

Teaching Bad Apples

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<http://www.workingexamples.org/example/show/712>

<https://www.thegamecrafter.com/games/teaching-bad-apples>

Seed

Tell us about your idea or project. What's your vision?

Teaching Bad Apples is a game developed in 2014 for current and future teachers. It plays much like Apples to Apples or Cards against Humanity, with each player in turn reading a situation card, followed by the other players choosing their response cards. Each situation, however dramatic or bizarre, is authentic, obtained through crowd-sourcing, social media, and online teacher forums. After many play tests, including feedback from practicing teachers and teacher educators, we concluded that the most effective way to teach people to deal with these dicey situations is to have players provide wildly inappropriate responses to the authentic situations, and then in the debriefing talk about “what you would really do.” Effectively the game teaches by counterexample, and by making light of these situations it breaks down conversation barriers, and then gets into authentic and appropriate reactions.

What problem are you trying to solve and why does it matter?

Teaching Bad Apples, originally named *Teach Me To Teach*, began as a simple card game meant for teachers, both current and future. It started at a conference, where a few instructional designers got together, and someone brought along a deck of Microsoft product playing cards for show and tell. A spontaneous play session broke out, and each person took turns proposing something hypothetical to teach, while the others matched their product cards with the thing to be taught. While this might sound to the average citizen like something they might encounter in Dante’s 8th circle of hell, it was, surprisingly, and despite the fact that we only had Microsoft cards, actually quite fun. So at the end of the session we concluded that if we can make Microsoft Product cards fun, certainly we can come up with a similar game that is broader, more educational, and more fun. So a prototype was created, followed by multiple iterations of the game, ending up with the finished product one year later.

In this first version of the game, we stuck to the “teaching cards” and “method cards” vision. Most content cards were vanilla, like, “Teach students how to formulate a hypothesis,” or, “Graph a linear equation.” Similarly, most

method cards were equally appropriate and vanilla, like, “Use an instructional video,” or, “Craft a motivational lecture.” After the first playthrough, and just for laughs, we added in a few offbeat cards to the mix, such as a content card that read, “Teach your colleague how to clear porn off his classroom computer,” and a method card that read, “Watch your mother do it.” We even toyed with “wild cards,” that modified what was to be taught, like, “While sky-diving from 15,000 feet,” or, “With a ticking bomb next to you with a 1-minute timer.” This spiced up the game, yet potentially at the expense of some educational value.

Fortunately, during an early playthrough, we happened to have at the table a former state teacher of the year, and she was very helpful and supportive. Her suggestion was simple, yet profound: get rid of the boring cards, and keep the fun cards. This turned things upside down for us, and freed up the creative process. We started coming up with more and more outrageous content and method cards, and as we did, we started to realize that many outrageous situations that we had encountered ourselves could not really be classified as “content.” Similarly, the wildly inappropriate methods we were coming up could only, and with a very liberal interpretation, be considered teaching “methods.”

For example, when discussing crazy school situations we each had encountered, one of the teachers was describing a time when she chaperoned a senior trip, and she smelled marijuana coming from a student’s room. We used this example on a card, but it really was more of a “situation” to react to, rather than content to be taught (although as you’ll see below, we ultimately did allow for this to be a “teachable moment” as well). Similarly, some of the tongue-in-cheek method cards we were coming up with to react to these situations, such as, “Lower your expectations,” or, “Watch Reefer Madness with them,” could only loosely be considered teaching methods, and really fell under the broader category of “responses.” From a theoretical point of view, you might say we broadened our scope beyond the traditional field of educational technology, where solutions are often instructional, to performance technology, where problems can be solved in a variety of ways.

So, after a few more playtests (Figures 1, Figure 2), we continued culling the boring cards, while keeping and adding more fun cards. We decided that in order for this to maintain its educational value, the situations needed to be authentic. In a debriefing after one particularly raucous playtest, we looked back and reflected that everyone had a fantastic time, and that spontaneous conversations were happening on an almost continuous basis, with everyone sharing their stories. And while the response cards we played during the session were without question nothing we would ever actually do, we almost always followed up with a, “Well, this is what I really did,” or, “This is what I should have done,” or, “I couldn’t get away with that today; you’d have to do it this way now,” and so on. It worked shockingly well, and in the end this sort of “teach by counterexample” approach stuck.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Future Plans

It seems that there is a never ending flow of situations that teachers find themselves in, so our first expansion will be additional situations, along with some additional inappropriate responses. We will continue to crowdsource the situations, and coming up with inappropriate responses is surprisingly easy, as all you have to do is to write down the inner thoughts and fantasies about what you would want do, if only you could.

In addition to expanding the existing game, when we have shown the game to non-teachers, we often get feedback that this method (authentic situations, followed by counterexample style responses), is a suitable for a wide variety of other professions. One example in particular involved athletic counselors in a Division 1 college football program, where they are now creating a parallel game that helps their players explore ethically difficult situations, and how they should respond to them. Situations like, “A young co-ed admirer is aware that you are likely to be taken in next year’s NFL draft, and she wants you to get her pregnant,” are followed with response cards that explore all of the things the player definitely should NOT do, and then a discussion of what they really should do.

Bloom

You did it, your project has bloomed! How did it turn out? Tell us about your final product or result.

So far, so good. Our long development process and multiple iterations seems to have paid off. Everybody who plays it really likes it, and sees both the entertainment and educational value. Our team (Nathaniel Turcotte, Matt Leifeld, and myself) is looking to market the game, as well as develop an expansion pack and a mobile app next.

What conclusions can you make and why do they matter?

Keys were:

- The scenarios need to be authentic, so the core of the game is “real.”
- The responses to the scenarios need to be outlandish, to make it fun.
- If you want learning to occur, a simple debriefing that asks the question, “What would you really do?” is all that is needed after each hand.

Tell us about some of your successes. What can the WEx community learn from them?

1. Iterations are critical.
2. Don’t get married to your original idea; our game morphed multiple times.
3. Teamwork is important, we had a good core team working together and for each other.
4. Listen to your playtesters’ feedback; they were critical.

5. Never stop having fun with it, and be enthusiastic about what you make. How YOU perceive the game will rub off on others.

What were some of your big challenges and how did you handle them?

The biggest challenge was how to have fun and make it educational. By teaching through counterexample, we think we have come up with a formula that works.

Reflecting back, what did you learn along the way? What would you do differently?

We would have not been so afraid to make it “fun first” from the outset. We got there, eventually, after much wheel-spinning. Once we “let it go” and went for all out fun, we found the learning followed.

So what’s next? How are you making sure your work reaches people and is adopted?

This is where we are hoping to network and develop partnerships.

Looking forward, what kind of impact do you think your work will have? How might it continue to evolve?

We hope it will be used in schools of education around the country to arm pre-service teachers with foreknowledge of some of the crazy scenarios they will encounter as teachers. And we really hope teachers use it, if for nothing else than for off-line fun with colleagues.