SHORT NOTES ON CLASSROOM INNOVATIONS

Are you ready for "The Amazing Race"?

Grace WONG Khei Mie,[1]

[1] Senior Lecturer
Department of Real Estate, School of Design and Environment
National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Dr Grace Wong, Department of Real Estate, School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore, 4 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117566.
Email: rstgwong@nus.edu.sg

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INTRODUCTION

As different types of learners with varying learning abilities and intelligences (Gardner, 1983) tend to have different preferred learning styles and strategies depending on the purpose of learning, learning content and circumstances under which learning occurs, teaching materials and activities should be flexible and variable in order to cater to as many types of learners as possible, including visual, auditory, reading-writing and kinaesthetic learners (Barbe, Swassing & Milone, 1979; Fleming, 2006). Through my experience in teaching the General Education Module GEK1010 Property Management, which caters to students from different years of study, degree courses and faculties, I have designed and implemented several games in my lessons to engage a wide spectrum of learners.

Besides managing a diversity of learners, one of the greatest difficulties of teaching is how to relate theoretical concepts and ideas to existing practices or phenomena in reality when lessons are mostly conducted in a classroom setting. In addition, one of the most challenging outcomes of learning is how to apply such theories and notions to explain, associate with or even influence actual events in the real world. This learning outcome is even more pertinent for industry-based and practice-oriented modules like GEK1010 which is a General Education Module offered by Department of Real Estate to students from all faculties. This module features the various aspects of Property Management in relation to businesses and organisations. For these reasons, the games in support of learning not only have to be interesting with regard to the level of learner engagement, time-sensitive since they are conducted during tutorial sessions, and relevant in terms of course content, but they should also be applicable in connection with the practical work aspect of the module. The variety of games developed for GEK1010 range from classroom-based, table-top, and pen-and-paper activities, to beyond-the-classroom site-based fieldwork activities. One such on-site game is modelled after the reality television game show "The Amazing Race" (CBS Corporation, 2014; Wikipedia, 2014).

"THE AMAZING RACE: VERSION GEK1010"

Race Location:

Similar to "The Amazing Race", which focuses on different continents, the game features a race around a specific location (e.g. Orchard Road). The location is communicated to students before the actual date of the tutorial session so that they can be at the site by the start of the session. However, unlike “The Amazing Race”, which comprises many episodes per cycle, the game is designed as a single-episode cycle, peculiar to the module for that particular semester. Other locations (e.g. Marina Bay or the Civic District or Changi Airport) may be selected for subsequent semesters to avoid repetition as far as possible. Hitherto “The Amazing Race: Version GEK1010” game has been played thrice using the National University of Singapore (NUS) School of Design and Environment premises, Orchard Road and NUS UTown as locations.

Race Teams:

All students in the tutorial class are divided into teams of two members each. Due to uneven class sizes, the number of teams may vary from 11, which is typical of each cycle of “The Amazing Race”, to 14. In keeping with the spirit of “The Amazing Race”, where teams consist of two people with a pre-existing relationship, students are allowed to choose their partners and form their own teams with their friends and classmates.

Race Resources:

Unlike “The Amazing Race”, no monetary allowance is granted and teams are not required to use money to complete their tasks. However, teams may use their computer notebooks, mobile phones, cameras and other digital devices to access internet resources, library e-resources and social media.

Race Pit Stops and Legs:

At the start of the game, all teams are gathered at the first Pit Stop (e.g. entrance of ION Orchard in Orchard Road). As this game emphasizes creative thinking, experiential learning, and practical application by students, no route markers are provided as there could be more than one answer or solution to the task. Therefore, unlike a fixed route that is determined by the various legs of “The Amazing Race”, there are no specific Pit Stops in this game and teams can create their own learning journeys to facilitate their progress in the game.

Race Tasks and Clues:

At the starting Pit Stop, all the teams are given their first task or clue via an email from the tutor. The teams can access their emails using their mobile phones and computer notebooks, etc. They are then expected to explore the site, observe and search for the required item or scenario as defined in the task. Once a team has completed the required task, it emails the answer (e.g. a number or a short description) or evidence (e.g. a photograph) to the tutor. The tutor assesses each team’s response as it arrives and if he/she is satisfied, the task or clue for the next leg is then issued to the teams according to their progress in the game. In the event that a team does not complete the required task satisfactorily, the tutor will request the team to continue with the task and withhold the next task or clue until the current leg of the race is completed.

For example, a task within a shopping mall may require students to identify a tenant and explain why this particular tenant suits or enhances the retail theme/concept that the mall has established. This task would provide practical illustrations to help students learn more about leasing strategies in retail management. Another example of a task, this time within NUS premises, may involve the fire safety aspects whereby students locate and pinpoint possible fire hazards relating to obstructions along evacuation routes, and/or storage of flammable materials, especially in laboratories. Such a task would allow students to apply the theoretical knowledge learnt in fire-safety management to the real-life environment in which they live, learn and play.

Race Rewards:

As this game is essentially a learning experience for students to relate and apply the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired in the classroom to real-world situations, no teams will be eliminated. All teams are encouraged to complete as many allocated tasks as possible since each task that is completed satisfactorily scores a mark for participation in the tutorial session. No marks are allocated for uncompleted tasks or tasks in progress by at the end of the tutorial session.

Race Conclusion and Winners:

All teams continue the race to complete as many allocated tasks and legs as possible within the tutorial duration of one and a half hours. At the end of the tutorial duration, an email is sent to all teams by the tutor who tallies their scores from the tasks that they have completed. The winning team is the team with the highest score. The race concludes and all teams are dismissed directly from the site.

Race Epilogue:

As part of the cognitive learning process, all students are required to submit an individual reflection on their learning expectation, performance and experience with regard to the game. This facilitates the students in understanding their own learning style, process and progress as well as assists the tutor in fine-tuning the game content or format to better suit different types of learners.

The reactions and feedback from students have been positive and encouraging. Generally, students have been very enthusiastic and motivated to play the game as they view such a learning experience as fun. Students are also highly appreciative of an immersion learning experience because many may not have been aware of or exposed to the various real-life examples available in practice.

MOTIVATIONS

The main motivation for selecting a reality television show as a game format for teaching is to engage and enthuse students in active and independent learning by using a popular and familiar theme or idea. Besides the element of competition inherent in the game to foster motivation and active learning on the part of the students, fun and enjoyment in playing the game also vastly differentiate this learning experience from the traditional tutorial method whereby sessions tend to be rather repetitive in format and students tend to play a relatively passive role.

An important objective in this learning process is to expose students to specific sites (e.g. a particular location) or a variety of situations (e.g. different legs of the game), thus allowing them to relate and apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world conditions. In contrast to the traditional classroom tutorial method, students could further enhance their content knowledge by immersing themselves among on-site real-life examples which the four walls of a classroom could hardly provide.

Another objective of the game is to exploit the wide spectrum of existing communication technologies for teaching, since students of today are conversant with a multitude of internet resources and social media. While module content is heavily infused into the allocated tasks of the game to ensure academic rigor, the paramount advantage of the game is that students with their different learning styles can be immersed in an actual multi-sensory learning environment on-site rather than within a classroom, hence reinforcing their knowledge assimilation and retention. Rather than providing a pre-determined learning journey typical in a traditional classroom tutorial session, students with different learning styles could employ their creative and critical thinking skills to determine their own learning journeys when linking and explaining theoretical concepts and strategies in relation to empirical evidence and actual practice since there tend to be more than one answer to the tasks.

LIMITATIONS

The main constraints encountered in administering the game involve, firstly, that of time as the tutorial duration of one and a half hours is rather short; and secondly, that of the site or location, which may limit the number and type of tasks or legs that can be carried out due to a lack of necessary features and facilities on-site. Consequently, different and unique tasks have to be created that are specific to a particular site in order to overcome some of these constraints.

CONCLUSION

As a tutor implementing this game into my lessons, I have had the most amazing and enjoyable journey of exploring ideas, designing and modifying game content and formats, as well as playing the game with my students. "The Amazing Race: Version GEK1010" is now ready for another learning cycle. Are you ready to race with focus and fervour, learn with excitement and fun, and live with the memories thereafter even when the game has long ended?

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