Connecting *Dungeons & Dragons* To Student Success

Kelly Coons

Harvard Graduate School of Education

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Part 1: Introduction

The four-year college is designed to be a bridge between adolescence and adulthood: a time for emerging adults to solidify what they want to do to contribute to society and to practice forming their own schedules, without the presence of reminding—some might say *nagging*—family members. That bridge is a relatively short length to cover such a distance between developmental stages, however, and students are often unprepared for the constant level of rigor that college success requires. College is a marathon, requiring pacing and planning, not a sprint. At the same time, college is also when students explore their interests freely, including those outside of the academic realm, and these independently-guided interests can be a roadmap to these students. One of the interests that emerged for me during my experience at the institution of the four-year college was *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*): a collaborative role-playing game. The components of a successful *D&D* game align with the core concepts behind educational psychology, specifically identification of the parts that compose a successful group and a belief in the ability to improve over time. By creating a presentation for an in-person *Dungeons & Dragons* club on campus that links the pillars of fruitful learning to the aspects of a successful *Dungeons & Dragons* group, I believe that students can absorb and retain information that will equip them with a growth mindset and knowledge of successful groups, so they can endure across the four-year marathon.

Part 2: Learner & Context Analysis

College students are a diverse demographic, but I am specifically focusing on "traditionally-aged" college students: those students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. Narrowing the focus from all college students to this particular subset affects many demographics other than age. For example, according to the Education Data Initiative, college students who attend college directly after high school attend an undergraduate institution full-time 83% of the time: a noticeable jump from the 62% of full-time undergraduate students among the entire population of college students (*College Enrollment Statistics*). What could account for this difference? Full-time college enrollment is expensive, and while the specific amount of money needed differs depending on the institution and the applicant's financial aid reward—which not all students are eligible for—it is inaccessible to many, and, working while attending college full-time is taxing. This could explain why "...[s]tudents from the highest quintile of socioeconomic status are 50% more likely to enroll in college than those in the lowest quintile" (*College Enrollment Statistics*). There are no comprehensive analyses of the demographics of *Dungeons & Dragons* players, never mind eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old *Dungeons & Dragons* players in college, but an article from *The Guardian* detailing the hobby's rise in popularity features several quotes from high-profile players, and they all detail how the game is a safe space to explore different personalities and perspectives, even for normally shy and quiet people (Stuart, 2019). Combining this data about students at four-year colleges and *Dungeons & Dragons* players, my first learner persona is "Matt," an 18-year-old white male, who has been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* since

high school. He is shy and nervous about his ability to do college-level work. It is unreasonable, though, only to have a white learner persona and to assume that everyone coming to a club meeting open to all are seasoned *Dungeons & Dragons* players. Thus, my second learner persona is "Zeena," a 22-year-old Black female, who has just started dabbling in the game. As a senior, she feels like she's doing well in college but is curious about how this new hobby relates to learning. These two learner personas share an upper- to upper-middle-class background and grew up in the United States speaking English as their first language. Both of these learner personas also experienced a lot of value being placed on college academic performance, like being told that a bachelor's degree is the ticket to a "good job." As a result, they buy into the idea that not everyone is "college-material": a fixed mindset. They will be attending the presentation at a *Dungeons & Dragons* club meeting: a formal learning setting, with a set time and place, albeit a voluntary one, since students are under no obligation to attend the club, never mind every meeting. Perhaps that voluntary status can offset a common pitfall of formal learning settings: the goal not being appropriate for everyone (HPL, *Unit 5.1.2, 2022*). Regardless, the voluntary nature of the meeting helps fulfill **young adults' developmental need for identity construction** (Erikson, 1968). A secure sense of self is associated with lower incidences of mental health problems, academic struggles, and feelings of inadequacy (Crocetti, 2017; Meeus, 2011), all of which are potential degree-stopping roadblocks. The face-to-face nature of the club meeting allows me to give feedback and answer questions as they come up, preventing improper connections from being made, although the short timeframe of a club meeting can make it feel like a rush to complete activities. Regardless of how much the learners engage, there is a jump between the learning context, a low-pressure club meeting, and the performance context, a high-pressure classroom setting. That is why **facilitating transfer** is essential, and I will do so through the abstraction and connection-making of **analogy** (Perkins & Saloman, 1992).

Part 3: Goals and Outcomes

The goal for this project is as follows: "At the end of this activity, students will distinguish how to support their learning processes, particularly as it relates to attitudes towards the capacity to change and collaborative work, as emerging adults in the semi-independent environment of a four-year higher education institution and, eventually, in graduate school and/or the workplace." This goal statement names the two primary subjects of the presentation: growth mindset and the parts of a successful group. It also names both the near-future performance context, classes at the four-year college, and the longer-term performance context: what students will do after graduation—either further education or entering the workforce. The first outcome statement is: "Students develop a growth mindset, seeing their abilities as always evolving, rather than a fixed mindset, enabling them to craft more far-reaching goals." I highlighted growth mindset because believing that you can grow into a sense of belonging and competence helps generate the perseverance needed to do college-level work full-time for four years. This is because, for people with a **growth mindset**, struggling is not a sign that you are not good but the process through which you attain success (Bryan University, 2016). Thus, students with a growth mindset are more likely to push through the struggling, rather than give up. The second outcome statement is:

"Students identify what constitutes a successful group, so they can create those kinds of groups in academic, professional, and recreational contexts alike." I have put a specific focus on group work because group work is a component of many college classes and is a source of a lot of interpersonal tension, especially because college achievement is so moralized in American society. Additionally, by specifically naming situations where knowledge of group dynamics is useful outside of the college setting, I can hopefully engage people who do not care about college but are interested in other contexts: a way to engage students who are otherwise dismissed as uninterested in learning.

Part 4: Assessment Approach

Students' learning will be tracked through both a beginning formative assessment and an ending summative assessment. The formative assessment will be a short, five-minute session of answering the question "If you were a *D&D* class, what would you be?" and explaining why. This question serves to not only get a gauge of the population's familiarity with the system of *Dungeons & Dragons* but also establishes that, while this club meeting may be occurring in a space that is usually used for classes, this is not a class itself. The percentage of what students picked each class will also be shared, helping students themselves as part of a greater gestalt, including those with both similar and different skillsets to them. This more casual tone will hopefully also decrease student anxiety. Any question about the mechanics of *D&D* could act as a way to determine the audience's level of familiarity with the system, however, and a myriad of questions could be asked to set a casual tone, however, so why did I pick this one? The answer lies in how these classes are described in official *Dungeons & Dragons* media. While official *D&D* media emphasizes the social aspects of the game—the official description from Wizards of the Coast, the publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons*, proclaims that it is about "...having fun with your friends..." (Wizards of the Coast)—the official media describing the available classes, the types of characters you can play, instead stress the importance of stats, which is not a social aspect of the game. On D&D Beyond, the official digital toolset for the game, each class is described using video-game-like language, rather than the language of acting and storytelling that characterizes most of the game's marketing. Each class has a "primary ability": the ability that a character needs to have a high score in to be effective. For example, the Barbarian's primary ability is strength. While each of the six stats—Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma—have at least one class that specializes in each, this language encourages players to pick a class that focuses on the highest stat of their character. In other words, when I ask students what *D&D* class they would be, I am asking what their highest stat is—*not* their interests or aspirations. I am asking about their *current* strengths, not the ones they want to develop. This question, then, aligns with a fixed mindset: the belief that a person's abilities are innate, rather than developed. After finishing the presentation, I will lead a summative assessment. This summative assessment is students completing a "character sheet" representing themselves over the course of twenty minutes, complete with puzzling out their own stats. More than completing an inventory of themselves in the present moment, though, I will require that students include a plan for their future "level ups": what they want to focus on for

the rest of the academic year. Helping students imagine how they want to grow helps them imagine the steps to reach that growth. The feedback system for the summative assessment is reading each summative assessment and referring the students to their college's academic advisors regardless of how little or much they wrote. The language of the students' character sheets is also a measurable way to see if they have internalized a growth mindset or not—and, thus, what further actions to take to help facilitate that result. This feedback system may at first seem to be evasive: By providing essentially the same feedback to every student, how are they meant to act on that feedback? However, putting students in contact with academic advisors respects the short timeframe of the activity, acknowledging how the time constraint makes deep self-reflection difficult. Perhaps more importantly, it once again respects young adults' growing independence (Erikson, 1968). If they feel like they can act on their plans themselves, they are welcome to. If they do not feel like they can act on their plans as they are or simply feel more comfortable getting the advice of someone more experienced, then they can interface with a professional trained to help them clarify their individual goals and create actionable steps out of them. Regardless, students who complete this summative assessment will be engaging in **metacognition**: both "metacognitive monitoring (assessing one's actions and activities in relation to one's goal)" in the form of planning their next level-ups and "metacognitive control (taking strategic action to direct one's activity toward one's goal)" in the form of either self-directed action or action in collaboration with an academic advisor (Scholer, 2016). Such planning from the inside out is a crucial part of independent adulthood. During adulthood, others do not approach you asking if you need help. It is instead the responsibility of the adult to determine what they want to accomplish and seek out help from relevant experts if they feel that they need help to accomplish their goal.

Part 5: Learning Activities

This presentation will primarily use Quick-Writes as a learning activity. Quick-Writes respect collective wariness towards group work and the short timeframe of the presentation making effective use of groups difficult. Quick-Writes provide students with copies of their thinking, captured in the moment, to help structure responses to larger assignments, like the summative assessment, or to return to, to expand upon or refute at a later date. The summative assessment is designed to be a living document: a roadmap to return to as the students' needs evolve. Having the ability to see where their needs "started" can inform the path they want to go down. Metacognitive control is easier when cognitive processes are made more visible. In this less-formal, not-a-classroom environment, students can think in ways tied to the "real-world" more easily: That is a powerful ability of **situated learning** (HPL, *Unit 1.4.3*, 2022). Furthermore, this particular environment is a club. Students join clubs based on their interests, and those interests provide a base for strong relationships to form. Thus, the *Dungeons & Dragons* club acts as a **holding environment**: a supportive space where students feel comfortable trying new things (HPL, *Unit 1.3.4*, 2022). When students explore clubs based around their areas of interest, they are engaging in **constructing an identity** (Erikson, 1968). If students live at a four-year college, then it may be the first time that they are doing leisure activities without family members seeing

them and passing judgment on what they do in their free time. Thus, the club environment respects that need for self-exploration. The Quick-Write activities tap into the theory of cognitivism as well. Cognitivism argues that learners are not passive receivers of knowledge but are interlocutors with it. In order to learn, cognitivists argue, people need to manipulate and question information (HPL, *Unit 2.1.2*, 2022). People inherently organize information like a filing cabinet. Information is grouped together into like categories. These mental "boxes" are called schemas. Learning, then, is the changing of these **schemas** (ByPass Publishing, 2013). One of these schemas is the box that students put themselves in—do they see themselves as "college-material," for example? The cognitivist tradition allows young adults to manipulate and question their ideas of themselves: a subject of never-ending interest across the lifespan but of heightened relevance at this stage of life.

Part 6. Reflection

My primary concerns revolve around the accessibility of this lesson. There is a lot of prerequisite *D&D* knowledge. While the presentation can contain images to jog students' memories, there will not be time to explain, for instance, what classes are or what collaborative storytelling looks like. While hosting the lesson at a *Dungeons & Dragons* club will likely attract people with that prerequisite knowledge, the "revolving door" aspect of the club is a double-edged sword: While people with *D&D* knowledge are free to come, so are people without *D&D* knowledge. As a result, Learner Persona One (a person with lots of experience with *D&D* but not lots of experience with educational psychology) is given preferential treatment over Learner Persona Two (a person with more experience with educational psychology and less experience with *D&D*). Unrelated to the concern over accessibility, the current plan involves a Presenter instructional stance, which reinforces hierarchy and doesn't offer much space to think collaboratively... even though I am talking about the importance of group learning. Is it possible to teach about group learning in such an individualistic manner? Despite these issues, I continue to defend my decision to craft a presentation about *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular as opposed to a broader topic like video games. *D&D* is inherently collaborative, so relating it to collaborative assignments is not a big jump to make—and generating buy-in around the importance of group projects, particularly for students who feel like their peers are less smart than them, will probably be the hardest task of the lesson. While there was no space to talk about it in the design proposal, *D&D* is also a game with a certain amount of randomness because a bad dice roll can cause a failure even when a character's stats would dictate that they are good at a given task—like how factors beyond the inherent difficulty of a task can affect someone's ability to do it (*HPL Brief: Cognitive Load*). Making those comparisons, though, requires even more discussion of the mechanics of the game, so maybe that would need to be a sequel to the first presentation, rather than being an addition, keeping in mind that club meetings are only about an hour long. I believe that the greatest thing that an educator can give a learner is intrinsic motivation: the drive to learn based on desire to improve or curiosity, rather than seeking praise or money or a grade. When that intrinsic motivation relates to something a student is already passionate about, it makes students feel like their interests are valuable and helps boost their self-

esteem and sense of competency: something that is particularly vulnerable for disabled students (American Psychological Association, 2004): the specific population I want to serve. While it may seem odd for me not to highlight this demographic, by *not* targeting disabled people in particular, there is a greater opportunity for authentic inclusion.

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