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Susan Detwiler, Trudi Jacobson, and Kelsey O'Brien

BreakoutEDU

Helping students break out of their comfort zones

If you'd walked by Professor Susan Detwiler's Writing and Critical Inquiry (WCI) classrooms at the University at Albany-SUNY on September 7, you would have seen something rather unusual: two teams of students huddled around tables, preoccupied with locked boxes and an assortment of other materials. Engaged in animated, yet hushed, conversations to keep the other team from overhearing, the students puzzled over cryptic messages and secret codes, hoping to unlock the box and reveal what was inside. Some of the materials on the table provided clues, others turned out to be red herrings.

The students were working with BreakoutEDU,[1] an immersive games platform. Building on the growing popularity of escape rooms, which challenge players to "break out" of their surroundings using clues and puzzles, this collaborative team-building experience can be applied in educational settings to meet a range of learning objectives.

After attending a conference session about BreakoutEDU this past summer, Trudi Jacobson, head of information literacy, returned full of ideas about how it might be used to facilitate student learning. The idea was eagerly embraced by her two colleagues at a planning meeting for the fall semester's jointly taught class sessions: Susan Detwiler, member of the WCI faculty, and Kelsey O'Brien, information literacy librarian and liaison to the WCI Program.

Coteaching model

WCI is a required seminar for first-year students, in which students learn the thinking, writing, and reading mindsets and strategies necessary for their academic careers and beyond. These objectives dovetail with the university's general education information literacy requirements, and so over the last several years, the three of us have worked closely together to strengthen students' research skills and deepen their understanding of how to engage in academic inquiry.

At the center of both the WCI course and the information literacy program is developing students' practice of inquiry. As outlined by program standards, WCI students complete a sequence of three major assignments. First, they write to explore experiences or phenomena in the world. Then students write an analysis of a relevant issue or question that arises from the first assignment, incorporating scholars' interpretation of that issue or question. In the final paper, students write to join in the appropriate scholarly or broader conversation of that issue or question. This carefully structured sequence of

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assignments requires that students approach their self-determined topic and research question from multiple perspectives and with a genuine sense of inquiry that illuminates the complexity of the subject.

Detwiler builds her course around four sessions that she coteaches with O'Brien and Jacobson, introducing the librarians at the beginning of the semester as core members of the educational team. The learning objectives for the classes that O'Brien and Jacobson lead are related not only to information literacy, but also broader concepts and ways of thinking that permeate the entire course. After brainstorming, it was clear that the learning during the Breakout activity embodied the inquiry approach necessary for successful completion of the WCI class.

Our coteaching experiences have offered opportunities to explore the overlapping goals of our respective disciplines. While the WCI program aims to support students as lifelong learners "by connecting writing practices to the process of critical thinking,"[2] the information literacy department "prepares students to think critically about the information that they encounter and create."[3] The coteaching model is particularly successful because it provides students with repeated opportunities to grapple with self-determined content. They begin to realize that the emotional work and commitment necessary for writing is also necessary for research.

The first cotaught session of the semester typically focuses on introducing the librarians and preparing students for the research process, drawing from the four domains of metaliteracy[4] to address not only the cognitive sphere, but also students' metacognitive and affective experiences with research. This semester, our goals for the initial class were multifaceted. The first goal was to help students cultivate a growth mindset. In preparation for this topic, students were assigned the Failing Better quest, an exercise from the Metaliteracy Badging System,[5] which was cocreated by librarians and faculty members from across SUNY. Secondly, Detwiler wanted to address the class theme of inquiry, which relates both to research and to writing. Finally, we hoped the session would help build team cohesiveness, as the class follows a team-based learning structure.

Designing the game

BreakoutEDU consists of a kit of materials, including five different kinds of locks, a large and a small lock box, a black light marker and flashlight, hint cards, and reflection cards. Once we obtained the kit, the librarians set out to design the game, puzzles, and clues.[6] The BreakoutEDU website provides thorough instructions about getting started, as well as a game library.

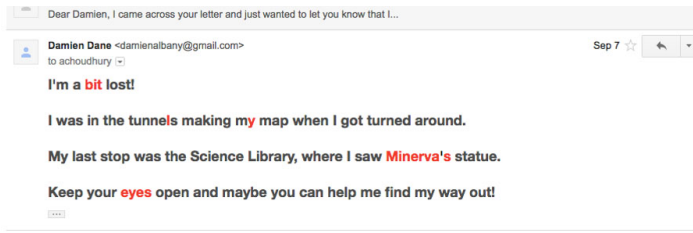

Figure 1. Decoding the automated email response revealed a bit.ly url that contained the next clue.

Our first step was to develop a storyline about the university's mascot, Damien, getting lost while mapping the tunnels found under our campus to assist new students. We then came up with a variety of puzzles and clues that led to the five answers needed to unlock each lock. Some answers could be found using the materials provided to students, while others involved multiple steps, such as emailing Damien, deciphering a message in his auto response (see Figure 1), and then entering a bit.ly url, which led to a coded message. From the items provided (including library promotional materials, a flash drive with files, a book, several written documents, and a handwritten message from

Damien), students had to work out a variety of types of combinations (directional, numerical, alphabetical) to unlock all five locks on the box within a prescribed amount of time.

Playing the game

We began the class by reading the scenario about Damien and providing basic instructions about the mechanics of each of the locks. We provided each team with a backpack containing the materials that would serve as clues. Each team also received two hint cards. We explained that they would not be penalized or rewarded for using them, but that since they were limited to two, they should think carefully before asking for a hint.

Figure 2. Students work together to attempt a solution for a lock.

Encouraging teammates to work with each other, rather than turning to us for the answers, was a challenge for the instructors, but also a vital element of the game. While many students were visibly frustrated and several were unsatisfied with our hints (expecting us to give them the answer), we attempted to step back and let them work through the task together. Once they succeeded in opening their first locks, we witnessed a growing excitement and camaraderie among the students.

As the clock counted down, students ran through a gamut of emotions: determined, frustrated, elated, puzzled, competitive, and excited. In a reflective debriefing at the end of the game, they volunteered that it was fun and unexpected. Other remarks by the students and instructors indicated that the experience:

- gave students a chance to practice "failing better,"
- revealed the rewards of perseverance,
- clarified the connections between research as inquiry and writing as inquiry,
- demonstrated that it took everyone's contributions to succeed, and
- provided everyone with an opportunity to speak out—many said they took risks in sharing their ideas.

Ultimately, three of six teams successfully opened all five locks to open their boxes, revealing a picture of Damien, who they had successfully "freed" from the tunnels. All of the successful teams were down to the last minute, and one team gained entry with just three seconds to spare. Every team unlocked at least three locks, and even the unsuccessful teams seemed to be in good spirits, though they were eager to know what was in the box once the clock ran out.

Feedback and reflection

Following the activity, students reflected on the connections to the course goals of writing as inquiry and research as inquiry. One student wrote, "Even if the activity was hands on and our goal is to write, they seem to have a close connection. . . . During this activity, you had to think outside the box, and that is something I rarely do, and I had to in order to help my team solve the activity."

As instructors across disciplines, we capitalized on this exercise as a means of

highlighting the thinking skills that students were putting into practice. One student commented that the activity encouraged collaboration, and made the connection between the collaborative nature of writing and research. "Also, the way . . . my team approached the problem and how they viewed [the unlock task] made me question myself on how I view things and this relates to writing because you must think more than one way to try and get at what you are writing. . . ."

Detwiler observed an immediate and marked change in the willingness of members of one particularly reluctant class to participate in class discussion. As stated by a first-year student, "This exercise helps to show us that using the help of your peers is a very valuable tool when it comes to problem solving, or even writing. Using ideas from others can help to create new thoughts using a combination of both minds. Sometimes the solution can't be seen by one but can be seen by another."

Figure 3. Students excitedly open the lock box to reveal the congratulatory message inside.

These comments indicate that students were making connections between the activity and the objective of fostering inquiry in both research and writing.

BreakoutEdu and writing

For first-year writers, writing is exceptionally difficult because they need to transition from high school test-driven writing requirements to the more self-determined writing and thinking that is required in the academic setting. Through BreakoutEDU, we created a simulated experience early in the semester that mimicked the emotional and intellectual experience of writing and thinking necessary for success in the WCI course.

The Breakout session also mirrored the inquiry necessary for research. This inquiry process will follow the students throughout their university careers. As evidenced in their reflections, students clearly experienced the emotional cycle and the inquiry mindset connected to the research process.

Within writing pedagogy, a tension exists between teaching writing with the intent that the skills will transfer and teaching writing as a way of thinking and being. The BreakoutEDU session reduced some of this tension. As students approach challenging writing and thinking tasks, they can refer back to their shared experiences and reflections. This will help them both with transferring knowledge, and with building their thinking.

Conclusion

In class the following week, students approached the assigned WCI writing revision task with increased commitment and energy. Using the team problem-solving solving developed during the BreakoutEDU activity, students gave each other feedback about the level of inquiry displayed in their written drafts. Because teams engaged in a physical representation of inquiry, they were better equipped to identify student inquiry in their essays. In future cotaught sessions, all three instructors envision being able to use the BreakoutEDU activity as an anchor point for approaching research and writing as in-

quiry. The Information Literacy Department plans to share information about BreakoutEDU's impact with others in the library, and to encourage other professors to consider its use for their information literacy-related sessions. Detwiler shared the lesson with other WCI professors. While writing a story line and assembling clues can be intensive work, the benefits are striking.

Figure 4. A successful team shows off their opened lock box.

As we coteach additional research sessions, we anticipate referring back to the BreakoutEDU activity throughout the semester. In order to be successful in the WCI course and in the university as a whole, students need to be able to examine a topic from multiple perspectives, persist through a difficult topic, use a variety of research strategies, and take risks as thinkers and writers. As students experience each writing, research, and thinking challenge, our BreakoutEDU session will act as a touchstone to help them overcome the obstacle.

Notes

1. BreakoutEDU, n.d., "About," accessed November 5, 2017, https://www.breakoutedu.com/about.

2. University at Albany-SUNY, n.d., "The Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry," accessed November 5, 2017, www.albany.edu/wci/.

3. University at Albany-SUNY, 2015, "Information Literacy Department Mission Statement," last modified September 3, 2015, http://library.albany.edu/infolit/mission.

4. See https://metaliteracy.org/.

5. See https://metaliteracybadges.org/.

6. See Helpful Tips, https://tinyurl.com/y9qnj6xk.

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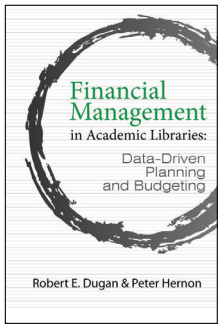

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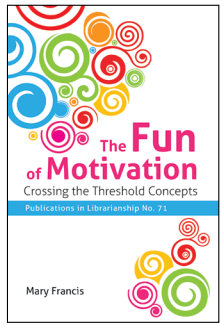

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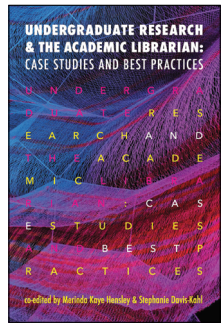

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