



Harry Potter and the Gamification of School

Description

When I was a kid a school (long before Harry Potter had been thought of – and gamification for that matter...), teaching methods generally sucked. A teacher stood at the front of the class, dictated out ancient notes and you had to write them down in your exercise book. If you didn't pay attention or did something the teacher did not like, you got a board rubber thrown at your head. There was no intrinsic enjoyment to be had from the learning process; it was all drained by the way we were taught. This was not unique to my school years; it had been this way for decades.

That is why they had to come up with something to help motivate students to at least behave during class, the House system.

Each student was a member of a house (I was Owls) and had a merit table associated to them. Merits were given to good students, good deeds, exploits on the sports field and so on. De-merits were awarded for bad behaviour. Every now and then all of the points for each student and each house were added together, the de-merits subtracted and then the house with the most points got a reward.

It was a simple system that worked for a number of reasons. The first was that it promoted teamwork and peer pressure. You did not want to be the one to drag your house down due to not doing your homework for 10 days straight. That was dealt with by the other members of the house in the playground. It gave you some incentive to do well in your own right. Everyone could see your scores on the class merit chart – again creating a little bit of peer pressure and in some promoting some pride in their scores.

In Harry Potter and in other real schools, this was taken to the next level by actually awarding a House cup at the end of the year to the house with the most points. This would add even greater pressure to achieve or at least not misbehave too much. I think our house cup was awarded based on Sports Day, but that was never my strong point so I never paid much attention!

Right, so we have established that back in the old days extrinsic rewards were used to motivate students to do well. Did it succeed? To some extent yes. However, before you start quoting Deci at me and yelling that extrinsic rewards don't work especially for anything that needs creativity (like education

and learning surely). Points, badges and ladders are the spawn of evil gamification “experts” who don’t know the true psychology behind motivation. Re-read the first paragraph. Teaching methods sucked. There was no joy to be had in the way we were learning. Yes there was joy to be had when you finally cracked it, but the process was boring, uninspired and just plain painful at times. Intrinsic motivation was almost non-existent for this. Now re-read Deci and everyone’s conclusions about motivation and extrinsic rewards for mechanical tasks. Hence extrinsic rewards offered some glimmer of hope. It made you feel part of something that may be a bit bigger than you.

My hope is that this kind of thing is no longer needed. We are 25 years further on in education, surely teaching methods have improved. More teachers should be inspiring their students with well thought out and engaging content. Blended and eLearning approaches should be perfected by now to allow students to learn in ways that best suit their styles. Teachers should no longer be standing at the front of the class reading out notes they first wrote when I was at school. School is now fun and engaging at every level.

Right?

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