

## **Social rating game motivates students to share and discuss**

By Tara Caimi

When it comes to enjoying games for learning, “age is irrelevant,” says Sherry Robinson, associate professor of business, who has been using games in her courses since her inception at Penn State Hazleton in 1995. Back then, Robinson points out, most of her students were older than she, and most, she adds, were women. “They loved the learning games we played,” Robinson says, indicating that people of all demographics can benefit from games.

Over the years, Robinson has used paper, dice, various technology tools, and a traditional blackboard as vehicles for the games she incorporates into almost all of her classes. “Playing games provides a fun context for learning that is really engaging so that it doesn’t seem like work,” she says.

This semester, Robinson is piloting a new approach to explore the benefits of using game-like elements in learning by working with instructional designers and computer programmers as a fellow with the Teaching and Learning with Technology (TLT) unit in Information Technology Services. Through the TLT Fellows program, Penn State faculty members work with members of TLT on innovative projects that explore using technology to enhance teaching and learning in academic courses.

After learning about the faculty fellows program about a year ago, Robinson saw a perfect opportunity in MGMT 301 Basic Management Concepts, a course in which she asks students to share and discuss current events in an effort to help them relate management concepts to aspects of life. “Business is everywhere, and I want them to see that,” Robinson says. “What we study in class is relevant to real life.”

Game-like activities can offer a nice change of pace to the traditional lecture and can help to improve students’ attention and retention, according to Robinson. “When they remember what happened in a game, they can then remember the attached concept,” she says, adding “I want them to integrate course material with their real lives, not just memorize it long enough to put it on a test and then forget it.”

Though presenting and discussing current events have always been critical elements of this course, as a faculty fellow, Robinson was able to add a competitive edge with a social rating system. Competition can increase motivation, Robinson says. “I have had students who studied together so they would be competitive, just like runners train to do well in races.”

In previous semesters, Robinson has used class time for game-like activities, but this semester, she is using game-like elements both inside and outside of class time. Each week, students post current events to a blog, then vote on each other’s current events using a “like” button similar to that on Facebook.

For every current event posted before the deadline, students earn a puzzle piece. Four earned puzzle pieces translate into a token. Tokens, according to Robinson, are “magical devices that can extend the due date of an assignment by twenty-four hours.”

The student whose current event receives the most votes per week receives a token, and the most “liked” current event is chosen for further discussion through comments made to the original blog post. Comments are then rated, much like the original blog post, and the student whose comment receives the most “likes” also earns a token.

Students may increase their chances of earning a token by submitting an additional current event and an additional comment each week. Contributors of one randomly selected current event and comment each week also receive a token, making it advantageous for all students, even those who have not earned tokens through the rating system, to continue posting and commenting.

In addition to “buying” extra time for assignments, tokens can be exchanged for points, which convert to grades at the end of a semester. Robinson feels the game-like activities provide motivation for students to post current events and comments while also giving her “the opportunity to grant grace without being unfair to the people who submit their work on time.”

“Cool!” was one student’s reaction on the first day of class upon hearing about the activity and its similarity to the Facebook rating system. With the course currently underway, it is too soon to measure outcomes, but Robinson is hopeful that the game-like elements will help to sustain that level of enthusiasm.

Participation in the portion of the course that incorporates game-like elements is optional. Students in the class also complete traditional assignments to demonstrate critical thinking skills, including submitting papers about the relevance and importance of the current event they chose and presenting their insights to the class.

Chris Stubbs, information technology project manager in TLT, said the team will investigate the effects that including game-like elements in an academic course may have on learning behaviors. “If providing some kind of nominal feedback, whether its in the form of a badge, or an achievement, or a token can inspire some number of students to engage with materials in ways they otherwise would not have, then game-like elements could come to be a powerful tool in the instructor toolbox and could create some really cool opportunities down the road,” he said.

At the end of the semester, students will provide feedback about the game-like activities through focus groups, which will help Robinson measure the effectiveness of the tools and activities and make improvements for future use. Processes and tools developed for this project, such as the social rating system, will be available to other faculty members for use in their courses where applicable.

In addition to Stubbs, TLT team members include Jackie Ritzko, instructional designer and eLearning support specialist, Chris Millet, manager of advanced learning projects. Members of Robinson's TLT Fellow team have posted updates and reflections about the project at the TLT Fellows blog site at <http://blogs.tlt.psu.edu/fellows/>. To learn more about the TLT Fellows program, visit <http://tlt.its.psu.edu/faculty/fellowship>.