

Prensky on Fun, Play, and Games: not the answer to all learning

Disclaimer: This response deals solely with Prensky's chapter because the Crawford reading was contained in the Prensky material (Prensky cited Crawford & Huizinga and discussed much the same material).

I suspect that I am going to have recurring themes in my responses to the readings in this class. I expect a bias in these readings: these are game guys; they should believe that games can teach people things. But I am already tired of Prensky's sole focus on games. He seems to advocate games not as a way of teaching but as **the** way of teaching (from Chapter 2, students operate at game speed and they have to dummy down to be at our speed; the problem is not the students, it is that teachers are too boring; we need to address them in their media...).

From a teaching standpoint, games are useful. Software is useful. But so was digging my hands into the body cavity of a dead fish and lifting up the liver to see how the stomach and intestine fit into the cavity with the other organs. The smell of the preservative was so strong that you could taste it in your mouth for hours after. The organs were cold and slimy through latex gloves. The bones were sharp and flexible; the vertebrae moved smoothly together when the spine was flexed. The scales were smooth with the grain, rough against the grain. We have only read 2 chapters, but I think Prensky will never get around to acknowledging the value of doing rather than gaming.

(On a more basic level, I recall my children, when very small, fascinated by our basic, early 90s computer games. These games might have even promoted reading readiness and early math skills. But their life would have been poorer without much time banging on pots and pans, pouring water in glasses and playing with the sounds, stacking blocks and cans of food, and understanding that metal cans and wooden blocks feel different.)

I will step off my soapbox and respond to Prensky.

He has an interesting collection of quotes. His use of Donald Norman caught my eye. In my days as an engineer, I read Donald Norman and greatly respected his work. But he presumably uses quotes to exemplify his message, and the Dick Cavett quote (*There's so much comedy on television. Does that cause comedy in the streets?*) was unworthy. Cavett is minimizing violence, and Prensky is helping him. Comedy in the streets does not get headlines or kill people. How would we know if there were 'comedy in the streets'? Maybe we could just listen – how many times a day do we hear a throw-away comic line quoted? (Schwing! Doh! As if!)

Prensky's strongest point stems from his Carnegie quote: *People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.*

But this, too, is problematic. Prensky uses this quote to re-inforce the idea that fun is good, and I agree with that. But I don't think that is what Carnegie meant. Take some of

our most successful politicians. Bill Clinton, on leaving the White House, said he wanted to be known as the person who had the most fun as President. In *Primary Colors*, Joe Klein's book loosely based on Clinton's 1992 campaign, the protagonist muses in the beginning that the Clinton character is so good as a politician because he believes in the value of people and he loves what he does. What he does (politics), he loves. Because he loves politics, politics, by definition, is fun.

Prensky turns this around to imply that what you work at should be fun, even if it is hard fun. While I truly believe, as in the Clinton example, that you are more likely to succeed if you love what you do, I cannot shake the idea that this is ultimately elitist. Can anybody love slathering a layer of smelly, hot tar on a roof in Las Cruces when it is 105° in the shade? How about folding the same stack of t-shirts that has been ransacked by customers 10 times a day at the local discount store (See Erenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*?) Maybe I am being elitist, in that I cannot imagine such things being 'fun'.

I think Prensky's idea that work should be fun applies only to the economically and educationally empowered. Surely, there cannot be enough people who LOVE to fold t-shirts in the world to staff every Wal-Mart in existence!

Other stuff: His stuff on games was useful – taxonomies provide structure to describe, and in the describing, give us limits we can then push and play with. Probably I should have talked about this rather than ranted on about quotes, but I had an in-depth discussion with my husband (an extra-ordinarily clear thinker and intellectual partner, and always my first audience), so these ideas seemed more settled.