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Campfire Talk Game, An Unsupervised Intervision Game For Students And Staff

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Campfire Talk game, an unsupervised intervision game for students and staff.

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Workshop overview

Are you witnessing students facing concerns, difficulties, and problems throughout their educational journey? Perhaps you know PhDs, lecturers, or support staff who encounter challenges in their educational, research, or teaching paths. Openly addressing these issues can prove beneficial in all of these scenarios! While coaching is a potential solution, it can be time-consuming and demanding, right? Instead, let them have a Campfire Talk: a non-intrusive and socially safe serious game that requires no supervision. It provides a platform for discussing struggles that in practice are often difficult to address or overlooked but can deeply affect individual or group behavior. During this workshop, participants will have the opportunity to experience the game firsthand, followed by an exploration of its underlying mechanisms and potential application in their own educational settings. An open-source version of this game will be available for participants.

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Learning outcomes

In this Campfire Talk workshop, participants will:

- Recognize shared struggles and challenges in their educational, research, or teaching journeys.
- Experience a coaching tool that requires minimal time or skills from supervisors.
- Understand the benefits of open discussions, the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for discussing struggles, and the positive impact from the process.
- Gain practical experience with the Campfire talk and have insight into the use of ludodidactics in the design of the game.
- Engage in reflective discussions, analyzing the game from their perspective, but also considering its potential impact on students, PhDs, and staff in their own educational settings.

Workshop Activities

The game is suitable for researchers, educational staff, students, and in general, anyone that has experienced issues in professional or educational settings.

The session starts with introductions and an explanation of the game's background, followed by a round to play the game. The facilitator will arrange the materials needed, and explain the roles and steps involved.

Participants will be divided into groups of 4-7 individuals. Each player assigned a specific role (Adventurer, Explorer, Fire Master or Logbooker). The Adventurer shares an issue from their education or research that they feel comfortable discussing. The Explorers ask open-ended questions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The Fire Master moderates the conversation, and the Logbooker records insights derived from the discussion, which will be shared with the Adventurer.



(Figure: visual of the Campfire talk game)

By utilizing own issues, participants experience the game's impactful coaching qualities directly. Following this experience, we shift to a metacognitive reflective perspective. We examine the game from the participants' viewpoint, as well as from the perspectives of students, PhDs, or lecturers in a typical educational setting. This discussion explores contextual differences among participants. Additionally, we briefly discuss the ludodidactic design and its implementation in our institute.



Game Rationale

Burnout, anxiety, loneliness, and other mental health issues are a big problem in universities (Boston 2021). Many students in our university are struggling alone, with issues like those of their peers. They are unable to share their worries and struggles with fellow students or supervisors and have difficulty asking for help. Supervisors are often unaware of these struggles or shy to act on them.

Discussing struggles is hard and it takes courage to share and open up. These conversations need social safety, dialogical skills, empathy, awareness, vocabulary, and other factors. Engineering education is not characterized by providing students space and skills to openly discuss these things.

This inspired the creation of the Campfire Talk game, co-created with students and developed using ludodidactics, a didactical approach to developing teaching and learning behavior based on game principles (Renger and Hoogendoorn 2019). It is a serious game, which aim to create an environment where the players voluntarily want to learn and use the knowledge and skills. It creates a way of being able to do something without having to master it (Renger and Hoogendoorn 2019).

In the design phase of the Campfire Talk game, we deconstructed having a good conversation into process steps and helpful tools. Next, we reconstructed that in a way that people with no or limited conversational skills can have conversations together wherein emotions are discussed, and self and peer coaching occurs. The following six game mechanics make this work. (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004; Renger and Hoogendoorn 2019)

(I) The theme of an adventure and a campfire is a powerful metaphor: since ancient history, people have had different kinds of conversations around a campfire (Dunbar 2014). It normalizes running into issues if you reframe it as an adventure.

(II) Identity: Players personalize their game by choosing what they want to talk about. Therefore, the topic is always relevant to the player.

(III) Roleplay: Players are assigned a role and adopt its corresponding attitude.

(IV) Performance support: Players are helped in their role by tools such as a guide with open questions, a logbook, and tips.

(V+VI) Helping and Knowledge Sharing: players are put in a position where they can help each other out by sharing.

The effect of the game is that it creates a socially safe space and facilitates having a good conversation between peers where both introverted (quieter) and extroverted (talkative) have space to talk. It names and normalizes issues and accompanying emotions. Participants feel relieved that they are not alone in struggling with an issue. It shows that there is a wide spectrum of reactions and solutions to similar problems, encouraging and empowering them to see new ways of dealing with their issues. Players also experience respect and sympathy for others when they understand them better, possibly benefiting empathy skills.

Take home message for participants.

Through the workshop, participants will gain firsthand experience and access to a coaching approach that requires minimal time and skills from supervisors. This coaching method empowers students, PhDs, and staff to effectively address the challenges and issues they encounter in their educational, research, or teaching journeys. Furthermore, participants will have the opportunity to access an open-source version of the Campfire Talk game, enabling them to continue utilizing this valuable tool in their own context.

Participants' Insights and Experience

This edition of The Campfire Talk was met with collective enthusiasm, evident in the meaningful conversations it sparked across the room. The game, now in its latest stage of development, led to discussions about personal struggles about various topics, including course design or supervision. As one participant expressed, *"It's really nice because I felt free to talk about my 'dirty laundry,' even with strangers."* Participants were deeply engaged, with several groups continuing their discussions even after the official workshop time ended.

Upon reflecting on their experience, attendees highlighted the game's universal applicability. Many noted that it could assist not only in professional settings but also personally. Quotes such as *"I think it would help everyone, in any setting"* and *"Everyone should play it; it would make them a better person... Or at least better at asking questions or listening"* were collected. Some participants appreciated the specific challenges and skills associated with each role in the game, such as: asking questions, moderating discussions, and active listening. For instance, explorers were encouraged to ask open questions instead of giving advice, fostering a specific skill set that the game provided materials to practice.

Implementation

It was widely acknowledged that The Campfire Talk presents a relevant solution to a latent and apparent need across numerous universities. Attendees expressed keen interest in the game's development and how they could implement it in their institutions. The enthusiasm was palpable; three individuals volunteered to translate the game into their native languages, one offered to printing overseas for sustainable production, and others contemplated introducing it to their student, PhD, or staff groups.

Significance to Engineering Education

The Campfire Talk provides a safe space for exploring struggles freely, incorporating ludodidactic elements that facilitate this exploration in a structured and accessible manner, promoting empathy and understanding. Witnessing the impactful responses and the game's ability to touch upon the basic human need for connectedness, it becomes evident that it is a powerful tool applicable in diverse settings and groups.

For those interested, the open-source version of The Campfire Talk is available on our website: [Link to the website](#)

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