In the Classroom 135
Using Quest-based Learning in the Classroom

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Stan Skrabut: Thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me. As I'm recording this podcast, classes are starting. They have already started for one institution where I'm teaching a class, it's a graduate-level course, and we're already through our second week moving into our third. That's pretty cool. This week for the place I work, we're about to launch our undergrad classes. That's pretty exciting. Mostly face-to-face. With this COVID, we'll see, but so far things are going well.

Taking a look at classroom teaching strategies, one of the strategies I've used with great success in the classroom is quest-based learning. I've used it both for undergrad and graduate courses. It's a wonderful assignment strategy for exposing students to different skills and knowledge. Let's take a closer look. According to Chris Haskell, quest-based learning is an instructional design theory of game-based learning that focuses on student activity choice within the curriculum. The key to this is that learning design takes its cue from game design.

In the article, understanding quest-based learning, Haskell compares traditional grade book learning versus quest-based learning. When we're talking about grade book learning, that's typically how we set up our course. We present information, then we have quizzes on it, assignments on it, but it's very linear. It's one pathway straight to the end. For grade book learning, there's one fixed path through the course, from A to Z, that's how we're going to take the course, and it's activity-driven. Throughout the course there's activities that you have to do, once the activities are done, they're graded, put into the bank, and that's all she wrote. They're also reductive in grading.

Normally you start out with 100 points, and things are subtracted. If you get things wrong, they're taken off. You may start the course with 100%, but throughout the course, you're going to get less than 100%. They're punitive in nature, right? You're always punished throughout the course and therefore unmotivating. Whereas quest-based learning has a flexible path through the course, that you can take a number of different paths that the instructor ahead of time has set these challenges, these activities that are all related and they will take you throughout the course where you're learning different core concepts of the course.

It's competency base driven, and with competency base driven, that's pretty easy. It's either a go or not yet. That either you finish the task successfully, move on, or not yet, redo it. That's one of the features that I like about using quest in my classroom is that I can have students continually work on it until they actually master it rather than

one and done, and if you didn't master it, so what, we're moving on anyways, but with these types of quests, they get an opportunity to redo it.

Also, grading is cumulative. The fact that you start with zero and you work your way up through the course to you can earn whatever grade you want and you will never earn a lesser grade. You continually work your way up to get to the highest grade if you want, and even go past that, if you so desire. You're recognized and rewarded for hitting certain milestones throughout the way. There's always something else to work towards and thus it's more motivating.

When we're looking at quests, we're looking at short learning activities that have a specific learning goal. These are very closely tied to learning objectives that you have in your course, and you basically create these activities around those specific learning goals. Quests are also experiential. They are learning experiences. Here are some key features of quest-based learning. First of all, students get to choose which activities they will complete, which order they're going to complete them in, and when they will do them. There's no absolute deadline in the course.

That students have an opportunity to start a quest, complete a quest whenever they wish. I find that that very attractive because students can fit those in based around their schedules and they get to prioritize things based on what they already have going on. Sometimes the way courses are and very much in a linear path that suddenly it comes a period in time in course where everything's due at once, midterms are all due at once, finals are all due at once. Those final papers, all due at once, and it just overwhelms students. Here they have more control when they can complete assignments and get those things turned in. It works quite well for the students.

The other thing is that quests are tied to competencies. They are tied to specific skills or competencies rather than assigning a grade or degree of completion. Instructors either approve the request for completion or return it for further work. You look at something if it's not done to your satisfaction, if it doesn't meet all the steps in the rubric, which can be tied back to specification grading, then you just turn it back and say, "Sorry, not yet, feel free to resubmit."

Students have been programmed that, "Oh my God, a failure is bad," but I'm going to challenge that. Which leads us to our third item is that the fact that you have multiple attempts. If students do not successfully complete a quest, they have an opportunity to redo it until they're successful. This is really what learning is all about. James Dyson. You probably heard of Dyson vacuum. James Dyson had 5,127 attempts before he successfully created the Dyson vacuum. If it was normal education, boop, you're done. You didn't do it. Move on, but this is not the case.

Another individual you may know, Thomas Edison. He made 1,000 unsuccessful attempts at creating the light bulb. If he was in our normal classroom, one and done, we'd still be sitting in the dark. Learning should not stop after the first attempt. Even in our normal working world, we don't always get it right the first time. I am helping faculty learn how to use a learning management system. I know I've taught it to

them, so we should be done, and yet I have some faculty coming back to me over and over again to work on the same things.

I'm just glad that it's not a class where it was linear and things had a one-and-done type of assignment. No, that's not how we work. We have plenty of opportunities to try it and try it again until we get it right. Why not do this in the classroom? Also in a quest-based class, there's multiple pathways through the curriculum. In my courses that I teach, no two students have completed the exact same quest. Each one gets to put together their learning as they believe that it should-- What they find most important.

The reason I do this is because my learners are on a spectrum. Some already have skills in the skills that I'm teaching and it would be boring for them to hold them back and have them redo things that they're masters in. There's other opportunities that they can follow that they can learn new things. In gaming, pathways would be considered questlines. When you complete a questline, you basically follow a certain path until you get to the end of that questline, that may open or unlock additional sections of the curriculum. As a follow. They may open based on another pathway or questline.

Ideally, activities scaffold and become progressively more complex as you're moving through it. I seem to have a rough day talking today. Been just running ragged, so my words are tripping upon themselves. I hope you don't mind. I'm sorry, but we'll get there. We'll get there. So far we talked about student-select activities, that quests are tied to competencies, that you have multiple attempts, multiple pathways. Also, you are measuring the course in terms of badges and achievements and experience points.

Students start the course with zero points and they acquire points throughout the course. They never lose points. They're always advancing in the course. Along the way, they complete quests, which then may help them earn certain badges in the course or earn experience points and achievements as they're working through the course. The other really important thing about this is there is no single point of failure because there are so many quests in a course, as long as students are working, that they always have a chance to successfully pass the course.

Students have an opportunity to see where they're strong and where they need to improve, but because the point and values are so small in the grand scheme of things, there is no single point where if a student fails a final that they fail the course. That's not how quest-based learning is designed. Students always have an opportunity to pass the course through the last day of the course.

Here are some overall benefits for quest-based learning. In Chris Haskell's research, students had higher grades. 93% completed the course with an A, but the remaining students failed for just failing to do any other work. They just stopped participating, but 93% completed with an A. Students also reduced the amount of time to complete the course. Normal course is 16 weeks on a linear path, but they were able to complete the class, on average, in 12 and a half weeks, and some even completed the course in four weeks.

Because they had an opportunity that there was no due dates and the freedom to move ahead, students were able to move through the course much quicker and they found it to be much more motivating. Additionally, students persisted in their learning by completing more quests than required. In his course, he had the bar set at 2,000 and a number of students were exceeding that bar. They voluntarily completed more work than was required as compared to a traditional course. When thinking about quest-based learning, here are some tips to make it useful for your students.

First of all, when you're introducing this to your students and you're explaining what quests are, compare and contrast with what your students are already used to doing. Explain how there are no due dates, explain how they continuously move up, explain how this differs from a traditional class. Along with this, also establish your expectations. A big concern of instructors is if there's no due dates, except for the last day of the course, won't students just wait until the end? They possibly could.

I had one student who did exactly that. They were able to forecast how much work they needed to do. Probably, in the first 12 weeks of the class, they did not turn in anything and I was really concerned. They participated in the discussions we had as part of the class, but they didn't do any quest. Then suddenly, boom, they completed all the quests that they needed to do to earn that A.

What I do is I try to encourage them to complete the quests every week, at least something. I also hand out bonus points if they do that, to help move things along and keep them on task because the end of the course comes very quick and it can catch some students off guard, so make your expectations clear, what you're hoping to achieve, why you're doing this type of learning activities in order to help students understand the importance and get on board.

The big part of quest-based learning is that there's lots of choice. This is very much in line with universal design for learning, so provide ample quests so that students have choice to meet the final course completion criteria. There should be multiple pathways through your course. In one of my courses, students needed to earn 1,500 points. 1,500 points for the quest, but I have more than 2,500 quest points available. I provide them ample opportunity to make choice.

Also, plan out your quest plan. Map it out. I use a spreadsheet when I do this, so I can show what is related to what, that if certain questlines are not open until fundamental or basic knowledge is achieved, then I show those indications and I control that as part of the course. Understanding what your entry quests are, what's going to get this thing started, and what students must do to open a new module of quest. Being able to explain that and also have those programmed in to be able to do that. Also, what are the criteria for earning badges or achievements as you're moving through these different questlines or as students are earning these different quests. Keep that in mind.

Another part of or another tip to make this successful is to provide timely feedback. The fact that quests are short, they're competency-based activities, grading is really easy and quick. You look at it, either it's go, no go. Go or not yet. It's easy to provide

immediate feedback to get the student back on track. You can grade these very rapidly, provide some additional counsel and send them right back out there.

While technology is not required to do this, I strongly encourage it. There are specific sites to facilitate quest-based courses, such as Classcraft or Quest to Learn. However, I've been doing it with a learning management system. Learning how to do adaptive releasing and how to incorporate badging into a learning management system. In typical learning management systems, you can create these activities, these mini-quizzes or discussions or other types of assignments, whatever that you want. You can have students create podcasts or videos as part of their submission. It's really up to you what type of activities that you're going to create.

You create these and you turn on and off the adaptive releases. You want to open up the other modules and keep students engaged. What you're trying to do is think of the logic as you're moving through the course, through these questlines, connecting these activities together in a meaningful way. That's where technology can really come in handy, but I would say make sure that you map this out first so you know what it's going to look like.

A quick way to get started is to break down larger assignments into smaller scaffolding quests. If you were normally, what's the elements to a research project? They have to write introductions and annotated bibliographies and collect their research and write up a lit review and write up methods and write up-- You can break those down into those smaller elements and have those as quest points as you're working through, or it could be-- Thinking back to my computer programming days, that we always had these small assignments that would build upon each other, that would make just wonderful quests as you're thinking about your course.

I am a huge fan of having a lot of these really mini assignments, just to focus on little pieces of the course. I keep thinking about the course I'm teaching right now, how to really break it up and do these types of things. I'm not there yet, but I'll keep working on it in that direction. Quest-based learning really makes it hands-on and you can still have those lecture pieces.

You can just break them down into small videos and have the students watch this particular short video that you created and then write a reflective piece on it. There's lots of different ways that you can do this, but I think quest-based learning makes it a lot more fun, more engaging for the class. That is what I have for you. Before I let you go, here's a quick plug for my book.