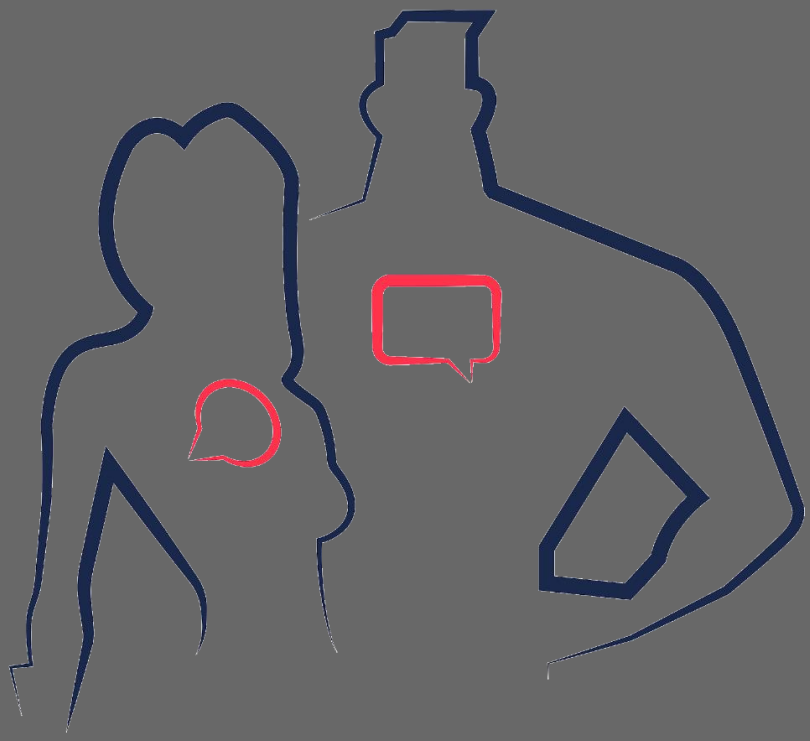
- A PUBLICATION OF SENTENTIA GAMIFICATION-



DISCUSSION HERO

A Gamified Discussion Board

Created By

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The Idea

Discussion Hero is a gamified discussion board where students become heroes and villains in a tough, yet still respectful, battle of ideas. This puts the debate aspect of discussions boards front and center by giving students an understanding of what is expected of them in a creative and entertaining way.

"I think the argumentative nature made the discussion posts more entertaining and interactive."

– Northwestern University Graduate Student

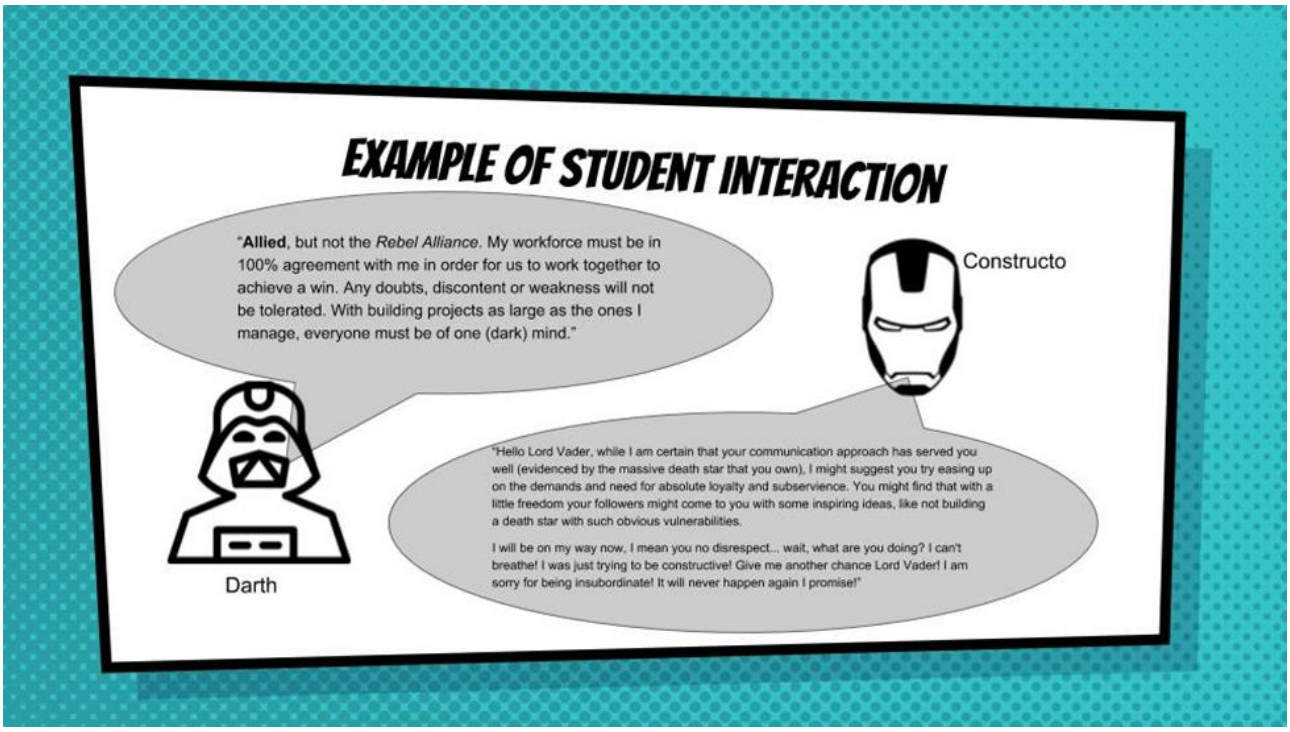
About NW SPS

About the Northwestern University School of Professional Studies

Northwestern University School of Professional Studies students are part of a unique and distinguished university community. They learn in a supportive, collaborative environment in courses — offered online and in the evenings on Northwestern's Chicago and Evanston campuses — that enable them to balance their personal and professional lives with the pursuit of learning. Classes in SPS degree and certificate programs are taught by some of the university's most respected and talented teachers — scholars and professionals who value the diversity, energy and creativity of our students.

One of the 12 colleges and schools of Northwestern University, SPS and adult learning have been a core part of Northwestern's mission for more than 80 years. SPS is enmeshed in many parts of the University — sharing faculty members, creating innovative programs and setting the standard for higher education for adults. SPS students become part of a university ranked among the nation's best universities with top medical, law and business schools, and a faculty that has made pioneering contributions to materials science, nanotechnology, economics, the humanities, and more.

The Need



Discussion boards in online courses and trainings can be hit or miss, even when instructors design carefully worded prompts. While discussion boards are often meant for vigorous discourse and a variety of opinions and positions, some students simply do not want to go against the majority and tend to agree even if they do not feel the same way.

Many faculty have shared with their learning designers how they wish students would engage with each other in a more dynamic exchange of ideas. As a result, we explored various ways to gamify discussion boards to do just that.

We set out to find a way to have students understand what their roles should be in a discussion in a creative and entertaining way; one that would allow them to clearly see what was expected of them.

Discussion Hero takes this concept and places student participants into Hero/Villain roles that bring the debate aspect front and center, while setting strong etiquette guidelines, thus ensuring respectful discourse.

The Process

The Use of Superheroes

The reasoning behind the use of superheroes and gamification was based on the need to approach discussions in a new and creative way.

Students normally understand that heroes and villains often disagree, which allows them to get in the mindset that they need to have a back and forth of opposing ideas.

The use of the leaderboard puts a competitive spin on the discussion without making competition the focal point.

Students can use it to track their progress, and also encourage those who are on their "side" to participate.

This helps bridge a sense of community among the class, one that spreads beyond the roles.

Awarded a Provost Fellowship

Discussion Hero was awarded a Provost's Fellowship in 2018 to help with the cost of creating the final product.

The activity is being developed in several stages:

- The initial web based development using HTML and CSS
- A prototype and pilot version used in an actual online course in 2018
- Currently it is in the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) creation phase which entails programming the activity using JavaScript.

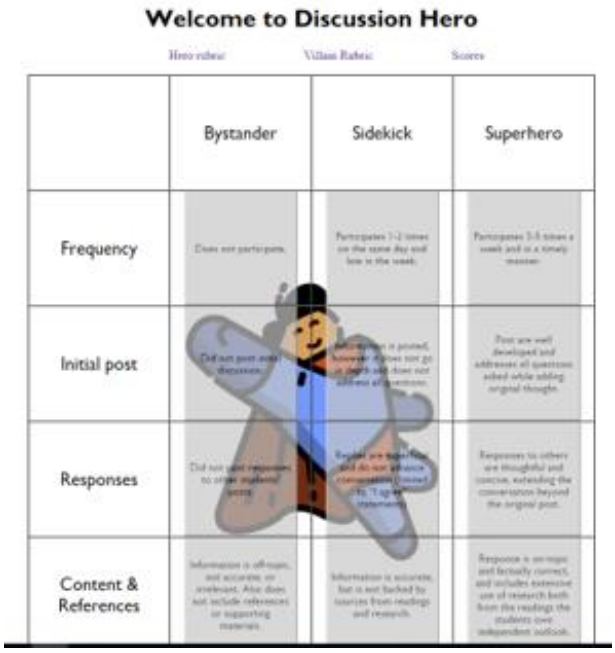
This programming will allow it to be integrated into the Canvas LMS at Northwestern University for the next phase of development as an automated version.

Automation will ensure greater adoption by faculty and programs at Northwestern.

"In choosing a villain, I felt a bit more comfortable making pointed statements without seeming overly critical."

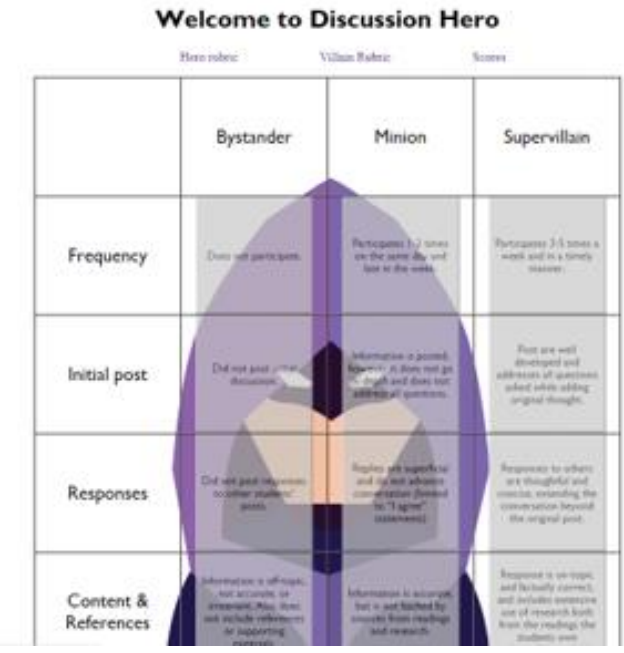
– Northwestern University Graduate Student

The Results



A combination of survey answers and comparison of discussion topics within the course from the first pilot produced the following results:

- 26% increase in participation
- 67% of respondents claimed they were motivated to participate more
- 90% of the class said they would like or be willing to use the activity in other courses



What's Next?

While the original proof of concept was created in a spreadsheet in 2017, the **Discussion Hero** activity has developed and grown at a rapid pace.

A more visual component will be added, with the interconnected avatars appearing on screen in a way that resembles Northwestern's existing Nebula interface.

With the help of Northwestern's IT Department, the final product will be a more integrated LTI within the Canvas LMS.

By automating much of the grading and improving the look and feel of the interface, learning designers will be able to offer Discussion Hero as an alternative for faculty hoping to create vigorous and critical discussions through gamification of their discussion boards.

Note: Faculty will always be able to override the scores if necessary.

Discussion Hero was piloted in one graduate course in spring, 2018. It was used in one discussion during week seven of a ten week course. There are two additional instances since then. The results of those are still being gathered.

"... enjoyed the low risk, competitive aspects."

– Northwestern University Graduate Student

About the Creators

Jacob Guerra-Martinez

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Website:
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Before moving to Chicago from a small town in Texas (right at the southern tip), Jacob worked as an Instructional Designer for almost eight years at a local community college. That role allowed him to collaborate with faculty members in the development of online courses for various programs, thus expanding the educational opportunities to students of all types throughout the region.

He is currently a Learning Designer at Northwestern University, where he develops online courses and also co-designed **Discussion Hero**, a gamified discussion board.

Martinez graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Radio-Television-Film from the University of Texas at Austin, and then went on to earn a Master's degree in Computer Education and Cognitive Systems from the University of North Texas. That program is where he got his first taste of distance learning, and from then on he was hooked.

Since 2001, Dr. David Noffs has taught in the Interactive Arts and Media department at Columbia College Chicago. In late 2015, Dr. Noffs joined Northwestern University as a faculty developer in the School of Professional Studies teaching Information Design and Strategy.

He designed and taught a completely new online graduate course in the School of Professional Studies called Learning Environment Design.

In 2017, he joined Northwestern as a full time Learning Designer where he has continued his pioneering work in online teaching, including co-designing Discussion Hero, a gamified discussion board which was awarded a Provost's Digital Learning Fellowship from Northwestern in 2018.

His course was recently showcased by Northwestern as an example of high-quality online pedagogy, design, and online facilitation.

Dr. David Noffs

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