GAMES, PLAY, AND THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN

By Megan Hennessey and Ken Gilliam October 13, 2020
https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/wargaming-room/affective-domain/

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Ken Gilliam: Hi. I'm **Colonel Ken Gilliam** and today on A Better Peace, we will venture into the War Gaming Room, a series dedicated to war games and other innovative methods used at the U.S. Army War College and other institutions for education, research and experience. This is our first episode in the series, and it was recorded in May 2020 right at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. My guest today is **Dr. Megan J. Hennessey** whose areas of expertise include the scholarship of teaching and learning, faculty development, professional military education and English language and literature. More importantly, Dr. Hennessey is the Director of Educational Methodology at the United States Army War College. Megan, welcome to the War Gaming Room.

Megan Hennessey: Hi Ken, thanks so much for having me.

KG: Megan, I ask the same opening question of all our first-time guests and it's really more a personal then professional question. What was your favorite game or play activity as a kid? And do you still do it?

MH: So, my favorite game was monopoly as a kid and probably because, as the youngest of four kids, it's kind of fun to stick it to your siblings as you collect properties and charge exorbitant rents. My strategy was to buy up all the railroads because it was sort of like passive income and they were staggered across the board, but I guess I must have gotten pretty good at it because no one will play with me anymore. So, no, I haven't played it in a long time, and my husband notoriously hates monopoly because he thinks it brings out the worst in everyone.

KG: So, we'll get into the serious part, playing games as an adult, and part of that is my job at the War College to help people do some of that, so I'm going to review the mission of the War College and I'll quote is "to enhance national and global security by developing ideas and educating U.S. and international leaders to serve and lead at the strategic enterprise level." That's hard to do in one breath by the way. Embedded it inside of that are some institutional learning outcomes and they describe the attributes that we want our graduates to possess and I looked at

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those and reviewed them and found one that I think might frame our discussion today. I should say I'm quoting this: "our graduates are senior leaders, who convey complex information and communicate effectively and persuasively to any audience." I think the others also apply. There are five or six other learning outcomes that probably apply to faculty as well. But that one seemed to me to best embody what the institution might want from its faculty in order to achieve its institutional mission, and that you and your team are a big part of helping faculty to do that. So, how long has educational methodology been a thing at the Army War College? And can you describe to us some of what you do?

MH: Sure, so I came on board in the summer of 2017 and I think the position existed for a few years before that. I have a colleague at the War College who calls my job the equivalent of the Harry Potter defense against the dark arts professorship.

KG: So, a low survival rate? Is that what it is?

MH: Yeah, a low survival rate. There was a lot of turnover in the position for the first several years I think that it existed. It kind of occupies a unique spot in higher education and educational research because usually when we say methodology and higher ed or academia, were referring to research methods and the way in which you put a study together, the methods that you use to explore a question and investigate a problem further. And some of that definitely relates to educational methodology, what I do, and some of it doesn't. So, it's a unique job title and sort of straddles the intersection of pedagogy and research methods in a way to inform what faculty are doing in terms of the choices they make in the classroom to encourage the students to obtain the outcomes that you just shared. So, really, it's teaching teachers how to teach, but I don't even like that phrase because it's more of a coaching, advising peer relationship, and just learning what the faculty are doing, their various levels of proficiency and their expertise, which is wide ranging. These are very expert people and we have unique challenges just in that because we have such a high turnover rate at the War College for faculty, so we have at least 1/3 of our faculty that turnover every year and it's for a variety of reasons, but we do have military faculty so there's a lot of turnover as a result of that. But these faculty are coming in with the expertise that I mentioned but also with a wide variety of teaching proficiency and lots of teaching ideas. So, educational methodology exists to sort of work with faculty and ensure that any methods that we're using in the classroom are purposeful and are aligned with learning outcomes. So, in my portfolio I do a lot of faculty development. I work in assessment, curriculum design and development, outreach. We relate a lot of these things to accreditation and really, we're focused on both the students and the faculty, although most of our interaction on the team is with faculty and the students are almost sort of the end user or the end customer if you will.

KG: Megan, I'd really like to get your ideas about experiential learning and how that fits into higher education and how you've seen it evolve since you've been here and joined us in 2017.

MH: Sure, I think that experiential learning really ties in nicely to the way we understand the learning domain. So, if you're familiar with Bloom's 1956 learning taxonomy, and then later, Anderson and Krathwohl developed on Bloom's original taxonomy in 2001 and contributed to this idea of a third domain. So, we had grasped the idea of cognitive and psycho-motor domains and then we also have the affective learning domain. So, the affective learning domain is really appealing to the ethos and the emotional response of the learner in a learning event. So, we know that eliciting an emotional response creates a connection to the learning material and it actually changes the wiring in our brains to then be more accepting a retentive of new knowledge content. So, it's almost like growing a muscle in a way. You could think of it as cross training to use an athletic analogy. So, I was an NCAA swimmer for example, so while I was constantly training in the water and swimming lap after lap after lap, we also did what we called dryland training, which sounds kind of funny as a phrase, but anything out of the pool was "dry land"—to warm up, to stretch and otherwise condition us to be better in the water when we return to the pool. So, in a way you could look at the affective learning domain and things like experiential learning activities as a way to better condition your brain to receive new knowledge content and to learn more. But also, the affective learning domain is its own domain. So, you can learn things specifically in the affective domain that may not relate to the cognitive or psycho-motor domains. So, when you think of experiential learning about wargaming, active learning strategies, these are all really powerful engagement tools and they break down barriers in the classroom on a variety of levels, any relationship barriers that you may have between the teacher and the tot for example, or individual barriers that students may have in their own psyche as they're approaching new materials that they're unfamiliar with, or they may be intimidated by or they don't know where to start, you can breakdown those barriers in the classroom through play. And it encourages creative and critical thinking through strategic decision making in a tangible way. So, I'm thinking back, you had asked me what my favorite game was thinking back to monopoly, my strategy was always to buy the railroads because I saw that it worked time after time, but then I also learned that there were limits to that strategy. So, when you have something tangible in front of you like a board game or if you're going on a staff ride and you can actually see the topography of what past leaders on the battlefield dealt with, it really introduces a new level of cognitive processing that we might not get elsewhere in other sorts of pedagogies like lecture or purely discussion-based methods.

KG: So, games themselves and the idea of play, just one small part of the experiential learning menu of items that you can do. What role, if any, do you think those games play in higher education, especially in professional military education, like here at the Army War College?

MH: In many ways, we have a very challenging job in PME because we don't necessarily want to replicate the authentic experience of battle in the classroom for obvious reasons. And so, we need to find different ways to introduce that risk and solicit an elicit that authentic emotional

response in a safe and learning manner. So, that's where play comes in handy because you can replicate that sort of emotional response in a safe environment and you can track learning, wargaming with other types of experiential learning, and active learning strategies. Where the learning occurs, most is often in the reflection period that may follow or may be spaced throughout that activity. So, if you include some Q&A or some journaling or some kind of similar opportunity for students to take stock of what are you experiencing right now? How does this relate to what we've learned? How does it relate to how you see yourself after you graduate and return to the force and they have to deal with these decisions on a daily basis or in real time in an authentic environment? So, I think a lot of the goodness comes from the reflection that comes throughout the play and the experiential learning activities.

KG: Do you have any practical examples that you've observed games, play activities inside of the War College classroom? And were any of them more successful than the others?

MH: Sure, I'm thinking of when you helped us with Lego® Serious Play®, Ken. So, I've seen you do it a couple of times, but you helped us in the applied communication and learning lab to walk through our identity as a group and to sort of figure out the challenges that we were facing in our organizational culture and the shared mission that we were creating as we combined communicative arts and educational methodology. So, Lego Serious Play, I've seen be successful, I think a lot of the value there is building narratives around sort of identity and sense-making and actual physical manipulation of objects and the creation of analogous structures. So, when you can actually see something represented before you that's tangible, that's real, you can touch it, you can move it, it helps you to better explore different facets of that problem that maybe you couldn't talk out. So, actually having that model in front of you, and I think some instances of this are more successful than others. I've seen Lego Serious Play fall short a couple times because the players weren't open minded to the activity and I think Lego Serious Play can be more challenging than maybe other types of play or experiential learning because Legos are traditionally linked very closely with childhood. In some ways, that's a strength because you can build on this underlying quality of nostalgia, familiarity, most of us have seen the Lego before, or have stepped on one as a parent. So, most players would also know instinctively how to piece together the Lego bricks, but if you have some folks who are going through Lego Serious Play, and maybe they're a little too anchored to that nostalgia and aren't able to see how that manipulation of the bricks and the narrative control would contribute to what they're dealing with right now as an adult or as an adult learner, it could be a hard bridge sometimes to make. I've also seen our basic strategic arts program do a Build the Forest Game. And what was most impressive to me is how quickly the students became invested in their decisions and how keenly they felt the consequences after the dice were rolled and they dealt with risk mitigation for whatever popped up that was associated with the number that was rolled on the dice, and they were physically invested, yelling, in a good way.

KG: Oh really?

MH: They were into it. And that's to me a perfect example of the affective domain at work. So, as you look at the domain, there's different levels of learning just like you would see in the cognitive domain and for the affective domain, the first thing you want to do is ensure that students are receiving the information they're getting. So, that's the lowest level of learning is receiving and if you don't have that, you can't get much farther in learning. So, the students were definitely receiving the message there and they were advancing through the affective domain and making connections that I think will last longer in their minds and in their ability to make decisions in the future because they are linked with an emotional response. So, that was a great example of gaming at work at the War College, I think.

KG: So, I'm going to insert just a little bit of commentary here because for the ones that you talked about, Lego Serious Play is probably by far the one thing that we do in our Department of Strategic Wargaming that elicits the widest range of responses from participants.

MH: I'm not surprised.

KG: It's one of those, they really, really love it, or they really, really don't like it. But I've also found it's one of the few where the students are vocal about it, and they make sure that the faculty know their feelings on it. And I compare that to the traditional seminar discussion format, long paper or short paper, independent project, group project. When I look at how they vocalize their distaste if they have it, to me, it's actually a good thing and it's a benefit of what Lego Serious Play does for you. It actually allows them to provide that very vocal feedback which you don't see in other formats. So, to me it's just one of those cognitive things of, they've been allowed to talk and talk about what they want to talk about as opposed to they may not feel that same freedom in those other formats.

MH: Yeah, I can see that for sure. There's a different type of processing that's happening, too because you're forcing them to make a linguistic connection, to explain verbally to their peers around the Lego table what they have done, the choices they've made and why.

KG: Oh yeah. So, I have another interview coming up with Doug Bennett later to talk about some of that as well. I would preview a little bit of it here that there is no loafing in a Lego Serious Play classroom. Everyone has to build. Everyone has to explain, and if you haven't at least prepared and read and understand some of the material coming in that will come out very quickly. And we've had to try to manage the classroom when that happens in order to get past some of that where it's, okay if they haven't done it, they just need to start learning because a lot of that learning happens when they share the models with each other. You have to start building.

MH: Absolutely.

KG: The other is Build the Force. We use something very similar to that with the entire War College resident class and the distance class use it as well. They have a defense management analysis tool and they do an end of course exercise at defense management and it's really a lot of the same tool, maybe a little bit different view that they get, but they're making the same kind of decisions and having to battle some of the same kind of things, and the reaction is a little bit different and I'm wondering if it is age related because those BSAP students are just a little bit younger and maybe a little bit more familiar with some of the technology that we're throwing at them and maybe a little bit more comfortable with it. And maybe the same thing with Legos. I think we've got some open source research out there that says once you get a little over 50 years old, you kind of shy away from the Lego Serious Play. So, we're trying to figure out ways to get around that.

MH: Yeah.

KG: But I said, you should be talking more than me. Also, we've tried to experiment with the Commandant's idea of more project than paper. So, two years ago, it would have been the class of 2019, the Commandant put out a memo, let's see if we can do some of this with students where they experience and work together in small groups and come up with these ideas and they do it as a project. So, we took that on and challenged some students to build some war games. Do you have any insights or opinions because I know we're not the only ones doing it? There should be others inside of the War College that are doing it and if there's a difference or your perceived difference in trying to do project-based learning and doing their strategy research project in a traditional sense.

MH: Sure, I think project-based learning gives students that unique opportunity to think about different aspects of their argument and the research that defines and substantiates their argument in a new way. So, if you're building a game, for instance, based off of your research question associated with your strategy research project, you have to put a lot of thought into things like mechanics and role-based decision-making, and the consequences of certain decisions and what that means for gameplay. And you have to spell it out very clearly in the game instructions in order for people to actually be able to play the game. So, when you're writing a paper, you do some of that. You're obviously trying to substantiate your argument with evidence and you know you're citing sources and you're building your logical reasoning along the way but, I think project-based learning, especially creating a game, takes it one step further because you have to ensure that everyone who might play the game understands to a tee the mechanics and why certain things lead to certain outcomes or certain choices lead to certain outcomes and the situation of the environment and the push and pull of different tensions. That's very real in a way that reading paper might not be.

KG: So, was there any particular subject or setting where you think that there should be more games or experiential events?

MH: Sure, I would love to see more in professional development for the actual faculty and staff at the War College. So, we're kind of dipping our toes into the water this summer. We're working with Professor Chris Wheaton at the Center for Strategic Leadership and are building a Socratic dialogue game. So, Chris has a lot of experience with card deck-based games like The Mind's Lie which is used in the Intel community, and for the past three years, since I've gotten to the War College, I've done a lot of site visits and had the chance to do a lot of informational interviews with higher ed and industry leaders outside of PME and I have constantly been looking for some kind of modeling and simulation, or game-based design that can allow faculty to practice their Socratic method skills without the resource burden of having to do live lesson rehearsals in front of faculty peers or test students so to speak. So, Chris had this great idea for this game. It's a conversation-based game. You can customize it to any sort of content that you wish. Right now, we're working on an iteration or a conversation deck based off of just war theory using Dr. Abraham Trotsky's expertise from the applied communication and learning lab. So, he's helping us to write a conversation deck and essentially the gameplay drives each player to really think about what questions they would ask and why to advance the dialogue through the conversation deck. So, it's been fascinating so far, just to do a couple pilot versions of the game with Chris and I have high hopes for its utility this summer as we pilot it and test it out even further with our new faculty. But I think it's going to work very well, and I think it's also something that could be played with many different audiences. So, the new faculty are our target audience for now, for this summer, but they may choose to play this game with their seminars at the start of the academic year, for instance, to further teach them the benefit and value of this type of dialogue in the learning environment.

KG: Chris Wheaton is amazingly energetic and really good at doing that. I'm glad he's on the team. We have tried to do some things with him as well and been very successful in integrating across and great conversations and great ideas. You are in the business of advising faculty. What advice would you give faculty if they are trying to build something new along the lines of a game or a new experience for their students?

MH: I think the advice I would give would be not to be intimidated by the time investment. Obviously, it takes a lot of time to design and think through creation of these sorts of experiential learning activities and it takes time for the students to experience them or to play, if we're talking about games in the classroom. And that can be stressful for some because they think and we commonly refer to our curriculum as a zero-sum curriculum, so there's no more room for anything else to be added, something has to go if we add something in. And I think that's the wrong language to be using when we have these discussions because experiential learning isn't

additive, it's a purposeful integration of behaviors linked to learning. I think we're having these conversations a lot lately as well because as we've moved online due to COVID-19 and we're doing fully remote teaching, I feel an attitude that's pervading a lot of conversations, that well, I have to replicate my three hours of seminar time online, so we have to have three hours of synchronous time online as well. Otherwise, you know, it's a waste, they're not having the same experience as they would have in the seminar. Well, of course they're not having the same experience, but it's all about the thoughtful choices of what instructional strategies you're going to use and why. For some things you can accomplish the learning outcomes better if it's not in a synchronous discussion-based environment. There're countless activities that you might think through that could be a better way to get at that learning outcome than just talking about it on zoom. So, purposeful engagement activities and thoughtful choices about the balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities are really coming to the forefront of our curriculum design discussions now, and I think that's something I would target if I was giving faculty any advice or having a discussion with them about these sorts of methods.

KG: I really like your point about not being zero-sum. It's not additive, it's something else. And you've quantified it better than I could even try to do for the faculty. Megan, what does the future hold for you?

MH: Oh well, we're always busy in educational methodology. We're constantly on the move, especially now, moving to remote teaching. We've been very busy in the past 3 months now that we've been online.

KG: Oh wow, yeah.

MH: Just ensuring faculty have what they need in order to work with the students in different modalities that they may not have been familiar with before. But in terms of my research, I'm currently co-authoring a study with Colonel Tina Perez and Dr. Brandy Jenner, who was our educational methodology postdoctoral fellow last year. The value of problem-based learning interventions for national security professionals, so that's tide very closely to some of the things we've talked about today with experiential learning. How are we setting up the classroom for this very unique demographic of students and charged with very unique and serious learning outcomes in a way that ensures long-term retention and engagement? So, that's what we're looking at and then summer courses are our busiest time in ed methodology as we prep for the New Year and we have new faculty development in July. So, we're very excited about that game, the Socratic dialogue game and currently, trying to figure out the best balance of potential hybrid options for faculty development.

KG: Megan, thanks for sharing your experience. I really appreciate the help that you provide to us inside of the Strategic Wargaming Department and helping us understand how we can help

faculty and help students and I really hope that the faculty themselves see the value that you bring to the table.

MH: Thanks, Ken.

KG: In the end it's about the students, but your true value to the institution is to get the faculty doing what they do, and I think it's much more powerful if you can do that.

MH: Thank you.

KG: And thanks to all of you for joining us in the War Gaming Room. Please send us your comments on this and all the programs, including ideas for future programs. If you want to hear more, subscribe to A Better Peace. After you have subscribed, please rate and review this podcast on your podcatcher of choice, because it helps others find us as well. We will see you here next time, but until then, from the War Gaming Room, I'm Ken Gilliam. Play to win.