Application of Instructional Games in Managing the Mental and Emotional Health of Students in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The major focus of this paper is to critically look into the effectiveness of applying instructional games in managing the mental and emotional health of students in the teaching and learning processes. The paper further looked into the operational considerations that have to be taken care of before applying instructional games in the teaching and learning processes. Problems and limitation that are associated with instructional games as well as guidelines for using instructional games are delved into in this paper. While it is the opinion of this paper that instructional games could be used in the classroom so as to bring in variety and remove boredom, it is equally the view of this study that instructional games should be used sparingly in the classroom by educational practitioners. Also, since the mental and emotional state of the learner influences the learner, any instructional game whose object goes at variance with stimulating the mental and emotional health of the learner should be jettisoned.

Keywords: Instructional games, programming consideration, games development, physical dexterity, classroom barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Technology-based games bridge the worlds of gaming, entertainment, and education in an attempt to deliver fun and effective learning. Simply put, instructional games add game-like rules and or competition to learning activities. Educational games involve elements of competition wherein two or more individuals/groups are in conflict (contesting) with one another, for example as we have in Ludo and Ayo games in real life situation. Educational games interest learners, hence they motivate them while also making positive contribution to their learning by giving practice, fostering social activity good sportsmanship and creative ideas. Whenever students know that they would be playing an educational game, they expect fun and entertaining activity because of the challenge of the competition as well as the potential for winning (Gee, 2004). Teachers frequently intersperse games with other learning activities so as to hold learners' attention or as a reward for accomplishing other learning activities, even though games by themselves, can be powerful teaching tools. During the process of applying games

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to learning, it is important to recognize the common characteristics that set instructional games apart from other types of software: game rules, elements of competition or challenge, and amusing or entertaining formats. It is pertinent to point out at this juncture that all these elements generate a set of mental and emotional expectations in students, thereby making game-based instructional activities different from non game ones. This study therefore focuses primarily on the application of instructional games in managing the mental and emotional wellbeing of students in the classroom.

Application of Instructional Games in the Learning Process

It is germane to state that before using games either as curricula or extra-curricula activity, the teacher should consider very importantly what will be the effect of such games on the well being of the participants in terms of their mental and emotional expectations. Any game played should be capable of adding or improving the mental and emotional maturity of the players. Also, the teacher should ask himself certain pertinent questions. According to Squire (2005), among such questions are: Have I as the teacher learned enough about this game so as to be able to run it effectively? Do I understand the basic intentions of the game, and can I manage it reasonably in my own situation? Does the game poses a positive effect on my mental and emotional expectations? Games require a different kind of technique; hence the teacher who uses them needs a degree of managerial acumen. In sum, the decision to use a game may require a conscious change in objectives to be achieved for the teacher.

The adaptation of any game agrees with the level of the learners. For example, if the game is a reflection of the real world; the teacher should react to the situation as realistically as possible, by developing new rules that are based on consciousness, if the situation arose in real – life situation, flexibility is needed to preserve a genuine open-endedness about the game situation.

In building a game for classroom usage, the game situation must not be farfetched. For instance, a Christian Religious Studies teacher can build a game around the birth of Jesus Christ, the Baptism of Jesus Christ, and the Sermon on the Mount etc. A well developed game will penetrate and influence the emotional health of the learners and thereby keeping them healthy all through the day. In the development of a game, the following questions must be answered. They are:

(i)   What is the basic idea of the game?
         -        The relevance of the topic to the game
(ii)   What is the context of the game?
         -        Local, national or international context - exploration
(iii)   What style of game will be most appropriate?
         -        Facilities, materials, equipment required, individuals or groups (small or large), number of competitors desired. Games could be entirely co-operative provided it is required to be so.

(iv)   Who will the players represent?
-        Freshermen, Christ's disciples, Nigerians (African countries) etc.
(v)   Are there to be defined objectives for the players?
(vi)   What do the players have to do to make the game work?
(vii)   How does this become a game reality?
(viii)   What limiting constraints (activity, punishments) are needed to make the game playable?
(ix)   What are the operating instructions for the players in terms of self-testing device, rules etc.
(x)   Does the game match up the reality in terms of interaction and motivation?

Mental and Emotional Benefits of Instructional Games to Students
Good instructional games often entail rejuvenation of the mental capabilities of the learners which in turn reflect on their emotions. A person learns better when he or she is in a good balance with his or her emotions and mental health. Emotions are those attributes when expressed; tell with precision the state of mind of a person. Mental health is often times influenced by thought. For instance, any student or learner who has a negative view about any subjects or courses automatically cultivates mental hate for such course and the teacher. This tells on the emotional behaviour such a leaner will be expressing.

The science of the mind has it that a healthy mind is a healthy body. The mind controls the entire body of a person. If the mind is corrupt, the entire body is not spared at all. Since the mind controls the mental ability of a learner, as an instructor, it is wise to know that capturing the minds of the learners, prepares them mentally and emotionally for the lessons. It is intrinsic of human beings to believe more in what they see and participate than in stories. This phenomenon shapes the way people react to issues and events. A learner who begins the day mentally and emotionally sound is more likely to assimilate and retain the lesson than a learner with low mental and emotional standing.

It is plausible to use instructional games that will arouse the interest and mental health of the learners. It makes them feel contented within and without. A child once said to the mother, "I won't follow you to your Jesus again, he is not real, I will follow my friend to see their Jesus that is visible". This was premised on the fact that in her mother church, children are not exposed to watching movies and cartons that depict the teachings and the works of Jesus as she is always taught. Whereas in her friends church, such facility is available. Comparing the reasoning of children in the two churches, one is forced to believe that there are significant variations in the level of their mental and emotional growth. Hong, Cheng, Hwang Lee and Cheng (2009) survey educators in a bid to create a checklist of criteria that determine the educational and health values of games (Ash, 2011). The survey came out with a finding of seven identified categories which included: mentally challenge, emotional fulfillment, knowledge enhancement, thinking skill

development, interpersonal skills, spatial ability development and bodily coordination. For any educator to adequately cater for the above identified categories, he should bear the following in mind.

Appealing formats and activities: When Moreno and Erdmann (2010) examine the evidence on what makes things fun to learn, he discovered that most popular instructional games included elements of adventure and uncertainty, and levels of complexity that matched to learners abilities. Hence educators should apply the above in a bid to achieve appealing formats and learning activities thus achieving set learning goals.

Instructional Value: Teachers should examine instructional games carefully and determine their values as both educational and motivational tools. This is necessary so as to ensure that instructional games achieve their desired goals.

Physical dexterity is necessary: The teacher should ensure that students will be motivated rather than frustrated by the gaming activities. Unless the object of the game is to learn physical dexterity (for example, for students with physical challenges), the focus of the game should be learning content-area skills, rather than physical dexterity. Hence, for content-area games, the level of physical dexterity should be manageable by all students.

Social Societal and Cultural Considerations: Instructional games may be inappropriate for learners learning if they are not designed with a respectful outlook for the learners, for example, instructional games that call for violence or combat require careful screening, not only to avoid learners' modeling this behaviour but also because female learners perceive the attraction of these activities more differently than male learners do. In addition games may present female learners and various ethnic and cultural groups in stereotypical roles. Under normal circumstance, it should be noted that teachers should choose games that do not perpetuate stereotypes while at the same time highlighting positive messages like peace and friendship rather than unnecessary aggression.

Classroom teaching without elements of games and fun would be a dry, barren landscape for students to traverse. The effectiveness of games for educational purposes, according to Cheng, Wang and Hirng (2009), is that games are more interesting than traditional instruction. It is equally worth noting that retention of knowledge over time favours the use of instructional games. The appeal of games seems to centre around students' desire to compete and play with themselves. Instructional games provide teachers with opportunities for taking advantage of students innate desire to get them to focus on a particular curriculum topic. Some instructional games hold special promises for improving classroom teaching strategies and making learning more engaging, motivational and directional. Video games hold high premium for these. In all, instructional games bring in varieties into the classroom setting thus removing monotony and boredom instilling mental and emotional freedom.

The prevailing economic conditions all over the world greatly influence not only the other sectors of the economy but also the education sector. A greater proportion of children that go to school every day have great mental and emotional challenges inflicted on them by a variety of factors including poverty. Poverty steals both the mental and emotional health of school children. Some of them leave home tormented and depressed. With this "carrying effect" the child cannot find learning a healthy deal. It is the place of the teachers in this instance to right the wrong by using a system that will drive back to the learners' sound minds and emotions.

Guidelines for using instructional games

Recent studies seem to show that instructional games can be useful in fostering higher order skills but their usefulness hinges on how teachers employ them. According to Houssart and Sams (2008), the following guidelines would assist to make the best use of instructional games capabilities when designing integration strategies for game functions:

Use sparingly: Some educators believe that game - especially computer based ones - are overused, misused and used inappropriately. Games should be used sparingly so that students will effectively learn from them and continue to remain motivated by the game play. When it is over used or become a custom, the essence will be defeated and the students will instead of developing good mental and emotional health, adapt to the reverse.

Involve all students: Teachers should make sure that girls and boys alike are participating and that all students have meaningful roles to play. In sum, educational games should not be sex biased.

Emphasize the content: Area skills first: Before learners begin playing the instructional game, teachers should make sure that they (the learners) know the relationship between the instructional game rules and content area (for example, mathematics) rules. Learners should be able to recognize which rules that they will be using in their later work and which ones that are merely part of the instructional game environment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Instructional games bridge the worlds of gaming, entertaining, and educating in an attempt to deliver fun and effective learning. This does not suggest that the teacher should depend solely on the use of instructional games for teaching and learning purposes all the time. Instructional games should be used sparingly so that learners are not instructional games obsessed. It could be concluded that the employment of instructional games would bring in varieties in the classroom thus removing boredom; however it should not be employed as the site alternative to

other teaching modes, so that the classroom is not turned into a gaming centre. It should also be noted that in situations whereby instructional games are being employed for teaching and learning purposes, they should be strictly monitored so that the values that may be derived from them are not lost. Also, since the mental and emotional state of the learner influences the learner, any instructional game whose object goes at variance with stimulating the mental and emotional health of the learner should be jettisoned.

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