SEED Podcast, Episode 09, Karenne Sylvester and Gamification in Education,
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Rachel Willder: (RW) Hello and welcome to the SEED e-Learning podcast. My name is Rachel Willder and I will be your host for this podcast where we focus on all things e-learning in SEED. Today I am joined by Karenne Sylvester who is a learning technologist, here in SEED. Karenne did an MA in Educational Technology here at The University of Manchester and her dissertation was based on gamification where she concept-designed a pronunciation activity. After her MA she then went to Future Works, where she did a three-year professional diploma in games, design, and development before joining us here. Today We will be discussing gamification in education. Hello, Karen, how are you today?

Karenne Sylvester (KS): Hi Rachel. It's good to see you.

RW: Good to see you, we actually work together day-to-day, don't we, so this is quite a formal introduction. So, let's just hop straight on in. So, can you start by telling us about what gamification in education is?

KS: So, the simplest explanation for gamification is whenever you take an activity, that is not a game and you turn it into something that looks and plays as if it is one. So, this very action is not without its resistance, whether that's in the field of marketing or whether it's in you know, for sports or finances. And it even had its critics; 800 Years ago, Thomas Aquinas; because the feeling is that play should be for fun and for nothing else. But if we look around us everywhere around us, then we can see that. Humans we play since we're babies or children or in our 80s and all animals on the planet play. So, if that's Cats, Dogs, Sheep, Polar Bears, Fish. So, what we know is that play are phenomena that stretch completely across the Spectrum and across all of our understanding. It's a behaviour that is in plain sight, and it might be because that activity is so obvious that sometimes it lacks the Intrigue needed to sort of really properly, take a look and understand it. But, in fact, play can be investigated from many different perspectives. So, you could take a biological Viewpoint and you could sort of think about the fact that play is inherent in all animals, or you can look at it from a psychological perspective. What is it? Why do we need it? And what is it giving to us? You can look at it from a historical perspective. So, you know, there are games that were played in Egypt that we have board games for that. We can't play anymore, but it can be looked at from a sociological perspective and anthropomorphic and philosophical. The issue with play is not about really about the discovery but about explaining what we mean by play, what we mean by games, what we mean by gamification, however, you know, seriously, basically even Plato said 2,000 years ago. The central aim of pedagogy is to encourage learning as a form of play. And this is why, you know, gamification, has its critics whether it's done in marketing or whether it's done on

Instagram or, you know, some other form, but in terms of education, gamification is an absolute match because play is about learning.

RW: It's interesting, isn't it? Because you take it back to school and you take it back to primary school and you don't realize that you're learning, you don't realize that you're developing these skills, your language skills, numeracy skills, the way of encouraging people
to be interested in learning is often through games, isn't it? It's like Learning without realizing that you're learning and then applying that.

KS: That's right. I mean if you just take a, if you've got a pet, and you look at your cat and she's playing with her food or she's playing with a piece of string. Why is she doing that? What it? What is the goal, you know?

RW: Interesting. Interesting. I'm just thinking about like my own little boy and just because he's at that age. He's just turned two and everything's learning for him and he learns by doing and it's so interesting to see how he figures stuff out.

KS: You know, you think about people who are strategizing and working out something? Did they learn it with Checkers, you know, or with Chess.

RW: Haha I wasn't even thinking highbrow, I was thinking something like the boardgame Risk!

KS: Well, there you go.

RW: So, what do you think of the main benefits to teaching and how this can impact the student's experience?

KS: To understand the benefits of gamifying a learning activity. Then you have to understand play. So as I said before, there's a lot of resistance to play and that it's fun. However, most people don't really understand what fun is. But if we're talking about fun, then fun itself, the first thing they think of is the most obvious one, laughter, imagination, curiosity being relaxed. No penalties. No outcomes, right? And that's the that's the one that most people's brains go to when they think about fun, but, you know, Nicole Lazzaro, she's a really important person in this, you know, sort of this feel in this study of gamification.
She's the founder of XEO design and she actually looks past just easy fun. And
looks at hard fun. That will be the challenge, the overcoming, the obstacles. The
games we were just talking about risk, you know, checkers. Chess will follow to another category of other, which is more serious fun. But really hard fun is this idea of being able to overcome an obstacle in order to get to a goal and it's that reaching that goal that makes that fun and then we have serious fun. So that I mean chess falls into hard fun and serious fun, but really serious fun is about developing meaning. It's changing the way that you think about

something, anticipating, predicting. You know that there is no laughter. Yeah and yet when you finish that you feel so good. You're still it was still a fun experience. Um, and then of course the most important element in going back to your Question about the student experience is the people fun. So if you are working on a quiz and you're walking on that by yourself, that isn't fun, but if you have a group of people working on a quiz together, just think about a pub quiz, right? And it no longer becomes how important it is to be yourself, be the most intelligent person in the room, but rather How your team work together to be the most, you know, intelligent team or the one with all the right answers? So, yeah, so gamification isn't just about the about these, these fun elements, but also the actions that we want these players to take. It's really actually a lot how you make the learning experience memorable. How you make it sticky. So if we're thinking about our students, when, if we're thinking about learning right? And so we're thinking learning, we want competence, right? We want them to gain Mastery over something. We want our students to be, to be able to take actions from the for themselves, right? That it's a voluntary process that they're doing. And so that's why gamification is perfect for Education. Because if you're, if you're going back to what I was saying about this, you know, sort of giving the students opportunity to develop competence. Well, that can be part of the game that they have to master some steps.

RW: It's kind of takes it from that level of, all, right, you can do the basics. You can just regurgitate the information that we're giving you, but you've not. It's not actually in your head. All you're doing is memory recall.

KS: Right actually. And my point is that this can be a fun experience whether
you're teaching them, uh formula or you're teaching them how to critique an essay.
All of that can be a fun experience. One of the things that I want to talk about
is how you break down games and understand them, because if you want to gamify something,

RW: So what would you define as what's the game? That would happen in an educational setting?

KS: Okay. Well, games must have three things. They must-have components. They must have mechanics and they must have dynamics. So, by components, then this will be things like: Are you going to have teams? Are you going to use game pieces? Are there levels to the game? Are your students going to go on a quest, what's the environment like? are there pitfalls? Are there obstacles? And how do all of these things connect to the educator goal or your ILO? So whatever it is, those pieces, you have to work out how those things are going to form the game pieces. If you like, I think again, thinking about Monopoly, right? So if I look at Monopoly, I've got my money. I've got my plastic houses. I have my little token pieces to move around. But if you're thinking about a game, like twister, and the components are your human body and a sheet on the floor with colours on it? Yeah, right. So when your turn thinking about

how you're going to create an educational gamified experience, so that's the sort of thing. So you take whatever it is that you're teaching. So
like let's say I'm teaching economics and I have a formula I want then all those pieces of the formula. How am I going to get it? So that, that formula can be constructed? And then, of course, there is the dirty word in gamification 'PBL', the Points, the Badges and the Leader boards. Okay. Now those are considered dirty words in gamification because it's 'Pointsification' rather than 'gamification'. Right? Because everybody just goes.
Oh, I'll give points. But the problem with just saying, okay, I'm just going to give points is that it can lead to the students feeling bad. You're going to feel absolutely terrible. If you don't do well. So points need to be thought through,

RW: does that go to knowing what the students motivation is going to be as well?

KS: and how far apart of those scores going to be, you know, so if you using points because points can be used beautifully right there motivational if they're you have correctly, right, but if you know, if the difference between people is going to be small, then you're much less likely to have people walking away going I hate my score, therefore, I hate this formula. So, yeah, you have to be thinking through it and my and much more thinking about the mechanics. So, as I said, so a game has components mechanics. And I know next. And by mechanics, I mean, those rules. I mean, the objectives that need to be reached are the challenges and the win state. So win states. Don't need to rely on points they can do but can you have the win State be actually constructing that economics formula? Are they able to actually get to what your ILO wanted to achieve? You know, so by the end of this blah, blah, blah. I will have achieved this. So, can you get it to be the same? um, and, and this is actually where the fun is. Finally, then you have your dynamics. Okay. So dynamics are the bigger picture. They are the environment. They are the narrative and this is actually where a lot of
gamification falls short, and where you wind up developing things that are really
unpalatable. So there's something called serious games were People, I don't mean things like chess. I mean things where people have taken a very serious subject like poverty in Africa and developed a game and it's very, very depressing to play, and there's no wins State, and there's no real story. And then it's, and then it's boring, and it's horrible. And so, this is one of the key things is that, if you're going to gamify something, you want to make sure that there is a progression, you want to make sure that there is that these students
have some choices. They feel like they're able to develop and also, you want
to make sure that the students are touched on an emotional level. Which is really like, you know, I know that off of this podcast, people are going to go "what?!" but the stickiness in learning is often about the emotional attachment.

RW: You've covered quite a lot there, a lot of components. And the way that I kind of, I kind of came into this thinking that this was very easy to kind of slot into all academic disciplines, but after learning just how many different components there are. It doesn't. It now feels more

like this is something that can be. Is more humanities-based rather than I just can't I can't form an emotional attachment to a formula is what I'm trying to say.

KS: It can be to anything really, it's just that it's really just about the win state.
But the win states can't be easy. Like a can't just be, like, press the button.
Read a book and I understand everything. There needs to be a little bit of work
to get to something, you know, so that's why we have the components, the mechanics
and the dynamics because those things help us too when we have reached the win state
to feel victorious and that's where the emotional connection.

RW: Yes. I think that there's like if you have lots of little ones and that builds up to the big win that's just as important.

KS: Yeah. Absolutely.

RW: Do you think it's something that could be integrated into most academic disciplines or do you think that everyone? It's the one particular, that you think this is definitely something that could be.

KS: Well, I think you've been talking to Sanderson quite a lot recently, right?

RW: Matthew Sanderson, Yeah. Yeah.

KS: And you and you guys have been or he has been going out for field trips.
That can be turned into a quest.

Say everything can be a game but not everything can be a fun game. So that's where I would say. Like, so, for example, if you're thinking right, I have 40 articles, that I want my students to read. I'm going to turn that into a game. Well, you know, word of caution. So if you're going to make the game to read 40 articles about the number of articles, well, all you're going to do is create some cheating because who has time to read 40 articles, right?

RW: I was watching when you say that he was a school and I think it was a college in the States, but they were as a group of students, that a shared Google doc and everyone contributed to it from the classes and then they started doing it for. So you need to read these papers. So it's like well, I'll take this paper. You take that paper. You
take that paper.

KS: Brilliant! And now we have a game right now. We have a cooperative game. We're different, people are reading different things, summarizing, and sharing
knowledge. And so that's a game if I've experienced this exact. That's a perfect

example, right? So that's why you need to think through the elements of a game and you have to think about what are the penalties? You know, it could have you have you made it impossible to enjoy the experience in which case, not fun? Not A game of it. Or have you made it so that people want to cooperate or want to compete, you know, and does that make them feel happy at the end? Will they remember what it is? Oh, yeah, so if anybody wants to work on a project and gamify something get in touch because I would love to help you out.

RW: Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, thank you. Thank you too. Karenne there for a really interesting chat about gamification in education. You can find out more about this topic and so much more by visiting our Humanities pages, which includes our best practice resources. And he's full of information from the e-learning team in Humanities. There's a link to this from the notes section of the podcast where you can subscribe to the podcast, and you'll automatically get the latest episode on release from wherever you get your podcasts. Finally, if you liked this episode tell other people about us or if you have any ideas of things, we should be covering get in. Touch with us. We love to hear from you. See you next time and stay safe.

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