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Getting Burned or Becoming Toast?: Problem-Exploring the Game “I Am Bread” as a Tool for Teaching Growth Mindset in First Year Writing

Laura E. Decker

Overview

First-year writers often struggle to take risks on projects, especially as they move from their composition courses to projects within new disciplines and contexts (Robertson et al.). However, taking risks by diving into new discourse communities, as Bartholomae argued, is required to participate effectively in the world. The struggle to take risks relates to what Wardle termed an “answer-getting” philosophy toward writing, rather than a philosophy of “problem-exploring.” When answer-getting, students play it safe, hoping to produce the singular or correct answer or written product. On the other hand, when problem-exploring, students “grapple toward one possible solution through experimenting, questioning, thinking rhetorically, mimicking, pushing boundaries, trying unfamiliar techniques, using new tools, feeling uncomfortable, and composing a product that might or might not be judged as successful” (VanKooten and Berkley 153). Embracing the kind of messiness produced in the uncomfortable space that problem-exploring provides can lead to “curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and toward a recognition that more than one solution can work” (Wardle). In other words, problem-exploring encourages students to, as Wardle describes it, “creatively repurpose” or transfer what they know to address new problems and situations. Encouraging students to follow a process of trial and error, and to explore opportunities for creative repurposing, is related to Dweck’s notion of growth mindset, which she defines as the belief that one’s intelligence is

not fixed and can be developed. One objective in first-year writing courses should be to help students come to embrace the risk that comes with problem-exploring, to realize the power in failure, and to develop a growth mindset as a writer.

This activity aims to demonstrate for students that exploring problems and embracing messiness are tools for building a growth mindset that can serve them as writers. To accomplish this goal, this activity uses a playthrough video of a video game called “I Am Bread,” (React) as well as small group discussions, a whole group close reading, a collaborative reading, and a whole group discussion.

Time Commitment

70 minutes

Materials

To complete this activity in a face-to-face setting, you need a monitor projector in order to show the playthrough video, and students need something to record with, such as pencil and paper, or a laptop or other recording device. Since this activity asks for small group work, consider how you might be able to group students together in the space you have available and without requiring movement from students who have limited mobility.

Activity Process

- First, engage your students in a conversation about games generally and video games more specifically. Who enjoys playing games? Are there students who identify as “gamers” in your class? Do students know a lot about video game play? Is anyone familiar with the game “I Am Bread”?
- Then, show students the playthrough video “Teens React: I Am Bread” (React). You may want to define

playthrough videos for them as videos meant to show potential players how a particular video game works, similar to a tutorial but with all the mistakes that can occur in real, live gameplay. As students watch the playthrough, ask them to jot down notes on the moments in the game where the players face challenges, as well as how the players overcome these challenges—especially whether the players take risks or play it safe in the game, and how well those decisions work for them in the end.

- Next, ask students to form small groups and share with one another what they jotted down in their notes.
- Then, bring the class together for a whole group discussion about the game. At this point, I always ask students what they notice about the players that successfully complete the level (Tom and Daniel) and the players that fail to complete the level (Sabrina, Madison, Sam, and Mikaela). We eventually look closely at the exit interviews with each player that take place at the end of the playthrough video, and students realize that while the female players all apologize to the bread or for their unsuccessful gameplay, the male players (even Sam, who is unsuccessful in the game) take aggressive action against the bread by destroying it or banishing it from their lives. Students are usually intrigued by the starkly different responses to the game across genders. (Here, I offer them scholar Claudia Goldin’s conclusions about why women don’t major in economics at the same rate men do, which is summarized in the *Time Magazine* article “Why Failure Hits Girls So Hard” (Simmons) on how men and women see failure differently.)
- Next, lead the whole class in a close reading of the following excerpt from Crystal VanKooten and Angela Berkley’s article, “Messy Problem-Exploring Through Video in First-Year Writing: Assessing What Counts.” During the close reading, help students draw connections between how the authors define “problem-

exploring” in the passage and the video game playthrough for “I Am Bread”:

- Problem-exploring is thus comprised of a combination of Wardle’s (2012) and Halbritter’s (2013) take on messiness: it occurs when students face a rhetorical problem that does not have a pre-identified answer and grapple toward one possible solution through experimenting, questioning, thinking rhetorically, mimicking, pushing boundaries, trying unfamiliar techniques, using new tools, feeling uncomfortable, and composing a product that might or might not be judged as successful. This grappling most often occurs in response to problems that design thinkers might call *wicked*. Originally defined by design theorists Rittel & Webber (1973) and subsequently taken up as a model for approaching the design and teaching of writing (see Kostelnick, 1989; The New London Group, 2000; Marback, 2009; Leverenz, 2014; and Purdy, 2014) *wicked problems* are viewed as poorly structured, confusing, and utterly contingent on the often conflicting values and preferences of multiple parties. Most recently, writing studies scholars have identified wicked problems as especially well represented by the challenges posed to instructors and students alike by multimodal and multimedia compositions (Marback, 2009; Leverenz, 2014; Purdy, 2014). (VanKooten and Berkley 154).
- After close-reading the passage, ask the class to collaboratively read Carol Dweck’s “Who Will the 21st Century Learners Be?” which defines growth mindset and explains how playing it safe in an attempt to look smart can be detrimental to success. The collaborative reading can take place in small groups or as a whole class, depending on

your students' needs. Once the collaborative reading is finished, ask students to take a few minutes to write about the connections they see between video gameplay, problem-exploring, and growth mindset.

- Finally, conclude the activity with a whole group discussion about problem-exploring, failure, and growth mindset, and how they can be tools in the first-year writing classroom.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of what problem-exploring is and how it can be useful in writing
- Think critically about what failure means and the role it can play in being successful
- Develop language and tools for a growth mindset

Learning Accommodations

- The playthrough video for “I Am Bread” has ADA compliant captions on youtube.com, which can be helpful for students who are deaf or who have hearing loss. However, the playthrough video does not have audio description available for students who are blind or who have low vision. For teachers who would like or need to provide an option with audio description, the youtube.com channel Audio Described Gaming has a repository of video game playthroughs that have captions as well as audio descriptions. Although this activity uses the video game “I Am Bread” because it offers additional discussions on gender, failure, and undergraduate major, exploring the notions of problem-exploring and growth mindset can be accomplished with many different video game playthroughs.
- There are many kinds of collaborative reading strategies for college classrooms, and these strategies mimic many

of the same strategies used in K-12 settings. Popcorn reading, which asks students to read a paragraph and then say “popcorn” and call on a new reader, can be a fun way to collaboratively read with your class, but it can also put timid readers and students whose first language is not English on the spot. You can read a list of alternatives to popcorn reading in the article “11 Alternatives to Round Robin (and Popcorn) Reading” (Finley).

- Material in this activity can also be presented in an asynchronous, digital format. For asynchronous courses or accommodations, students can view the playthrough video on their own, use conferencing software or chat apps for their small group discussions, and asynchronously annotate the close reading passage and collaborative reading using software like Google Docs to make meaning as a class or in small groups.

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Further Reading

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