ROCKVILLE: TRANSFORMING GRADUATE ETHICS EDUCATION THROUGH GAME-BASED LEARNING

Scot Headley

Introduction

Ethics, Equity, and Justice is a required course in the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership program at George Fox University; an Oregon Independent University affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). The course approaches the study of ethics by examining ethical models, applying them to the dilemmas of leadership. The primary text for the course presented four ethical models. These models are the ethic of the profession, the ethic of care, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of critique (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). A particular emphasis in the course is an investigation of equity and justice for marginalized students. Students in the Ed.D. program are educational practitioners, teachers, and leaders in PK-12 and higher education organizations. Five of the students who participated in the course joined with the course instructor to form a collaborative writing group, to continue the learning process that occurred in the class. In addition to the authors of this paper, two students who participated in the course, Angel Krause and Alicia Watkin, helped to collect data for this paper. Three of the student participants, Danielle Bryant, an adjunct professor at Corban University, Charity-Mika Woodard, an art professor at Pittsburg State University, and Sherri Sinicki, a high school teacher and instructional coach at Dayton (Oregon) High School collected and analyzed data and co-authored this paper. Scot Headley, who had recently returned to a faculty role at GFU after a 4.5-year tenure as the Dean of the College of Education; taught the Ethics, Equity, and Justice course described herein and co-authored this paper.

Course Development Process
Changing the Course Design

With the retirement of a longtime faculty member, Headley accepted the assignment of teaching the course in a four-week summer term. He initiated a process to learn about the culture and expectations of the program and the abbreviated summer term. As a result of interviews with faculty members and students, and a document review, the professor concluded that an active learning environment was appropriate, providing an opportunity for students to fully engage with ethical dilemmas and inequities. The course objectives were:

- Examine and articulate issues of ethics, equity, and social justice through a Christian and various additional ethical theories and worldviews.
- Critically evaluate one's ethical framework and its implications for the application of social justice within educational contexts.
- Reflect critically and ethically on matters of equity and social justice in educational settings, while explaining and defending the role of educational institutions in promoting social justice within contemporary contexts.
- Collaborate on the analysis of educational problems and implement strategic actions that reflect justice for all students and stakeholders.

Headley purposed to retain the course objectives. However, due to his course preparation, chose to alter the primary learning activities in the course to a game-based learning environment. This choice reflected his belief that an active learning approach would foster student engagement, provide an opportunity for reflection, and foster empathy for marginalized student populations amongst the students in his course. He wrote in his journal on March 10,

> I do not want to "cover the material." I do not want to be in an academic arms race. I do want my students to be able to use higher order thinking skills. I want my students to be able to communicate well, especially in writing. I want my students to be able to engage in controversial issues. I want my students to be able to engage in respectful ways, be able to disagree, be able to see other points of view. I want students to be uncomfortable. I want students to discover. Do ethical systems help? Does theory help? Does application help? (personal journal, 3/10/17)

The course was scheduled to begin the first week of July. On March 30, Headley re-read an article by Squire (2006) in which that author reviewed the lessons that video games held for educators. He wrote, "I argue that educators (especially curriculum designers) ought to pay closer attention to video games because they offer designed experiences, in which participants learn through a grammar of doing and being (Squire, 2006, p. 19). At that point, Headley realized that learning about video games, role-playing games, and board games would be advantageous. He wrote in his journal at that time,

2

The ethics course as a game. It is a path. There are rules, there is an objective. There are dilemmas to solve. There are challenges to overcome. There are confrontations, and tension. There are winners and losers. What would the game board look like? Would it be a board, as Life or Monopoly, or would it be a multiplayer game, like a video game? (personal journal, 3/30/17).

Headley committed to developing a game as the focal point of the course. From that point on, his investigation into the literature and the world of gamers inspired, challenged, and informed him as he worked on developing the course.

Game-Based Learning Research

The increasing diversity found in America's classroom requires teachers to be able to reach a multitude of students. While personal experience lends itself best to the concept of understanding students, it is not possible for every teacher to have experienced the variety of races, social status, and cultural backgrounds found in one's classroom. However, the ability to take on student's perspectives dramatically improves a teacher's ability to both respond and interpret student behavior (Barr, 2011; Davis 1983). Recently, educational research has explored the concept of using Role-Playing Games, also known as RPG, to equip educators in the process of understanding and to utilize perspective taking with students. RPGs are not a new phenomenon, but their use as a way of exploring marginalized or misunderstood students is something new. Through the use of the RPG, the teacher can mindfully incorporate personality traits and information about their students into gameplay, which leads to higher levels of empathy and understanding for their students (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Belman & Flanagan, 2010). This, in turn, enables the teacher to bridge the gap between differences in their background and their students' backgrounds. Research has also shown that the benefits of RPGs are not limited to educators. Students can also benefit from the RPG experience in exploring concepts such as social class inequality (Sandoz, 2016), morality (Sicart, 2005), and other societal issues (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015).

Given the positive response in the research literature around Role Playing Games, along with interviews with gamers, Headley planned a reformation of the course that would lead his students through an RPG experience. An initial draft of the course featured a two-week role-playing game. Upon further refinement, the final plan for the class featured a one-day gameplay followed by a debriefing session. The students also participated in a self-directed learning process in which two additional games were student-designed, played and debriefed during the class.

The Course Experience

The reformatted four-week summer course was developed as a means of having students assume the role of a marginalized student. To help prepare students for the new experience of participating in a Role-Playing Game, the professor sent out over half a dozen research articles, delivered online through the use of Moodle and Google tools, focused on the validity of Role-Playing Games in education. During the first week of the course, the students were asked to read the articles and contemplate questions about role-playing games.

Understanding the research around Role-Playing Games was not the only objective for the first week of class. The students were also asked to look at a list of possible characters that would be played during the RPG, and choose a character they would become during the game. The professor asked each student to create a backstory for their character given the limitations or special needs that the professor previously assigned to each character before the start of the course. The characters represented a wide range of students that can be found in many American classrooms today. These students included: English as Second Language students, students from poverty, students coping with substance abuse issues, students with special needs, undocumented students or DACA students, recently immigrated students, and homeless students. The students in the class were free to choose whatever student they wished to embody for the RPG experience. Interviews with students, after the first week of the course, revealed that many had decided to develop characters that they had previously interacted with either through their own personal or professional lives. As such, many of the backstories or additional information provided about the character was based on real individuals.

Interviews after the end of the course revealed that students went into the beginning of the face-to-face component of the class hesitant about what would be happening. Only one student, whose son had participated in an RPG at his school, had an idea of what might happen. A student backchannel, via a Facebook Group page, revealed that many students did not fully understand the reasoning around the use of an RPG in a graduate level course. However, all the students responded with enthusiasm of trying something new, while continuing to trust the doctoral program's setup and professors. It was with this mixture of hesitation, curiosity, and excitement that the ten doctoral students began their second summer session.

Students arrived on campus on July 10th still unclear of what lay ahead for their ethics course. The first day was taken up with a review of ethical models and some instructions about the actual RPG that they would play. The next morning, they walked into the classroom, and it had been transformed by the professor. All the tables had been pushed together and in the center of the tables lay a game board for Rockville. The students eagerly got out their prepared game pieces, or character cards, and sat around the large square. The professor instructed the students to get into character, and he put on a porkpie hat to assume the role of mayor of the town of Rockville. The game rules were handed out, and everyone read the sequence of play. The primary objective of Rockville is for the character to win a full scholarship, that would pay all educational expenses for life. As the game progressed and the students played and got to know each character, they felt that every character was deserving of the prize. Step one in the game was to pair up with another player to propose a service project, in character. The players accomplished this task, the mayor approved the proposals, and the teams moved on. After this task, the characters split from their partners for the next tasks and worked their way around the game board of the town of Rockville. To simulate how life circumstances can be beyond the control of marginalized students, a roll of the dice or the character's social economic status (SES) determined their moves in the game. One student noted in their journal, "I wish I had more control over what happened to my character" (student journal, 2017). The turning point in the game as discussed by several people in their journal was when a hate rally was held in Rockville, forcing some characters to lose a turn. "I didn't understand that my character was at a disadvantage until that protest, yes, she was Muslim, but this is a Christian school, nothing bad is going to happen to her here" (student interviews, 2017). "I knew that I was into my character, but playing the game I really cheered for some of the other characters as well, I wanted the best for them." (student interviews, 2017). This shows the ownership the students had over their characters. One student noted, "We know these students, we based them off our past or current students" (student journal, 2017). Rockville concluded when four finalists made it to the school district central office. The remaining participants served on the selection committee. The finalists each got up in front of the group and gave a heartfelt speech about why they deserved the scholarship. The students in character pleaded for the opportunity to go to college and noted how it would change not only their lives but be a launching pad for their family. This portion of the game was very emotional. One character had given up his opportunity to another student because

he felt it was what his character would have done in the situation. The remaining characters were responsible for choosing the two winners from the four finalists. "I have never been on a jury, but I feel this is what it would be like deliberating" (student interviews, 2017). The professor did not know how the game would turn out and who the fellow students would pick. He did not lead this discussion but left it solely in the hands of the students. In debriefing the situation, the professor pointed out, "Ethical decisions are not about right versus wrong, they are sometimes about right versus right" (Headley, personal communication, 2017).

The Rockville game became the defining activity and focus of the course. Indeed, course participants continue to refer to the class as Rockville and wore custom-made buttons identifying their participation in the course. However, in the remaining time allocated to the course, some significant activities and interactions occurred. With Rockville as a model, two student teams created role-playing games that were used to apply course content, create ethical dilemmas, and provided experience to make meaning of in regards to ethics, equity, and justice. Students and professor alike were profoundly affected by the games, the characters, and the course.

Assessment

To learn about the participants' perceptions of the course, several assessment measures were put in place. Game feedback was gathered during debriefing sessions immediately following the games and in a journaling activity that same day. At the conclusion of the course, in addition to the course evaluation employed by the University, the professor created a tailored course assessment to gain specific feedback about the games and other aspects of the course.

Debriefing of games

While course participants played three games as critical activities in the course, only Rockville, the instructor-designed game, will be considered for discussion in this section. A debriefing activity occurring both as a full group discussion and as an individual writing exercise immediately after playing the game, the following prompts were presented to participants:
- Share your reflections regarding playing the game.
- What connections to course content did you notice within the game design and play?
- What suggestions do you have for making improvements in the game?

An analysis of the participant responses revealed the following broad themes: a) course content, b) game design, c) character development, d) gameplay, e) decisions, dilemmas, and disruptions, and f) emotions; each of these themes will be discussed below.

Course content. This theme included responses directly citing course content. Most of the answers related to course content referred to ethical models. Participants noted their reflections on comparing ethical models as they played the game; with one model, the ethic of care, being singled out in particular as this model was exhibited and observed during gameplay. Four of the ten participants specifically noted their feelings of empathy for characters in the game, and as a result, in several cases, sensing the transfer of empathy to their students. One participant commented on the similarity between characters in the game and students in her school. One participant noted that the game had caused her to consider distinctions in class and race in the student population.

Game design. This theme included responses reacting to the actual design of the Rockville game. Several participants described elements of the game design, and how those factors either fostered or inhibited their gameplay. Two participants noted that ten players were too many to play this game, suggesting that maybe seven would have been a more reasonable number. Three participants identified time as a consideration with two stating that they would have liked more time devoted to the game, and one indicating that the time was just about right. One-half of the participants responded with other observations related to the game design, including that it fostered collaboration, and allowed for engagement with course content. Several participants stated that the game was a good model for them as they looked ahead to construct their games later in the course.

Character development. This theme relates to responses that described character development and being in character during gameplay. Five of the participants described being in character, with specific observations including the difficulty in staying in character during gameplay, coming in and out of character to work on various elements of the game, and the immersive nature of playing a character in the game. One participant described the significance of developing her character and how it helped her reflect on her work with her students.

Gameplay. This theme included responses about the actual play of the game itself. The most frequently given answer had to do with an appreciation for the gameplay in allowing for interactions and collaborations among the participants. Two participants specifically noted that the gameplay allowed for the demonstration of the ethic of care, with one indicating that the game caused an examination of her personal biases going into the game.

Decisions, dilemmas, and disruptions. This theme encompassed responses related to the decisions and dilemmas encountered in the game, as well as several proposed disruptions. A majority of the participants noted that they wanted more decision opportunities in the game such as more choices on advancing or sending players back. Also, four of the participants desired more specific decisions that involved an opportunity for further course content to be applied. Half of the participants called for disruptions to the game as designed by the instructor, for example, the introduction of an evil character and the overthrow of the game master, a role performed by the instructor.

Emotions. This theme included responses specifically related to the emotional reaction of the game participants. Five of the participants stated that playing the game was fun, with two more describing the game as engaging. Three other participants indicated that they had an emotional response. Three responses related to frustrations over injustices evident in the game. Two stated that the game was meaningful and enlightening, with one reporting that she experienced empathy for her character.

Course Assessments

Both post-course assessments revealed a strong affinity for the methodology, a high degree of engagement, enjoyment, and learning, and a desire to employ game-based methods for both the professor and the students. These assessments were conducted about two weeks after the conclusion of the face-to-face component of the course. For this discussion, the following prompts asked on the two-post course assessments, will be considered:

- Was the class intellectually stimulating?
- What aspects of this class contributed in your learning?

- Describe highlights related to your learning, engagement, meaning making, and enjoyment in the course.
- How was your faith and/or worldview challenged and affirmed due to course participation?
- What one adjustment will you make in your work as an educator as a result of course participation.

An analysis of the participant responses led to an organizational scheme consisting of the following categories, a) the course environment, b) gameplay, c) decision making and dilemmas, d) personal beliefs and thoughts, and e) emotions. A discussion of these categories follows.

Course environment. Participants stated that the course exhibited a safe environment in which to engage challenging topics. Specific responses included the view that the instructor cared for his students, and the course fostered creativity. One participant stated that the classroom was characterized by laughter, while others noted that they felt the course demonstrated a trusting environment. Others said that the course was relevant and meaningful.

Gameplay. Six of the ten participants noted that designing, playing and debriefing the games contributed the most to their learning of all the course elements. For example, one participant wrote, "In order to complete the assignment we had to reflect on all of our readings, bring our own knowledge, and rely on the knowledge of others." Another stated that "The Rockville game was especially meaningful for me...I was able to connect and feel in ways I did not anticipate." Five of the participants stated their intention to introduce gameplay and game design, role play or simulation into their courses as a result of their participation in the course.

Decision making and dilemmas. The dilemmas introduced in the course caused participants to apply ethical models and to make decisions affecting others. As one person stated, "Two weeks later and I am still thinking about the ideas and dilemmas we discussed". Several participants noted as significant to them the challenge of working through ethical dilemmas and others also noted the similarity between those dilemmas presented in the course and those within their work environments. One participant stated that as a result of her involvement in the course, she intended to engage her colleagues in discussions of ethical dilemmas back in her workplace.

Beliefs and thoughts. This theme included beliefs about the course and how the course stimulated the participants' thinking. Four of the participants noted that the course had challenged their thinking, their personal beliefs, or their biases. One person pointed out that the course fostered her reflective thinking. Another stated that "I know everyone was highly engaged because even people who do not share their thinking did during class...We are still talking about the power of the learning now."

Emotions. Some participants shared an emotional response to the course. One participant stated that she had an emotional connection to the work of the course. Several specifically noted that the course helped them develop a sense of empathy, both for the characters in the games they played and also for their own students. Three participants committed explicitly to viewing their students differently, extending grace to them, or paying closer attention to their students in the future.

Discussion

The revised version of Ethics, Equity, and Justice was a deliberate move on the professor's part to implement a teaching methodology that was engaging and led to the application of course content. The intent was to put course participants in difficult decision-making situations and to create empathy for marginalized students. What we learned from the course is considered in three concluding categories, a) learning, b) beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, and, c) applications.

Learning

In regards to learning, of all the ethical theories presented in the course, the ethic of care seemed to be the theory that got the most attention and acceptance. We conclude the following:

A. Gameplay and debriefing are useful for learning ethical content and for fostering collaboration and interactions. Game design is also recognized as a valuable instructional tool.

B. Dilemmas and decision points are desirable in teaching ethical content, these methods fostered application of content and helped participants make connections to their own context with their own students and colleagues.

C. Character development and play seemed to be a meaningful activity that helped participants develop empathy and to make connections with their own students.

Beliefs, Thoughts, and Feelings

The course stimulated thinking and created emotional responses. In particular, we conclude that:

A. The course environment which featured gameplay methodology challenged participants' thinking and biases.
B. Games of this nature fostered feelings of empathy for characters in the games and participants' own students.
C. Designing and playing roleplay games of this type is fun.
D. Character development, game design and gameplay created an environment that is engaging to participants.

Applications

Our experience in this course showed us that a fun, engaging and safe environment fostered learning in ethics, equity, and justice. We conclude that:

A. The course served as a model for curriculum and instruction for the participants. One-half of the participants stated that they would be introducing some aspect of gameplay and design into their own instruction in their own teaching, at multiple grade levels.
B. The feedback from course participants regarding the instructor-designed game is useful in amending it in future iterations of the course.

Conclusion

Ethics, Equity, and Justice during the 2017 summer session was a meaningful and rich learning experience for the professor and the course participants. Although the course has now been finished for over four months, students are still talking about some of the major takeaways from this experience. This continued interest and recall of themes add to the current research that role-playing games can be a fundamental way to tackle difficult topics, such as ethical dilemmas. The students of this course went beyond meeting the academic standards set forth by the university, to experiencing empathy for marginalized students in our current school systems.

Role-playing games have a role in engaging students in fostering empathy, in creating scenarios to wrestle with ethical dilemmas, and in learning course content.

References

Barr, J. J. (2011). The relationship between teachers' empathy and perceptions of school culture. *Educational Studies, 37*(3), 365-369. doi:10.1080/03055698.2010.506342

Belman, J., & Flanagan, M. (2010). Designing games to foster empathy. *International Journal of Cognitive Technology, 14*(2), 5-15.

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual difference in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44*(1), 113-126.

Kaufman, G. F., & Flanagan, M. (2015). A psychologically "embedded" approach to designing games for prosocial causes. Cyberpsychology: *Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 9*(3), article 5. doi:10.5817/CP2015-3-5

Kaufman, G. F., & Libby, L. K. (2012). Changing beliefs and behaviour through experience-taking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 103*(1), 1-19. doi:10.1037/a0027525

Sandoz, J. (2016). A game design assignment: Learning about social class inequality. *On The Horizon, 24*(1), 121-125.

Shapiro, J. P., & Gross, S. J. (2013). Ethical educational leadership in turbulent times: Solving moral dilemmas (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Sicart, M. (2005). Game, player, ethics: A virtue ethics approach to computer games. *International Review of Information Ethics, 4*, 14-17.

Squire, K.D. (2006). From content to context: Video games as designed experiences. *Educational Researcher,* 35(8), 19-29.