From the Ground Up: Redesigning a Synchronous Online Sport Psychology Course to Reflect Gameful Learning

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Gamification is “using game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems” (Kapp, 2012, p. 10). It involves incorporating game design elements such as storylines, challenges, rules, feedback, levels, badges, point systems, time constraints, and avatars in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). This innovative pedagogical approach is becoming increasingly popular in educational settings and was recently advanced as a high impact teaching approach for sport psychology educators (Shipherd, 2020). Specifically, Shipherd and Burt (2018) have suggested that gamification may be particularly well suited for some sport psychology courses because it allows educators to create abstract realities that simulate the complicated and dynamic nature of sport and the consultancy process while also supporting learners’ engagement and motivation.

To date, little research has focused on the integration of game-based elements into sport psychology courses. However, drawing from the broader educational context, researchers have highlighted numerous benefits of gamification. In fact, in their systematic review of gamified learning in higher education, Subhash and Cudney (2018) found that gamification and game-based learning “... have overwhelming support for a number of benefits to both teachers and students in higher education” (p. 204). Of the studies reviewed, benefits included improved student attitudes (i.e., increased effort, participation, attendance, confidence, and interest in class), engagement, motivation, enjoyment, performance, and learning. A synthesis of qualitative studies in educational settings then highlighted four reasons for learners’ enjoyment of gamification: gamification can foster enthusiasm, provide feedback on performance, fulfill learners’ need for recognition, and promote goal setting (Bai et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers have suggested that gamifying the classroom using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2004), a macro-theory of human motivation, as a guiding framework can help increase students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness (van Roy & Zaman, 2017).

To our knowledge, there are two published works related to gamification in sport psychology courses (Shipherd, 2020; Shipherd & Burt, 2018), both of which focus on guiding sport psychology educators through the process of gamifying their classes rather than on the instructor’s experience of implementing gamification. To this end, the present study details an instructor’s (i.e., the first author) experience redesigning her synchronous online sport psychology course from the ground up to reflect elements of gameful learning. Presentation content will include an overview of how the course fit into its larger sport leadership program, situational factors (e.g., characteristics of the student population; duration, type, and frequency of course delivery), learning goals, feedback and assessment procedures, and teaching-learning activities; all of which will be discussed through the lens of the course’s gameful design. For instructors considering adopting this high-impact teaching approach, information from the current study can be used to support either a full course redesign or the implementation of select game elements to target students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Findings from the current study will also contribute to current teaching pedagogy literature, especially as it relates to teaching sport psychology and course design for synchronous distance education courses in sport leadership programs.