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METHODS FOR DEVELOPING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CREATIVE ABILITIES THROUGH GAMIFICATION TOOLS IN DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract. This conceptual and methodological article examines how gamification tools can be integrated into digital learning environments to develop university students' creative abilities. The study uses a focused narrative synthesis of established research on gamification, self-determination theory, creative thinking and technology-supported education, supplemented by design-based pedagogical reasoning. Its principal contribution is a five-stage instructional model combining an open-ended creative challenge, learner choice, collaborative ideation, iterative feedback and reflective assessment. The model distinguishes motivational game mechanics from tasks that directly elicit originality, flexibility, elaboration and usefulness. A sample six-week implementation sequence, tool-selection matrix and analytically derived assessment rubric are provided. The literature suggests that gamification can support engagement and learning, but the resulting gains should not be equated automatically with measurable improvements in creativity. For this reason, the article outlines a feasible pre-test/post-test research design and safeguards relating to accessibility, student privacy and excessive competition. The proposed approach offers a practical framework for instructors and a testable basis for future empirical studies in higher education.

Keywords: gamification; digital learning environment; creative abilities; university students; creative thinking; instructional design; formative assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of learning management systems, interactive response platforms and online collaboration environments has broadened the ways in which university students can participate in knowledge creation. Nevertheless, access to digital resources does not, by itself, guarantee creative thinking. Closed-response quizzes can increase participation while leaving little opportunity for students to produce alternative solutions, revise ideas or justify an original approach. Therefore, a critical pedagogical question is how to design digital learning experiences in which students move beyond the reproduction of knowledge toward the generation and refinement of ideas.

Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). In education, such elements may include missions, progress indicators, badges, feedback loops, collaborative quests and optional challenges. The literature identifies potential benefits for motivation and academic performance, although outcomes vary with context, population and implementation (Hamari et al., 2014; Sailer & Homner, 2020). Creativity, however, cannot be inferred from points earned or task completion rates. The OECD (2023) distinguishes the abilities to generate diverse ideas,

generate creative ideas, and evaluate and improve ideas. These abilities require open-ended and iterative tasks, rather than merely faster responses to predetermined questions.

The aim of this article is to substantiate and describe a pedagogical method for developing university students' creative abilities through gamification tools in digital learning environments. Its objectives are to: (1) clarify the theoretical mechanisms linking gamified learning with creative performance; (2) develop a reproducible instructional model; (3) propose teaching activities and assessment criteria; and (4) identify conditions necessary for rigorous empirical evaluation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is a conceptual methodological study, not a report of an implemented intervention. It employs a focused narrative review of foundational peer-reviewed gamification research, motivational theory and the OECD creative-thinking framework, and compares the pedagogical affordances of commonly available digital tools. Sources were chosen for their relevance to the concepts of gamification, autonomous motivation, creativity and educational assessment, rather than through a claim of systematic or exhaustive database retrieval. Findings were integrated through a theory-to-design mapping: educational mechanism → gamification feature → creative student action → observable assessment evidence. A proposed instructional sequence and scoring rubric were then developed. No participants were recruited, no student records were collected, and no statistical hypothesis tests were conducted for the present article.

The theoretical basis combines three complementary perspectives. First, self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence and relatedness as conditions supporting high-quality motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Second, the gamification literature cautions that effects depend on design, tasks and user characteristics (Hamari et al., 2014). Third, the OECD model operationalizes creative thinking as generating diverse and original ideas and evaluating or improving ideas (OECD, 2023). The resulting approach treats game mechanics as supports for creative activity—not as substitutes for creative activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A pedagogical model for creative development

The proposed "Challenge–Choice–Create–Critique–Reflect" model comprises five interconnected stages. It can be embedded in an existing learning management system without requiring the development of a bespoke educational game. A central design principle is to reward explanation, exploration, revision and evidence of learning rather than only speed or competitive ranking.

Stage	Gamification mechanism	Student creative action	Evidence
1. Challenge	Narrative mission; authentic problem scenario	Define the problem and propose possible directions	Problem statement and initial idea map
2. Choice	Optional pathways; flexible task levels	Select tools, perspectives and solution formats	Justification of chosen pathway
3. Create	Team quests; progress milestones	Generate several distinct and workable solutions	Idea portfolio and initial prototype

Stage	Gamification mechanism	Student creative action	Evidence
4. Critique	Feedback loops; revision achievements	Evaluate ideas and improve a selected solution	Peer-feedback log and revised artefact
5. Reflect	Reflection badge; personal progress dashboard	Explain originality, usefulness and changes made	Reflective narrative and final submission

The stages are cyclical: an unsatisfactory prototype may return to idea generation after feedback. Progress indicators should communicate formative development and task completion rather than a universal numerical score for creativity. Students can receive recognition for a well-supported revision even if the final outcome differs from peers' solutions.

Practical methods and digital tools

A task is genuinely creativity-oriented when it permits multiple plausible approaches, makes quality criteria transparent and requires reasons for design choices. For example, in a pedagogy course, student teams might be asked to design three alternative digital activities for teaching the same difficult concept to learners with different needs. A shared board supports divergent brainstorming; a digital storytelling or presentation tool supports artefact creation; and a peer-review form supports iterative improvement. Kahoot! or Quizizz may be used for retrieval practice at the beginning, but those tools alone are insufficient for evaluating originality.

Method	Illustrative digital tools	Creative output and assessment
Creative mission and branching tasks	Moodle or another LMS; H5P	Multiple solution routes, rationale and completed challenge
Collaborative idea laboratory	Padlet; Miro or equivalent board	Diverse concepts grouped into distinct categories
Digital storytelling and prototyping	Canva; collaborative slide or video editor	Original product evaluated for usefulness and elaboration
Peer-review quest	LMS rubric; shared commenting	Evidence-based critique and a revised product
Reflective portfolio	Google Docs or LMS portfolio	Documented decision-making, iteration and self-assessment

These are examples of tool categories, not endorsements or evidence that any named platform independently produces creativity gains. Tool selection should depend on institutional access, bandwidth, accessibility, data-protection requirements and the nature of the assignment. Low-bandwidth alternatives such as asynchronous documents and downloadable task briefs should be maintained.

A proposed six-week instructional sequence

Week	Instructional focus	Learner deliverable
1	Baseline open-ended task; orientation and challenge framing	Initial idea set; individual learning goals
2	Choice-based exploration and divergent brainstorming	At least three distinct solution concepts

Week	Instructional focus	Learner deliverable
3	Collaborative quest and feasibility analysis	Selected design with justification
4	Prototype production and formative check-in	Version 1 of the educational artefact
5	Structured peer critique and revision mission	Peer-feedback record; version 2
6	Public presentation, post-task and reflection	Final artefact; reflection; parallel creative-thinking task

The schedule is an instructional proposal, not a description of fieldwork undertaken. Teachers may implement it in pedagogical, humanities or interdisciplinary modules after adapting the problem scenarios and discipline-specific quality criteria.

Assessment of creative abilities

An appropriate evaluation combines artefact-based performance, ideation tasks and process evidence. Inspired by the OECD creative-thinking constructs, a practical four-criterion rubric is proposed. Each criterion receives 0–3 points (maximum total 12): 0 = not demonstrated, 1 = emerging, 2 = competent, and 3 = strong. Before grading, instructors should calibrate the rubric with sample responses, use blind or independent double marking where feasible, and report inter-rater agreement.

Criterion	0 points	1 point	2 points	3 points
Diversity / flexibility	No viable idea	One relevant approach	Two distinguishable approaches	Several substantively different approaches
Originality	Copied or entirely conventional	Minor variation	Noticeably uncommon combination	Distinctive and justified idea
Usefulness	Does not meet task needs	Limited feasibility	Meets most task criteria	Well aligned and feasible
Evaluation / improvement	No substantive revision	Changes without rationale	Evidence-based improvement	Substantial improvement grounded in critique

The rubric is a proposed classroom instrument; its validity and reliability have not been established in the present study. Scores should be interpreted in relation to task context and disciplinary expectations. In particular, idea fluency, originality and practical value should be analyzed separately, since a single aggregate mark may conceal different creative profiles.

Interpretation of the literature and anticipated mechanisms

Sailer and Homner's (2020) meta-analysis found statistically significant positive average effects of gamification on cognitive learning outcomes (Hedges' g = 0.49), motivational outcomes (g = 0.36) and behavioral outcomes (g = 0.25) across the studies they examined. These findings support the possibility that carefully structured game elements may improve conditions for learning; they do not establish that gamification necessarily increases creative abilities. Likewise, self-determination theory suggests that meaningful choice, feedback indicating competence and constructive peer relations may encourage autonomous engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the proposed model, these motivational affordances

are linked to open-ended production and iterative revision, which are the activities through which creative performance can become observable.

There are also significant risks. Public leaderboards may heighten social comparison and discourage experimentation among some learners. Rewards for speed may bias participants toward conventional answers. Strongly scripted challenges can limit autonomy, and platform analytics can misrepresent creativity by treating clicks as achievements. Hence, competitions should be optional, group success should be balanced with individual contribution, and feedback should emphasize the quality of explanations, diversity of ideas and revision decisions. The instructor retains responsibility for disciplinary accuracy and fair assessment.

Design for a future empirical validation study

The proposed method is testable through a quasi-experimental design. Two comparable university course groups could study the same subject content for six weeks, with the intervention group using the complete five-stage model and a comparison group completing equivalent non-gamified open-ended tasks. Both groups should receive comparable instructor support, learning time and access to tools. Baseline and follow-up parallel creative-thinking tasks, scored by trained assessors unaware of group membership, would serve as the primary outcome. Measures of motivation, engagement and usability would serve as secondary outcomes. A sample-size calculation should be completed before recruitment. If allocation is not randomized, baseline differences and potential confounders should be addressed in the analysis. Appropriate reporting could include adjusted group differences, confidence intervals, effect sizes, assessor agreement and missing-data handling. Ethical approval and informed consent requirements should be checked at the host institution; data minimization and accessibility adjustments should be documented.

CONCLUSION

The development of university students' creative abilities in a digital learning environment requires more than the introduction of points, badges or quizzes. The proposed Challenge–Choice–Create–Critique–Reflect model places gamification mechanisms in the service of open-ended problem solving, student autonomy, collaborative ideation, evidence-based revision and reflective assessment. Its distinctive contribution is a practical alignment between game elements, observable creative actions and a transparent assessment framework. The model can guide instructional design in higher education; however, its effectiveness for improving creativity remains a hypothesis requiring experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation. Future studies should investigate discipline-specific outcomes, student differences, sustainability of gains and the effects of competitive versus mastery-oriented game structures.

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