



Running a Seminar Class as a Game Design Studio

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Short summary: In this short talk, I introduce the overarching structure to my seminar class which is framed as a game design studio.

Slides: [Available here](#).

Your constraints plus the who and what of your teaching context

Context (Where do you work? What kind of institution? What is your role? etc.)	<p>Meiji University, a private university in the centre of Tokyo. I belong to the School of Political Science and Economics (SPSE). The department is made up of various smaller departments: Political Science, Economics, Policy, and the Humanities and Languages (of which I belong). My role is thus as a language/culture expert. I teach three English language classes but more classes that align with the “culture” part of my role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The History of Video Games (where we held this end-of-semester event),- Game Design 101 (analog and digital)- My seminar class (which is the feature of this talk).
Students (goals, wants, needs, knowledge, skills, hobbies, hates, worries)	<p>It's an interesting thing to think about. I initially worried that my seminar class would not garner any interest. “Games and education...?In this school? Who's going to be interested??!” However, students often choose the university name over the department they get accepted to¹. The prestige of the university taking preference over their desired area of study (See Lopuski, 2024). Thus, we have a number of students within the SPSE that have joined because of the name of the university rather than the course that they have been accepted onto.</p> <p>So, as a result, there are a number of students within the school who are NOT interested in political science or economics, but other topics instead. I have actually been told by students, “Thank goodness you're here². I wouldn't know which seminar to apply to if you weren't here.”</p> <p>What are their goals though? Another good question. And not one that I can answer in the singular. I have 18 students in the seminar class, and although it is not quite to the level of inquiry seen in deHaan's work (2023), I do ask them about their goals--I do this as a formal lesson at the start of the year, where we spend a full class learning about each other. I created a worksheet where students have to answer various questions about themselves, which they share with me.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some are here because they want to work for a games company (One is currently interning for Sega as a game planner).

¹ Please let me know if this is true in other countries.

² Great game btw: <https://thankgoodness.game/>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some are here because they don't want to join a seminar that is connected to their "major."- Some are here because they think it will be fun.- Some are here because they think it will be easier than other seminars, and so they can focus their efforts on getting external qualifications.- Some, I really do not know why. <p>I advertise the seminar as a place where students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Create educational games,2. Have the (external) target audience play the game3. Write their thesis based on the results of the experiment4. Possibly crowdfund or create the game to sell at a game convention <p>So, with these things in mind, I think a lot of students are drawn to the creative and practical aspect of the seminar. They can make something, and possibly sell it. That will look great on their resume.</p>
How much freedom do you have?	I have full freedom to play. There is no external pressure to do anything in particular, the seminar class is where I choose goals. This is where I have SPACEto play (York, 2023).
Language (goals) (the goals of your course or curriculum, what you must teach, what you want to teach, what students need to know, etc.)	<p>I teach students about various learning theories, game design techniques, the concept of gamification and game-based learning, and about research methods. Thus, this class is NOT an "English as a foreign/second language" class. The medium of instruction is Japanese, though I have some strong English speakers in the class, so sometimes I group them together and we conduct activities in English. I also bring in English-speaking guests.</p> <p>The "language" that students learn in the class relates to its theme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Game literacy: Game genres, mechanics, components, etc. Keeping Zagal's (2010) definition of game literacy in mind, students learn how to play games, talk about them, and make them.- Academic literacy: Students have to submit a thesis at the end of the class, so they learn aboutRelated to education and learning theory, as well as how to conduct an experiment, research design, statistical tests, citing, formatting a research paper, etc.

How do you create SPACEin the methods, materials and mediation of your teaching and learning playground?

	Methods	Materials	Mediation
Safe: learning from failure, inclusive, competence, supportive	Group work. Lots of feedback, from both me and other students Mini-presentation sessions (low-stakes)	Weekly diary entries, which I read and comment on.	I talk to students one-on-one throughout the year to check on their school work, job-hunting, and other topics.



Participation: society, community, choice, self-direction, culture	Participation is built into the curriculum. Students must make a game for a specific target audience. That audience must play the game.	Not a material in the “traditional” sense perhaps, but I have guest speakers join the class at a rate of about 4 guests per semester, connecting the students with game designers, publishers, teachers, developers, etc.	I provide feedback on students’ diaries to help them see how their activities in class relate to their personal and private lives.
Agency: autonomy, freedom, dialogue, interaction	After a lecture, students make games based on the teachings. They are free to create whatever they like based on the concepts covered in the lecture.	Diaries have multiple sections which the students can write about topics of their choosing. Game review worksheets are designed as a framework for having students think critically about games. Students have agency over the content.	If students are unsure of which path they should take when trying to decide on a project, I’m happy to step in and give them my own opinion, or talk through their options with them.
Critical: challenge, reflective, interdisciplinary, purposeful	The class is designed so that students can build a game for any discipline. Some stick to my own area of expertise -- language, but others are working with companies outside the university to build a game, thus requiring them to learn new skills.	Their diaries are based on the pedagogy of multiliteracies four strands (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015), one of which is critical analysis.	Student creations are reviewed by me, each other, and external sources (other game designers, companies that they are developing the game for, and the target audience in general).
Experiences: relatedness, identity, relevant, meaningful	Most of my teaching is based on the creation of a framework/playground within which students can play (see York, 2020; deHaan & York, 2025). Students choose HOW they play. In this case, students choose their groups, the games they play, the games they make, how they run an experiment, and so on. I do this so that the project is meaningful to the students.	The games they design provide students with meaningful experiences.	During the first class, I tell students that one of the goals of the seminar is for them to use it as a stepping stone to the career of their choosing. They are free to do something that is relevant to them.

The teaching and learning, as high definition as you can share

What we do (teaching and learning)	What is the result (learning/outcomes/actions)
Application process is a job application [Japanese only]	Students know that the seminar is serious, but playful (role-playing as part of the application process) even before joining.
An overview of the seminar as game design	I have only used this for the second semester of the third grade, but it



<u>lab</u>	<p>gives students a clear overview of their potential roles within the team, and what is expected of them.</p> <p>Anecdotal, but compared to last year's seminar which did not use this resource, this year's seminar focus is much sharper, clearer, rigorous (especially the diary work), and concrete. Students understand this; and have been working as hard as I am pushing them.</p>
<p>I give several lectures on learning theories at the start of the first semester to build their knowledge and skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constructivism• Cognitivism• Behaviourism <p>Students make simple games based on the concepts introduced in each lecture. Other students play those games and guess what concepts were referenced in its creation.</p> <p>This teaching method aligns closely with Kafai's work on constructionist learning³ (See also Papert, 1980).</p>	<p>Students check their understanding through material creation. Students get a taste of game design basics. A positive "product-first" atmosphere of "done is better than perfect" is created.</p>
<p>I ask students to write a weekly diary. Topics include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Media consumption• Personal projects• Group work <p>They link their media consumption and activities to their academic work and beyond.</p>	<p>Students put their thoughts on paper. Perhaps one of the few times when they can freely write what they want as part of a class. I don't grade them on the content, only on having completed it, thus it is a low-stakes activity which should provide them with the safety to write as they wish.</p> <p>Students write about various topics in their diaries. A lot are focused on their group work, but some are on job hunting concerns and internal group issues. I generally know what problems students are facing with their group based on informal observations during class time, and give feedback and advice in the document itself. I do this outside of class, and use their diaries as a source for teaching in the next class.</p> <p>They can use their diaries as part of their thesis writing, of which I give them the choice of two types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experiment report (i.e., collect data from subjects who play their game and assess its "effectiveness").• 🤝 "Journey" paper (i.e., write about their journey as a game designer, documenting what they did, and how it influenced the final design/project/experiment).
<p>Thesis in pairs as default Thesis based on product creation -- backstory --</p>	<p>Groups police each other to stay on task.</p> <p>Although I haven't specifically prescribed it, students create presentations based on their weekly tasks to tell their teammates</p>

³ Not to be confused with "constructivism"



My own university thesis was a kind of group project. I created an 8-bit granular synthesizer, making the circuit boards and programming the microchips. I was really proud of it, showing it off to the rest of the class at the public open day. I think this has had a profound influence on my teaching. I want students to make something, together, for someone else, to exist in the world.

-- end backstory --

I expect groups to:

- Design an educational game
- Assess its effectiveness (as part of an experiment), and this should be done with non-classmates, in an external environment.

Students work in teams of 4 to make their games, and prescribe each other a task each week. This varies from simple things like “print X” to more complex tasks like “read X papers” or “research X”

what they have been working on [[Example](#)].

Students can specialize in things that interest them (art, project management, reading research papers, etc.)

I think having students make something as part of their thesis project is a good way to inspire an entrepreneurial spirit.

Having students work with external institutions is also a good motivator. Some examples:

- One group is working with a high school in Tokyo, and invited a teacher to come and playtest their prototype in class.
- Another group is working with an elementary school and has created a number of presentations to outline their project plan [[link](#)] (JP)
- One group that has made a lot of progress on their prototype is considering crowdfunding the game, and invited two representatives of AEON’s crowdfunding initiative to tell us about it [[source](#)]



Bottom-up or Top-down game design

Students are making games that are to be used in an educational context for a target audience. Now, three of the four teams are creating games which are bottom-up (meaning they are creating a game based on an interest they have, and have to find a place to test it later).

But one group is creating a game for a company (which I’m calling top-down). They are struggling because the content of the

Students are assigned homework to come up with a game idea they’d like to create before they form groups. While some students find this challenging, others have clear visions. In the next class, students share their ideas and form groups based on the ideas that resonate with them. This approach creates a safe environment where students can join a group around an idea they find interesting, even if they are not satisfied with their own ideas.

This time, one group decided that they’d like to explore the option of creating a game for the supply chain management company. With a strong leader, and equally strong members, they are working hard on their design.



<p>game (supply chain management) is something they are not familiar with, and interfacing with the company can be difficult sometimes, but this is a fantastic opportunity for them and will look fantastic on their CV. The company has even offered to fund some prototype creations.</p>	
<p>Internal playtest sessions Play testing is a core activity to the game design process, and so students play each other's games frequently.</p>	<p>Such sessions help students realise that although they may know how to play their games, external bodies will be clueless → thus the need to create concise, clear rulebooks. One student has purchased a book specifically on how to create rulebooks for board games as a result.</p>

3 key takeaways for other teachers. Share tips, materials, etc that others can use immediately.

Takeaway	Details
1 Fake it til you make it	<p>If students are going to make games, the environment should be like a game design studio! I actually looked into the Valve employee handbook (Valve Corporation, 2012) when planning the class to structure it like a company. As concrete examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students are put into groups and work on projects that they value. It's not something that I have given them, but something that they have chosen to work on. This relates to the Valve handbook on page 4: "This company is yours to steer—toward opportunities and away from risks. You have the power to green-light projects. You have the power to ship products"• 360° peer review: Students evaluate each other (anonymously) as a way to outline strengths and weaknesses and thus create a better group dynamic. This does not relate directly to the Valve handbook. In their, compensation is based on peer evaluations which, in an educational context, would equate to grades. I do not do so for this class, but do in others..!
2 Focus on practical applications and collaboration	<p>Students work in teams to design educational games, with self-assigned weekly tasks. Focusing on creating a tangible product may foster an entrepreneurial spirit. Collaborate with external institutions for real-world impact. (aside: think globally, act locally)</p>



3	Provide a framework (playground) for students to play in.	Simple, clear goals + constant reinforcement = focused students. This works, for me, in general. There are of course still issues with it. For instance, only certain students writing their diaries, only certain students pulling their weight during group work, and so on. But, this is a university seminar class, and the goals are pretty clear (I think), and I can't do the work for them, and they are adults, so they have to do what they think is best and work out any kinks themselves!
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