

Chess, Contest, and English

This article reports on an ethnographic analysis of students who play chess at a mixed comprehensive school in England. The authors explore how children learn when playing chess and speculate about how the appeal of the game could be used by secondary teachers to improve English lessons.



The Opening

It is a truism that teaching is a highly controlled activity, with curriculum and school policies largely prescribed and subject to searching and regular external inspection. However the motivational features of the classroom learning environment remain within teachers' sphere of influence (Guay, Vallerand, and Blanchard; Hardré and Sullivan), and have been shown to impact directly positively or negatively upon pupil progress (Skinner and Belmont). Maintaining and enhancing pupil motivation must therefore be a priority concern for new and established secondary school teachers, particularly since teachers' relative strength of influence increases in higher grades (Maehr). In this small-scale study, we carried out participant observation of a school chess club to explore whether there were any motivational elements that could inform classroom practice in English teaching. How can a board game illuminate the complex dynamics of the school classroom? Richard F. Bowman's work carried out at the dawn of video game systems demonstrated the clear similarity of ethos between academically engaging classrooms and, in this case, video game systems:

Each is steeped in (a) clarity of task, (b) clear awareness of participant roles and responsibilities, (c) choice in the selection and execution of problem-solving strategies, (d) potentially-balanced systems of *skills* and *challenges*, and (e) a progressive hierarchy of challenges to sustain interest. Moreover, each reflects (a) unambiguous

feedback, (b) affirmation of the instructiveness of error, (c) seemingly infinite opportunities for self-improvement, (d) provision for active involvement in tasks which are rooted in the high probability of success, (e) freedom from fear of reprisal, ridicule, or rejection, and (f) an overarching recognition of the need for learners to enjoy what they experience in the classrooms of life. (Bowman, "Pac-Man' Theory" 16)

Nearly 30 years on, drawing parallels between gaming and teaching, in terms of pupil motivation, Bowman suggests that in both there is a "dynamic interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational supports" and that "effective teachers can learn to use both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards in personal, thoughtful, and complementary ways to heighten students' academic attainment" ("Rethinking" 267). However, extrinsic rewards can be perceived by pupils as controlling and disempowering; therefore, we urge caution in applying them in classroom settings and prefer methods that seek to inspire pupils to be engaged and skillful in their learning activities in school, discovering purpose in their work as an aspiration and guiding principle (Pink).

We maintain that thoughtful reflection on the nature of games and gaming, drawing on pupils' engagement and interaction with the process of playing and winning, can offer useful illumination of aspects of pupil motivation that can assist the English teacher to raise achievement. We return to this theme later, in the Endgame.

Turning to the locus of the participant observation that elicited our data, Westfield School is an

oversubscribed mixed Community Comprehensive School situated toward the edge of a county town in England. Although most pupils are from above average socioeconomic backgrounds, a significant number are from less advantaged backgrounds, and eligibility for free school meals and number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are in line with the national average.

This article takes as its focus the students who play chess at Westfield. It attempts to understand how this pursuit forms a part of their lives and culture within and outside of school. It also investigates the chess club in which they play during Tuesday lunchtimes. The observations and interviews were conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA). Voluntary informed consent was gained with respect to all participants in the study.

We begin with a quotation by an anthropologist about chess clubs, partly because his experience of chess clubs is radically different from what was observed at the chess club at Westfield. Robert Desjarlais argues that “[a]nyone who has spent time at chess clubs or tournaments will tell you that at least some of its participants are a bit ‘odd’ in their manners of thought or engagements of others. But they will also tell you that chess is a haven for, not the cause of, this oddness” (148). Desjarlais’s point here is problematic. While *Counterplay: An Anthropologist at the Chessboard* makes an admirable attempt to grasp the culture of chess clubs generally, branding the members of chess club as “odd” portrays the people who he observes at chess club as peculiar others. Desjarlais’s language, as it describes members of chess clubs as odd, fashions those participants as odd in the minds of readers. In Austinian terms, “the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin 6); members of chess club only become odd in the minds of readers when Desjarlais describes them as odd, which is surely little more than his own subjective view of them. Anthropologists “need to appreciate that there are perspectives different from our own and that our ethnocentric biases may blind us to those alternatives” (Robbins 15); Desjarlais could have borne this in mind.

In the ethnographic descriptions of participant observation at chess club, and in our analysis of the semi-structured interview, we will attempt

to avoid this kind of ethnocentric bias, and avoid making judgements about the children who play chess. Instead, following in the tradition of Mary Jane Kehily and Joan Swann, we will approach culture as “something that can be observed and studied in day-to-day engagements with the social world” (ix). Rather than judging children, we will attempt to represent the culture of the students who attend chess club as best we can. Like Kehily and Swann, we recognize that any understanding gleaned from observation and interviews with the children is necessarily “partial,” as “children present certain . . . sides of themselves at interview” and “adults emphasise others” (x). Indeed, the extent to which, as teachers and researchers, we can ever really be a “participant” in a club for children is open to debate. For we will always be, to more or less of an extent, an outsider looking in. Armed with this recognition, allow us to begin.

Middle Game: Observation of Chess Club and Analysis of the Group Interview

The pared-down requirements of social interaction found in chess clubs and tournaments make it possible for asocial players to be present.

— Robert Desjarlais, *Counterplay*

The above description of asocial players and pared-down social interaction is radically different from our observation of the children who play chess at Westfield, where the chess club is a highly sociable affair. It has around 30 regular attendees who play ladder matches, the aim of which is to beat your opponent and in doing so either move above them in the ladder or retain your place in the ladder. There are also “friendly” matches, where one’s position in the ladder is not at stake. Charlie described the way that the ladder worked at interview: “You can challenge someone up to four places above you. And then if you win you swap places with them but they move down so everyone gets shifted one place down. So you’re trying to get higher up the ladder and if you get to the top more people want to challenge you.”

Although a mathematics teacher organizes the ladder, the children are highly independent. That is to say, when the children arrive at the club, they will set up the boards and begin ladder or friendly matches such that everything will be

in motion before the teacher arrives. Typically six to seven matches will be played at any one time. While these matches take place, other students will sit or stand around the matches, observing them. The students' positions within the ladder change often: as such, the ladder motivates the students. They appear to desire to move up it. Kai made the following point: "You lose to somebody last week and you want to get back up. If you go from first to fourth you want to get back up to first so [the ladder] motivates yourself to try and get better."

Motivation here seems to arise from a competitive jostling for position within the ladder. This desire to move up the ladder, or to retain one's place in it, manifests itself in an apparent preference among group members for ladder matches. The students take friendlies less seriously. Kai noted that "at my old school it was kind of just playing friendlies and stuff." "Just" here implies that the friendlies fall short of ladder matches, that they are inferior, indicating that Kai prefers the ladder format. Zoltán Dörnyei usefully describes motivation as a "process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached" (118). In these terms, the chess ladder constitutes the instigation force, in that it motivates the children to succeed. The idea of victory more generally also constitutes part of this instigation force.



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It is common for students to discuss and talk about the games they observe. In one match, in which two of the top six players in the ladder competed, a crowd of eight children encircled the match, their eyes focused on it as it unfolded. One audience member described the style of a player's opening as "aggressive"; another audience member hinted at a potential victory by uttering "Mate in three," informing the players that a checkmate is possible in three moves' time. As the students played chess, they seemed to be learning in quite an active way. Students also seemed to be learning by observing chess. In the interview, what students have to say about chess and their learning was a fertile subject. We will now discuss this.

Charlie made the following suggestion about openings when asked the question, "Can you explain what a chess opening is?"

It's like a set of four moves. A small number of moves to start off and it's an agreed thing that both people follow so they will take the piece that's meant to be taken. So it leaves you with a set of pieces in a set way which is your normal start so you start with those pieces set out like that and then after that you start thinking for yourself. If you're doing a timed match it saves a lot of decisions in the openings and gives you more time to think about later on.

Charlie appears to be a reflective chess player. He reflects on his own strategies and the advantages of using chess openings: that they save time. It is important to consider the context of his utterance. The question prompted him to explain what a chess opening is. As well as doing this, he hinted at the potential advantages of opening without being prompted. His language was also didactic, in that he was explaining what a chess opening was to Alex and Kai. When asked if other students use chess openings, the following conversation occurred:

Kai: Sometimes.

Charlie: You do quite simple ones but I can't remember what they're called.

Ali (addressing Kai): You've also kind of made your own, haven't you? I notice that you always bring out your pawn.

Charlie and Ali do more than reflect on their play. They also consciously consider the techniques

of Kai and feel sufficiently confident to describe the openings Kai uses. These interactions, these moments of learning through talk, can usefully be interpreted in Vygotskian terms, in particular through Lev Vygotsky's approach to the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (86). In Vygotskian terms,

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the actual developmental level of Ali and Charlie, in terms of their ability at chess, would be higher than Kai. Indeed, Ali and Charlie are above Kai in the ladder. However, the students' discourse constitutes

exactly the kind of collective problem solving with more capable peers that Vygotsky champions: it is an example of one of "these functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (86).

Vygotsky argues that "what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (87). This seems to be paradigmatic of the way in which students learn about chess at chess club. In the earlier example of the spectator of the chess game calling "Mate in three," the player went on to perform a checkmate. Students at chess club offer assistance to each other through talk and then later use these strategies independently, both during and after games. As such, the discourse of the interviews illuminates the functioning of learning within the zone of proximal development. When talking about anticipating opponents' moves at chess, Ali made the following analysis: "What happens is that if you don't . . . [use openings] and you're playing black they expect you to do that so they've set it up for you to do that. So if you do something else they're unprepared and you can destroy them. Well, not destroy them but take a few of their pieces and gain a bigger advantage." Ali here is attesting to the way in which, in a chess match, he anticipates the response of opponents to gain an advantage. Later the students were asked about

why they prefer speaking and listening activities, as opposed to writing tasks. Ali's response, and the talk that follows with his peers, is revealing: "[Adopting a rhetorical position that you do not necessarily believe is] good because you get to see somebody else's view or put yourself in their shoes. That's what you're doing. And it helps in chess and stuff. You think, What are they trying to do? What would you try to do in their position? And then you switch back and you look at your own pieces and you say, well I'll move here and defend that." Ali likes debating, because it enables him to think through alternative positions and take on those positions. He then links this skill to chess. He is learning in the sense that he is developing links between chess and rhetoric through language. He is displaying what Vygotsky describes as the "capacity to use language as a problem-solving tool" (27). In doing so, Ali connects the idea of adopting another person's position in debating, anticipating an interlocutor's response, to the anticipation of an opponent's response in chess. Charlie's interpretation of Ali's point as an "interesting analogy" affirms Ali's approach; they are learning collaboratively through language. It is important here to make the point clear that, during the interview, the students were engaged in collaborative learning.

The interviews with chess club members thus demonstrated three important observations about the chess club at The Cherwell School. The first is that chess club is a highly sociable affair, and radically different from the characterization of chess club in Desjarlais's anthropological writings. The second is that the competitiveness and ladder system of chess club motivates students, as it constitutes an "instigation force" which Dörnyei writes about (118). Finally, it allows for the kind of collaborative social learning described in Vygotskian thought, both in discussion during the games of chess and in reflection after games. This section has attempted to grasp some of the reasons why children play chess and how children learn to play chess. It has placed those reasons within the context of educational research.

We approach the Endgame, where we will speculate about how these findings could be harnessed to improve English lessons.

Endgame: Possibilities for English Teaching

One of the striking features of the children's perspectives was their preference for speaking and listening tasks over written tasks. When asked whether they like English, all four students said that they did. Alex said, "I mainly like reading books and sometimes doing arguments." In reply to the question, "What do you like about the arguments?" the following conversation occurred:

Ali: It's a bit like at the endgame [of chess]. So you have your endgame and it's a bit like an argument at the end. Or like a fight.

Charlie: A debate.

Ali: A disagreement at the end.

Alex: It's like having a counter attack. A counter argument. And you fend them back and something else comes out to strike back to defend.

What Alex, Ali, and Charlie appeared to enjoy about arguments was markedly similar to what they liked about chess. Indeed, all three of these students compared the endgame of chess to arguments. It appears that these students like arguments because it involves thinking through and overcoming another person's view. Perhaps the possibility of winning an argument constitutes an "instigation force" (Dörnyei 118), like the force provided by the possibility of winning a game of chess (or moving up a chess ladder).

When asked whether students enjoy writing arguments, Charlie replied: "It's not as fun, but we haven't actually done that much on that." However, when asked if he'd enjoy written arguments that incorporate the structure of debate that they enjoy in arguments and chess, he welcomed the idea: "Yeah, I think that would be really good. Also it can help your story writing, or any kind of writing, if you have done a bit of role-play and thought it through. So when you're writing persuasive letters if you have an argument or debate first then you can see what the negatives are and what you need to push to counter those negatives."

Charlie here seems to recognize the value of thinking through and then overcoming a rhetorical opponent's position in role-play and debate prior to

writing a story or piece of persuasive writing. One strategy of improving the motivation of pupils in writing tasks could therefore be to include structures of rhetorical debate in tasks prior to writing exercises, and also to present a view for them to position themselves against.

Ali made an incisive point when I asked if players discussed chess after games: "Sometimes, when I'm in tournaments and stuff. If you get back from the chess wall and have written down your moves they analyse the game and the coach analyzes the game and says you could have done this, you could have done it this way and then in the next round you use those moves and do it better." This seems to hint at the value of accurate, targeted feedback. In a psychological study of chess as a way to teach thinking, Dianne D. Horgan found that, among the children in her study, improvement and mastery of chess were very closely linked to quality and quantity of feedback. There were further gains in that children learnt to be objective about their losses since there was little opportunity to rationalize losses. She makes the interesting point that chess forces quick judgements—a process often discouraged by classroom teachers—and she speculates that "It may be that practice in making fast judgements forces the integration of a child's rapidly expanding knowledge base" and that "The combination of forcing quick judgements and encouraging analytic processes may speed the acquisition and revision of schemas" (9).

One of the things Ali likes about chess is that it enables constructive feedback. "Feedback that focuses an individual's attention on specific aspects of task performance and instructs the individual in how to improve might enhance performance, compared to less instructive feedback" (Johnson, Perlow, and Pieper 304). The effects of this performance-focused feedback were marked. When asked if he found feedback useful Ali said, "Yes, it's very calming. You're a bit, like, Ah I lost. Oh gosh. And then they say to you, You did really well during this bit but less well during this bit. Then you think, I'm going to do this bit well in the next round. You're very determined and it helps you keep your morale up." Ali here is speaking very candidly about his emotional response to losing in chess: "Ah I lost" evokes a sense of disappointment. When organizing

arguments and debates and English lessons, it is important to be sensitive to the possible dangers of combative debating. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates argues that “Taken as a whole, is not Rhetoric the art of winning the soul by discourse, which means not merely argument in the courts of justice, and all other sorts of public councils, but in private conference as well?” (Plato 47). What is absent from Plato is the disappointment felt by the loser of a game of chess or an argument, the unproductive feeling of “Ah I lost” that could weaken the “instigation force . . . and thereby terminate action” (Dörnyei 118). Targeted feedback, as it transforms negatives into positives, could counteract this and reignite the instigation force. At the end of the above student’s description of chess, the instigation force is constituted by a determination to “do well in the next round” after the feedback because his morale is “up.”

In conclusion, we can summarize the implications of our work for English teaching practice:

- Our pupils exhibited enthusiasm about chess that was closely associated with devising a strategy that involves anticipating the moves of an opponent to overcome that opponent and bring about their defeat. This instigation force (Dörnyei 118) can be used by the English teacher to increase pupils’ confidence through argument and debate within the classroom.
- The pupils’ response of disappointment at losing can be turned to advantage in the classroom context, through creating opportunities for pupils to rationalize and to be objective about defeat.
- Improvement and mastery of chess are closely linked to quality and quantity of feedback, which points to the value of accurate targeted feedback that the English teacher can provide aimed at enhancing pupils’ writing, argument, speaking, and listening skills.
- Chess forces quick judgements, which is a skill that can usefully be practiced in the English classroom, for example, through role-play and drama, to speed the acquisition and revision of ideas.
- Chess provides an ideal context for enabling constructive targeted feedback. Performance-focused feedback can be used effectively by English teachers, who can create structured opportunities for this within curriculum design.

Reflecting on these opportunities leaves us with a final question: Could a ladder system be used in English lessons? The idea of a ladder resonates with the powerful concept of instructional scaffolding developed by, among others, Arthur N. Applebee, building on the work of Jerome Bruner and Vygotsky. In the context of the school chess club we can see how the processes of joining, belonging, learning, and performing reflect Applebee’s five stages of instructional scaffolding in English teaching, progressing the learner toward independent learning: student ownership of the learning event, appropriateness of the instructional task, a structured learning environment, shared responsibility, and transfer of control (110). Perhaps English teachers could, at the beginning of each year, encourage students to read and record as many books as they can. Students, after reading a book, could summarize that book on a sheet of paper. They could hand those sheets of paper in to a teacher and receive a point for every book summarized. There could be a ladder for the most summaries of books completed. This idea could harness the instigation force that seems to motivate students to play chess to encourage students to become voracious readers and more independent learners. ⑤

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Student contracts give teachers a way to differentiate instruction in the classroom. By giving students the opportunity to develop a contract, they become more responsible for their schoolwork and more enthusiastic about their education. Students begin to realize that what they want does matter. Instead of teachers dictating how students will learn, students are able to decide in what way their education will be structured. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson "Student Contracting" provides teachers with a basic contract format, sustained silent reading (SSR) extension activities, and literature response activities. Students develop contracts that focus on language arts education. Teachers and students negotiate and decide on appropriate contracts for the classroom. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/student-contracting-141.html>

2013 Promising Researcher Winner Named

Amy Stornaiuolo, assistant professor, University of Pennsylvania, has won the 2013 Promising Researcher Award for "Like Two Different Worlds': Teachers' Perspectives on Social Networking and Schooling." This award, given in commemoration of Bernard O'Donnell, is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. The 2013 Promising Researcher Award was presented at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston, at the Opening Session of the Day of Research, Saturday, November 23, 2013.