CO-CREATING CURRICULUM
Motivating students using their interests

By Lucas Steuber, MA-T MS SLP

When I was six or seven years old, McDonald's had an advertising campaign around the *Dick Tracy* comics where you could complete a game board using stickers of the various characters from the series. I became so obsessed with the game that *Dick Tracy* stickers quickly became the household currency, distributed in exchange for completed chores and good behavior.

There's a whole host of issues that could be discussed around fast food and token reward systems, both of which are more than a little controversial in the current academic and cultural milieu.

However, the real point of the story is that the company was onto something: They had created an advertising delivery medium so engaging for kids that the actual concept of eating the food they were selling was irrelevant. What mattered were the stickers, building the board and being able to show it off to my peers how many I had accumulated in my lawn mowing, house cleaning and dishwashing quest.

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> [Lucas Steuber, MA-T, MS, SLP]

I've been thinking a lot recently about the importance of creating and using materials that are specific to the interests of the kids that I serve. With that in mind, I decided that the next step wasn't to keep repurposing materials that may or may not still be engaging or culturally relevant for our kids. Instead, I decided to ask them what they would want to do if they could make a game. The first answer that I got, of course, was a blank stare.

Kids are used to adults directing their activities at school, and while they absolutely have the ability to pursue their own imaginative play, it's generally not in the context of "therapy." Of course, that statement is minimizing the contributions of many fantastic educators and clinicians who use the creativity and ingenuity of kids every day to support their learning.

However, there's a sort of immediacy to the cultural zeitgeist among nine- (or ten- or six-year-olds) that is difficult to keep track of as an adult. One day it's Pokémon, the next it's Transformers, suddenly it's LEGOs again (when I was a kid I remember it being mostly Lincoln Logs, *Dick Tracy* and eventually, *Ghostbusters)*.

For a lot of the kids I work with right now of any gender, the cultural zeitgeist is more or less contained within one word: Minecraft.

The process of creating a game was actually quite simple, relative to its benefits. I've been using Papercraft sets with kids for a while now, which are origami projects that are targeted at different themes (Minecraft, *Star Wars*, *Frozen*, etc). The process of building these figures out of folded paper is excellent for kids with goals around sequencing, following directions, sitting and listening and many other objectives.

Each time students build a new piece, they're able to add it to the growing "city" that we've made collaboratively as a visual representation of the progress they've made in speech. When we decided to start making the board game, many of them elected to sacrifice some of their blocks to be cut up in the construction of the board. This added another level of ownership to the process—even physically, part of this game is theirs.

Students then participated in the construction in ways that were aligned with their speech and language goals. Kids with planning and sequencing goals researched and designed terrain and other components. Kids with goals to follow directions assembled pieces and added them to the finished product. Kids with social/behavioral goals negotiated between different students and teams to decide what the final game should look like. Finally, all of the students wrote a set of rules specific to their objectives in speech.

In many ways, good therapy is modality-independent; it's generally just fine to structure your activities around the interests of the student. Too often, I feel that we start with a goal in mind and then inject it into some sort of kid-friendly disguise intended as a distraction from the fact that we are actually doing "work."

Rightfully, that process should work the other way around: We should determine the identity and motivators of the student, and then work within that space to facilitate growth. This project was intended to create something so interesting to the students that their speech and language progress becomes an almost unconscious component of their participation in the activity. It really doesn't matter whether the game is themed with Minecraft, *Frozen*, or whatever comes next—what matters is that it's theirs.

What's so meaningful about being an integral part of the creation of something? Every day as part of society we are expected to behave, conform and perform for other people, whether as children at school or as adults at work.

How often do we have the opportunity to design activities that are expressions of our experiences, of ourselves? When was the last time that you created something, truly made an activity and materials from scratch? With that in mind: How often do children get to create their own tools for learning? How can we make them active participants in designing their education?

A board game is a small thing. It isn't the ultimate expression of self-identity, it's not the solution to every academic goal, and it's not for everyone, but it does have a lot of potential power. It is a structured, rule-bound, role specific, cooperative, turn-taking, finite activity designed to build relationships and allow for sharing of mutually positive interactions.

Board games help us learn rules for social interaction, winning cordially, losing graciously, waiting our turn, encouraging each other, starting and stopping, organizing and managing materials and even operating external representations of ourselves. When children are allowed the opportunity to co-create games, they have an entirely different level of ownership and commitment.

Instead of having yet another extrinsic force dictating the setting, rules and rewards, they are able to make these decisions for themselves. It's an exercise in higher-level cognitive functions around cost/benefit analysis. When we value their contributions, they grow. As a wise woman once told me: "The one doing the talking is the one doing the learning."

At the end of the project, I gathered together all of the students who contributed and had them admire the finished product. They each had a hand in the creation, they each wrote some rules and built some materials, all of which were guided by their own awareness of their speech and language goals. Now, together in one room and facing the reality of completion, one of my students looked up and asked: "So, how do we start to play?"

I was able to say the sentence that defines the very core of who I want to be as a speech-language pathologist: "You tell me."

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Creating materials and games from scratch gives children a sense of ownership and works on speech, language and behavior goals.

[Photos provided Portland LanguageCraft]