Final Reflection: A Mini Course on Serious Games

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As the sole course designer and instructor for *A Mini Course on Serious Games*, the two-week course period and the weeks before the facilitation of the course granted me an opportunity to demonstrate skills in online course content creation and instruction that had been taught throughout the semester. The history, theories, and best practices related to online teaching and learning, namely, provided a framework for the development of my mini-course; reviewing past modules that covered topics such as the prominent theories of distance education (DE), the different generations of DE, articulating course goals/objectives, etc. became valuable reference points when I found myself stuck on how to proceed with designing resources, crafting assignments, communicating with students, etc.

In the first module of EME6457, we were asked, "*Are we still in Taylor's fifth generation of distance education?*". Given the tendency for people to underestimate the rate of technological change, I suggested that, rather than us being in the fifth generation, we had moved onto the sixth generation; the start of the fifth generation was only beginning to explore the features of the Internet for course delivery. The sixth generation is a derivation of the fifth, but we have learned how to capitalize off those features for the last two decades. Massive open online courses and a heavy reliance on interactive media are commonplace. This sixth generation has reached millions for DE, who can now connect to high-speed internet. It's also brought the massive digitalization of educational public resources, the expansion of quality online education degrees in higher ed, dynamic interaction through video conferencing, etc. A seventh generation, I assume, will likely bring AI and data analysis techniques for personalized learning. In keeping with the technological advances of this 'sixth generation', I wanted to provide plenty of opportunities for students to use outside technological tools – such as for the design of their infographic and playthrough of a digital game.

Pedagogic theories of DE followed the advent of the twenty-first century, and prior to the 2000-mark, as researchers were preparing for the possibility of sustained interaction and discourse over time and distance through the Internet, theories like Moore's three types of interaction – learner–content interaction, learner–instructor interaction, and learner–learner interaction – emerged. Researchers were looking for more precise definitions of terms and concepts, like "interaction", as put into the words of Moore: "Many of the greatest problems of communicating about concepts, and, therefore, practice in distance education arise from our use of crude hypothetical constructs — terms like distance, independence, and interaction, which are used in very imprecise and general ways, each having acquired a multiplicity of meanings." (1989, p. 1) These early theories of DE informed my own course design; Moore's three types of interaction was strategically implemented into my course as I began to draw up instructional materials (L-C), send out course announcements (L-I), or facilitate group discussions in Canvas discussion boards (L-L). For any DE classroom to be genuinely effective, it has become clear

that these three interaction types must be present and provide meaningful opportunities to engage with the content, with peers, and with the instructor.

Although I recognized that the constrained time frame (~2 weeks) of the course might make it difficult to foster a sense of community among students, I wanted to provide plenty of opportunities for students to interact with each other. In the exploration of other DE theories, I learned from the Community of Inquiry framework that understanding the role of social presence in the intersection of social, cognitive, and teaching presence can make the process of learning deeply effective; "...social presence is essential in creating a community of inquiry and in designing, facilitating and directing higher-order learning. Creating a climate for open communication and building group cohesion are essential for productive inquiry." (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 168) While I had believed to accomplish providing a variety of assignments to build cognitive presence, and had created teaching presence through an instructor introduction, welcome announcement, feedback, etc. – I sought out a way to create social presence among my students. The topic of my course, games, was already a familiar and well-liked medium among most of my students: in the first week of the course, some students had shared interests and expressed their fondness for games as a learning tool. I developed activities that I believed might foster more collaborative learning due to their interactive nature, such as the final debate activity, where students wrote in a discussion board on the potential future of serious games, informed by the reading content in the module. Students had to defend their views and engage with their peers' speculations in a respectful manner. In Module 3, students had the opportunity to actually play a game, applying what they'd learned so far by actively navigating a game world and exploring and identifying its motivational elements.

Concerning my role as the instructor and my schedule, I made an active effort to promptly address student queries – whether it was via email, direct message, or within the course itself, as well as regularly monitored the gradebook, and provided feedback and grades for assignments. To stay in communication with my students, I utilized various communication channels, such as the announcements tool, and made my contact info readily available in the syllabus and instructor information page for students to reference at any time. However, in the future, when conducting an online course, I would aim to be more proactive in delivering detailed and timely feedback on discussion posts and assignments. As I had addressed in our final presentations, I also plan to explore additional strategies to foster a sense of community among students; I believe that creating a learning community - a collaborative learning environment - is crucial for student success and satisfaction. While I enjoyed having the flexibility to design my course as I envisioned it, in a future iteration I would reconsider working alone – building out an online course is a complex process that requires a range of skills and I suspect that having a team to work with might've made the process easier. At the same time, if I had chosen to work in a group, because of the highly collaborative and iterative nature of the task of course design, I suspect that there may have been issues such as communication, scheduling, and decision-making amongst my team members. Whether or not one decides to design an online

course alone or with a team, it's essential to have a clear plan, including timelines, roles and responsibilities, and a shared vision for the course.

Designing a mini-online course was a rewarding and educating experience, particularly as someone who has had minimal experience teaching in the classroom, and no experience teaching online. Not only was it an educational experience, it was unique – I hadn't experienced the opportunity before in my academic career to be able to envision and create a course that was tailored to my specific interests and knowledge. For the majority of courses, (whether they are online or in-person) there will be shortcomings alongside the successes. What went well, and what was a struggle for me or my students, I believe exemplified the importance of thoughtful and intentional course design in the context of distance learning. While, overall, I was able to apply the theoretical knowledge I took from EME6457 and combine it with my existing technical skills to produce a mini-course I was satisfied with, looking back, there are several aspects I would do differently: I would place more emphasis on peer-to-peer interaction and instructor engagement, put forth greater efforts as the instructor to foster a sense of community among the students, and make intentional endeavors to be more engaged as an instructor and involved in the discussions taking place in discussion boards, activities, etc. From the lessons learned during the two weeks, I believe this experience underscored the importance of continuous improvement, adaption, and redesign in distance learning, which is summed up well in the words of Ko & Rossen – "Preserving the quality of your course need not mean finding an exact translation of what you've always done in the past." (p. 72). In other words, it is important to approach online learning keeping in mind that students' needs, broader society's demands, culture, and the innovative learning tools that influence the online classroom are dynamic, which requires constant reflection and adjustment. Moving forward, I would invest time in familiarizing myself with the latest technologies and instructional design principles and theories to enhance the overall learning experience for my students, taking a learner-centered approach.

References

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