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# **The impact of a game-based approach to Bourdieu on learners training to teach in post-compulsory education at an English University**

## **Abstract**

The delivery of theory alongside practice in teacher education is inherently challenging and prone to failure, leaving trainees ill-prepared to problematise the social and cultural realities that shape their classrooms. Finding new and productive ways for trainees to engage with theoretical concepts is, therefore, an important educational and social outcome. This paper explores the use of a game-based approach to the teaching of Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus to two small groups, training with a University in the North of England to become teachers in post-compulsory education. Critical and learning theories are used to explain and justify the design decisions and strategies employed and critical participatory action research is used to evaluate the impact of the game. The paper reports encouraging findings and recommends extension and wider use of such strategies in the teaching of theory to resistant groups.

## **Introduction**

The context for this study was two small groups training with a University in the North of England to become teachers in post-compulsory education. Their qualification requires them to 'develop judgement of what works and does not work in teaching' and 'to ensure the best outcomes for learners,' (ETF, 2013). As such, it is a

practical programme focussing strongly on competence and skills. However, it also requires, 'deep and critically informed knowledge and understanding of theory' (ETF, 2013). Such theory often constitutes a 'threshold concept ... akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something;' often experienced by trainees as 'troublesome knowledge — knowledge that is 'alien', or counter-intuitive or even intellectually absurd at face value' (Meyer & Land, 2003, pp. 1–2). Whilst engagement with theory is an important outcome for trainee teachers that enables them to recognise and challenge the reproduction of inequality in education, its delivery is inherently challenging and prone to failure, leaving trainees less able to problematise the social and cultural realities that shape their classrooms.

All the trainees in this study were working as in-service teachers in post-compulsory settings alongside their studies. As is typical of this sector, there was a preponderance of vocational teachers, with only three of the twenty-three participants engaged in traditional academic teaching. In England, class-based attitudes to vocational qualifications and the institutions in which they are delivered persist. Often seen as 'second-chance' institutions and places for 'other people's children' (Richardson, 2007; Thompson, 2009), they lack parity of esteem with schools and universities. Teachers who work within them tend to have lower levels of general education and are less well remunerated than their counterparts in UK academic settings or in some vocational settings abroad. The qualifications which they deliver have also been undermined by successive failures to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications in England (Hodgson & Spours, 2010; Pring et al., 2009; Simmons, 2009) and this in turn, 'relates to the long-established status distinctions between 'sacred' and 'profane' knowledge ... related to the social division of labour by sociologists such as Émile Durkheim and

Basil Bernstein ' (Thompson, 2014, pp. 10–11). Theoretical constructs are arguably vital to trainees working within so loaded a system, so that they can develop a critical consciousness; an ability to 'analyze, problematize .. and affect the socio-political, economic, and cultural realities that shape lives' (Leistyna, 2004, p. 17).

Bourdieu's notion of field and habitus provides one route to such consciousness; 'field' being the social arena in which relationships are formed and 'habitus' being an essential asset of the individual upon which that field operates (Grenfell, 2012). The theory enables an evaluative perspective on how educational fields might favour or militate against particular individuals. It rests, however, on a set of subtle ideas about the ephemeral and contingent nature of social reality. The trainee teachers in these two groups had previously shown reluctance to engage with such theory which they saw as esoteric and inaccessible, preferring instead to rely on what they knew of their own practice.

Basil Bernstein's notion of knowledge as either vertical or horizontal is useful in highlighting the systematic importance of this issue to teacher education. Vertical knowledge is based on abstraction and generality, whereas horizontal knowledge;

is often tacit or otherwise informally transmitted, and lacks generality; as Bernstein puts it, horizontal knowledge is segmented, in the sense that it is associated closely with particular contexts and sites of practice, and can be contradictory between different segments. (Thompson, 2014, p. 39)

This means that horizontal knowledge is often vital in particular working contexts but if this is the only type of knowledge an individual possesses, it limits the ability to transfer across contexts or to question and cope with change. Vertical knowledge enables individuals to be evaluative of change and is also higher-status, conferring greater rewards, both monetary and in terms of esteem.

The fundamental pedagogic problem for teacher educators [is] how to bring together the horizontal knowledge associated with practical pedagogy in the workplace with the vertical knowledge embodied in many subject areas and in the formal theories of learning encountered in ITE. (Thompson, 2014, p. 40)

## **Inspiration**

For this study, gamification was identified as a potential strategy that would address this challenge. My approach was informed by the ideas of Vygotsky (1978) and of Wertsch (1985) on the social formation of mind as well as recent research on gamification (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Kambouri, Thomas, & Mellar, 2006; Sharpe, Beetham, & Freitas, 2010; Walsh, 2014; Whitton & Moseley, 2012). Whilst the gamification literature presents a series of persuasive, small-scale case studies, there is a lack of robust empirical evidence in support of its efficacy. Moreover, there are important caveats. The very notion of a game as a trivial pursuit may be irredeemably compromised by attaching to it a serious, learning purpose and vice versa and this can lead to tensions in classroom environments (Deterding, Björk, Nacke, Dixon, & Lawley, 2013).

A further caveat is that any game is ultimately only a metaphor, requiring the players to be complicit in the illusion. The metaphor inevitably breaks down at some point, failing to fully and accurately represent the concept to which it refers. This can, however, form the stimulus for more advanced discussion. In the game, learners master a rudimentary ability to play the academic 'language games' required to discuss theory (Wittgenstein in Shotter, 2012), thus opening the portal to a new 'threshold concept' (Meyer & Land, 2003).

The importance of attaining mastery of specialised language through social interaction, with learners actively engaged in constructing their own, internal representations of an external reality has a significant pedigree in the history of learning theory. For Vygotsky, the means by which these internal representations are constructed are always, in the first instance, social: 'Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people ... and then inside the child.' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57). Inspired by these ideas, the game-based approach employed here is dialogic, providing scope for interactions that are more tolerant of misconceptions than a formal, didactic atmosphere. Frequent, informal, low stakes opportunities to use specialised language are afforded within the game so that the social interaction that Vygotsky conceives of as vital at the outset of the learning process is more successfully negotiated. This is significant given trainees' insecurities around academic language that frequently arise out of the class-based and entrenched attitudes to professional identity outlined earlier in this paper.

To succeed, however, the prospective learning must lie within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is a golden zone between what the learner can do unaided and what they are completely unable to do, even with help. Within it, the learner is able to break new ground through exchange with a more knowledgeable other (MKO). Wertsch (1985), explored more closely how speech acts mediate the inward migration of learning from the social to the internal world within this zone: initially, the learner is unable to understand the MKO in the context of the task. In this case, the terms 'field,' 'habitus,' 'doxa,' etc fall into this category. The game provides opportunities to continually employ these terms whilst demonstrating their meaning through the situations thrown up within the game. The learner is thereby

enabled to progress through subsequent stages of internalisation, at first responding with limited understanding but with a growing capacity for complex and accurate exchanges. In the most successful cases, this culminates in an autonomous and sophisticated commentary, applied to situations beyond the confines of the game. The ultimate aim is mastery of a new way of thinking about and discussing practice and a consequent shift in the learner's identity.

### **The Game**

Gamification of this kind emphasises 'playing to learn' (Sharpe, Beetham, & Freitas, 2010, p. 75) through 'high level immersion'(Kambouri et al., 2006, p. 5). In addition to the ideas of Vygotsky and Wertsch, the design of the game was informed by criteria drawn from the gamification literature; the need for storytelling, clear progression, freedom to fail and rapid feedback (Stott & Neustaedter, 2013), as well as avatars, evocative environments, narrative context, ranking, marketplaces and competition (Deterding et al., 2011; Walsh, 2014; Whitton & Moseley, 2012).

To begin the players are each randomly issued one economic, two social and two cultural capital cards. In Bourdieu's terms, economic capital is money or other financial assets; social capital arises out of social connections and cultural capital arises out of behaviour, manners, demeanour, mode of speech, deportment, habits, preferences etc. For Bourdieu, all these forms of capital act as a currency for exchange. This is Bourdieu's fundamental insight; 'It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in *all* [emphasis added] its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory' (Bourdieu, 1986). Our failure to account for alternative forms of

capital blinds us, it is argued, to the consequences of cultural and social capital in our own lives and in the lives of our learners. This misrecognition is at the root of persistent social injustice and inequality because it allows it to continue unchallenged.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital is manifested as habitus. This is a complex notion. For the purposes of this game and to initiate trainees' journey towards an understanding of it, they were told that their hand of five cards determined their 'habitus' and was akin to 'who they were.' They were encouraged to choose a name that they felt reflected this habitus and to introduce themselves to the group in this guise, explaining the cards they held and embellishing with a life history if so desired. As an example, one player dealt the hand of heir to a dukedom, with knowledge of how to obtain controlled substances, on an income of £29,719 per year and with links to the DJ of a top nightclub called himself Jasper and adopted a 'posh' accent and a rebellious demeanour. This became his habitus, which along with the others in the game, was metaphorically carried into a series of four widely divergent social fields: a nightclub, a prison, an interview for a University place and an election campaign. Each of these fields had its own 'doxa' or set of rules which enabled the players to calculate their 'symbolic capital' based on the cards held. For Bourdieu, this symbolic capital is automatically generated from the habitus whenever an individual enters a field and is used to assign them their legitimate status there. In this way, it was demonstrated that habitus acts as a kind of 'credit card' for social status but one which changes in exchange value according to the particular field in which it is being used. Monetary prizes for high symbolic capital were issued. Any who accumulated enough wealth during the game had the opportunity to purchase



additional social and cultural capital as play unfolded. The doxa was deliberately weighted to favour wealthy, well connected individuals of a higher social class.

### **Methodology and findings**

The methodology employed was critical participatory action research. This entails 'collaborative commitment to engaging in iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to address untoward consequences of social practices.' (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2013, p. 313) This is congruent with the game because both call for a focus on social justice. I framed the game session as both a learning opportunity and a research activity and introduced it as 'an open communicative space,' in which the trainees' views about the game were sincerely sought in order to improve current and future iterations. I explained my hopes and expectations but also my eagerness to pursue findings that contradicted or complicated them.

The first group in this study was made up of ten women and six men, ranging from twenty-nine to fifty-five years of age and the second, six women and one man, aged between twenty-eight and forty-two. I articulated this to each group as an example of an 'opportunity sample' (Colman, 2008, loc. 853); not necessarily representative of the whole population of in-service, post-compulsory trainee teachers in England and therefore of arguable validity. Whilst more objectivist approaches to research would reject this method of sampling as not presenting generalisable findings, I explained that critical participatory action research rejects the notion of an external expert who enters a setting to record and represent what is happening. Instead it entails, 'the recognition of the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to

participate actively in all aspects of the research process thereby, 'owning the discourse: seizing the power!' (Herbert, 2005 in Kemmis et al., 2013, p. 419).

The sessions were an hour long and took place, one in the summer term and one in the autumn term of 2014. I issued a set of cards, a scorecard, a doxa for each field, some fake money and a printed set of rules to teams of three or four players. The cards carried QR codes with links to purpose-built websites, hosting support and extension materials (see example in Figure 1).



Figure 1

I also created a two minute video introduction to Bourdieu

<http://youtu.be/87BPL62wyyU> to be played at the start of the game (Figure 2).

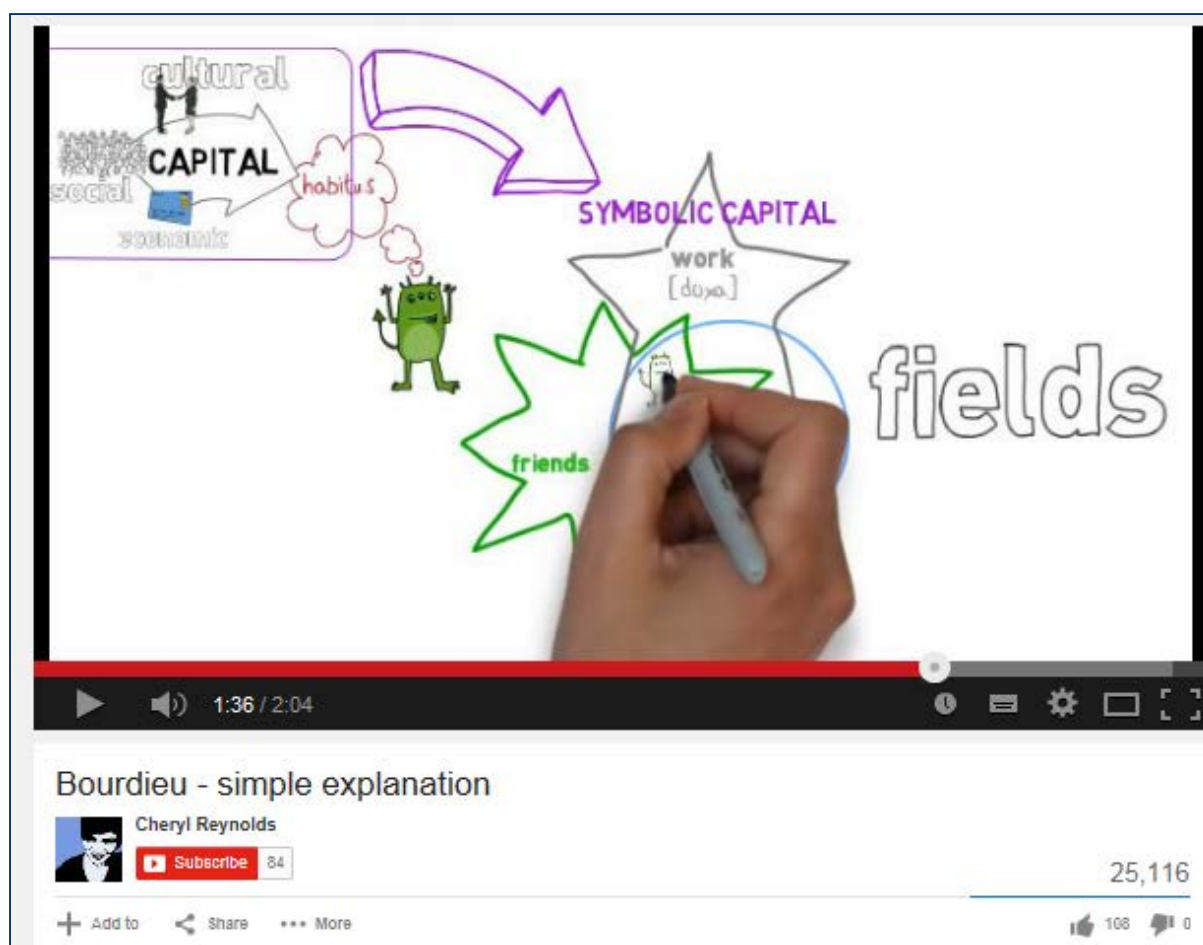


Figure 2

This was followed by a quick demonstration of the rules of play, also issued on a handout. Trainees then played the game for half an hour. I took note of the use of any novel terminology whilst they played. At close of play, a winner in each group was 'rewarded' with applause, allowed to join a 'club' of winners on a 'special' table and to purchase biscuits with their fake money. This was used as an opportunity to discuss 'symbolic violence:' exclusion, less favourable treatment or vilification of those with low symbolic capital.

To consolidate learning, students were given five minutes in silence to write down what was uppermost in their minds as a consequence of playing the game. Written impressions were shared with the group and included a sense of injustice and

applicability to their own life histories and those of their learners. The link between monetary reward and social/ cultural capital was recognised and decried. Also commented upon were ways in which the game *differed* from reality and further questions about the definitions of specialist terms. Two trainees commented on the effects of overlapping doxas when friendship groups are performed in classrooms or work-placements. These were impressive insights that showed a sophisticated engagement with theory and an application beyond the confines of the game. I then issued a piece of my own reflective writing that made use of Bourdieu to analyse a failed teaching experience in order to model theoretically informed writing.

We finished with a return to the idea of our 'open communicative space' of critical participatory action research, reviewing the experience and impact of the game to make it better and fairer in future. In each session, trainees felt that the gamified approach to teaching Bourdieu was successful. The first session was the larger of the two, with sixteen trainees in five teams of three or four participants. Whilst some teams made more progress than others, all were able to use at least some of the novel terminology by the end of the session. However, there remained some misconceptions for some participants at close of play. Some teams said they felt 'a bit at sea' and needed more explanation from the tutor. In light of this it was decided during the plenary of the first session that smaller groups with more tutor input would be fairer and more productive for all participants. A further suggestion was to play again in reconfigured groups to enable dissemination of insights. Acknowledgment of these immediate findings and the prospective impact on future work further illustrated the tenets of critical participatory action research and sought to model the role of 'teacher as researcher' to trainees.

The second iteration of the session was with a smaller group of seven learners, playing in two teams. This resulted in more consistently secure understanding of the theory for all participants by the end of the session. Across the two iterations of the game, there were forty-seven recorded instances of the use of novel terminology. Though not a complete record, the frequency and nature of exchanges is indicative of the looked-for social interactions outlined earlier in this paper. They clearly represented learning within the ZPD. Prime examples of utterances that revealed a growing confidence in using and questioning specialist terminology included;

*'Why does my accent give me less cultural capital than yours?' (Anna)*

*'You're in a prison now, buddy. Here, my habitus is king!' (Richard) [laughter]*

*'How come she gets to buy an appreciation of opera? Lisa's going to win it now. I'm not playing anymore, this is a stupid game.'* (Anna) *'Well that's the doxa, isn't it?'* (Lisa) [laughter]

What characterised these exchanges was a kind of mock indignation or triumph that is only really facilitated within this specialised atmosphere of game-play. A semi-self conscious use of novel terms showed trainees playfully rehearsing their new vocabulary. Other exchanges were rather more serious and reflective:

*'Is my habitus just the sum of my economic, social and cultural capital or is it something else? What is it, exactly?'* (Richard)

*'What forms does symbolic violence normally take then? What I'm thinking is... what I mean is... I'm thinking about my classroom and wondering if I'm guilty of symbolic violence on my students. That's scary.'* (Nicola)

*'Can we challenge the doxa if we think it is unfair? Is that in the rules? Can we change the doxa?'* (Catherine)

These more serious exchanges revealed fulfilment of the more ambitious aspiration of the game of enabling trainees to look differently at the social mores of their

classrooms. There were also instances of Bourdieu appearing in subsequent written work from trainees, including:

*This next lesson is one where I was beginning to think about the context of my learners. Who is this individual who comes into the classroom? What knowledge do they have? What is their context? In thinking about this, I found the work of Bourdieu ... really helped me think about how our social groups are distinguished and the types of groups my learners could belong to (Bourdieu, 1984). (Jane)*

*Sociologists have, for decades, referred to the social inequalities of the education system suggesting that it is those whose backgrounds provide them with the highest level of cultural capital that will receive the greatest rewards (Bourdieu, 1977, Sullivan, 2001, and Dunne and Gazeley, 2008.) A number of my learners feel they do not belong in FE/HE almost to the point of feeling like imposters. They are often the first in their generation to attend college or university and lack the social and cultural capital required to understand the systems in which they now find themselves. (Alix)*

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the use of a game-based approach to the delivery of theory in teacher education, recognising that, whilst vital, this is inherently challenging and prone to failure. It identifies gamification of theory as a productive strategy whereby trainees can engage with theoretical concepts in productive ways. Critical and learning theories were found to be extremely useful in informing the pedagogical approach, the game design, the strategy for its implementation and the methodology for its evaluation. The paper reports some encouraging preliminary findings around shifts both in trainees' understanding of the theory and in their response to the notion of theory in general. Ironically, this in itself may represent an increase in their own cultural capital within the academic field. The main conclusion of this study is to

recommend wider use of such strategies in the teaching of theory to resistant groups.

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