

Active Learning and Games

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Boredom and active learning

There are plenty of studies that show that students are bored in survey courses. Generally, when asked about what might improve the situation they advocate a move toward active learning. In particular, they desire more things like this:

- Discussions
- Debates
- Projects
- Lessons that involve technology
- Group projects

Why don't we do more of these things in our classrooms? There are several reasons. First, there's the paucity of time and energy on the part of the instructor. These are rare commodities due to the pressure to publish (if you are lucky enough to hold a tenure-track position) or the need to teach at least a half dozen classes at a time (if you are not).

It's hard to find more time and energy, so instructors need tools that will enable them to engage in active learning without needing to spend a great amount of time and effort implementing active learning strategies. The first step is to provide instructors with active learning materials that possess at least five qualities:

- Flexibility – to fit instructor preferences and institution-specific curricular demands
- Field-testing – they must work in a variety of settings
- Ease of adoption – they must have low barriers
- Scholarship – the history needs to be sound

Finally, these activities should be fun – yes, the F word. This is not pandering in an attempt to increase enrollment; it is a recognition that when people are having fun, they are cognitively more open, expressive, and creative than when they are not. Fun is a disposition to learn. When people are having fun when they are learning, we usually call it *play*.

Tyranny and Illusion

The second immense obstacle to active learning is the tyranny of coverage, which is usually a product of curricular necessity and misplaced professional ethics. The illusion of coverage is easiest to maintain in classes that feature traditional, lecture-based passive instruction. This is because lecturing is time-efficient. Students and instructors know (or think they know) how to set up and exit from lectures, which allows the instructor to disgorge a lot of ideas in the course of every class meeting. Of course, this collection of ideas only scratches the surface of the historical complexities of the era, but a carefully constructed lecture does make it seem as if a collection of critically important ideas is being conveyed (as does a well-written survey text).

Active learning pedagogies are less efficient in terms of data dumping, but studies show that they appear to be more powerful in terms of retention, engagement, student satisfaction, and skills development.

Passive and active approaches have different strengths and weaknesses. Blending them may allow a course to serve two masters, but if content delivery is prized above all other metrics, it is difficult for active learning approaches to find a niche. Consequently, student satisfaction is unlikely to improve, which means enrollment is likely to decline.

Games as active learning

My favorite active learning approaches are games. This is because playing is a powerful form of learning. Unstructured play allows people to learn all sorts of things, but playing *a game* focuses play on particular things. Consequently, curricular demands mean that we generally use games when we welcome play into the classroom.

In addition to conveying copious amounts of information, playing games allows for experimentation. The tight feedback loops in games allow for investigation and rapid self-correction on the part of players. In terms of history, this can allow players to perceive causation and contingency in new, exciting, and complex ways.

After they receive feedback within the context of a game, most players start planning. If a game allows for multiple players, this usually leads to teamwork. In terms of history, this facilitates small group discussions and allows players to develop an understanding of history that is complex, dynamic, and multifaceted.

After a game ends, instructors should devote some time for debriefing; it allows for reflection, which tends to lock the learning into long-term memory. If the information gleaned during the game is mixed with emotion, all the better.

Games can teach a dazzling array of skills and content, which is why the largest consumer of games – the US military – spends hundreds of millions of dollars developing and playing them. Like political scientists, they tend to refer to them as “simulations” or “exercises,” which makes them seem serious.

Playability and accuracy

Most games that include historical content wear it thinly. For example, the uniforms and equipment in the first-person-shooter video game *Call of Duty* look period accurate, and the backgrounds of the assault on Omaha Beach are gruesomely rendered, but the gameplay has very little to do with the experience of being a combat rifleman in 1944. *Hearts of Iron* is a grand strategy game that stretches from 1936 to 1948. Players make diplomatic, economic, military, and technological decisions for their respective nations, but other than “harbor German scientists” the game does not include any references to the Holocaust.

These game are good examples of play. They are immersive and exciting, but they convey a seriously cracked version of history. With copious amounts of framing, this could make them

good material for teaching, but for classroom use it would be better to use games that maximize historical accuracy over playability.

Broadly, historical game designs fall somewhere on this spectrum:



Other highly playable but inaccurate games include *Go* and *Chess*. They both model pre-modern clashes between rival polities, and reveal some important things about the cultures that created them, but using them to teach about history requires a significant amount of framing and unpacking. This, combined with the need to teach students game mechanics in order to get them playing the games, makes both of these highly inefficient as active learning tools.

On the other end of the spectrum, one might consider using something like *Harpoon*, which is the consumer electronics product closest to military computer-based simulations. It requires a significant amount of background knowledge and skill with the interface in order to play. Furthermore, the reliance upon computer software and the focus of each exercise means there is not a lot of room for experimentation.

Finding the sweet spot between these two poles is difficult, but not impossible. A range of products populate the middle ground. *Reacting to the Past* is one of the best. I hope to find more.