

Gravett, Emily - graveteo

From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation <TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU> on behalf of Center for Faculty Innovation
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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Maze Runners

Maze Runners by James W. Ward

At the beginning of the semester, I asked students in my REL102 (Religion, Spirituality, and the Meaning of Life) classes to consider the question of whether we should include a strong formal attendance requirement with clear negative consequences, a policy with reductions in grade clearly connected to a specific number of absences.

I shared that I have not been inclined to do so in the past, though I know many instructors are. I also shared that this question emerged out of my concerns around record numbers of absences in the past two semesters, beyond what could be explained by Covid or other illnesses. In those past semesters, though attendance was not directly connected to grades by way of a formal policy, it was connected to grades by way of class participation, which was included in the grading. Even with the understanding that failure to attend class without an explanation and a granting of an excused absence could lower one's overall grade, many students failed to attend and failed to communicate with me. In this semester, I have a similar feature in my grading. Part of what I wanted to know was if 1) students understood this link and 2) if it was sufficient.

As we talked, the consensus of the class was that we did not need an additional formal (punitive) policy around attendance and that the current course policies around attendance and participation were adequate enough. Many said that they would attend class regardless of whether there was a formal attendance policy or the inclusion of a participation grade. So far, attendance has been much better than in the past two semesters, and a majority of the students who do not attend communicate with me about missing class.

In a past life, before teaching, I worked in different group homes as a residential counselor. One of the homes had a very explicit points system connected to privileges/loss of privileges. The general rule of thumb was that we should identify three positive behaviors for every negative behavior in our points interactions with those in the home. This, they argued in our training, was the best way to shape behavior. In the time that I worked there, I became less confident that it was as good at shaping behavior as we all hoped, and even less sure that it would generalize outside of the context of the residential group home.

As an instructor, I also find myself chaffing a bit under a points/grading system. My conflicts are philosophical and pedagogical. I am intellectually interested in behavioral and cognitive psychology, but I do not want to be a behavioral or cognitive psychologist. Yet, as the language and frame of K-12 education moves into higher education, a language and frame strongly shaped by cognitive and behavioral psychology, I feel that I am being asked to be one. Shaping this as a debate around what kinds of policies are more likely to shape preferred behaviors frames it as a kind of behavioral psychology question.

In some of the classic learning studies in psychology, [rats ran mazes](#). Psychologists investigated how changes in stimulus conditions changed responses and came to argue that rats were building knowledge maps of the mazes and not just simply responding to stimuli. I shared with students that I sometimes feel like I am being asked to design mazes and submit "maze running" reports. Did my maze have clear objectives? Were the stimulus/reward conditions of the maze clear and consistent? How did my rats run the maze? Who found the most "cheese" in the maze? Who found less? Who found a way to leave the maze altogether?

I did not want to become an instructor in higher ed to design educational maze opportunities or submit maze runner evaluations. As I explained to my students, what drew me to higher ed was developmental psychology. To borrow from Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, traditional age college students are in a transition from “concrete operational thinking” to “formal operational thinking.” In this transition, some find their way to shallow relativism and/or a jaded cynicism. To those who have shaped in religious traditions, like so many in my courses, it may lead to a “shattering” of religious symbols and truth claims.

What drew me to higher ed was precisely the opportunity to facilitate movements during this transitional time of students’ lives—to be a part of their “aha!” moments, to see the “light” in their eyes when this happens, to see when a student experiences that a particular can be understood as “form,” to see that the system in which that form is operationalized can itself be understood formally, and to see the change in how they understand themselves and are able to situate and tell their stories of themselves. Being a part of these moments has happened often enough to keep me here, but increasingly I feel that it happens in spite of, not because of, our structures, as the emphasis on the “cheese,” on the extrinsic rewards of grades, which was already strong when I arrived here in over 20 years ago and has only increased over time, threatens to drown these kinds of intrinsic motivations and this kind of developmental space.

These moments of insight are too unpredictable. They are also more likely to happen when students are willing to perceive education as dialogical and share their thoughts. Yet, increasingly, students are uncomfortable in spaces that feel unstructured and exploratory. Without a maze, they are lost. Students want to be able to confidently and strategically move toward their cheese. So we offer our maze runner reports. We assess our stimuli and reward conditions. We ask how we can better scaffold and chunk our mazes, change our stimulus conditions, respond to and shape behaviors. [How did it come to this and why?](#)

I prefer (maybe wrongheadedly) to think that people will, if exposed to learning environments, learn because of the intrinsic rewards of learning. I would like to think we have capacities not just for maze mapping and the seeking of a sufficient quantity of extrinsic rewards, but capacities for, and a desire for, learning of an entirely different order. This is very hard to capture in our current maze runner reports. It should not surprise us that our attempts to gamify education have students thinking this is just a game they play to get the prizes they seek.

And so, at the end of our discussion about participation points, I told my students my bad joke:

A behavioral psychologist says to a developmental psychologist, “We taught our pigeons to play the piano.”

“Huh,” the developmental psychologist says. “We prefer to watch them learn how to fly.”

About the author: James W. Ward is an Instructor in the [Department of Philosophy of Religion](#). He can be reached at wardjw@jmu.edu.

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