Game On: Students Rack Up Points in UT Professor’s “Gamed” Classroom

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Plant sciences professor Brandon Horvath works with Kyle Talley to identify turf grasses in Introduction to Turfgrass Science Laboratory.

Taking one of Brandon Horvath’s classes can be fun and games.

That’s because Horvath, turf pathologist and plant sciences professor, has integrated elements typically found in games into two of his undergraduate courses, History and Impact of Turf Grasses and Turf Grass Pathology.

Students start out the semester with a zero and work their way to an A by earning points, just as in a game.

Points can be earned in a number of ways— quizzes, tests, and challenges outside the classroom. All coursework is voluntary, giving students the freedom to decide how they earn their points.

Horvath said this type of classroom approach increases self-motivation and participation. It also gives students who may not test well the opportunity to prove their knowledge in a different way.

“I wanted students to engage with the material and get involved,” he said. “The stuff I teach they’ll be dealing with the rest of their lives. I wanted them involved and working on it on a regular basis.”

Horvath also grades his students on a binary system, meaning either their work is acceptable or it is not. That way, students cannot calculate the minimum exam score they’ll need to pass.
“That’s not how it is in the business world. You can’t do a halfhearted job on something because you’re doing well otherwise,” he said. “Everything is expected to be good. I tried to instill that quality in my students by taking that mindset.”

Besides “gaming” his classroom, Horvath also has completely flipped his History and Impact of Turf Grasses class. Students watch lecture videos online and then come to class prepared to discuss questions and complete assignments with teacher and peer support.

Michael Medley, a senior in turfgrass science and management, enjoyed learning in a flipped classroom.

“We all looked forward to attending Dr. Horvath’s class because the discussions were always lively,” said Medley. “The key point is we were learning, but we weren’t cognitively aware that we were learning.”

Horvath is impressed with his students’ success and change in attitude stemming from his teaching methods.

“I’ve seen students who many instructors would say are not engaged become enlivened by the various game dynamics that I infuse into my classes,” Horvath said. “I am most intrigued by these students because when you engage them in conversation, or they write an app for an iPhone, or they author a video on YouTube or tweet at you on a topic, it is clear that they know and understand the material being covered.”

Medley says Horvath’s teaching style has helped him remember the material he learned even after the class was over.

“He seeks to shake the dust out of the old lecture hall system and create an open environment where students want to meet him halfway,” said Medley.

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