

A Scholarly Character Sheet to Frame Learning Activities and Improve Engagement

Abstract: Character sheets are an essential element of game design for tabletop role-playing games. They can be adapted to frame a series of learning activities and to improve participants' engagement. In this study, they are used at the beginning of a five-session graduate seminar on library instruction to assess the participants' knowledge and present the curriculum. They are also used as wrap-up at the end of the final session to measure the participants' progress. Besides providing a better assessment of the group by the instructor, the character sheet activity improves comprehension of the content and offers an engaging opportunity to start the seminar and create a personal connection with the students. Through objectivation, a theoretical framework, I argue that character sheets can support metacognitive abilities like self-authorship, self-determination, and a growth mindset. By framing and matching the content with the participants' personal journey, character sheets provide gamified syllabi to improve motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in a series of workshop activities.

Keywords: Active learning; game-based learning; tabletop role-playing game; character sheet; engagement; framed learning; self-assessment; self-authorship; self-determination; growth mindset

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Gamification in Library Instruction

Games have been used as teaching tools for a long time. Since the 2010s, the concept of gamification has been increasingly popular in all kinds of learning environments, including library instruction. Most of the time, it consists in using game mechanics or a playful attitude to enhance an educational activity. The main functions of gamification are increasing motivation and engagement in the activity and offering a more pleasant learning experience (Haasio, Madge, and Harviainen 2021). Games can be used in non-traditional settings like public libraries or, in the case of the activity presented in this paper, in research libraries (Nicholson 2015, 141).

Some activities constitute a completely framing immersive activity; for example, escape rooms in the library (Pinard 2020). In the case of the scholarly character sheet (SCS) activity described in this paper, the frame is simpler because there are few emotions at play, and also there is no experience of liminality or separation with the real, mundane world. Contrary to other role-playing in the classroom, this activity does not use emblematic and projective identities (also defined as *avatars*, like mage or healer) or an external badging system (Sanchez, Young, and Jouneau-Sion 2017).

We can identify three kind of selves at play in the SCS activity. First, a *current self*, which is the one assessed during the activity. Second, an *ideal self*, which can be imagined as the current self through the bullet points, check boxes and publications fully checked. It can be compared to the Idealized Self in Bowman's "Nine Types of Player-Characters" (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 403). Finally, a *prescribed self*, which is proposed by the instructor. In this prescribed self, the participants can have choices of development. Some parts are mandatory and some parts are optional.

The design of the SCS activity could be defined as *roleplayification*, a narrower form of gamification using specific features of role-playing like the act of taking on a social role (Hammer et al. 2018, 288–89). In the SCS activity, the participants are invited to curate their researcher online identity, to develop their information literacy skills and to define their role in the academic publishing ecosystem.

1.2 Role-playing Yourself for Learning

Many active learning activities are *role-taking*, where students assume a role to make strategic choices without playing a personality or intense social interaction (Hammer et al. 2018, 288–89). These games answer the need for purely technical simulations or functional professional situations. For example, most escape rooms, despite the stressful time management involved, are classified in this category. In this sense, the SCS activity is a role-taking activity.

Within this category, *role-play* is a more specific type of activity. It involves immersive self-play with a personality, where students have to apply cognitive knowledge in an emotional situation. For example, there is abundant literature on simulated patients or standardized patients in health education (Hallinger and Wang 2020). Role-play can also be used in oral communication lessons, such as negotiation or law courses. Under this definition, the SCS activity is a low-emotional role-playing activity.

In some role-playing activities, students play other characters with different abilities, social roles or personalities. *Reacting to the Past* is an activity replaying true or pseudo-historical scenes (Carnes 2014). Some activities consist in playing *ludic tabletop role-playing games* in or out of the classroom, focusing their goals on language learning or oral expression, for example (Lépinard and Vaquiéri 2019), or focusing on psychotherapeutic interventions to develop psycho-social skills like listening, empathy, self-reflection, etc. (Daniau 2016). In this regard, the SCS is not any of these activities.

A final category consists of active learning activities using *tabletop role-playing game devices*. For instance, dice are used to explain symmetry in chemistry (Grafton 2011) or dragons are used to explain phylogenetics in anthropology (Cruz 2017). There is no role at play. The SCS activity belongs to this kind of active learning activities. Furthermore, there is not much literature on this use of character sheets in educational contexts, which makes the SCS activity a unique contribution and approach to active learning.

1.3 History of Character Sheet Designs

Objective and explicit recordings of achievements and status were in use long before the creation of character sheets. The first historical use of a numbered score to quantify a skill may have been in the Imperial Chinese examinations at the time of the Song Dynasty (Magone 2014). The Boy Scouts, meanwhile, reused and gamified a military design: the collection of badges as marks of achievement (Jang, Johnson, and Kim 2012). Furthermore, since the 19th century, wargaming exercises have employed record tables to track the ability and status of military units in the field (Vego 2012).

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson authored *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, a fantasy game that evolved from miniature wargames and two proto-megagames named *Braunstein* (Wesely 1968) and *Blackmoor Campaign* (Arneson 1971). *D&D* was the first of an ever-growing family of games named tabletop role-playing games. Oddly enough, neither the first editions

of *D&D* nor *Braunstein* nor *Blackmoor* provided any personal character sheets to players (Boggs 2020). The need for such a device soon became important, however, and the player community quickly created and published the first character sheets. Tinkering to improve the original designs of the game was very common. These sheets combined the game design elements of quantification of skills, badge collection and resource tracking (Peterson 2012, sec. 5.9.1). Thereby, they centered gameplay around the characters and their possible evolution.

With *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976) and the more popular *RuneQuest* (1978), character sheets started to include a long list of precise skills, ranked with percentages. This game design approach lasted for decades, sometimes developing into extremely precise calculations like the careers of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986), the labyrinthine Optional Skills Laws of *Rolemaster Companion II* (1987), or the network tree of the Skill Web in *Shadowrun* 2nd ed. (1992). Some games innovated by creating group sheets (*Ars Magica* 1987) or designing complete notebooks in which players could write down every detail of a character's journey (*The Sailor Moon Role-Playing Game and Resource Book* 2000). Notably, the character sheet became an iconic and staple item of most tabletop role-playing game. Its popularity even extended to the character panels of video games and to personalized sports training sheets.

The main function of a character sheet is to record key information by quantifying the character and tracking abilities, resources, powers, flaws, etc. It can serve as well as list assets and relations; collected treasures; and heroic achievements of the player's character. Its elements structure the activity and the keys to solving it (Beattie 2016; Konzack 2013; Morningstar 2014). The character sheet is also a paratext of an activity, as defined by Gérard Genette (1987, 7–10), acting as a companion document to enhance, comment on or frame the activity (Jara 2013). An indie practice of designing "character keepers" was recently described and contextualized by Hermann and Reininghaus (2021).

1.4 Scholarly Character Sheet

The scholarly character sheet used and discussed in this paper is based on role-taking. It is not strictly qualified as a role-playing activity because it lacks emotion, decision-making, and social interaction. However, it invites participants to reflect on the challenges posed to their *current self*, their *ideal self*, and a *prescribed self* that is proposed by the instructor and the SCS (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 401, 405). In feedback, one participant shared that the SCS inspired them "to complete it and score a lot of publications."

A similar character sheet, nicknamed "Data & Devices," is also used in a data science workshop at the Brookens Library, University of Illinois Springfield (Barber 2020). It uses the layout of a *D&D* 5th edition character sheet, sorts 22 skills into 6 categories, and offers text boxes for Goals, Badges and Reflection. Another, lighter sheet is used for the purpose of tracking progress in a Library and Information Science tabletop game at The University of Western Ontario (VanderSchans, Mayhew, and Cornwell 2020). For describing the player, not the character played, the Larper: The Pretense character sheet is also an interesting tool to help in self-assessing strengths and weaknesses as a live-action role-playing game practitioner (Montola 2020).

1.5 Copy, Combine, Transform

Taking inspiration from tabletop role-playing game designers, most of the elements of the ludic character sheet were recombined to help introduce a series of workshops about library instruction (Illingworth and Wake 2021). Nicknamed “Scholarly Character Sheet” (SCS), this activity was introduced in Fall 2017 in my seminar *PLU6058 – Rechercher et exploiter la documentation*.¹ The seminar consists of five workshops lasting five weeks (three hours per week) and aims at upgrading graduate students’ skills and knowledge about searching, assessing, citing, and organizing their lectures. Since 2006, the seminar has been held two or three times per year, with 20 to 40 students each time.

My first purpose was to design a short and fun introductory activity to alleviate the banality of the syllabus. The syllabus aims at matching the students’ needs to the course content and also at establishing a form of contract. The SCS is a kind of passport into the seminar (Rient 2014). If a syllabus is written and presented in a warm and friendly tone, the students gain the impression that the instructor is motivated and approachable, and that the learning activity will be easier (Harnish and Bridges 2011). To produce more fun, I reused some iconic existing elements of game layout from *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) to describe the abilities, and of the Sanity track of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981).

The objectives of the seminar are very heterogeneous (e.g., theoretical knowledge, good practices, methods, know-how) and an activity was needed to frame them. Although the seminar is scripted from the basic to the most advanced notions, and from the general notion to the specific ones, it needed a frame that would turn a discrete series of sub-activities and teaching elements into a continuous path (Beattie 2016).

Another purpose was to assess the students’ prior knowledge and skills. For a practical seminar, with a lot of methodology and software manipulation, it was very important to identify individual strengths or weaknesses and also have an idea of the general level of the group.

A final purpose was to create a connection with the students. With the SCS, the instructor and the students discover who they are and where they are, and enjoy an engaging and safe icebreaker activity.

2. DESIGN INTENTIONS

2.1 Explicit Skills in a Framework

2.1.1 Listing Learning Goals for Objectivation

Sometimes learning objective achievements are too elusive or too distant (Northcraft, Schmidt, and Ashford 2011). The SCS clarifies the learning goals and the success criteria. The seminar comprises many small and sometimes very diverse learning objectives. With the SCS, it is possible to list more than 50 heterogeneous items with check boxes, rankings, etc. The SCSs layout is visually appealing and enjoins students to mark boxes while reminding them of key notions to be acquired. This series of teasers is meant to spark curiosity and excitement, but also set high expectations. More broadly, these explicit assessments and progress are based on objectivation. This is an education concept that explicitly identifies, names and encodes the notions to be remembered. It is a selective and orderly ranking process based on semantic

¹ Translation: “Searching for and Managing Documentation.” <https://bib.umontreal.ca/multidisciplinaire/plu6058>

memory, instead of emotional or procedural memory (Bissonnette and Richard 2001, 76–77).

Visualizing all the objectives should allow the students to gauge the global framework of the seminar, manage their time and measure progress. Also, they should be able to easily match and pair their own personal profile and needs to the learning journey (Daniau 2016). Through this feeling of control, the intention is to boost their intrinsic motivation and autonomy as well as to stimulate a critical-thinking attitude toward the curriculum (Bélair 2015). I noted that, with the SCS, the students asked more questions about the content of the seminar than before, when they tended to ask more questions about the evaluation and the mandatory assignments.

2.1.2 From Metacognition to Growth Mindset

The SCS is a guided self-assessment activity designed to challenge perceived identity and ideal identity. Because it is very specific and objective, students are supposed to have less opportunity to deny that they do not know a concept or to overestimate their skills, which is a common learning problem, especially for information literacy and information retrieval (Mahmood 2016). The activity is conducted in a playful tone in the expectation of helping students see and accept their learning gaps. This process is a self-reflection and an ordering exercise, allowing a possible personal narrative to emerge (Murray 2015, 114–15). Thus, by role-playing themselves, the students have the opportunity to create links and build a sense of self-authorship on their learning journey (Baxter Magolda 2009; King and Siddiqui 2011, 9–11). Because it encourages metacognitive reflection on the seminar, the SCS activity is meant to push the students to frame the knowledge to be learned, the practices to be developed and the ethical values to be updated. It helps them to better engage with the content and choose how to absorb it. These are theoretical assumptions and expectations that are not backed by solid evidence. Thereby, the SCS activity could be considered as an act of creative exploration and identification with another version of oneself. The intent is that, by underscoring students' current shortcomings, the activity will provide them with an ideal near-future self to be attained, at their own pace and with their own priorities.

These learning values are rooted in a more general value of a growth mindset: a belief that abilities and skills can be improved with time, practice and hard work (Barnes, Fives, and Coombs 2018, 51). A growth mindset can be developed by monitoring and assessing performance to identify how one can improve the next time. This is currently a debated concept, but one key point consists in creating an environment to support the mindset (Porter et al. 2021). In this regard, the design and implementation of the SCS activity are intended to encourage a growth mindset. Furthermore, the gameplay of many tabletop role-playing games follows the same growth-mindset value. Usually a group of player characters plays together over several sessions, following a narrative campaign and growing in powers and abilities. This dynamic is written in most of the rulebooks and it is also a type of gameplay that became naturally dominant in the hobby.

These learning values are also rooted in another, broader learning value: self-determination. This is the belief that each person has the ability to make choices and manage their own life (Wehmeyer et al. 2017, 4, 9). Interestingly, the gameplay of a lot of tabletop role-playing games follows the same self-determination value. As demonstrated in adventure gamebooks of the 1970s and '80s, this value seems to have been linked to a "cultural ascent. . . of the notions of agency, liberty, subjectivity and selfhood" (Cook 2021).

2.2 Gamified Journey

2.2.1 Curating the Elements to Boost Engagement

As an active learning activity, the SCS provides an immediate positive outcome and offers clear, authentic and relevant challenges. Focused on assessment, the SCS offers rich content with plenty of small tasks, a little uncertainty, and rapid feedback. These features are designed to increase students' engagement by sending a positive and gamified motivational message. The instructor's facilitation role is essential to this activity and, as explained above, has been designed to foster student choices and a growth mindset.

The Publications part of the SCS is autonomous and self-managed (see Box G in Figure 1). It is designed that way because not all students have the same publication goals. Since recording of achievements is self-managed, underlining the importance of student autonomy over publication processes or research-related choices, the students are expected to be more positively engaged (Cardador, Northcraft, and Whicker 2017).

2.2.2 Forecasting, Planning and Checking the Learning Activities

The SCS activity is also designed to sequence the ensuing workshops and assignments. It keeps track of each step and provides a "scaffold" for learning by building on different "bricks," or layers, of knowledge acquired during the five weeks. For some students, the SCS may be used as the front page of their research notebook, portfolio, or collection of work, thoughts and questions.

While the character sheet helps verify skill or mastery and acknowledges prior learning, one of its other goals is validation of non-traditional skills or experiences that are not present in the regular school curriculum (O'Brien and Jacobson 2018, 81, 91). Moreover, it accommodates some details that are too specific or too precise to be listed in a classic lesson plan: Wikipedia contributions, software installations and settings, etc.

Information can be described with aspects (using controlled keywords), written descriptions (uncontrolled vocabulary) or numbered items (e.g., rankings, check boxes, progress bars). The controlled vocabulary of some chosen keywords allows the instructor to expose the learners to key concepts of the seminar (e.g., "Predatory publishers," "Boolean operators"). The intention is to help the students decode the notions instructed by establishing a common language. The SCS becomes a primer and an index of notions that will be explained later. Interestingly, during the last 50 years of game design innovations, tabletop role-playing games have adopted an increasingly controlled vocabulary. In the case of *D&D*, this occurred mainly after the buyout by the company that published *Magic: The Gathering*, a card game heavily reliant on controlled vocabulary (Hartlage 2020).

2.3 Seeking Connection

2.3.1 A Passport for the Learning Journey and a Mirror

The SCS is also a way for me to initiate a relationship with students, based on a common self-assessment and on the learning promises of the instructor to answer their information needs.

Figure 1: Scholarly Character Sheet

My name : My supervisor : A My liaison librarian : <input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring program	<input type="checkbox"/> ORCID : <input type="checkbox"/> Profil Google Scholar B <input type="checkbox"/> BASE Search : <input type="checkbox"/> LinkedIn <input type="checkbox"/> ResearchGate <input type="checkbox"/> Academia
Field of study : Research subject : C	

Abilities Information research D Boolean operators ○○○○○○ Interfaces ○○○○○○ Catalog & databases ○○○○○○ Note-taking techniques ●○○○○○ Document types ○○○○○○ Writing & Information management Zotero (or Endnote) ○○○○○○ Word processing ○○○○○○ Alerts ○○○○○○ Research Data Management ○○○○○○ Source assessment & publication Peer review process ○○○○○○ Bibliometrics ○○○○○○ Copyright for researchers ○○○○○○ Citation ethics ○○○○○○ Open access ○○○○○○ Predatory publishers ○○○○○● Critical thinking ○○○○○○	Assets <input type="checkbox"/> Student ID E <input type="checkbox"/> BCI card <input type="checkbox"/> Proxy set up Browser dedicated <input type="checkbox"/> Extensions <input type="checkbox"/> Bookmarks <input type="checkbox"/> Search box <input type="checkbox"/> Software set up <input type="checkbox"/> Citation style : <input type="checkbox"/> data template FESP <input type="checkbox"/> @email dedicated to alerts <input type="checkbox"/> RSS reader <input type="checkbox"/> Cloud set up <input type="checkbox"/> ILL (interlib. loan) <input type="checkbox"/> Doc. Delivery Usenet <input type="checkbox"/> Book scanner <input type="checkbox"/> Writing retreat Theses: vous? <input type="checkbox"/> Writing group	Current research stage <input type="checkbox"/> Initiation F <input type="checkbox"/> Topic exploration <input type="checkbox"/> Comprehensive document research <input type="checkbox"/> Experiment, analysis, field work <input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Editing, correcting <input type="checkbox"/> Employment/program applications My publications Research blog since : G Conference presentations □ □ □ □ □ □ □ Book reviews published □ □ □ □ □ Micro-publications in repositories □ □ □ □ □ Magazine articles □ □ □ □ □ Chapters in collective books ■ □ □ Master thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Peer reviewed articles <table style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <th></th> <th>Submitted</th> <th>Forthcoming</th> <th>Published</th> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>		Submitted	Forthcoming	Published	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Wikipedia : 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36
 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50* 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72
 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100
 I am a "keeper" of the pages : _____ & _____ **H**

Translated by Jennifer AW Stubbs — version 1.18.1 — https://github.com/jmartinoli/STM_SchoCharSheet/ - Pascal Martinoli, U de Moncton, CC-BY.

Like a ludic character sheet, it prompts questions such as “What is the sheet offering to play with me?” and “Does it inspire me to play?” (Cendrones, Willem, and Globo 2021).

The SCS itself is designed to encourage connection. The header reminds the students how their program institution (research advisor) is connected to the library (liaison librarian) (see Figure 1, Box A). The instructor suggests that each participant book at least one appointment with their liaison librarian with the SCS in hand, to see at a glance their abilities and needs.

Then, the SCS prompts them to curate their researcher permanent identifiers and social

media profiles (see Figure 1, Box B). The explanation of why and how they should pay careful attention to their young researcher e-reputation is the heart of the lesson. Providing that explanation at that moment is meant to grant meaning and concreteness to an activity that could otherwise have been purely metacognitive and too abstract.

2.3.2 Being Welcomed in a Hospitable Activity

The purpose of the activity is deeply linked to students' personal identity and abilities. Embedding it in their personal journey can be uncomfortable to some students. According to the rules of hospitality, a host (the instructor) cannot ask too much of their guest (the students) the first time they meet (Stratman 2015). To reduce the stress of this initial activity, I present my own SCS and display "I am not perfect" in all the points. I present it online one week before the first workshop and then in person. The intent in having the instructor complete and show their own SCS is to color the teacher-student relationship with a new dimension of "being-with" (Stratman 2015). This in turn allows the relationship to transition from a difference in identity to a difference in roles, like the roles of host and guest. This dynamic helps mitigate the instructor's Imposter Syndrome and frame them as a provider of good practices, useful methods, and research tips. It is also intended to leave space for the students to share more their own novel ideas, routines, and techniques (Martinolli 2019).

In other words, the SCS allows the instructor to craft an adaptable persona to "wear" during a short-term public-speaking activity. The main functions of this crafting are to present an interesting self, focus more on content than charisma, and build a relationship based on a common assessment (Davis 2012). Finally, the SCS helps display gaps in the instructor's knowledge in a professional way (Goffman 1959, 200). Carefully selected so as not to lose expertise authority, this willingness to be vulnerable enhances the potential for authentic connection; otherwise, like Gressel (2022), I believe the students could feel the instructor is protected or masked by the persona.

I also avoid calling on students personally. This is a group activity and everybody is answering for themselves, without sharing with others. Finally, at the break, when I invite the students to share their SCS, I state explicitly that this is not mandatory. On a broader level, the design of this activity makes recognition and hospitality central to the pedagogy of the seminar. The content of the workshop is essentially methodological and ethical, so it could easily slip into uniform, boring, streamlined, and dry delivery of content.

Thus, the SCS activity can be qualified as a brief threshold space, "a space where we can act as hosts who help usher students into this academic geography, while honoring their worlds and creating a bridge to ours" (Jacobs 2008). Recognizing students through the SCS activity, acknowledging their previous skills and their research is meant to create a hospitable space where change can take place (Nouwen 1986, 71).

3. METHODS

3.1 Before the Workshops

One week before the first workshop of the seminar, I post my own character sheet on the course webpage. Students can see my research interests, my achievements and also the admission

that I am not perfect in all of the abilities. The rules of hospitality suggest that a host should not ask guests to describe themselves until the host does so first. A new host-teacher, who is in a power role, should be mindful that some students might feel threatened by “being known” by a stranger (Stratman 2015).

3.2 First Workshop

I distribute a blank SCS at the very beginning of the first workshop.² I ask the students to complete it using a light color because we will revise it in dark ink during the final workshop. I then display slides describing each element of the SCS, and comment on each slide.

First, the participants indicate their disciplines and topics as well as the current stage of their research project (see Figure 1, boxes A, C and F).

Then, the instructor lectures on how to curate one’s online identity (with permanent identifiers like ORCID, or online profiles like Google Scholar) (see Figure 1, Box B). This is a well-developed portion of the workshop that lasts 15–20 minutes because it describes a concept that is completely new to most of the participants.

This is followed by the heart of the activity: the participants assess their prior skills and those they will develop in the series of workshops (see Figure 1, Box D). For each skill, the instructor displays a slide show presenting the meaning of each bullet. The instructor does not precisely describe the five-bullet-point skills and asks participants to mark the bullet that seems to correspond to their strongest level or the one they understand. For each skill per slide, the instructor indicates which workshop will cover it.

Finally, the workshop reviews a selection of best practices: software installation, settings, etc. (see Figure 1, Box E). The instructor asks the students to check off how many accomplishments they have in terms of disseminating their research: number of conference presentations, published articles, research blogs, etc. (see Figure 1, boxes G and H). This provides an opportunity to introduce two “side quests” that will not be developed in the seminar but may interest the students: become a Wikipedian³ or start a blog about their research topic.⁴ Both side quests are completely autonomous, but they are structured and documented, and the instructor can provide help for those in need of advice.

The overall activity lasts 35 minutes. A break follows, during which I collect and photocopy the SCSs of those students who agree to share them (approximately 80%–90% do). I suggest that sharing will help me to assess their needs and have a better idea of their research.

The sheet is not used during the next three workshops. The only visual cue to the SCS activity is the first slide of each lesson during the workshops.

2 The Scholarly Character Sheet and the slides are available in open access at https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM_SchoCharSheet.

3 <https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM-Wikipedibus>

4 <https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM-incubablog>

Figure 2: Example of slide: the Boolean operators skill.

Boolean operators : I often use...

● ○ ○	Minimum of words with <space> or AND truncation*
● ● ○	"exact expression between quotation marks" NOT -google
● ● ●	(OR) ADJ NEAR SAME wildcards ! ?

1

Note: In the 2021 French instance of the SCS, the number of bullet points was reduced from 5 to 3.

3.3 Last Workshop

At the very end of the final workshop (the fifth), I ask the students to use black or darker ink to complete their character sheet. In updating what was learned, we only go through the Abilities. When they have finished, I ask if I can photocopy their updated SCSs. I exit the teaching lab for five minutes and bulk-scan the SCSs in color. When I return, I hand the SCSs back, ask for some direct feedback on the activity, and then conclude the workshop, wishing them a fruitful career and achievements in or outside academia.

The purpose of this last activity is to wrap up the seminar and send the students off. It lasts 15 to 20 minutes and functions like a debriefing, in which the students measure their progress and identify the gaps remaining to achieve deeper learning reflection and retention (Taras 2008). This self-assessment is facilitated and guided in a safe way because it is not evaluated and the students are free to share their SCS or not (Atwater 2016; Wickers 2010). It helps them to keep sight of the big picture of the seminar and point to what is important and why.

3.4 Assessment of the SCS Activity

The SCS activity was assessed once in January 2022 with an e-survey sent to most of the seminar participants since January 1998. The e-mails of the participants were collected from the previous seminar attendance lists. At the Université de Montréal, this kind of survey does not require an ethic review or an ethical approval when it is used for assessment and/or

improvement purpose.⁵ About the consent process, the participants were informed that: the information gathered will be used and published in a research paper assessing the activity; the information was gathered anonymously; the e-survey was not mandatory and it has no influence on the evaluation; and there will be no other email sent regarding this e-survey. The administrative person in charge of the seminars has been informed of the e-survey. To guarantee the confidentiality of the participants, the e-survey used a secure form software of the university. To my knowledge, no IP address was collected by the software and I cannot identify the participants.

The assessment consisted in three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. The first closed-ended question asked if the participant remembered the SCS activity. If not, the assessment ended. The other two closed-ended questions were presenting randomly multiple choices about positive and negative statements on the SCS activity. The last open-ended question was collecting the participant comments. None of the questions were mandatory.

Out of the 217 surveys sent, 6 e-mails bounced back.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since its inception in 2017, 276 students have used the SCS. Approximately 80% of them have shared their SCS with the instructor.

The analysis of the students' overall evaluation of the seminar is independently assessed by staff in the Université de Montréal Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies department. Since the introduction of the character sheets, we have observed a modest decrease in participant dissatisfaction regarding the objectives of the course and whether it matches their needs. We also observe that fewer students reply "moderately satisfied," while more reply "completely satisfied" with the overall structure of the workshops and say that the seminar matched their needs.

The student drop-out rate between the first workshop and subsequent workshops in the seminar has never been recorded. It was lower in the years after the implementation of the SCS activity, but this may be because of the improvement in the overall quality of the seminar. Thus, it is very difficult to isolate the effect of the character sheet on learning.

After the e-survey was sent, 55 participants replied, among whom 41 recalled the SCS activity and 13 did not.

The 41 participants who remembered the activity selected the following positive and negative statements (multiple choices were possible):

In the qualitative feedback obtained via the survey, one student mentioned, "It was very designed. I reused the sheet to get to know my students when I became a junior librarian." Another said, "More than identifying my gaps, this sheet made me realize that I already knew a lot more than I thought. So, I found it very useful. I also think that we can continue to use it even after the end of the seminar." Some participants mentioned they kept using the character

5 "Research that does not require an ethic approval": <https://recherche.umontreal.ca/responsabilite-en-recherche/ethique-humaine/evaluation-ethique/#c56745> following the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 (2018), art. 2.5 https://ethics.gc.ca/fra/tcps2-eptc2_2018_chapter2-chapitre2.html "Quality assurance and quality improvement studies, program evaluation activities, and performance reviews, or testing within normal educational requirements when used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes, do not constitute research for the purposes of this Policy, and do not fall within the scope of REB review."

Table 1: Student responses to the Scholarly Character Sheet activity.

Positive statements		Negative statements	
I discovered the gaps I had	31	The sheet was not used during the seminar	9
I realized it is important to curate my e-profiles	27	I see the interest but the activity was not appealing to me	6
I saw that I was making progress	23	The activity took too much time	4
I had the feeling I knew where I was going during the seminar	20	It was not interesting, I was bored during the activity	3
I acknowledge the previous skills I already had	19	The sheet made me more confused	2
It helped me better understand the seminar	19	The activity didn't motivate me especially for the seminar	2
At the end of the seminar, I took stock of what I learned	15	I didn't especially connect with the instructor or the library personnel or the other participants	1
It made me more critically engaged toward the seminar	10	I was uncomfortable during the activity	1
I had the feeling the seminar was less confused	10	The activity didn't spark any curiosity for the seminar	1
I had the feeling of having more control on the seminar	7	I didn't see the interest of this activity	0
I wanted to check a lot of publications and achievements on the sheet	3		

sheet for themselves long after the seminar; one said "Extremely relevant to get an overview and get to know ME better. I've kept this sheet since the seminar!" and another said "I am

still using it after the course to check if I am on the right track with my knowledge and online profiles.” Finally, I discovered the SCS touched a tabletop role-play gamer who shared “I am a great fan of to-do lists (and of *D&D*), the sheet was useful to see where we were going during the seminar and to assess quickly what was missing in my researcher apprenticeship.”

Therefore, students appreciate the activity not only for its exciting and promising aspect, but also for its usefulness and the feedback obtained on their learning. By better assessing their skills, learners may gain a better sense of self-efficacy with regard to their information skills over the longer term. Self-efficacy is one of the main benefits of educational role-playing games, particularly in health simulations: knowing that we are doing something well has an influence on the quality of what we do (Maddux and Kleiman 2016, 8).

The character sheet in its current design is used during all subsequent workshops in the seminar as the introductory slide for each workshop. The SCS is revised and redesigned every year with an eye to clarifying and simplifying its content.

The SCS activity takes up some 6% (35 minutes + 20 minutes) of the total seminar time of 15 hours. The seminar is very dense, but this activity is well embedded and is not a “waste of time,” especially since the insertion of a 20-minute presentation that teaches how to manage researcher e-reputation. That e-reputation presentation gives coherence and substance to the SCS activity and helps to reduce a biased perception on the part of students of active learning activities in general, as they can be seen as less efficient than classic instruction (Deslauriers et al. 2019).

4.1 Additional Designs

Tangentially, the reader is invited to explore a completely different style of SCS that helps students to plan a path of library skill self-study. This one is based on the skill tree of *Shadowrun* and the more recent talent trees of *Edge of the Empire* (2013). It is a modular self-study program designed to organize the various teaching materials available in open access on the library website. It is available at <https://bib.umontreal.ca/parcours> (see Figure 3).

This self-study program was designed to guide students through most of the libraries’ educational resources. Given that the libraries website hosted a lot of heterogeneous information, we built index tools to structure its content, and this is one of them. Each item points to a section of the website that presents the resources in multiple formats, e.g., short videos, in-person workshops or online webinars, checklists, library guides, tutorials. The self-study program also helps the librarians to prescribe learning activities for the students they are following up.

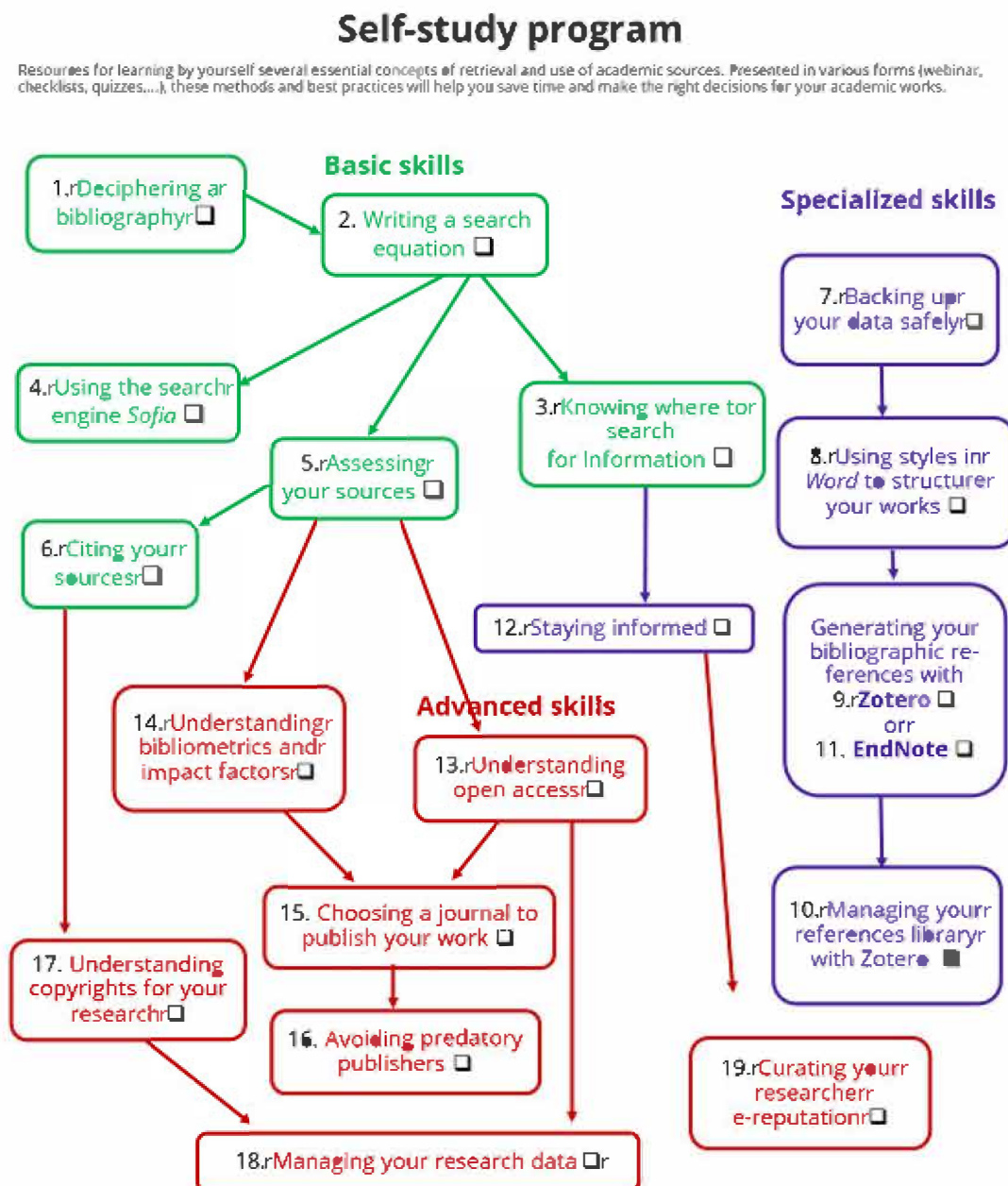
Another teaching material based on the SCS is currently under construction. It consists of a portfolio of research processes aimed at guiding students in their learning but also at documenting all of the information sources they use along the way. One possible model for the portfolio is the character diary used by players of *Castle Falkenstein* to record the details of their adventures.

4.2 The SCS Activity In-Person and Online

During the pandemic of 2020–21, the seminars were given twice in online-only format and once in hybrid format. In online only format, the SCS activity was conducted differently: the

instructor presented slides of the SCS boxes while students responded anonymously in polls

Figure 3: Self-study program for basic skills, specialized skills, and advanced skills.



or via chat. The purpose of the activity was primarily an icebreaker, to understand the content of the seminar and broadly assess the level of the group.

However, I did notice a limitation when the seminar was given in hybrid format, in person and online at the same time: reduced engagement due to the lack of a common activity done in the same way by everyone. In my own experience, I think that having two separate groups reduced the dimensions of welcome, integration, and hospitality. In addition, the fact that the sheet was virtual took away an element of materiality that I liked about the previous face-to-face workshops.

4.3 Limitations

Research on student self-assessment is growing. As stated earlier, one of the main findings is that students are overconfident in assessing their skills, especially in information literacy (Mahmood 2016). To moderate this issue, the activity is guided by the instructor, and the skills assessed are very specific and context-bound. More important, the SCS does not assess the perceived level of skills, but the precise mastery of a method. For example, the evaluations hinge on simple, binary questions: “Do I know this concept?” “Do I apply this technique?” “Do I understand what that means?” Finally, the self-assessment is completely separate from the evaluation of the seminar. No research was conducted, however, to verify whether these moderations were effective in reducing overconfidence.

Moreover, no thorough evaluation has been conducted to assess the impact of the SCS on student engagement, motivation, and learning. Except the 2022 e-survey, no post-seminar follow-up has been performed to measure the long-term impact of the SCS on these aspects.

5. CONCLUSION

As Féasson (2017) has written, tabletop role-playing is “a hobby about meta”: a naturally framing activity that, like a story frame, allows one to structure sub-activities in a very effective and engaging way. The role-playing character sheet has the same framing attributes. By structuring time and content, it marks out a beginning and an end and it defines a stable, hospitable temporary space. When applied to learning, it gives meaning to a training course by ordering and prioritizing a sequence of activities. Like in tabletop role-playing games, the character sheet activity is facilitated by a teacher, a master or a host, who ensures it runs smoothly.

Thus, the character sheet can be used as a program of gamified activities in addition to the lesson plan to improve motivation and engagement in a series of learning activities. It has a low technical and cognitive cost and it does not last too long. Through its framing and personalized mapping effect between content and participants, the induced motivation could lead to better engagement in the workshops. It is possible that, through the metacognitive skills of self-authorship, self-determination and a growth mindset, the SCS could improve the learning outcomes of the workshops. Further research and evidence need to be conducted to support these claims.

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7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no actual or potential conflicts of interest relating to the content of this presentation.

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