

Gaming the classroom: Teaching style motivates, engages

February 11 2014, by Sheryl James

Writing a blog comparing Socrates to Steve Jobs.

Designing a board game incorporating political theory concepts.

Creating a comic strip featuring a little kid on a playground facing choices every day.

These are just a few examples of the assignments not just completed by students in Mika LaVaque-Manty's Introduction to Political Theory class but created by them as well. Not only that, but the students decide how many points each assignment is worth.

As they go through the semester, they earn points toward a grade with each project, but never lose points.

If this play-against-yourself set-up sounds familiar, it's because for students, it is. The structure of LaVaque-Manty's class involves a relatively new teaching innovation: using the principles of gaming—that's right, the very activity many students played when they were supposed to be in class in high school or doing homework at night—to teach material.

"I'm interested in using these gaming techniques because, for one, it's familiar to students," most of whom are freshman and sophomores, says LaVaque-Manty, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor, associate professor of political science and associate professor of philosophy, LSA. "But more

importantly, it's about the logic of the game. With a standard grading system, you begin with an A, and then you have points docked off, where in a game, you begin with zero and then you accumulate."

LaVaque-Manty gives students full warning in his syllabus that they're about to go where they may never have gone before. As in gaming, there are some things students must do to make progress—such as readings, reading-related homework, attending lectures and discussion sections.

But games "allow you to choose some activities—quests, tasks, challenges—and skip others," the syllabus stresses.

"In the world of games there are multiple paths to achievement," LaVaque-Manty says. "So I implicitly encourage students to think about what they are good at and what kind of challenges do they want to undertake—and not to worry about things they don't feel so strongly about or find uninteresting."

How is this "game" going over? Surveys show most adapt to it and like it. Others essentially reject it by opting for conventional assignments.

Freshman Phoebe Young, 17, found the gaming approach "both intriguing but intimidating" at first. The autonomy "is new to them," she said. "College itself is already a fairly self-autonomous pursuit, but this added idea of being responsible for your grade, where you're choosing where and how you're being graded, can be intimidating."

Young quickly adjusted to the gaming structure and chose blogging and a group project—the comic strip.

Freshman Jordan Davis, 19, loved the class but admits that at first, "The intensity comes from, just, everything's on you. There's a big responsibility for you to do your assignments and to really put in your

best effort, because no one's telling you, 'Look, this is what's due, this is what you need to do.'"

Davis created the Socrates-Steve Jobs blog and another on global warming, and he is working on the comic strip in a group with Young and other students.

LaVaque-Manty said the key to the class is about encouraging students to choose, take risks, and self-regulate. But even more important is teaching them how to problem-solve, "and to think about what kind of learners they are."

He adds, "I'm very mindful of the fact that, in the age of Google, universities should not be in the information business. What folks like us, especially at world-class universities like Michigan, are good at is inquiry."

"I don't mean that we should turn all our students into academics. What I mean is that the best we can offer our [students](#) are tools and skills for asking interesting questions – and recognizing what are interesting questions—for answering them, and, in general, for solving problems for which we don't yet know the answers."

Provided by University of Michigan

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