

Making Learning Engaging Through Interactive Games

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So, we have been interviewing a lot of practitioners and you would have seen in the past instances, a variety of practitioners from different fields were interviewed to share their experiences in terms of how they have been finding this interactive game-based learning, teaching-learning methodology very effective in their classrooms. So, today I thought I will introduce another such person, this time only difference is that I am not doing that interview, but I have, I am leveraging an interview which has been done by Dave Eng who runs the universityxp.com website and he does a lot of collation of articles, videos, podcasts, etc. of developments in that field. So, as we get to see this, let us first listen to this interview and then share the key takeaways.

Here is the permission and request to cite this episode as obtained from him. So, this has been done in March 3rd, 2024, he is interviewed and in the episode number 106 and with the internal reference number as can be seen on the screen. So, let us see the episode now. Hi, and welcome to Experience Points by UniversityXP.

On Experience Points, we explore different ways we can learn from games. I'm your host, Dave Eng, from Games-Based Learning by UniversityXP. Find out more by going to universityxp.com. On today's episode, we'll learn from Silviana Falcon.

Dr. Silviana Falcon is an assistant professor at Florida Southern College's Barney Barnett School of Business and Free Enterprise. In 2020, she received the prestigious Dorothea C. Tanner Chair in Ethics in Business and Economics.

Dr. Falcon also authored the book *Lectures in Play*, a practical and fun guide to create extraordinary higher education classroom experiences. Silviana, welcome to the show. Thank you it's my pleasure. So Silviana, first, I really want to talk about your book because I think that was one of the first introductions I got to your work. And I want to focus this first question on *Lectures at Play*.

So for our audience, can you share some insights from your book, *Lectures at Play*? And the subtitle is *A Practical and Fun Guide to Create Extraordinary Classroom Experiences*. And specifically, I'd like to focus on this. How do educational games enhance the learning environment and how can they be effectively incorporated into traditional lectures? For sure. So over the past eight years, I've consistently integrated educational games as fundamental components of my lectures. In my book, I detail my painful transformation from the expected conventional lecturer to a passionate creator of educational games.

In a nutshell, My book outlines my pedagogical approach, which revolves around creating a welcoming learning environment where students begin by applying their existing skills to playing games and eventually link that game experience to the new knowledge they acquired through my lectures. I think of lectures and play as a mutual symbiotic relationship where the interaction of lecture and play create the environment where students thrive. So speaking of creating a welcoming learning environment, I've also found that incorporating games into the learning process has this like remarkable social impact, right? For example, I find it fascinating that students, these are college students, start showing up to class early, even to my 8am class. And instead of being glued to their phones, they engage in lively and amiable discussions or conversations with one another. So the interactive nature of these educational games helps me foster an environment where camaraderie and teamwork is evident in students.

So they collaborate, they strategize, they cheer each other on during these activities, creating a truly positive and inclusive environment. So even beyond the games, the spirit of cooperation carries over to my lectures, which is wonderful. It's truly extraordinary to witness how these games can turn a regular class into an exciting and vibrant space. The students feel a sense of belonging and connection, which I believe boosts their motivation to actively participate in the learning experience. I call it a win-win-win situation because they have fun while being fully engaged in their education, and I have fun teaching.

Now, when it comes to effectively combining lectures and educational games, I found that there's not like a one size fits all type of approach. It's all about adapting to the situation and the specific learning objective, right? So let me put it to you this way. Sometimes I find it highly effective to begin with a game, immersing the students in an interactive experience. Then I follow up with a lecture using the collective experience we just had in the game to highlight and reinforce the concepts, the key concepts. This approach allows the students to see real world application of the knowledge they just gained from the game.

Now, in other instances, I opt to start with a lecture first. By doing so, I can lay a solid

foundation and drive in the essential concepts, right? So once the students have a grasp of the foundational knowledge, we then move on to playing the game where they can actively apply these concepts, which I believe ultimately foster a sense of competitiveness and practical understanding. And you know what? Sometimes I mix things up by starting with a game, creating a lively, engaged environment right from the beginning. Afterwards, I delve in the lecture material to provide further context and insights. And then I turn around and challenge the students a little bit more.

I bring back the same game, but with added complexity, allowing them to build upon their earlier experiences and push their boundaries all within the same lecture, right? Or the same time that we're together. In the end is about, I think it's about striking the right balance and tailoring the approach, the content and the needs of the students. So I hope my answer provides your audience with a better understanding on how to use these games in the lectures to enhance the learning environment. Great. Thank you, Silviana.

Super comprehensive response. And there are a few things that you indicated there that I really resonated with, specifically the symbiosis between play and lectures. That's something that I introduce and I also adapt in my own teaching and professional practice. I teach at NYU in the Certificate of Online Learning program there. And I only teach online, and I realize that there's a didactic component with lectures, but there's also opportunities for engagement with simulations and some games and some other applications of experiential learning.

As of this recording, you last presented one of your games at the Game Space Learning Virtual Conference, the 5S game, I believe. Could you just briefly give us an overview on what that game was and if that's something that you use with your students now? Oh, I use it every semester, really. It's an extraordinarily simple game, really, where students use the knowledge they already have, which is counting, right, in sequential order. And they have to find numbers in sequential order. But it provides them with an understanding that the task may be simple, but the environment in which that task takes place can be chaotic, can be dysfunctional.

And I teach the class, the management class, Introduction to Management, and I want the students to be able to understand ultimately, no matter what I teach or what they remember from my teaching, is that they themselves are responsible for creating a nurturing environment where their employees can thrive. So I play this game at the onset of my classes, and it sets the stage. All of a sudden, they see themselves as the responsible individuals where success happens in the workplace. And so it allows me to set the stage, as I mentioned earlier, From the beginning, and I weave everything else through that lens right everything else I teach because I want them to truly understand

their responsibility as future managers.

All right. Thank you, Silviana. I appreciate it. I think that leads me into my second question here is, again, we're still talking about your book, *Lectures at Play*, but I'd like to focus on ethics in business and economics. So in your book, you discuss the importance of both ethics in business and economics. Could you elaborate on how you address this aspect in your courses at your institution? And what specific topics or activities do you include to encourage ethical decision-making among your students? Very important topic.

Teaching business ethics is undeniably crucial when it comes to preparing students to ultimately make a positive impact on society, right? So it revolves around helping them grasp the art and the science of making sound decisions when they encounter tricky gray areas, right? So One of the challenges I face when teaching these concepts is that many students have not yet encountered high state situations that put the values to the test, right? So business ethics is not just about following rules, which all in itself is sometimes difficult, but it's not just about following rules. It's about navigating challenges. A complex situation where the right path isn't always clear cut. So to tackle this challenge, I've used a variety of simulation approaches where students can explore consequences of their decisions and practice ethical reasoning in a safe environment, right? One of those educational games that I used and I've used consistently is called *Star Power*. I don't know if you've ever played it or if your audience has heard of it before, but it was cleverly designed by Gary Schertz 53 years ago, which is outstanding.

The game creates like a limited mobility, three-tier society-based game on differential wealth. It's a somewhat complicated game because students have to engage in a series of chip trading sessions, like token trading sessions, to increase their individual wealth and societal status. In other words, students have opportunities to exchange these tokens with other students in order to enhance their societal positioning, right? Their scores. Although most students remain in their original group throughout the game, there's a bonus section where a lower status person ends up with an upward mobility opportunity. So after several trading rounds, the wealthy group earns the right to make rules for the rest of the game and trading continues under the new established rules.

One adaptation that I've made to this game is that I place a significant number of extra credit points to be awarded to the winners, which adds to the real strong competition dimension of the game. And I think it's worth mentioning that it is the only time in the, in the semester where I reward students with extra points. So again, this is a very unique, almost like a unicorn opportunity for them to earn extra points. And timing is also key because I play this game right after the midterm exam where some students may be

strongly motivated to win to improve their overall grade in the class. So as a result, it's not surprised that the wealthy class When given the opportunity, change or manipulate the rules in a way that guarantees their continued success.

It's also interesting that some students cheat their way to the top, right? So the lower societal class, which is the majority, tend to be very resentful and express a great disappointment on the decisions made by the wealthy class. Some students even inquire as to how to leave this oppressed system, highlighting basic immigration concepts, right? So this game is great at illustrating complex processes of economic, social, and political stratification, as well as linkages between ethical decision-making in the face of great power, right? So this is where students understand how power can be misleading, can compromise your values, no matter how much you say you're a high values person or individual who will always do what is right. When the stakes are high is when those values are truly tested. So the students really are able then to sense what power feels like and what it feels to have no power, right? And so it's a great, great game because the students, you know, we spend a lot of time after the game listening to each other's points and the outcome of that debriefing has always been positive. A showcase of deeper learning, just by playing that game than any other method I have ever used to help students understand the blinding effects of power.

So, I think again, here comes right. A simple game can create lasting experiences for students who may not have had experiences to rely upon right in the past. So again, the educational games is if well chosen and well articulated can provide a level of experience for students that can help them truly understand what you're trying to convey.

Great. Thank you, Silviana. Great responses. I think that the game that you discussed is not one that I'm familiar with. I did play a game originally through one of my colleagues when I used to work for a semester at sea, which was about the way different societies with different values interact and communicate with one another. Your game seems like it's more focused on the economics of those decisions, which is germane to the question that we asked. But I think that overall, the main focus here is that you're not merely talking about theory with your students, but they are actually experiencing theory differences in class privilege, ethics surrounding immigration, wealth disparity, the fact that you discussed how the ruling class can then make up the rules for the rest of the game, thus solidifying their power as the ruling class.

Just a lot of really great aspects and outcomes, I think, for the game overall. And what, you know, particularly made me proud was the fact that you still include a very diverse and deep dive into the debriefing of the game afterwards, because just talking about theory is one thing, just playing a game is another thing, but playing the game, talking

about theory, and also discussing students' own feedback and their own experiences with it, I think is just great overall. Could you just state the game one more time, Silviana, and its author so that listeners can find it? It's Star Power, and it's a 1969 game, and it's Gary Shirtz. All right, I will make sure that I will also include a link in the show notes for those that want to check out their own copy of Star Power. So Silviana, that brings me to my last question here.

So I realize that you have a very diverse background as a healthcare administrator, entrepreneur, and now professor. So I want to know, how do you leverage your experiences in these different areas to offer versatile perspectives in problem solving? You talked a little bit about that in the last question. But I would like to know, could you share an instance where your ability to view problems from multiple angles has led to a successful business decision or educational approach? Sure, certainly. So I believe my diverse background has provided me with a wealth of experiences that I leverage to offer various perspectives in problem solving. For instance, One of the most significant challenges that I encountered during the transition from industry to academia was the stark contrast between the rapidly evolving industry and the relatively unchanged nature of academia's reliance on passive learning methods.

It was just mind-boggling to me. Drawing from my entrepreneurial background, I recognized the need to take initiative and create a positive change. So I had the confidence and the courage to seek, create, and reimagine activities that helped me bridge the gap between theory and practice. And the results that I've experienced have been extremely rewarding. I've witnessed my students leaning forward and wanting to learn more and wanting to be active participants in their discovery of new knowledge. It's truly been a testament of the power in innovative and engaging learning approach.

So I've been able to capitalize on that entrepreneurial background. And as a healthcare administrator, You know, working in such a high-paced, high-stakes environment taught me the value of collaboration and teamwork in problem solving. So just last week, I had the opportunity to bring together my diverse background once again. And I collaborated with others within the university where I work to write a grant proposal that aims to expand this successful blend of lectures and educational games to STEM disciplines within our college. And so extending the potential of this pedagogy into the STEM fields excites me.

So all in all, I believe that my diverse background has allowed me to be more open, I guess, to opportunities for innovation, for collaboration and positive change. I'm not sure that I could have had the courage to kind of turn the page and go against the grain of what other professors were doing had I not had those variety of experiences behind me.

Thank you, Sylvian. I appreciate it. I 100% agree with your approach from passive to active learning.

I think that active learning, and as I have used it most frequently through experiential learning, is a really great way to discuss and integrate theory and content as part of the learning process. But my follow-up question is that other faculty members that may be listening to this right now may be struggling with students who they may term like disengaged or uninvested in the course. Have you ever experienced or have worked with any students that would be described as such? And if so, what have you done in the past in order to get these students to more actively participate in the learning experience from your perspective as a faculty member? So I think that's inevitable, right? You will have a student who's there because somebody told them to be there. They're not invested, they don't see the value, or somehow their interest lies somewhere else.

And so there's always that. But I can tell you that the way in which I play games, I've learned over the eight years that I can't just expect students to come in and engage right away with me. Because they've had K through 12 where all they have to do is sit there and pretend to take notes. They're not used to this type of environment. And personally, I don't think all of us like a lot of change all at once, right? We're all humans. And I think I've heard that humans only like change when it's in their pockets, right? I am very cognizant of that.

And so I start my semester by slowly introducing games that are not so out there, right? That they're not like walking about and exchanging these like tokens that we talked about in the Star Power game, because that's highly, highly immersive, right? And so I start slow. It's almost like I think of them as they know how to walk and I'm teaching them eventually how to run. And so I start slow to the point where I'm inviting them, right? I'm inviting them and I try to engage them in trust conversations. And there are some students that I see are not engaging, for example, and then I write them a note. A handwritten note and say, look, I'm not seeing you engaging.

Can I call upon you the next week? Is it okay if I call upon you? And then I even go so far to write those notes or an email sometimes to a student who I can see their wheels are turning, right? I can just see it. And I know another faculty member who might be listening or you who's listening to me right now, you probably can nod and say, yeah, I've got those. I can see that their wheels are turning, but they don't speak. So usually I do a lot of eye contact with those students to gain their trust. And then I also invite them to participate and say, hey, can I call upon you the next time? Can you distribute these handouts? And so slowly but surely, I gain their, intentionally, I gain their trust.

And then all of the sudden, those are the students who write on their student evaluations that my class gave them a voice and that they learn that they could speak and that their, I guess, their thoughts matter to the conversation. And I think those are the ones that I find most rewarding when I can turn them around and bring them about and have them actually see The wonderful opportunity they have before them to be in college and to literally change their own trajectory and the trajectory of their children and their children's children. So I think that's the beauty and the challenge.

But games, games allow me to do that. Right. Thank you, Sylviana. I appreciate it. I especially appreciate the fact that you put a lot of agency into your students to be an active participant in the process. And I think that really addresses the underlying aspect of motivation.

So that brings us to the very end of our interview. Thanks for joining us today, Sylviana. Where can people go to find out more about you and specifically also pick up a copy for your book, Lectures at Play? Sure. Thank you. So I'm on LinkedIn, of course, you can find my profile on LinkedIn and message me that way.

You can also find me at sylvianafalcon.com. And my book can be found on Amazon. Great. Thank you, Sylviana. I will include links to all of those descriptions in the show notes.

So make sure you check it out there. Thanks for joining me. Again, I'm your host, Dave Eng from Game Space Learning by UniversityXP. On Experience Points, we explore different ways we can learn from games. If you liked this episode, please consider commenting, sharing, and subscribing. Subscribing is absolutely free and ensures that you'll get the next episode of Experience Points delivered directly to you.

I'd also love it if you took some time to rate the show. I live to live others with learning. So if you found this episode useful, consider sharing it with someone who could also benefit. Also, make sure to visit UniversityXP online at UniversityXP.com. UniversityXP is also on Twitter at [University underscore XP](https://twitter.com/UniversityXP) and on Facebook and LinkedIn as UniversityXP.

Also, feel free to email me anytime. My email address is Dave at [UniversityXP.com](mailto:Dave@UniversityXP.com). Game on. Hope all of you got to see the episode.

Now, here are the key highlights, at least as far as I am concerned. Obviously, there are many more great points that she refers to. The important things I would like to highlight are the college students start showing up early in the classes, even to the first class in the

morning, 8 a.m., which is where most of them are typically reluctant what if they bunk the class or what if they go a little bit late etc. So once she starts using these interactive methodologies there is a natural interest and inclination built in the class.

And the other thing she highlights is that instead of being glued to the phones, they actually actively engage in the discussions in the classroom. So what students are looking for is active engagement, fun and interactivity in classrooms. This clearly is illustrated from her experiences. So it also fosters an environment of collaboration, teamwork, strategizing, which is more a very, very lively environment.

which is something that all of us prefer in the real world. So, she also highlights that the cooperation goes beyond just the games which also into her lectures. So, the overall classroom ambience is made very vibrant and the motivation levels are pretty high. So, these are some key observations made by her as she started adopting this pedagogy. When it comes to actually using the right kind of game, she says just like everyone else that there is no one size that fits all approach. Sometimes she starts a classroom with a game just to engage and then build on it and then share her insights as a part of a regular lecture or classroom interaction.

Some other times the theory or the lecture is done first and later the games are brought in as a revision or an ongoing attachment to that. Other observation is very key. Gradually, it is reducing these days, but again, there is a significant gap. She says that the classroom pedagogy has not kept up with the industry in terms of the interactivities. So, the classrooms have stayed very similar or probably the rate at which they have changed has not, what do you say, has not kept up with the rate at which things are available in the world.

So it still continues to be passive learning and here is an opportunity to use these methods to make it more active learning and use of these games, interactivities really converts that classroom into a very active environment. The last thing she says is about giving a voice for all the individuals in the class. Every class has different kinds of students. Some of them are quiet, some of them are open, but it's very important to recognize and give a safe space and a voice for even the student who's quiet. So I think that is the joy for every single teacher and probably even also for the student.

If the student gets an environment where they get to voice their opinions and participate in some form, not necessarily verbally, but through even digital interactions, if the ideas are shared either digitally or by speaking up, I think that is the biggest success of a teacher. And she has highlighted rightly, those are the real rewarding moments for any

faculty. So, these were some key takeaways from the wonderful experiences shared by Professor Sylvia. Thank you.