

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Tierney, W. G., Corwin, Z. B., Fullerton, T., & Ragusa, G. (Eds.). (2014). *Postsecondary play: The role of games and social media in higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 336. Price: \$44.95 USD (hardcover) ISBN 13:978-1-4214-1306-8. Electronic ISBN 13:978-1-4214-1307-5.**

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More than a half century ago, Benjamin Bloom and his associates framed learning objectives within three taxonomies – cognitive, affective and psychomotor – ranking the cognitive domain in a hierarchical sequence starting with recall of knowledge and moving up to evaluation of this knowledge. However, these categories did not contemplate or accommodate change – the ability to adapt to change, to learn how to learn, and to integrate learning across disciplines and skill sets. Significant learning is relational and interactive, and should generate excitement about the value of the subject for the student and others in society (Fink, 2013).

How, then, do the impersonal features and distancing effects of social media and technology-based games create hunger for learning by higher education students, most of whom are “digital natives”, born after 1980, their lives mediated by technology? How do social media and related games lead to effective enthusiasm for teaching that meshes with student interests and motivates students to learn? How does the students’ world of what is real for them mesh with that of “digital immigrants”, a large number of their professors and administrators born before 1980, their lives interrupted by technology?

Zoë Corwin, research director for the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC), argues that the gap is real (witness the miscommunication when traditional vs. social media styles, formality and content of writing clash). But it can be bridged. In her chapter titled “From Communication to Community: How Games and Social Media Affect Postsecondary Stakeholders”, Corwin emphasizes that the way different stakeholder groups such as students and teachers experience games and social media is intertwined. She challenges “those of us in the academy to reconceptualize the meaning of postsecondary learning” (Tierney, Corwin, Fullerton, & Ragusa, 2014, p. 105).

Corwin is one of 19 contributors to this compilation of 12 essays by U.S.-based educational researchers, game theorists and learning assessment experts on the role of games and social media, addressing current and future challenges of student entry into and engagement within higher education. More specifically, the timely and troubling topics focus on how games and social media are transforming society and higher education swiftly and significantly; inspiring teaching technique innovation; reformulating the learning experience; embracing cross-generational participation; encouraging crowd-sourced interaction and feedback through open sources; decentralizing knowledge; and complicating communication channels to a degree and in ways not envisioned even five years ago.

This book grew from a four-year interdisciplinary collaboration in the United States to create new no-tech, low-tech and high-tech games to prepare high school students for and to improve their access to higher education, and the perceived disconnect between educators and gamers to achieve these socially motivated goals. The initiative complemented the work of guidance counselors and aimed to fill a gap in the literature on games and social media, and, in particular, game and new media literary theories in higher education.

Insights anchored in observation and reflection in this book serve to help school administrators, instructors and related practitioners engage students more effectively, from enrolment to completion, through modified curriculum, delivery and assessment. However, Tracy Fullerton, Electronic Arts Endowed Chair in Interactive Entertainment at the USC, warns that games and social media are “not a magic bullet” (Tierney et al., 2014, p. 125). Academics and administrators need to understand the limits of games and social media as well as their potential. As a game designer, Fullerton is concerned by the heavy expectations being placed on games to “fix” education and learning (p. 127). Games and play cannot replace the need to assess learning, although “the feel of fun” (p. 133) can be transferred across a population. For example, describing a scene where we watch a baseball player hit a ball with a bat, she suggests that we may also think we can do the same. This creates the excitement and the pleasure to try and to learn – akin to the experiential and real learning that can occur with classroom games.

Indeed, the notion of “games” transcends technology, typically associated today with the digital form of games. To provide for a common understanding of and benchmark for this term and related definitions, a useful, albeit abbreviated, glossary (pp. 319-320) covers the core concepts, corroborating and, in some cases, challenging accepted impressions. Among those threading the book’s content are considerations embedded in its title:

*Play*: “Voluntary, intrinsically motivated activity often associated with toys and games. Sometimes dismissed as frivolous, play can also be a transformative experience, especially when linked to learning.”

*Games*: “A form of play with goals and structure. It is often colloquially used to mean computer or video games, which enable computer mediated play.”

*Gamification*: “The infusion of game design techniques, game mechanics, or game rewards into existing systems and structures, for example, the creation of badges, stars or certificates within learning situations to motivate students.”

This book (hardcover or electronic format) is a worthwhile addition to the dynamic body of knowledge through the scholarship of teaching and learning. Its key arguments cross geographic borders, and the key themes are timeless – that change is a constant, even if the pace of change in the academy appears to be very slow. As Tierney and Corwin

posit, the nature and the substance of teaching and learning have not changed much over the years; consequently, expectations of students remain relatively the same. At the same time, before play can be entirely integrated into the postsecondary fabric, they submit that a regulatory structure with a tax-efficient system must be developed and implemented to guarantee high-level course content and delivery. Their views are valid in the Canadian postsecondary education system, with our multiple provincial and territorial regulators, boards and commissions.

As a higher education “player” in the Canadian scene, if I were to signal any oversight or content gap in this compendium, it would relate to the broader discussion of societal danger to integrity and honesty in a world where social media rule – created to some extent by the insular nature of games and the individual distancing of “selves” in social media despite the constant “face” communication these digital platforms promote.

The inherent pressures of being connected 24/7, through media that create a life of their own, where students no longer believe what the professor says directly but what they read or see on their Facebook pages or Instagram, are a potential minefield for a complementary collection on postsecondary “play”. 🍁

### References

Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.