assignment helped me to pinpoint some of the skills I needed to work on", and "This assignment helps me think about what kind of leader I aspire to be." When asked about their updated understanding of a leader upon completing the exercise, answers included, "I believed a leader was more of a one-man show, but now I understand a leader utilizes all around him to better the group as a whole instead of just him or herself" and "A great leader is someone who can reflect on themselves and recognize the things that they are not doing perfectly. Someone who doesn't see themselves as 'above' others, but part of the team." The consensus across classes and activities was that students both enjoyed this series of activities and found meaningful, experiential learning in them. By focusing on concepts that have been traditionally taught at a more theoretical level in leadership education, or though the use of case studies or other material that separates students from the action of choice and decision-making, students felt as though they were able to connect and reflect on complex leadership topics, and their role as leaders themselves, as they worked through the challenges of leadership through role-play.

Concepts Taught

Broadly, this activity considers a variety of management related skills, such as decision making, communication, relationship management, personal development, bias, diversity, and reflecting on choices and outcomes. This series of activities encourages students to take these concepts and allow for creativity and thinking outside of the box. Each activity required students to submit written assignments serving as practice for the needed, and often underdeveloped, skill of written communication (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007; Oppenheimer et al., 2017). Different from traditional case studies, the described activities also provided the benefit of considering the individual in the situation rather the context alone, while also allowing for critical self-reflection.

The emphasis on individual differences further translates to specific leadership topics in the course. Examples include identifying the value of a diverse leaders, a look into personal and cultural biases as they relate to leadership, and the relational aspects of leadership such as successful communication and the leader-member exchange relationship.

Conclusion

A key aspect of meaningful gamification is granting control to participants (Nicholson, 2012; 2015), allowing them to be active in their own learning. This RPG activity allows students control over the direction of the exercise through choosing the

characteristics and abilities that they deemed relevant to their leader and assigning values to those characteristics, along with the actions and decisions the character ensues. Grounding the activity within the established framework of D&D, we introduce aspects of 'play,' a catalyst for learning that happens best when participants choose their own path (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkofff, 2003). Students can draw from the more conceptual aspects of the course, fleshing out their character and, answering the questions that Stanislavski posed from a leadership perspective.

The reviewed student feedback indicates that students found this to be a useful exercise. First, many students indicated a significant value gained from process of self-reflection following the activities, considering what characteristics they personally possess and how they would react in similar circumstances. This reinforced many course concepts, both from students' personal perspectives and from the perspective of the role they were playing, further illustrating the unique nature of individual and leader experiences. Second, students reported it challenged their preconceptions of leadership, enabling them to have a deeper understanding of the concepts taught. Finally, students described the exercise as fun, creative, and engaging, thereby improving their overall experience in the classroom.

REFERENCES

Ausubel, DP. The acquisition and retention of knowledge: a cognitive view. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers; 2000

Bull, Schaefer, R. A., & Crosswhite, A. M. (2018). Top Management Team Crisis Communication After Claims of Sexual Harassment. *Management Teaching Review, 3*(2), 148-171.

Cano, J. H. M., Lopez, J. P. M., & Posada, D. M. O. (2019). Phenomenographic study on the teaching-learning of entrepreneurship through the use of role playing games. *Developments in Business Simulations & Experiential Exercises, 46,* 274-282.

Cover, J. G. (2014). *The creation of narrative in tabletop role-playing games*. McFarland.

Debnath, S.C., Tandon, S., & Pointer, L.V. (2007). Designing business school courses to promote student motivation: An application of the job characteristics model. *Journal of Management Education*, 31 (6):812-831.

Ergle, D. (2015). Fostering employee engagement through gamification: AirBaltic Forecaster Tool. *Management*, 10(3): 219-234.

Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R. (2003). Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less. Emmaus, PA: Rodale.

Kellogg, R. T., & Raulerson, B. A. (2007). Improving the writing skills of college students. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, *14*(2), 237-242.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Prentice Hall.

Kolb, D.A. & Boyatzis, R.E., (2000). Experiential Learning Theory: Previous Research and New Directions. In R. J. Sternberg and L. F. Zhang (Eds.), *Perspectives on cognitive, learning, and thinking styles*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.

Kolb, A., & Kolb, D. (2010). Learning to play, playing to learn: A case study of a ludic learning space. Journal of Organizational Change Management, 23(1): 26-50.

Licorish, S. A., Owen, H. E., Daniel, B., & George, J. L. (2018). Students' perception of Kahoot!'s influence on teaching and learning. *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning*, *13*(1), 1-23.

Malone, P. B. (1995). Developing leadership skills. *Developments in Business Simulations & Experiential Exercises, 22*, 198-203.

Miller, C. (2013). The Gamification of Education. *Developments in Business Simulations & Experiential Exercise, 20, 196-200.*

Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. San Fransisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Nicholson, S. (2012). Strategies for meaningful gamification: Concepts behind transformative play and participatory museums. Presented at Meaningful Play 2012. http://scottnicholson/com/pubs/ meaningfulstrategies.pdf

Nicolson, S. (2015). A recipe for meaningful gamification. In Reiners T., Wood L. (eds) Gamification in Education.

Oppenheimer, D., Zaromb, F., Pomerantz, J. R., Williams, J. C., & Park, Y. S. (2017). Improvement of writing skills during college: A multi-year cross-sectional and longitudinal study of undergraduate writing performance. *Assessing Writing*, *32*, 12-27.

Reilly, A. H. (2018). Using reflective practice to support management student learning: Three

brief assignments. *Management Teaching Review*, *3*(2), 129 -147.

Tychsen, A., Hitchens, M., Brolund, T., & Kavakli, M. (2006). Live action role-playing games: Control, communication, storytelling, and MMORPG similarities. *Games and Culture*, *1*(3), 252-275.

Vygotsky L. Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. 14th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1978.

Waskul, D., & Lust, M. (2004). Role□Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role□Playing. *Symbolic Interaction*, *27*(3), 333-356.