

A Gamer's Critique of Traditional Education and Implications for the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how two aspects of video games, group dynamics and affinity spaces, are surprisingly similar to characteristics of an ideal classroom learning environment. However, most traditional classrooms lack these two aspects, creating a stagnant learning experience. This paper will describe these two aspects and their components in the contexts of a video game and a traditional classroom. The paper will also describe on how these two aspects has been applied to an ESL reading class, and how ESL classes in general can benefit from the application of true group dynamics and affinity spaces.

Introduction

One of the authors of this paper has been a gamer/student for two decades, and he has found that gamers learn differently than the by the traditional methods of instruction in schools. Gamers learn from experimental processes by doing the actual task before being instructed. The traditional learning style in the classroom is an instructed process; the student first is instructed on how to do the task and then does it. In gaming, players address the problems by doing them. The question is, how might video games help address the current problems within the education system?

Gee (2005) described a research project done on monkeys. Puzzles were placed in front of the monkeys. At first, if the monkeys solved the puzzle, they got food. However, the researchers wanted to know if the monkeys would play and solve these puzzles even if there was no food involved. It turned out that the monkeys not only played with the puzzles once they found out there was no food, but they also kept on solving the puzzles and playing with them in their environment, occupying themselves for long periods of time (p. 30). If learning and solving puzzles are sufficient intrinsic rewards for primates, then should this not also be true for humans?

This joy of learning and problem-solving may not be noticeable if one were to observe the majority of classrooms. Why can gamers play for hours and days, while an average student can only sit and study for two hours at most? There are students who can study for five to ten hours at a

time, but they are not getting enjoyment from it. Gamers learn all they can about a game, acquiring new information and skills just from the process of playing it. How can this be applied to the education of children and second language learners? In the following sections, we will describe the characteristics of a group. We will discuss group dynamics and affinity space features of game and classroom environments. Last, we will describe how to incorporate these two aspects in the ESL classroom.

Characteristics of Group Dynamics

The first reason video games are fun is that they create a true group. According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2004), a group had six characteristics:

1. There is some interaction among group members.
2. Group members perceive themselves as a distinct unit and demonstrate a level of commitment to it.
3. Group members share some purpose or goal for being together.
4. The group endures for a reasonable period of time (i.e., not only for minutes).
5. The group has developed some sort of a salient 'internal structure,' which includes:
 - The regulation of entry and departure into/from the groups;
 - Rules and standards of behavior for members;

- Relatively stable interpersonal relationship patterns and an established status hierarchy;
 - Some division of group roles.
6. Finally, as a direct consequence of the above points, the group is held accountable for its members' actions. (p. 13)

Let us examine single player games. How is there the essence of group dynamics in a single player? Even though there is only one person playing a *game*, the game and the player have the dynamics of a group. Gee (2005) observed that when people play a character in a video game, they are not outside observers of a world and story, as when they read books, but they are part of that world and story. There is a blending of the player and the character in the game. Blending means the character in the game is not the player nor the character the programmers made but a combination of two individual personalities (pp. 29-57). Since players are not outside observers of a game, there is an essence of group dynamics within the game.

Group Dynamics in Computer Games

The game *Boulders Gate 2* (BG2) will be examined to illustrate how group dynamics happens in a game. In BG2, the player is in a city called Boulders Gate, a fantasy world with dragons, wizards, and elves. The player gets to create a character in the game, a warrior, wizard, or thief. Some Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) know the past history of the player's character. The player starts out in a jail cell not knowing anything. This player's character is called Thogin, and his captor tells Thogin that he is the spawn of the God of Darkness.

As the game moves on, Thogin gets information about a party of characters created by the programmers to help him in his main quest: to save his childhood friend, who is held prisoner by the city wizards for casting a spell without a permit. In this game, Thogin can decide to lead his party of heroes in doing evil deeds, such as stealing items from storekeepers, or doing good deeds, such as helping the town solve a murder. Of course, taking the evil path re-

quires less problem-solving because the player can just steal money or items from the store. However, there are consequences; the group of computer program-generated heroes may not like stealing and killing of innocent people, and they may leave with all their items. The townspeople will start to hate the player/party and attack him on site. The police will show up and try to kill the player's group. Stores will not sell the group items, and hotels will no longer do business with them. No hotels means no good nights' rests, so the player has to sleep outside where enemies can randomly attack, leaving the group too tired to fight. If the player does good deeds, more and more people in the world will know his/her name, and they will give him/her items or discounts at their stores. The player may control the party to a point; however, all the characters in the group have their own personalities, and sometimes they tell the player their thoughts and worries. Members may leave the group if they find out their clan is being attacked by trolls, and the players can decide to run after those members to help them or continue the current path. What often gets the players upset is when group members fight with each other because one member is an evil thief and the other a knight of justice (paladin). The player has to choose what to say carefully to resolve the conflict, or s/he may lose one member of the party. If this seems complicated, it is because the player is a leader managing a group of complex wizards and knights, sometimes with conflicting personalities. The aspects of group dynamics as identified by Dörnyei and Murphey (2004) can be shown in the analysis of this game.

The first characteristic of a group is that there must be interaction among members. There is clearly defined interaction among party members and the player. The second characteristic is that a group sees itself as a unit and has a level of commitment. All the characters, once they join the player's party, sleep, eat, and fight together, and all are committed to helping the player save his/her friend as well as complete other tasks. The player controls the members as a group and is committed to the

group by taking care of the members and playing the game. The third characteristic of a game group can be seen as the group shares a common goal; the main goal of BG2 is to save a friend or find rare treasures. The fourth characteristic is that the group stays together for a period of time, that time being when the player plays the game. As an example, Wentai spent two weeks playing the game the first time. The programmer's characters stay in the party as long as Thogin wants, unless sometimes special events such as a killing of an innocent person make the heroes leave. The fifth characteristic is that a group has to have an internal structure. Consider the requirement of the fifth characteristic of a group: division in group roles. In the Thogin group, Thogin is a necromancer, a type of wizard who specializes in the undead and dark spells. However, this alone is not enough to constitute a successful group; Thogin also needs warriors and fighters to protect him while he casts his spells. (Wizards are very weak, and it does not take much for them to be killed by an arrow or sword.) In addition, Thogin needs a thief to scout areas since a thief can hide in shadows and detect and undo traps. Traps can kill a whole group if the group is not careful. The last person Thogin needs is a priest who has the ability to heal members and cast protection spells. The core members in Wentai's group are always a wizard, two fighters, a thief and a healer. Finally, the group is held responsible for their actions; if a player decides to do evil things, the guards and townspeople will attack the group, not just the individual that did the deed. In summary, BG2 has all the characteristics of a group as defined by Dornyei and Murphey (2004).

In fact, it is precisely the group dynamics of computer games that attracts players. When games were first developed, it was just the player against the game using one joystick. Then two players could play against each other or cooperate against the computer. Companies realized that the more players are involved, the more enjoyment people get from the game. Soon two-player games became four-player; four-player became six-player, and so on. Players

participating in the same game learn to develop a sense of group roles and group coherence. To return to Wentai's experience with BG2, at first, his friends and he were a rather dysfunctional group because everyone's different personality made it hard to do a quest. For example, Dark Stalker the thief loved to steal from people or storekeepers. Sometimes he was successful, sometimes not; either way, most of the time the group spent their time running away from storekeepers' guards because Dark Stalker got caught stealing new swords. White Dragon, the healer/paladin, could never cast the right spell at the right time. He cast spells when no one was hurt or for protection when no one needed protecting. Thogin himself sometimes forgot he was a wizard and not Rambo, running into any battle head-on and casting the most powerful spells in his magic book, ending up hurting not only the enemy but also himself and his party. However, as the game went on, the group became more functional and coherent as they learned about the game and each other as they played.

What do video games have to do with language learning and education? When games are played with other people, the experience becomes richer. This is because humans generally work in groups and live in groups. However, currently, for the most part, students do not learn in groups. Next we will consider a traditional classroom, and determine whether it has features of a group.

Group Dynamics in Traditional Classrooms

From the authors' experience as students, they have noted that a traditional classroom has a teacher in front and students in rows. A characteristic of a group is interaction between its members. In a traditional classroom, the teacher gives information while the students listen and write down notes. It is a one-way interaction; the teacher gives, and the students receive. It is only a two-way interaction if the teacher asks a question, and the students answer. In our experience, this does not happen often. Children are punished for talking to other children. The interaction in the classroom is weak at best. There may be a group project,

but hardly enough to balance out the teacher-centered environment. The second requirement for groups to exist is a commitment by which the group members see themselves as a distinct unit. Fourth graders may see themselves as a distinct unit against the fifth graders in dodge ball, but in the classroom, this distinction disappears. Also, the commitment of students is not usually to the group but rather to their individual grades. The third characteristic of a group is that the group members share a purpose. However, students may share the same interest but not the same purpose. Some teachers encourage students to work together but do not allow students to share answers on homework. That is like saying you can swim, but just do not get wet. If the students are not encouraged to help each other with homework or to study together, then there is no sense of shared purpose, only individual purposes. Also, the traditional class does not meet the final characteristic of a group. A traditional class does not take responsibility for individuals. Students in traditional classrooms can hardly be called groups because the true dynamics of a group are virtually nonexistent. Back to our original statement: video games are more fun in groups. We humans live and work in groups. Why do we not learn in groups?

Affinity Spaces

As mentioned above, another aspect of video games is what Gee (2004) calls affinity spaces. These are usually strategy guides, official websites and fan websites where people come together to exchange information. These are portals to the main affinity space, the game (p. 83). Children today are much more comfortable than before with affinity spaces such as websites, chats, or forums.

Characteristics of Affinity Spaces

Gee (2004), wrote that there are eleven aspects of an affinity space:

1. Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary.
2. Newbies, masters and everyone else share common space.

3. Some portals (activities/classes/projects) are strong generators.
4. Content organization is transformed by interactional organization.
5. Both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged.
6. Both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged.
7. Dispersed knowledge is encouraged.
8. Tacit knowledge is encouraged and honored.
9. There are many different forms and routes to participation.
10. There are lots of different routes to status.
11. Leadership is porous, and leaders are resources. (Gee, 2004, pp. 83-87)

Most of these qualities of affinity space are the same qualities of an ideal classroom. However, these qualities are not realized in a current classroom setting for two main reasons. The first reason why classrooms lack affinity space qualities is that teachers are the main distributors of information and knowledge. The teacher is the gate keeper of information and knowledge since he/she decides what is important and what is to be distributed. In a true affinity space, there is not one distributor of information and knowledge, but all members can be distributors. The second reason why traditional classrooms lack affinity space qualities is that they do not have point four, "content organization is transformed by interactional organization," (Gee, 2004, p. 83). Groups that interact with the content are allowed to change the core content. To satisfy the requirements of affinity spaces, teachers could let students create their own content for the class and allow them to present their findings. This would allow students to change the teacher's lesson plan or create a different version based on the core content. The best games currently allow players to make their own versions of the game using the same basic content.

Affinity Spaces in Computer Games

As an example, *Warcraft 3* (WC3) is a game that has all the qualities of an affinity space. WC3 is a game where players can participate

in four different races and build a city and an army to fight opposing players. This type of game is called real time strategy (RTS) because everything happens minute by minute, just as in a real battle. Portals are websites, electronic forums, and chat rooms that connect to the main space, the game. People can check news on these WC3 sites (see <http://www.blizzard.com/war3/>), trade information and tactics, and make new maps and new ways to play the game. WC3 has a builder function where a player, using the same characters and elements of WC3, can make mini-games such as World Cup Soccer or capture the flag. Sometimes the mini-game is well-accepted by other players. Blizzard (the company that made WC3) pays money as a reward and may hire the people that made the custom game. On these websites, the players can also cite problems with the game, and the company will come up with patches that fix the issues.

Affinity Spaces in Schools

Gee (2004) argued that affinity spaces and schools are similar because people come together and exchange information; however, schools lack many of the features of affinity spaces as described above. Some people might ask, so what if schools are not like affinity spaces and do not have portals where people can exchange information? As Gee (2004) stated:

Young people today are confronted with and enter more and more affinity spaces. They see a different and arguably powerful vision of learning, affiliation, and identity when they do so. Learning becomes both a personal and a unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities (i.e., a person's own unique movement through various affinity spaces over time) and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others (who may be very different from oneself and inhabit otherwise quite different spaces) for a shorter or longer period of time before moving on. What these young people see in school may pale by comparison. It may seem to lack the

imagination that infuses the non-school aspects of their lives. (p. 89)

What can schools do in order to improve in these two areas? Currently, many classrooms are too teacher-centered to allow the students to be creative about their learning. The question is not whether a child has the ability to learn, but whether the classroom environment is unpleasant enough so that they can enjoy it. In affinity spaces, people come together to create content and form a community where they can share their knowledge and make friends with other people with similar interests. The community members learn from each other new information about a game and new skills for that game just as in a classroom. People (and monkeys!) love to learn and solve puzzles, which is why games attract them. Video games attract the younger generation because at this point we have the technology to create fantasy worlds, where players can spend a lot of time exploring and exchanging information about their experiences.

Bringing Group Dynamics and Affinity Spaces into the ESL Classroom

If the traditional class lacks group dynamics and affinity space features, then some ESL classrooms may suffer from similar problems. Since ESL learners already have problems with using the target language, the teacher's dilemma is how to teach the new language and help their students with comprehension and production. The first author of this paper observed about 35 hours of college ESL classes, and two common features appeared: lesson plans are normally rigid, and the classrooms environments are predominantly teacher-centered. In these ESL classes, group work rarely produced end products such as joint papers or presentations. Most of the work that was done in these ESL class was individual. This paper will not focus on why most ESL learning environments are teacher-centered and void of group dynamics, because many valid reasons can be given. The question is, how can teachers apply true group dynamics and af-

finity space features to make ESL classes better?

First, group work must produce a joint product that is graded by the teacher. The reason is students tend not to consider group activities seriously if they are not graded. However, the main objective is to encourage peer-to-peer learning and increase group dynamics in the class. Second, choice must be given with respect to either the material they will learn or the product of their group work. By giving the students a choice, the teacher is empowering the students' self-learning.

An example class in which these two features are apparent is presented by Klein (2006). The class is an advanced ESL reading course, and the main project is for students to create a Power Point presentation on an aspect of a book on their reading list. The groups are created by the instructor to prevent students from the same country from working together and to combine different English levels. Everyone reads the same books at the same time, and the group presenting can pick any topic from that book. The instructor gives a list of topics on the book to help the groups choose. Each group has to not only present a theme from the book, but also expand on it. The example Power Point presentation given was on the book *The Perfect Storm*. The group that did the presentation did it on the topic of longline fishing, which was the method used in the book. The group expands on the topic by giving information on the types of hooks used at different depths. The kind of fish expected can be determined from the length of the line and the process of reeling in the fish. The project is graded individually and as a group by the teacher.

This class is a good model of how aspects of group dynamics and affinity space can be applied. A group is created to tackle the task of creating a presentation. The aspects of a group are apparent from the common purpose and the responsibility of creating the presentation since it is graded. Affinity space features are also present since the group is free to choose any topic about the book. In fact, all the criteria for an affinity space, especially the core points (i.e.,

points four to seven in Gee's 2005 list) are satisfied by the format of creating this presentation. Point four is fulfilled because the project allows students to change the lesson material by presenting on a topic they choose. Points five to seven in Gee's list are satisfied because the instructor encourages the distribution of the students' individual and extensive knowledge by allowing them to present the topic to everyone in the class.

In retrospect, this class is like a game. The task is to complete a presentation, a possibly intimidating assignment for ESL learners. Like a game, a major task is given that initially seems unreachable. However, as the class moves on, and the group acquires additional information from the instructor or the Web, the task seems more accomplishable. As the player in the game gains experience from fighting monsters and acquiring tips from fellow players on the Web, the goal of beating the game also becomes reachable. After the task is accomplished, the group can feel proud of their work and of learning many skills along the way, such as how to do a Power Point presentation in English and find information about long-line fishing. The gamer also learns skills such as puzzle solving and new tactics in playing the game.

Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional classrooms, as compared to games, lack the group dynamics and affinity space features that encourage self-learning in students. Group dynamics in a traditional classroom are virtually nonexistent, thus creating a stagnant learning experience for the students. Second, traditional classrooms have too few affinity spaces where students can exchange their experiences, generate knowledge, and build new skills. A classroom where a teacher dictates what is learned may seem ancient in the eyes of today's students, since they are so intertwined with forums, chats, and online communities that allow them to express their ideas freely. Gee (2004) stated that the traditional school system has a lot to learn from video games. The two aspects traditional classrooms should focus on are building true group dynamics within the

classroom and creating more affinity spaces, areas that are not teacher-centered, but student-centered. Teachers should let the students take more control of their learning. With group dynamics and affinity spaces

being allowed to emerge in a class, the learning experience will be richer, just as in a game.

References

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