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Role-Playing Games, Identity, and Meaningful Curricular Engagement in a High-School English Classroom

Purpose

In high school English classrooms, many teachers struggle to engage students meaningfully with classroom content that learners feel is irrelevant to their daily lives. Often, when students do not find curriculum engaging, they miss the powerful lessons that the literature contains. This problem of disengagement is compounded when students are passive, solitary recipients of knowledge instead of active agents of their own learning. This paper investigates how role-playing games can transform traditional English curriculum into content that allows students to grapple directly with major ideas presented in classroom literature. Specifically, this paper examines how a role-playing game used in conjunction with Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* helped students deeply experience character motivation as well as themes connected to power. Through the classroom game, students actively formed new character identities tied to the play’s setting and essential themes. This paper argues that the role-playing game centered on *The Crucible* facilitated active engagement and identity formation connected to the text, and as a consequence, allowed students to understand abstract concepts of power and motivation in concrete ways.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on recent research on the intersection of role-playing games, identity formation, and deep engagement with curriculum. With the emergence of digital media, it is no surprise that many students are not meaningfully engaged through traditional classroom models where their role is to be a passive receptacle of knowledge. Gee (2005) notes that when students are not directly engaged with classroom content, the student feels “little motivation to study and become competent, [as] the learner has no real idea what it feels like to act effectively in a domain” (p. 221). If students see no connection between their life and school, they risk losing the ability to imagine themselves as competent actors in that particular domain.

Role-playing games invite students to experiment with different identities, provide a potential solution to disengagement, and reenergize student interest in the curriculum by giving them agency in their education. While traditional educational models place the majority of the classroom control in the hands of the teacher, games allow students “to feel a sense of agency or ownership [because] in a video game, players make things happen; they don’t just consume...their choices matter” (Gee, 2008, p. 35). Moreover, the game allows students to assume identities that they previously could not (Shaffer et al., 2005). In fact, Gaydos and Squire (2012) argue that this identity formation “is more important than mastering knowledge or skills alone” (p. 828). Students can set realistic goals and reflect on their choices in respect to their game identity (Gaydos & Squire, 2012). Furthermore, once students have agency, role-play allows them to “mesh” their own personal identity into the game (Gee, 2005; Shaffer et al., 2005; Gaydos & Squire, 2012). Gee (2005) argues that the best-designed video games enable players to discover and “act on a near-perfect fit or mesh between the virtual character’s skills, the real-world player’s skills, the way the real-world player sees the virtual world and the desires, goals
and actions shared...between the virtual character and the real-world player” (p. 219). When student identities are directly linked to the role-play, students become emotionally engaged in the game.

Ultimately, the combination of agency and identity formation that role-playing games encourage allows for students to deeply engage with and understand classroom content in ways that were not previously possible. When students engage with role-playing games, their virtual and real identity is directly and deeply involved in the game – and therefore the classroom – content (Gee, 2005). When students engage their own identity in the role-playing game, they “can understand complex concepts without losing the connection between abstract ideas and the real problems they can be used to solve” (Shaffer et al., 2005, p. 106). In this paper, students moved beyond simply reading the words of Miller’s play to deeply understanding characters’ motivations and relationships to power.

**Methods**

This study is based on qualitative evidence collected over approximately seven weeks of the 2014-15 academic year. Forty-nine students in two different junior-level English 11 sections participated in the role-play game. Students wrote responses as their character on Schoology (a learning management system) to eight different prompts. Students also completed mid and post-game reflections on their character, strategies, and connection to the major ideas in *The Crucible*. For the purposes of this study, I surveyed all student responses and interactions both in real-time and on Schoology. Additionally, I took detailed observational notes during the game and brief reflective notes after class about student interactions. The game play lasted anywhere between 15-20 minutes per session, although conversations surrounding the game lasted throughout, and sometimes beyond, class time. While I served as the “narrator” and game designer, I allowed student conversations to develop naturally. I did not direct students to engage with the game in specific ways. I had a largely observational role during class play.

**Data Sources**

The 49 junior students I observed represent a diverse range of academic abilities and interests. English 11 is a required course, and I noted that this group of students is especially disengaged when faced with more traditional classroom activities.

The role-play game occurred on Schoology (see Figure 1), although the in-class discussions surrounding the game were as valuable as the written responses. During the game, students responded as their character in writing to a series of specific prompts and questions (see Figures 2-9). Although I did not require students to respond to their peers’ posts, students enjoyed commenting and “liking” their classmates’ responses. In fact, one discussion thread had a total of 103 posts. I often asked students to consider their characters’ motivations, identities, relationships to power, and potential allies when they responded to the prompts.

While the general trajectory of the posts for each class was similar, I differentiated the prompts based on the responses students produced in previous threads. Consequently, the end result for each class was different based on students’ willingness to accuse other classmates of witchcraft.
or to compromise their characters’ moral code. Each discussion post paralleled major events in *The Crucible*.

**Results**

Student engagement during the role-playing game was high, especially in comparison to engagement in more “traditional” classroom activities. I attribute this level of engagement to students’ active agency in the game as well as their investment in their game identities. The role-play allowed students to become active agents in a setting where their choices mattered. In terms of identity, some students used their character as a way to project their real world identity and goals into the game (Gee, 2005), whereas many students used the game to inhabit roles that they cannot access in real life (Shaffer et al., 2005). Regardless, the game allowed students to mesh their “real world” goals and identities into the game, and as a consequence, students were emotionally invested in their characters’ identities. Most importantly, the active participation and investment in character identity led students to a deeper understanding of the play. The game allowed the text to become more than “just words” (Gee, 2005, p. 221) to the students as it invited them to understand the abstract concepts of power and character motivation in concrete ways (Shaffer et al., 2005). As an instructor, I have not seen such deep engagement with and understanding of *The Crucible*.

**Agency and Engagement**

Students who were traditionally disengaged with classroom activities and literature prior to the game responded very positively to the agency and opportunity to “play” in the classroom. Many students remarked the game was a “really good idea” and that “games are fun.” Instead of sitting quietly in their desks while we read the play, students moved around the room and talked to peers to form alliances during the game. Often, students huddled together to discuss how to defend themselves from witchcraft accusations. If I kept greater control over the learners’ agency within the game and specified how students should respond to the prompts and to each other, I do not think students would have been nearly as engaged.

The high level of engagement students had for the role-play game extended beyond the allotted 15-20 minutes we played in class, and discussions often continued outside of class. I heard students in the halls debate one another about the game, or refer to their classmates by their characters’ names. Furthermore, two students planned an alliance to save their characters’ lives. One student even voluntarily wrote and shared a full-page defense of his character (see Figure 10). The high level of engagement associated with the role-play caused students to think about the major ideas and themes present within the play and our game well beyond class, which was something that did not often occur in my previous experience teaching the play.

**Identity Formation**

Interesting connections between identity and student participation in the game emerged. Some students created characters that directly reflected their “real-world” identities (see Figure 11). When forming alliances, many students looked to their peer networks inside the class and worked to defend their friends just as they would outside of the game. Alternatively, other students developed characters quite different from their real life identity. One student exemplified this when she created a character that was very different from her real world identity. She remarked, “I wanted to be able to control how things went so I made a young male
with money.” The role-play allowed students to assume identities that aligned with their varied goals, such as seizing power in the game, experimenting with new identities, or staying true to their “real” self and moral code. Interestingly, students spoke in the first person during their game and assumed their character’s identity.

Because most students’ characters reflected a mix of their “real life” and in-game goals, they became emotionally attached to their character (Gee, 2008) and would react with great intensity every time I would introduce their character’s fate. One student emotionally invested in her character, Bonqui-qui, remarked during the reading of the play, “I’m just really frustrated! Everybody is accusing Elizabeth [Proctor], and everybody is accusing my Bonqui-qui! It’s not fair!”

Deep Understanding of the Play
Most importantly, the direct involvement and personal connections to the game allowed students to grapple directly with the abstract ideas surrounding power within the play. Organic connections between the game and abstract concepts in the text often occurred while we read the play in class. For example, while reading the play orally, in the middle of his line, one student proclaimed: “This is like on our game! All you all want is my land, money and power! That’s why you’re all accusing me!” This student’s experience with accusations during the game facilitated his connection between power and motivation in Miller’s text. Additionally, many students found that the game provided them concrete examples of the manipulations of power during the witchcraft trials. One student wrote, “The game helped me understand the book better because I could see how badly people wanted power and how they would just throw themselves under the bus or just accuse anyone and everyone just to get attention or power.” Many other students (see Figures 12 and 13) expressed similar sentiments that the game helped them directly understand and feel many of the character’s motivations throughout the play.

Scholarly Significance
Role-playing games can invigorate curriculum that students find irrelevant to their daily lives and identities. With the dawn of new media, it’s imperative to find ways to encourage students to engage with content meaningfully, and role-playing games provide a direct avenue into significant engagement by granting students the opportunity to claim agency in the classroom while forming identities related to the content. Ultimately, this high level of engagement leads to deeper understandings of a text. Studying role-playing games in English classrooms is important as this curriculum is relatively unexplored. Observing students engage deeply with texts while grappling with difficult abstract concepts in a tangible fashion was powerful and warrants further investigation.

Figures
Figure 1. A screen shot of a typical discussion thread on Schoology where students responded and “liked” posts.

In order to better understand a character’s motivation and relationship to power in *The Crucible*, we are going to create a virtual Salem. Our virtual world will mimic what’s happening in the text, with one major exception: YOU will get to choose how to respond with your character.

As we progress with this role play, you will have the chance to decide how you would respond to the witchcraft trials. You can make alliances with friends, or publicly declare enemies. You can accuse other characters of being a witch, or you can try to defend yourself (or others) from such accusations. Each time you post, you will need to respond to the prompts as well as read what your classmates wrote in previous posts.

When you write your responses, you should write them in the voice of your character.

In this post, you must address the following aspects about your character:

1. Character’s name and age
2. Family members: Who is in your character’s family, if anyone?
3. Place in society: The roles of judge and priest are already taken. You can, however, choose to be any other position in society. You could be a wealthy landowner, a tenant farmer, a young girl, a slave, an official in the church, a beggar, etc.
4. Personality: Briefly describe your character. Is your character trustworthy? Is he or she out for power? Is he or she religious? Does he or she get along well with other members in Salem? Does anybody in the community have reason not to like your character?
Figure 2. First prompt of the game where students were instructed to create their characters.

Take a look back at our first character introductions. Take a few minutes to review what others posted, and then answer the following questions:

Who does your character trust? Who is he or she friends with in Salem? Who does your character not trust? What other characters do you think will be the biggest support to you in Salem? Which characters will cause your character the most trouble? Think about who you would want to enter into an alliance with – if anyone. Explain your reasoning in a paragraph.


Remember, write your response as if you are your character! You should use first person (I, me, my, etc.).

Posted Mon Sep 29, 2014 at 12:42 pm

Figure 3. The third prompt in the game asked students to think about potential allies in the classroom as well as about their characters’ motivations.

Whipers of Witchcraft

Salem is buzzing this morning with news of potential witchcraft. Many locals are gathering in the center of town to discuss potential theories behind the witchcraft after disturbances were reported in Salem’s woods last evening. Locals reported hearing strange noises and laughter. Word has it that Reverend Parris is calling in witchcraft experts to discuss these events. Tension is running high in the town.

Describe your reaction to the news of the witchcraft and answer the following questions: Who do you think could be behind the brewing hysteria? Do you actually think there is witchcraft happening in Salem or do you have another theory about why people are saying there’s witchcraft in Salem; in short – do you believe the rumors? Did your character see or hear any of the witchcraft happening in the woods last night? If so, what did your character observe? Will your character go into town to discuss the news, or will he or she stay away from the chaos?

Post your responses to the questions above in your character’s voice. You should write at least a paragraph, but may need to write more.

**Remember to look back at the past two discussions to help inform your answer!**

Figure 4. This post gave students the opportunity to begin accusing their peers of witchcraft, all while addressing the “rumors” in the game.
Figure 5. As student responses became more complex, I differentiated the prompts.
Figure 6. These prompts asked students to consider their arguments in “Court” which paralleled the play.
Figure 7. This prompt continued the “Court” scene and asked every student to participate directly in various ways.

Figure 8. The penultimate post afforded students the opportunity to grapple with their decisions over their characters’ fate.
Figure 9. The final post of the game spelled each character’s fate and students reacted to their character’s fate with great emotion.
I, Johnny Crucible, am a resident of Salem, Massachusetts. There's madness going around Salem and people being accused of witchcraft. It's all nonsense and it's stupid. A little bit about myself; I'm a 18 year old guy who's very crazy and keeps to himself. He doesn't socialize with people much and lives deep in the woods. My parents died from Dr. Medicus because he poisoned them. I don't trust him one bit and because of him I live in the woods all alone. He's not married to anyone and has no children or friends. Neighbors are really concerned about him and fear that he might do something stupid. Stupid people are dangerous. There's rumors that he kidnaps people on Halloween night for terrible things and that's he's capable of great horrible things. He's a wealthy land owner but doesn't do much to deserve his money. He's not a very trusted guy and he's out there for lots and lots of power. Nobody likes my character and keep away from him at all costs. They haven't met him though but it doesn't stop them from backing away from him. And now Dr. Medicus is accusing me of witchcraft?!?!? He killed my parents and now he's accusing me of witchcraft?!?! What does he want from me? Now his friends are backing him up so now almost all of Salem is accusing me of a witch because he killed my parents and now I live alone in the woods.

But unfortunately the witch trials are true and I've confessed to the witch trials against me and now I'm an official of the court. It was true I was out in the woods drinking blood and dancing with other people and now they're saying it's lies?!?!? First they say witchcraft and now they're saying no witchcraft? Who's the one lying now? And I said who was all with me and I'm being questioned about it even though I was THERE? Dr. Medicus just wants me gone because of my money. He's mad cause I didn't pay him for killing my parents and now he wants me dead for my money. He's even got his friends in on this because of the money "he deserves". And now all of Salem wants my money so they want me dead too. It's pretty said my parents died but now they want me dead cause I have to survive on my own?!?! I decided to tell the truth to the community and now the people who were with me need to apologize for their helping in the witchcraft. But guess what. Their not apologizing and they think they can get away with murdering me because I told them all the truth. And quote from Dr. Donald Smith "No One Likes You. You deserve to die. You stole my crispitos" What the heck are crispitos? According to Dr. Donald "Their my favorite drug." And the druggie is trying to get me killed?!?!

Dr. Medicus said that they fixed a table so they can't be witches. It's like a murder case where they weren't there at the time of the victim's death but they still killed that person. Dr Medicus and his friends could've easily fixed the table then gone into the woods or gone into the woods then fixed the table. They could've fixed the table days before or after the incident in the woods. There is no proof that they were fixing the table during the time of the incident in the woods. They are lying about not being witches and they need to be punished. We saw them in the woods they can't deny it. They need to tell us the truth and apologize for everything they've done. If they don't get punished for what they've done they'll be mad witches going around thinking they can do anything they want because they didn't get punished like the rest of us who have confessed.

In conclusion since I was one of the people there I think I should know who was all there in the woods. I admitted it and I apologized for my sins and now the rest of the people have to too. These people are trying to murder an innocent person who lost his parents at a young age. I'm an orphan and yet they're still trying to make my life as miserable as possible. I've apologized to everyone even after what they've been doing to me and now it's time for them to apologize to Salem and me for what they've done.

Sincerely,

Johnny Crucible
Figure 10. Defense that a student wrote for his character. This student wrote this full “testimony” outside of class and shared it with his classmates and with me.

“I wanted to create my character by my personality and the real name of Aquaman. I created him to be a nice sweet man, who has the heart in life and cares for others and is a hard working man.”

Figure 11. This student’s reflection exemplified how some students chose to model their game character closely after their real-world identity.

“The game made me realize how much damage one person could cause, it did make Proctor’s reasons to not signing his name more clear. I thought it did this by showing when you really believed in something or if everything has been taken from you the only thing you have left is your pride. So when someone was lying about you, you felt compelled to defend yourself. My character is a lot like Proctor in his decision to fight his accusations and his reasons on why he would rather die than lie about something. He’s also the same on the fact that he wasn’t out for power, just defending himself. I tried to put myself in his shoes, think, "I'm accused of something I didn't do i'm [sic] not going to sit here and pout to myself or give them what they want with a confession I'm going to fight." I also thought about what some other characters would do in other books. It did make me understand Proctor's [sic] decision. As the game moved on I got kind of angry when it seemed that the whole town was against my character but over all I'm happy that he was spared and I hope his family survives the potato famine that'll happen in 100 years or so.”

Figure 12. This student’s response exemplified many student responses. Students remarked that the game allowed them to understand power and character motivation deeply and personally.

“The game helped me be more immersed in the story. It kind of proved to me that everybody only really cared about themselves and their own image.”

Figure 13. This is another typical student reflection that described how the game allowed this student to understand the concepts in the play deeply.
References

