

Games in the Classroom

Games can be powerful teaching tools. It's been long understood that young children learn a lot through play, whether it's with blocks or picture books or even hide and seek. The learning doesn't stop as we get older. Teens and even full-grown adults can learn while playing games. This is especially true with computer games.

Early Pioneer

For centuries, play was believed to be the opposite of education. It was just a diversion kids engaged in to burn energy. But in the early 20th century, scholars began challenging these notions. Chief among them was Jean Piaget, a Swiss philosopher known for his work studying children, who pioneered an educational theory that people build knowledge and meaning from their experiences.

Focusing on very young children, Piaget found that the way kids play evolves as they grow older, and each stage of its development corresponds with stages in the child's intellectual development. For instance, very young children are master of their own bodies and physical objects, and when they play they repeat the same movements over and over, such as banging blocks against a table. After that stage, they move toward more cognitive levels, tackling language and concepts. As such, their playing becomes more imaginative.

Over the course of the 20th century, Piaget's work grew in influence. And under this influence a transformation occurred in European and American education, including both theory and practice, leading to a more 'child-centered' approach. In this approach, play has taken a more prominent place, because it is natural behavior for the young.

Everyone is Playing

If you think all kids do these days is play video games, you're not far from the truth. A recent survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, released in November 2008, revealed that virtually all teens and young adults – 97 percent – play video games of one kind or another, whether it's games in their cell phones and on their iPods or with a Nintendo Wii or on a turbo-charged desktop computer.

And they play a lot – often over ten hours per week, according to another survey by AP-AOL. That same study showed that most students – nearly 90 percent – would like to see more computer games in school. More than two-thirds thought that games would improve their computer skills and just under half thought that they would help to improve strategic thinking skills such as problem solving.

This is one of the primary justifications for using games to teach. They give the students what they want, and more importantly bring education into an activity they're already be engaged in. A 2006 poll of teachers revealed that nearly 60 percent would like to see computer games used more often in classrooms.

[<http://www.silicon.com/publicsector/0,3800010403,39155586,00.htm>]

A Game for Every Subject

There are computer games for virtually every subject. Educators have found ways to create games that teach everything from foreign languages and grammar to math and science. Two of the most popular for older students, according to sales tallies at Amazon.com, are I SPY, where players hunt for treasure and build map skills, vocabulary and use logic and reason to solve problems, and Amazon Trail, which carries specific lessons in science, history, geography, social studies and even botany and zoology.

Another example is a game on this site, Financial Football, where players tackle questions on finances to earn yardage and score touchdowns. Here the game is just another way to convey a lesson, a way that's fun and that will keep the student engaged for far longer than a lecture would.

Games Motivate

Games typically have an end goal: winning. This prize at the end keeps students interested, and it motivates them to keep playing until they get that prize.

Much of education is trial and error. Like the old saying goes: practice makes perfect. These inevitable small failures along the way can be discouraging for students. This can be especially true in a classroom setting, where the student might get embarrassed for getting a wrong answer, or receive a low mark on a test. But with computer games, losing is just part of the fun. It's the challenge. It's what makes it interesting.

Some Limitations

One potential drawback to educational computer games is that they are, by economic necessity, created to serve the broadest audience possible. This can make it difficult to find games that are tailored to specific lessons or syllabi. Also, once they're purchased, they can't be updated for new lessons or curriculum changes – unless you know how to reprogram, or the company issues a new version.

There are, however, a growing number of learning-based games that can be edited and personalized by the teacher. This can make them a much more effective teaching tool. But even when this is available, it's important that the teacher devise ways to augment the lessons provided by the games, to tie them in to the curriculum and the themes of the overall class.

For more information visit www.practicalmoneyskills.com.