

Analysis of the Alignment of Classcraft's SEL Environment and CASEL SEL Standards

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Classcraft is a game-based system for organizing classrooms in ways that promote caring, teamwork, critical thinking and decision making, leadership, responsibility, self-management, and goal-setting. In this way, it can be an ideal complement to an existing Tier 1/Universal SEL curriculum/skill building process, and, coupled with such a curriculum, a synergistic vehicle for incorporating an advanced version of PBIS.

Classcraft is a deep, sophisticated, nuanced system that I cannot pretend to have fully explored, so my comments need to be qualified by this caveat. There were some features I was not able to fully access and perhaps some I even missed. With that partial disclaimer, I will proceed to elaborate on my analysis.

CASEL Alignment

There are two aspects of CASEL's SEL framework to which a particular program or approach can be aligned: SEL skill building (focusing on the so-called "CASEL 5" skills), and creating a climate in which SEL skills can be developed within a positive, pro-social framework. Classcraft is not a program, but rather an "approach." It is not a self-contained system for teaching SEL skills but it affords a viable, systematic way in which educators can create a climate within which SEL can thrive, and within which specific SEL skills can be emphasized, practices, and further developed.

Additionally, its ability to provide tailoring to individual students, provide specific feedback to both students and educators, and track and report behaviors over time make it ideally suited as a vehicle for Tier 2 interventions. This dovetails with the Quest function within Classcraft. Quests allow teams and classes to cooperate on learning tasks, but also afford options for individualizing pathways for particular students, in ways that they are not aware is different from their classmates (or, put another way, students assume everyone's pathways is individualized and so the fact that theirs might be focused on remediation of a Tier 2-related SEL deficiency would not be obvious). The publication of Quests focused on improvement of one or more SEL skills will be a major advance for Classcraft in serving as a vehicle for Tier 2 SEL support. (Similarly, the development of SEL Quest-related videos/webinars will help make this more accessible to teachers.) There is no doubt that a parallel argument can be made for Tier 3, where Classcraft's game format may be particularly engaging for students with learning or behavior challenges.

There are two areas where I believe Classcraft particularly supports SEL skill development while not teaching it explicitly. The first of these is critical thinking and problem solving. Within the Classcraft system, students have to make many decisions about their character/avatar, how to use their powers, points, Gold Pieces, etc., what to do for themselves, what to do for classmates, their goals/aspirations, and much more. This leads to the second, and most impressive, skill development area: learning from experiences. There are various ways to express this—overcoming obstacles, bouncing back from setbacks, understanding how to use second chances (which abound in the Classcraft environment because, like in video games, it's better to have students “restart” than be discouraged and “quit” the game), appreciating response-costs, learning from “mistakes.”

To those that feel that a “restart” is not realistic because life does not give “restarts,” I would say, first, that school is supposed to be a learning environment and restarts—as we see in video games-- are essential springboards for young people to achieve to new “levels,” and, second, life does give restarts (it is the basis of our judicial system) and it is better to experience restarts—and subsequent new learning and

new pathways-- for smaller things, in the relatively protected school classroom context, than for larger life setbacks in less protected situations.

Classcraft, SEL, Bullying, and PBIS

I spent considerable time with the Bully Prevention and PBIS modules because they connect implicitly and explicitly with CASEL work and SEL concerns. “Well Played” shows a sophisticated understanding of bullying that would allow teachers to operationalize best practices in the bully/violence prevention fields. Using a collaborative model, it begins by building up teachers’ knowledge base broader than bullying prevention (p. 8): climate, belonging, caring, helping, altruism. It portrays bullying as a collective issue, not as a person-centered problem focused on bullies and victims.

The PBIS guide actually discusses SEL and its connection to classroom management and climate more explicitly than is the case in the Bullying guide. At a level of concept, the PBIS guide recognizes that SEL skills are at the foundation of positive behavior and therefore should be the kinds of competencies identified within PBIS systems. It explicates the need for a Tier 1 approach to building SEL skills—something that is not present in PBIS, and is not a “claim” that Classcraft seems to be making, appropriately so.

In the PBIS guide, there is the best statement I saw about the alignment of Classcraft the SEL concerns:

“Through PBIS and Classcraft, it’s possible to develop positive school and classroom social cultures. It’s essential to give regular, frequent, and positive acknowledgement of successful academic and social behavior; involve students and community members, as well as faculty; and ensure that adults model the same behavior and values that are expected of students.” p. 13

I also found the most succinct statement about the nature of how Classcraft can be a vehicle for changing students' experience of their classrooms and schools:

“Classcraft is a gamification tool that reimagines the experience of coming to school. Based in the browser, it acts as a layer over a teacher’s existing curriculum with the goal of streamlining classroom management, gamifying lesson plans, and rewiring the social dynamics and culture of the classroom.

The result is a “role-playing game” that students and teachers participate in together throughout the school year. Students play on a team and become Warriors, Mages, and Healers, each with distinct roles and responsibilities. As teachers go about their lessons, students gain Experience Points (XP) for any positive behavior the teacher wants to encourage. By accumulating XP, students “level up” and unlock “powers,” or privileges that help them personally or academically or that benefit their team. When students demonstrate negative behaviors that the teachers want to discourage, teachers remove their Health Points (HP). When a student loses all their HP, they “fall in battle” and receive a “sentence,” or task they must complete, and their teammates lose a little HP as well. This teaches students accountability to one another rather than the teacher. Thus, supporting their teammates becomes the key to their own success.” p. 17

It is important and noteworthy that when the Utah experts commented on the PBIS FAQs, they did not mention SEL. Classcraft’s interpretation of PBIS and its understanding of the connection to SEL is advanced and enlightened. A Classcraft-informed PBIS

implementation would also involve systematic integration of SEL in Tier 1. It also could result in the adoption of SEL skills as behavior targets, without the corresponding developmental instructional focus, but Classcraft is clear about what best practice for PBIS should look like, and it looks like a PBIS-SEL integration.

A Final Thought About Implementation

I am not a video game player or enthusiast. It seems to me that a “gaming mindset” is important for the successful, and optimal, use of the extraordinary array of features built into Classcraft. Buddying with someone who “gets it” would greatly facilitate uptake and the speed of use of the sophisticated capabilities of Classcraft to model almost any classroom organization and management intervention that one would wish to. In particular, and for those who may not be familiar with nuanced video games, providing those new to Classcraft with walkthroughs of Quests would be important. On a final note, I will say that from the time I signed up with Classcraft, as any outside user would, I received emails and offers of support that would have been helpful and suggest a clear understanding of how Classcraft ultimately will spread from successful user to successful user.