Active Learning Through Serious Play in Mobile Co-Curricular Spaces

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Serious Play and Active Learning

"Serious play" is a term used to describe complex, systematic learning situations and behaviors that produce engagement, problem solving, and spontaneous creativity (Rieber, 1998). Serious play refers to a range of activities designed around learners as players engaged in active learning scenarios and simulations, both digitally and physically located. Serious play allows participants to experiment with decision making across a range of low-stakes gaming mechanics, either in collaboration or competition. When done well, serious play produces "flow," or immersive, focus, awareness, and enjoyment of an activity, which is tightly entwined with heightened performance and willingness to learn (Csikszentmihályi, 1990).

We have secured funding for a mobile serious play "laboratory" here at City Tech. Initially, our equipment will enable us to create and deliver co-curricular workshops to students using the open-source and widely-tested LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) platform. We will use LSP to show students how low-stakes modeling of problems and solutions can create powerful insights into how to improve as communicators on their path to becoming degreed professionals. In these workshops, students will (literally) play, by building models that represent facets of their own identities using specialized LSP kits designed for this purpose. Students will create narratives for their models, and work collaboratively to integrate individual ideas and narratives together into a team-based solution for problems they encounter while playing.

Through serious play, we hope to challenge the core perceptions, the "design model," of how City Tech students perceive themselves as communicators and how they approach unfamiliar or difficult communications conflicts. The process of LSP, and serious play more generally, leads participants through meaningful challenges (e.g., levels). Skilled facilitation challenges students to be more mindful communicators, and keeps the spirit and conditions of serious play alive so the group reaches that necessary point of catalysis. Through this cycle of creative—but structured and facilitated—experimentation, students wrestle with problems, failures, and progress and reflect on their shared experiences.

Co-Curricular Learning Spaces and Programming

We both continue to use LEGO® to teach in the classroom, but this is not a "curricular" project. Instead, we envision the mobile laboratory as a co-curricular tool that can be used to create a space for serious play anywhere we can seat ten people at a flat surface. Though we believe curricula can be innovative, and even accommodate creative play (as we have seen through *A Living Laboratory: Revitalizing General Education for a 21st Century College of Technology*), that belief is tempered by two systemic challenges that City Tech, like most public colleges, faces:

(1) The tendency in public education oversight toward functional complexity, where teacher-designed and led instruction is replaced with routine systems of content delivery, data generation, accountability reporting, and continuous improvement. Faculty are at risk of becoming de-facto managers of classroom work that is increasingly divorced from pedagogy because the focus continues to shift to producing grades for larger numbers of students than can realistically be engaged as individual learners.

(2) The pressures of austerity politics, which involve the continuous and dramatic public underfunding of higher education. City Tech still reckons with the legacy of the austerity politics of a generation ago: in our inadequate physical plant, our gaps in faculty hiring, our struggle with general education, our noteworthy issues of space, but most importantly, in our struggle to consistently engage students as emerging intellectuals and professionals.

We see the tangible costs of functional complexity and austerity politics within the manifest limitations of what we, and our colleagues across the college, are able to accomplish in service of learning—not just delivering classroom instruction. By creating a co-curricular space outside of our classrooms, where we can engage students in different learning modalities like serious play, we hope to not only begin a conversation, but also foster a community of practice that values learning-centered contact with students outside of the classroom.

Moving General Education Beyond Instructional Space

Our vision for City Tech is to see it assume leadership in providing innovative General Education (Gen Ed) experiences to students. As the *Living Lab* has shown us, when materially supported, City Tech faculty are able to make tremendous use of the resources of City Tech, CUNY, and New York City to create high-impact learning experiences for students. As a public undergraduate institution of technology in one of the world's great metropolises, we have that opportunity. And we have students who desperately need the context that Gen Ed provides to their discipline-specific education.

City Tech students' Gen Ed experience should not be limited to classroom instruction. Simply put, students are not in flow when we are "teaching" them. They are most engaged when they are within peer groups engaged in active learning and problem-solving activities that they help devise themselves. So, while student success is generally measured by what takes place in the classroom, we know as educators that only a portion of our students' intellectual, social, and emotional development happens under our direction.

Furthermore, students flourish when they have the opportunity to explore problems, test solutions, make mistakes, discover success, and reflect on their growth. The knowledge, skills, and values learned through Gen Ed need to be experienced and reinforced across multiple channels of students' interactions with the college, our faculty, and each other. Co-curricular programming is a mutually beneficial alternative way to access these channels. Using peer-to-peer active learning techniques provides students with the incentive of feeling empowered to explore and discover with their peers.

Looking Toward Our Future

As a learning, training, and testing method, serious play is more than 40 years old. We know others who are using these techniques at City Tech. We are committed to seeing this, and other innovative communities of practice, grow. Just as we see our role as bringing resources to our students and using these resources to the best of our professional ability to engage curiosity and promote learning, we hope others are doing the same. In fact, we would love to connect.

Of course, our mobile serious play laboratory is just the first step of a more ambitious project to use some of these ideas and techniques to connect with students, colleagues, and our communities. We will continue to seek investment, further design pedagogy, share our research findings, and support our colleagues in their own endeavors. As we continue to do our part to develop innovative programming, both inside the classroom and out, we invite you to join us.

References:

Rieber, L. P., Smith, L., & Noah, D. (1998). The value of serious play. Educational Technology, 38(6), 29-37.
Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. New York: Harper & Row.