Escaping a Lecture: Utilizing a Digital Escape Room to Introduce the SAE for All Model

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

The experiential learning course for pre-service and alternatively certified school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers at North Carolina State University focuses heavily on the work-based learning component of SBAE, known as Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE). The current model, SAE for All (The National Council for Agricultural Education, n.d.), has been introduced early in the semester since its adoption by The National Council for Agricultural Education. This initial introduction has included a lecture and a worksheet where students explored the SAE for All Teacher Guide (The National Council for Agricultural Education, 2017). For the fall 2022 semester, the instructors wanted to be more intentional in having students move through the stages of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2015). After seeing a presentation at the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture conference (Riedel, 2022) and in an effort to also differentiate instruction (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005) and introduce gamification (Reiners & Wood, 2015) to their students, the instructors chose to introduce the SAE for All model through a digital escape room built in Google Slides.

How it Works

The digital escape room was created in Google Slides and began with a relatable scenario followed by a "room" where students had to find the embedded hyperlinks. The links led to a Google Form to enter the secret code to "unlock" the door and to six puzzles in separate Google Slides. Each puzzle was related to the SAE for All model or content found in the SAE for All Teacher Guide. The puzzles were designed to challenge students to identify information about SAE for All and then decode the answer from the puzzle that would be used as a "key" to escape the room. The puzzles were numbered and had to be entered chronologically into the Google Form "lock" in order to enter the next piece of the passcode to "unlock" the door.

The escape room was used with two sections of this course in fall of 2022. The in-person section contained 12 undergraduate students and the online section contained 26 students that were a mixture of undergraduate and graduate pre-service and current SBAE teachers. The activity was first used with the in-person section to answer questions and address any issues for students to successfully "escape". This strategy worked well, allowing instructors to clarify and fix several small items prior to assigning it to the online section. The following week, the digital escape room was assigned to the online section, where students had one week to complete it.

Results to Date and Implications

Out of the 38 combined students, 36 completed the activity and "escaped" the room. Several weeks after the assignment was completed, the instructors surveyed the students using an anonymous Google Form, receiving feedback from 26, which was mostly positive.

When asked for positives, many students indicated that they enjoyed being able to do puzzles and the change from their typical college classwork. One student from the online section shared that they enjoyed "The puzzle activity and the creativity of the activities." noting that "It is nice to step away from typical papers and discussion posts." Another stated, "I'm personally not very techy so the Google interactive escape room was a cool element. I liked how it was like pieces to a puzzle." Many shared that they would love to learn how to make a digital escape room to use with their students. One participant shared, "I really enjoyed the activity and it gave

me a great idea that I can incorporate in my future classroom. I thought it was fun and engaging and very memorable!"

When asked about areas of improvement, students from both sections identified that they did not like the additional step of having to "make a copy" of the puzzle documents to be able to edit and decode the answers. Several participants from both sections indicated that a specific puzzle tripped them up and it needed more clarification on the instruction page. Since the in-person class was only given 30 minutes of class time to work, several students shared that it felt time consuming because they were unable to finish it during class. One student suggested, "Maybe make it a little bit shorter considering how short class time is or doing it over 2 class periods." One student that did not successfully "escape" the room shared they chose to not finish the activity stating, "I also did not like that you could not submit the next puzzle on the Google Form without having the correct answer. I ended up leaving it incomplete even though I did have some answers because I could not move on and add what I understood for partial credit."

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Overall, this activity was well received by students and the instructors plan to continue to use this activity in the future and incorporate digital escape rooms into their other courses. This digital escape room was an effective way to familiarize students with the SAE for All model for both in-person and online classes. As the instructors reflect on this experience and the feedback from their students, offering training on how to make an escape room could be a useful topic in a teaching methods course or in a seminar during student teaching.

For others considering incorporating digital escape rooms into your courses, be sure to give yourself plenty of time to build it. To start, consider watching some YouTube videos or reading blogs from secondary teachers for ideas and best practices for the mechanics of a digital escape room. Think through the learning objectives you want your students to achieve through their completion of the digital escape room, then plan ahead by designing the questions and puzzles before building the actual escape room and lock. When designing puzzles and clues, be as specific as possible without giving away the answers. When setting up the puzzles within different Google Slides or Google Docs consider changing the share settings to "force copy" so students can automatically edit the files instead of having to "make a copy" themselves. When you have finished building your digital escape room, consider having someone with limited knowledge of the topic complete it prior to having students attempt it to gauge how long it may take your students to complete and to identify potential barriers for completion. When implementing a digital escape room with an in-person course, be prepared to provide encouragement when students initially push back against the challenge.

Costs and Resources Needed

The major resource needed to build a digital escape room is time. While the initial input of time can be significant, it took the instructors over ten hours to build the activity, once it is established it should not need a significant time investment in the future. Students will need a general understanding of escape rooms and Google Workspace to avoid unnecessary questions and frustrations during the activity.

References

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