



## Ludic Language Pedagogy Playground

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# Language and literacy teaching with games: the “who” and transformative actions

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### Peer reviewers:

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Casey Nedry  
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## Key points

- **What is this?** This is a narrative of my process of trying to make a real difference for and with my students. I describe what I struggled with, how I framed transformation for my context, and how I try to work with students in order to see them change over the course of my teaching projects. I share materials and mediation techniques throughout the narrative and reflection.
- **Why did you make it?** I wrote this to give teachers a narrative and some tools to help them shift their game-based teaching to become more focused on their students before, during and after a particular teaching methodology, and to help teachers see more transformation in their students (and perhaps themselves). I also wrote this to help me reflect and to give me a foundation to continue to explore and research concepts such as transformation, agency, mediation and my students' connections to society.
- **Why is it radical?** It closely examines a teacher's **decision-making process** in creating a **new curriculum and research agenda**. It is unique in its exploration of the concept of **transformation through game-based language teaching**. It frames teachers and students as **actors and players** in the game-based teaching and learning process.
- **Who is it for?** This is for teachers who might be struggling to figure out how to make and see a real difference in their students.

## Tweet synopsis

Understand students,  
then teach deliberately.  
Nothing new, just truth.

#vaporwaveLLP #LLP\_haiku

## View at the LLP Playground:

<https://www.llpjournal.org/2020/08/26/the-who-and-transformitive-actions-of-teaching-with-games.html>

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## 1. Introduction: Making “making a difference”

I have been teaching language and literacy using games for about 20 years. But, about 5 years ago, I wanted to (I needed to!) change how I was using games. I really wanted to see a difference in students.

I hadn't seen a difference in students as a result of doing my earlier game-based projects. I had done experimental studies (**no teaching**) in which students who watched videos recalled more vocabulary than students who played games. I had set up a university game library that logged more than 500 hours of games played (**some “just in time” teaching**), but the students who used it the most only remembered about a tenth of the new words from the games they played. I had run community education programs, volunteer groups, and game design projects that were a flurry of activity (**a ton of teaching, I almost burnt out**), but I was never sure if my highly motivated university students were developing new skills or practicing what they already knew what to do. In all of these cases, I couldn't trace or show that any transformation had taken place, and it had really bothered me as a teacher and researcher.<sup>1</sup>

My explorations with games connected to other experiences I have had over nearly 25 years of teaching English as a second language; I can recollect many ways in which what I have done as a teacher has not made much of a difference in students or classes. I've given countless grammar lectures and have handed out reams of vocabulary worksheets and not seen students able to use this knowledge in classwork. I've noticed thousands of grammar or vocabulary mistakes in class, and corrected students' utterances, but seen the same students make the same mistakes again a few minutes or a few classes later. I've spent hundreds of hours giving feedback on students' essays, and students dutifully make all the edits I suggest, but then repeat the same problems on subsequent assignments. At times I've even gotten tired of class projects; students often completed projects at the last minute and then threw their work away (sometimes the minute after the semester ended). I had become incredibly tired of the knowledge that I could fix a problem temporarily but not permanently. I had also grown incredibly down from feeling that I had some effect on students when they were in my class, but that I didn't know if they were applying anything from class to their lives outside class, for example in hobbies, relationships or work.

I decided to focus on making and seeing a difference in students. But, at the time, I didn't know how to do it. At that time, before I started my Game Terakoya project, I hadn't been familiar with the literature on transformation in education.<sup>2</sup> I didn't really know where to start. I tried to think through things on my own.

These were my thoughts (and I recognize that other people will frame “transformation” or “making a difference” in different ways):

- Making a difference means that there has to be a difference.
- Difference is similar to change, transformation, doing more, being more, putting thoughts into action

I thought that transformation was something I wanted to pursue deliberately. I thought:

- I had to understand who my students are at the “start”
- I had to understand who they (and I) hoped they could become at “the end” (their/our goals)
- I had to do something with and for my students to help them reach their goals; I had to do something that makes a difference
- I had to understand who my students were at the “end.”

I realized I needed to be more deliberate in my teaching. I needed to take more time and to talk to and work with students more. James York (2020) had not yet published his “vaporwave” (slowed down 80's pop music) approach to game-based language teaching, but I think that my sense at the time

<sup>1</sup> I discuss these earlier game-based projects in this talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaimNyTeMbo>

<sup>2</sup> A list of some books, articles and websites about “transformative teaching” can be found in the Appendix.

connects to what he argues for. I needed to slow things down in order to have the chance to make and see some difference in my students. I started including more reflection and discussion at different stages of my teaching. I added more stages and activities and took more time each step of the way.

I needed to slow things down in order to have the chance to make and see some difference in my students.

In this paper, I am going to slow down and unpack the teaching and learning in my context. I'll describe what I struggled with, and what I and my students have done, the results that we have gotten, and what my students have shared about the process. I'll provide examples, materials and interactions between my students and I. I'll be deliberate about the actions we take and how we play before and during and after games, discussions, activities and projects. It's a personal narrative and reflection, and I hope that it inspires other teachers to think about how their actions contribute to their students' transformation in and out of school. I hope it will be clear in the steps and final reflection that I am not through wrestling with the various steps yet, and I hope it will be clear that I would love to connect with other like-minded teachers.

## 2. The “Game Terakoya” project

I have been teaching and researching my attempts to make a difference in my students' lives in my [“Game Terakoya” project](#) for the past 5 years. Terakoyas were Japanese Edo Period private schools that taught reading and writing. I've adopted the name and the concept and connected games, which I know a lot about, with progressive materials and mediation, which I have learned (and re-learned) about. Now, in my thesis seminars, university classes and workshops, I help my students explore who they are and who they want to become by exploring language, education, games and society. I help my students get their “L-E-G-S” under them.

**What do I use in my teaching?** I use all kinds of games: board and card games, tabletop roleplaying games, video games, mobile games, traditional parlour games, roleplays, simulations and play. I don't only or just use games, though. Games are a powerful initial experience for students, but then they need to analyze aspects of language, education, games and society. They use their intellect and academic training to ask and answer questions on worksheets and in discussions and presentations. Those experiences and their created knowledge helps them craft and complete participatory projects such as making and sharing a game, organizing a public event, or scripting and sharing a video on YouTube.

**How do I use games?** Students don't play games and work on their own. I am very involved throughout the workshop, class or curriculum. I design worksheets that push them to think. I point them at certain moments in gameplay that they missed. I push them to explain their ideas with reasons and examples. I require that they articulate how their projects help them grow. I take students through stages of playing games, discussing games, analyzing games and then participating in society using what they have explored in and around games. Table 1 shows how that instructional sequence was implemented in my 2018 class (deHaan, 2020).

**Table 1** "Game Terakoya Class 1" Structure

<b>First class:</b> course goals, grading rubric, quick introductions		
	<b>Loop 1</b>	<b>Loop 2</b>
Experiencing	Known Game: <i>Concentration</i>	New Game: <i>Diplomacy</i>
Conceptualizing	Short Debriefing	Long Debriefing
Analyzing	Analysis Project and Report	Analysis Project and Report
Applying	Participation Project Proposal and Report then <b>Loop 2</b>	Participation Project Proposal, Project and Report
<b>Last class:</b> student reflections, discuss connections, course feedback		

**Why do I use games?** I use games to help students participate in society in new ways. I let students choose projects that will help transform themselves into who they want to be, and in doing so, also transform society. I try to liberate students in my game-based teaching.

I wrote all about the "what," the "how" and the "why" of my game-based teaching in a 2019 research paper (deHaan, 2019). Figure 1 identifies some major themes in the what, how and why of that paper. That paper is an overview of 30 years of research in the field. It presents high resolution analyses of the transcripts, textual analysis work, the participatory project, concept maps, questionnaires, interviews, and language tests and showed that the pedagogy resulted in the student's literacy, intellectual and participatory development. It ends with a bit of a manifesto about the importance and the integration of goals, pedagogy, materials, teachers (and games) in game-based education. My teaching has been inspired by the "pedagogy of multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996) and its "learning by design" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) reframing. These teaching and learning frameworks are framed by the process of taking *available designs* in the world (media, ideas, experiences), then *designing* new media, ideas or experiences after discussing and analyzing available designs, and in doing so, students and society become *the redesigned*. The idea that taking and putting ideas into action transforms students and society was an incredibly attractive aspect of these pedagogies that I adopted into my Game Terakoya projects.



**Figure 1** The what, how and why themes in the Game Terakoya project

As I've continued to reflect on the positive experiences of The Game Terakoya project, and after discussing progressive education on the LLP Slack<sup>3</sup> and reading books and articles on progressive education (e.g., the [Human Restoration Project](#)), I suddenly realized that even though I have had the "who" (i.e., my students) in my mind this whole time, I seemed to have completely ignored them in my 2019 critique of and manifesto on game-based language teaching and haven't described my intentions and actions from their (and our) perspective. Game-based language teaching methods, materials and mediation matter, but so do students! This paper frames The Game Terakoya project from what students and I do and how the "what, why and how" really does start and end with the "who."

In this article, inspired by McFadyen's (2020) teacher narrative, I am going to try to unpack and contextualize some of my experiences. I am going to try to explore and reflect on the **human** component of my teaching with games. In order to do that, I think that you should get a bit of a better sense of what the teaching and learning in my recent "Game Terakoya" projects looked like and resulted in.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Casey Nedry for our stimulating discussion of progressive education in the LLP Slack.

## A few snapshots

In 2016 (deHaan, 2019), I piloted a game-based pedagogy extracurricularly over a year with one female university student. She chose to play a strategy board game (Figure 2), and became interested in how other gamers reviewed and discussed the game on YouTube and in forums. She analyzed dozens of reviews and texts, and then drafted, revised, posted and conversed with other gamers about a review she posted of the game (Figure 3).



**Figure 2** Railways of the World -- the game the student chose to play

**Railways of the World» Forums » Reviews**

**Subject: Railways of the World from the perspective of a Japanese student**

[New Thread](#) | [Printer Friendly](#) | [Unsubscribe](#) | [Bookmark](#) | [Thread Rolls](#)

**Railways of the World on Amazon.com \$91.84**

**Megumi Tanaka (pong)**

This is a MUST PLAY game for everyone who is studying English and likes traveling!

Although there are some hard "tasks" to go into the world of the railway, they are definitely worth doing for English learners like me. I am a university student in Japan, and played this game for the first time last year with my English teacher. What a wonderful Saturday morning it was! As a non-native speaker of English, I can not say it is easy to deal with a thick English language rule book. I looked up so many words which were new to me. What is more, I could not clearly imagine what actions to take in the game just by reading the rule book.

However, it is not that big a deal! There are two main rewards after such a hard task. Firstly, without a doubt, reading the rule book is absolutely good training for English learners to increase their English vocabulary. "Baron," "locomotive," "ridge..." I have not seen these words in my English textbooks. Players can understand the meanings and strengthen their impressions of unfamiliar words through the game. This game also gave me an advantage when I took a TOEIC test (a really tough test for non-native English speakers). I found the apparently strange word "locomotive" on the paper but I did not get upset. I knew that word! And, I think no one except me would understand it!

Secondly, the geographically elaborate board lets players feel as if they were traveling. Of course all the cities on the board exist in the real world, and the environmental features are represented very well. For people like me, who are not so familiar with American geography, it is so exciting just to look at the beautiful map! This map also worked as a study tool. I could learn some American cities that I did not know, and the fact that America has so many high mountains.

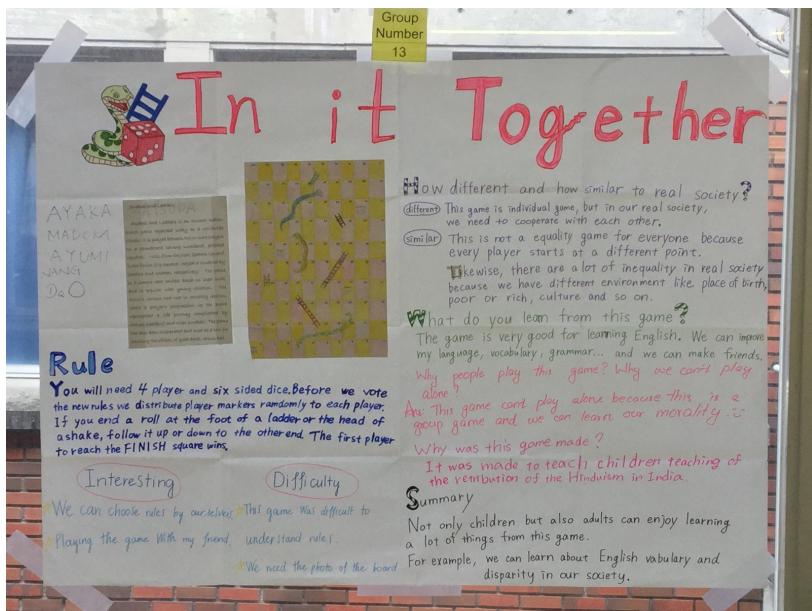
I wrote my review from the perspective of a Japanese person and an English learner, and I can say with confidence that this game MUST be enjoyable, effective and meaningful for people like me! I myself am the proof of its greatness. Are there any players of this game who are non-native English speakers like me? If so, what was your reaction to the game?

**32** **2.00**

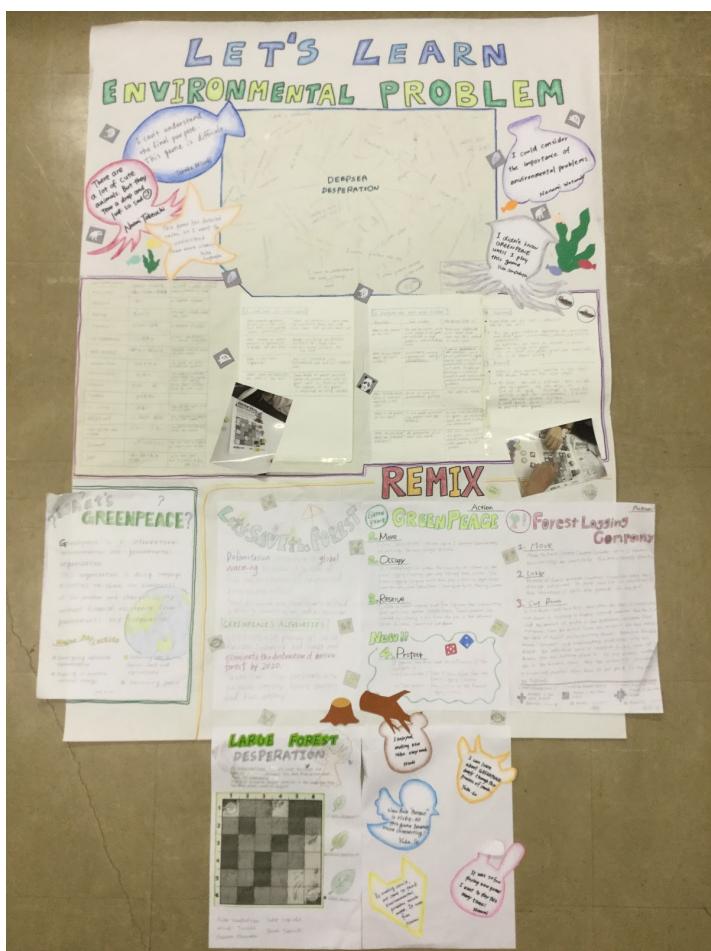
Posted Wed Feb 8, 2017 11:22 pm  
[QuickReply](#) | [QuickQuote](#) | [Reply](#) | [Quote](#)

**Figure 3** The review the student wrote of Railways of the World

In 2017, I tested the pedagogy in a 360-minute workshop with 60 university students. I introduced [TerrorBull Games' satirical/educational board games](#), students analyzed the games' language and real-world connections, and students remixed the games to make statements about issues they were passionate about. Students presented their experiences, analyses, creations and reflections in a poster session and on [Twitter](#) (Figures 4 and 5).



**Figure 4** A group's work on *In it Together*



**Figure 5** A group's work on *Deepsea Desperation*

In 2018 (deHaan, 2020), a class chose to play and discuss the friendship-testing board game *Diplomacy* (Figure 6). Students explored strategy websites, player demographics (Figure 7), and European history, and created and shared projects such as Japanese geography remixes, YouTube strategy videos (Figure 8), and events with international students.

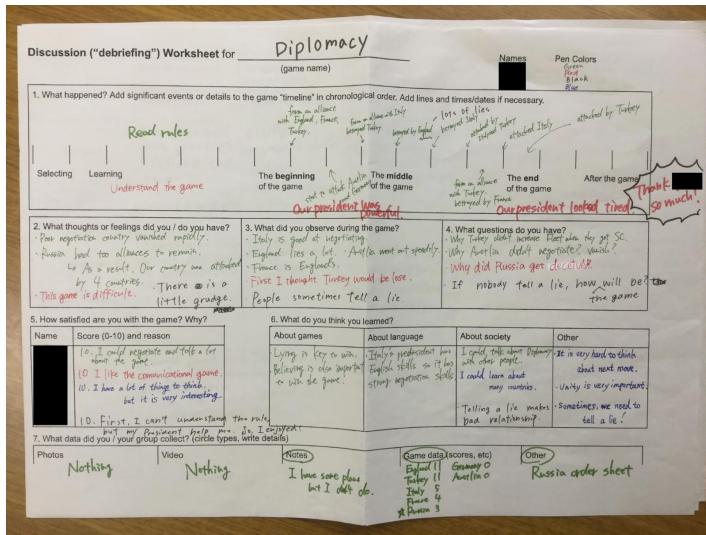


Figure 6 A group's discussion notes on *Diplomacy*

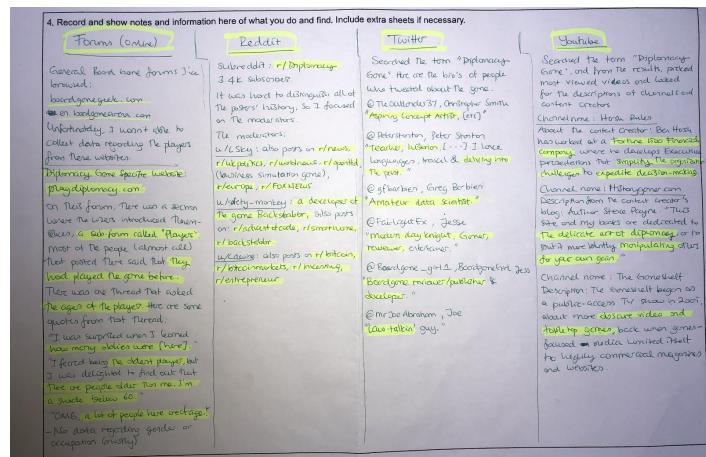


Figure 7 A student's analysis of *Diplomacy*'s players



Figure 8 A group's Tweet about their *Diplomacy* strategy video on YouTube

In 2019, I introduced a class to games and play with social connections: *Don't Get Fired* and the [VW "Fun Theory" projects](#). One of my students discussed the idea of "fun" in depth, analyzed plastic usage locally, and made a free print and play board game (Figure 9) and a [website for her game](#) to encourage families to change their behavior, and was featured in the local newspaper (Figure 10).



Figure 9 The student's game



Figure 10 The newspaper article about the student's game

### 3. Before, during and after my students and I teach and learn together in the Game Terakoya

In the next sections, I'll unpack how I address the "who" (i.e., my students, and I) before, during and after the instructional sequence in my Game Terakoya project. I will relate our activities. I will also use materials, interactions, reflections and media from deHaan (2019) and deHaan (2020) to illustrate what students and I have done, what I have made, and what students have said about the steps in the transformative curriculum of the Game Terakoya project.

#### Before: "Who are you?"

I had to understand who my students were and who they wanted to be before I could hope to help them transform. I realized I had to ask them to tell me more about themselves. I suspected that students would not easily, quickly, or freely explain everything about themselves to me in our first meeting. What I wanted to do with students needed so much more time and effort than the typical (useless except for remembering names) first day of class "my name is Jonathan and I like jam"-type ice breaking activity.

To understand who my students are and who they want to be before I can hope to help them transform towards their goals, I had to ask them.

So, to help me learn the things that I thought I needed to learn about my students, and to help them share important aspects of themselves, so that I could teach them, I created a workbook ([a Google document](#)) that asks students to reflect on themselves in a variety of ways. Students complete and share this before we start the "formal" teaching and learning sequence in my seminar.<sup>4</sup>

It's extensive. The workbook asks them to share some very personal information about themselves. It's 30 pages of questions, surveys, concept mapping exercises and gameplay tasks that get students to share:

- Their social connections (connections they have, and connections they want)
- Their best and worst experiences in school and growing up
- Their short and long term goals in terms of private, public and professional areas of life
- Their underlying lifeworld attributes (I unpack that Cope and Kalantzis (2000) term with them)
- Their media habits, both related to consumption and creation
- Their knowledge, skills and literacies
- Their ideas for "dream projects" to accomplish with my help
- Their reaction to projects other students have done that might match their dreams

Then, after they complete that, they share their work with me, so that I can read their answers and prepare questions to learn more about them when we meet for the first time.

In our first meeting, students introduce themselves. It is a several hour-long reflection of who they are and who they want to be and their similarities and differences to other people in the group. I ask students to discuss "Who Am I?" and also "Who Are We?", sometimes through the use of patterns and stand-out ideas in the information that they have created. I ask dozens of follow-up questions and point out obvious strengths and potentials, and I work hard to connect them and their ideas to the work we are going to do in the semester and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Students understand themselves and each

<sup>4</sup> I am working to simplify this for my classes and workshops.

<sup>5</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "I took a 1.5hr course in undergrad in which the instructor spent the first 45min of every single class talking to the students one by one about their week. Out of context it seems like a waste of time, but it gave our class a cohesion like nothing I have experienced before or since. We were all in it together from the first lesson on. I know your context isn't reflecting on that cohesion necessarily, but I thought I would mention it because of the v a p o r w a v e aspect of taking time all the time to give the teacher and the students opportunities to have meaningful interactions/teachable moments/growth." (June 26, 2020, 01:40)

other<sup>6</sup> better through this pre-work reflection and sharing and discussion.

These are always deep, meaningful, and fulfilling conversations. By the end of the first class, I feel like I know these students so well. I feel ready to work with them to help them achieve their goals as learners and my goals as a teacher. The Game Terakoya project is about focusing on students' selves and future selves. I care deeply about that, and I find it natural to want to know more about them, and to help them.<sup>7</sup> Even though (or because?) students and I spend so much time talking about them and what they hope to achieve, this time and effort acts as a springboard to continued effort (and seeing the rewards of those efforts) by both my students and myself during the main activities in the Game Terakoya.

#### What I did:

- I created a workbook ([a Google document](#)) that asks students to reflect on themselves in a variety of ways.

#### What students said:

- "You really care about us. You really want to help us."

### During: "Who are you becoming?"

Games can be defined in many ways. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) write that a game is "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (p.96). Does that describe *tic-tac-toe*? Sure.

Does that describe *school*? I think so. For some people, school probably seems very artificial and overly focused on rules and quantifiable outcomes. I think anything can be sincerely (or cynically!) viewed as a game.

It's interesting to frame *teaching* as a game in order to think about the human side of teaching. In games, and in teaching and learning, people communicate and act and interact with each other, and how people act has a huge effect on how meaningful the game, or the teaching and learning, can become.

In my Game Terakoya project, I've spent time thinking about the roles that my students and I take. I like to think of us as:

**Actors:** people who take actions, do things, make decisions, strategize and plan. Our actions make the "game" progress. We are actively involved in the Game Terakoya's teaching and learning, we are invested in it, we are not passive. We follow steps to reach a goal. This also connects to the second-to-last step of the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies and Learning by Design frameworks: "applying appropriately." **Acting** can mean "following a role" or "following the rules" and my students do often "behave" and act in "standard" ways in our discussions, their assignments and their participation in the teaching and learning process.

and

**Players:** people who engage in something for the purpose of enjoyment, people who explore and compete and socialize and invent new ways of interacting and understanding. Similar to the way that games are distinct from society, the Game Terakoya is a bit different than typical school, and we can play in its space and our play makes it both enjoyable and productive. This also connects to the last step of the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies and Learning by Design frameworks: "applying creatively." **Playing** can mean "being spontaneous" or "making

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<sup>6</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "I think it's important to give students the excuse to connect to each other as soon as possible. Not sure how it works in Japan, but in the US students will hide from instruction behind cliques of disinterest and ennui, with one or two students leading the charge of academic self-righteousness. I think a lot of this happens in the first seconds of the first day of class. With your questionnaire the students have an opportunity to contextualize themselves in a community of learners first, instead of having to scope out the safer option, which is to not care about learning." (June 26, 2020, 01:47)

<sup>7</sup> Comment from Casey Nedry: "Woot! Take that 'teaching to the test.'" (July 3, 2020, 15:26)

something up" and not following a script or recipe, and I encourage my students to take risks and try something as creative as they can imagine or manage in their final projects.

My students and I are actors and players in the Game Terakoya. We make decisions, we act, we put ideas into action in order to collaboratively transform students from who they are to who they want to be. Each of our actions, sometimes in turns, sometimes in tandem, moves students one step closer to their goals.

We take actions to collaboratively transform students from who they are to who they want to be.

Another way that we are actors (and also players) in the Game Terakoya is that I encourage my students to act as the person they hope to become. We discuss the mindsets that professionals such as teachers, mothers, politicians, travel agents and salespeople have, and I ask my students to approach the discussions, research projects, and participatory projects as these people might. My students try to act in (and perhaps sometimes they play at them as well) these roles, ultimately (ideally) becoming these roles in their professional careers and personal lives after graduation.

"You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than from a lifetime of conversation." Whether that quote can rightfully be attributed to Plato or not, I have found it to be absolutely true in my playing with students. I learn so much from asking students to complete the pre-Game Terakoya workbook, and I also learn a different side of students by the games they choose to play, how they approach the difficult task of learning games, how they sit and where they look at the table, by the actions they take in the game, what they say during the game, how creative they get with the game and with other people at the table, how they win or lose, and how they approach playing the same or similar games again. Games let me see a side of my students I can rarely see in lectures or other discussion-based classes. I experience their personalities, knowledge, interests and attitudes directly. Not all of my students like games, but most students reflect that they found something interesting by playing games. And I think my students enjoy learning who I really am through my passion of learning and playing and discussing games as well.

Next, I will describe what students   and I  do in each step (see Figure 11) of the main activities of the Game Terakoya.

#### What we do

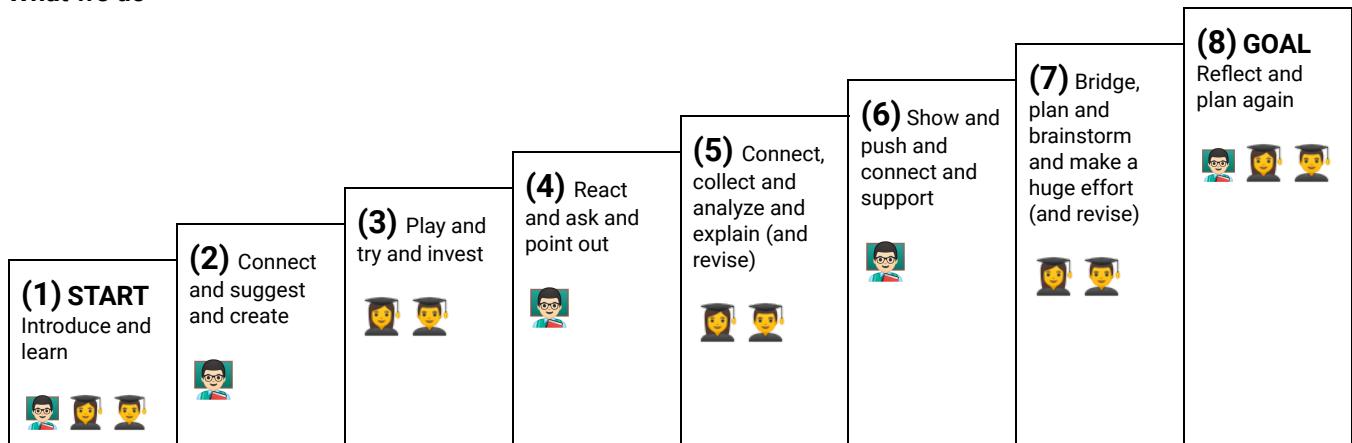


Figure 11 Actions and main players in each step<sup>8</sup> towards the goal in the Game Terakoya sequence

<sup>8</sup> Comment from James York: "Love the idea of each level building on the next and the use of verbs to show what is DONE at each step." (June 25, 2020, 20:48)

## (1) START: Introduce and learn

After students have introduced themselves thoroughly at the beginning of the project (described in the previous section), I think carefully about what they have shared about themselves.

## (2) Connect and suggest and create

I introduce them to various games, tasks, research questions and projects that I think may connect who they are to who they want to become. I believe that I am aware of deeper and broader aspects of language and games and school and society than they are, and I try to use my knowledge and experience to point them at projects that I think would benefit who they are and connect to who they want to be. I do, of course, give them the freedom to choose games and tasks and projects themselves, and if they choose something on their own, I, of course, work to support them through all the tasks in the Game Terakoya project to reach their goals. I try to broaden what they think they can do in school and society, and I encourage them to reach for high goals. The students choose from a variety of educational activities (i.e., discussing, analyzing and participating around linguistic, education, game and social aspects they notice and become interested in and then learn more about), and then I also spend time to create worksheets (please see the Google documents in the next section) for what they have chosen. I also try to create a relaxing and safe environment for students to explore and discuss; I convey that we are going to explore things together, that I am going to provide guidance and support along the way, and that it's ok to make mistakes.

### What I did:

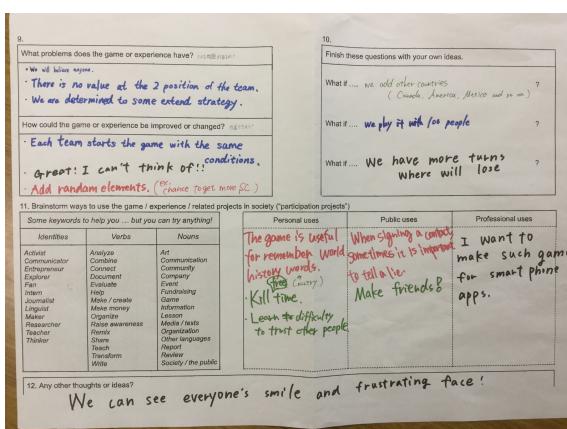
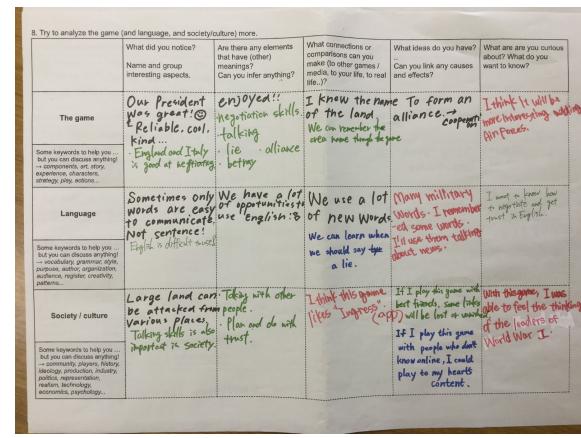
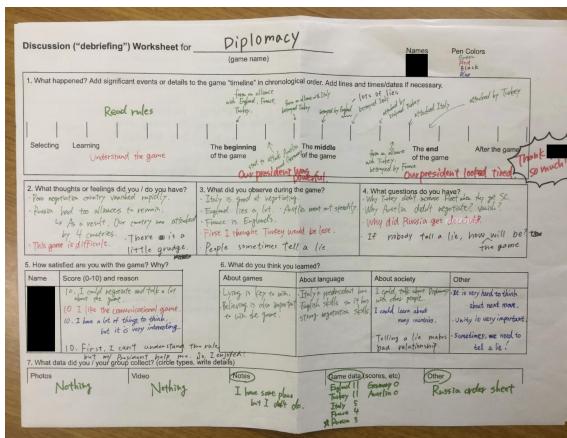
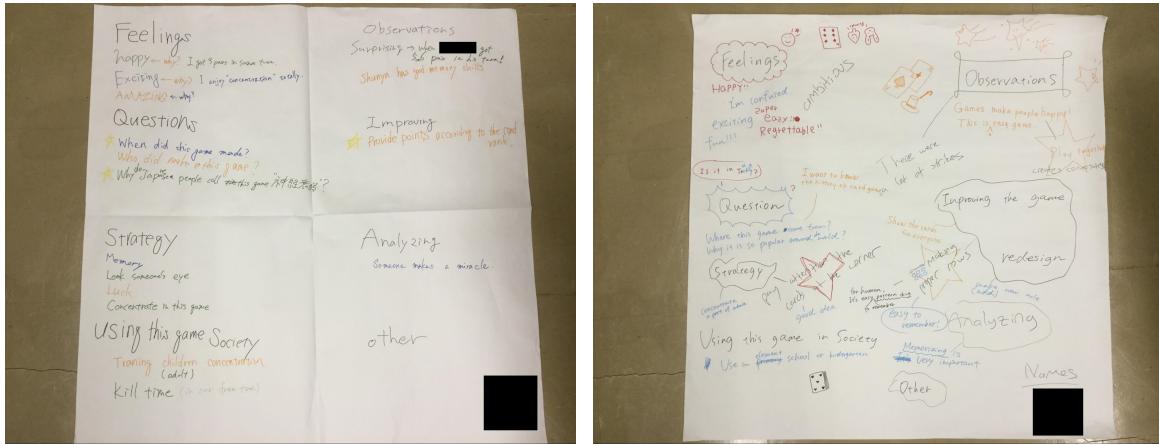
- I created and maintain a [Google document list of games](#) to recommend to students with certain interests and goals.
- I created a [Google document worksheet](#) to help students analyze game texts, a [Google document worksheet](#) to plan and conduct research projects, and a [Google document worksheet](#) to plan and conduct a participatory project. These materials are designed to help students articulate their ideas and to plan what they want to do in order to reach their goals.

## (3) Play and try and invest

Students, then, act by engaging in the activities (playing games, having discussions, completing worksheets) that we collaboratively decide to do. They decide what to do and then engage and put forth effort to prepare for and then complete the work to the best of their abilities. They are not passive. They take the step themselves. They choose to and then do invest time and energy in these things in order to work to get closer to the goal that they have shared with me. They try things, I believe, because they know that I am suggesting things that connect to who they are and who they want to be. There is a clear bridge between the stages in the project, and I believe that this is what encourages them to take the step and make their efforts. They are willing to try to find something meaningful for themselves. They try activities, they play, they record and organize their own experiences and then they reflect and share their thoughts about their actions. They reflect on their performance and their ideas and how this connects to their participatory goals they shared at the beginning.

### What students did:

- Before playing *UNO* and *Railways of the World*, my student "M" spent weeks analyzing the rules of the game, watching and analyzing YouTube videos of actual plays or reviews of the game and brainstorming language that could be used during the game (deHaan, 2019).
- In my 2018 class, students took time to answer questions to help them reflect on their game experiences (deHaan, 2020). This work took place on posters and worksheets (Figures 12-16):



Figures 12-16 Posters and worksheets that guided students' post-game discussions and reflections

#### (4) React and ask and point out

I react to their actions and reflections. During and after their efforts, whether face to face or in emails or on Slack or through Google documents, I try to build on what they are able to do and try to connect that to their stated goals. I ask questions about ideas they share or actions I see them take. I value their experiences, I consider their actions, and I respect how they act and their opinions and reflections on their actions, and I additionally act to help them better understand why and how and what they understand and do. I react to their ideas instead of prioritizing my own goals. I think that my consideration of them and their ideas continues to motivate my students to take more actions and continue to make efforts. Students, in many cases, control the direction and pace of the discussions by how much they engage with my questions about their statements. Some of these questions are "easily" answered by students; others are not. Students choose which of the more difficult (and more interesting) questions and concepts to build on in the next step.

#### What a student and I did:

- The student in my 2016 project read a sarcastic review of UNO, knew what sarcasm is, but admitted she could not recognize it and “read [the review] like a serious review.” I tried to help her see the sarcasm herself, but ultimately had to explicitly tell her it was sarcasm and used examples in the text to support my opinion. M was shocked that she didn’t see the sarcastic meaning. She said “Teachers shouldn’t tell the truth. Students should notice. But I couldn’t notice.”

I react to their ideas instead of prioritizing my own goals.

#### (5) Connect, collect and analyze and explain (and revise)

Students, then, must take another strong step and put forth effort in the curriculum to more carefully observe, research (see Figure 17), take notes, look, collect and explain their experiences or additional information in society to contextualize their experience. They satisfy their own curiosity. They connect and critique their understanding of themselves and the world.

#### What students did:

- In order to learn how to write an effective review of a game for an online forum, M (my 2016 student) found and read 35 online review texts and analyzed them in terms of content, purpose, register and style, organization, author identity and lifestyle, and creative techniques.
- **Figure 17 Students working on a Concentration analysis project:**



#### What students and I did:

- A student from my 2018 class came to my office hours. His group was interested in the memory aspect of the game *Concentration*, and had found information about short term memory and long term memory on the internet. I did not think that their research was deep enough; they had not named or described the type of memory work in the game well enough. I asked the student in my office hours “what memory and concentration skills do you use in the game, and do you use these in real life, like while driving or walking or doing homework? Are they the same or different? Why” which the student said helped him.

#### What students said:

- “Completely unlike other lectures, it wasn’t a passive class, but participatory class, so that it was easy to find my own interest to pursue and become enthusiastic about it. It was so much fun. I’d like to study further.”
- “What I do is not decided, so I had to think a lot. It was difficult, but I think it is necessary for me.”
- “If we think deeply we can see something more deeply.”

## (6) Show and push and connect and support

I again react to their actions and reflections during and after their work. I try to help them more completely answer the questions that they have and to satisfy their curiosity and expand their perspectives in relation to who they are. I ask them to articulate their ideas with more details and examples to support their ideas. I try to point them at things in their experiences and their answers that I think that they would appreciate the opportunity to try to answer more about for themselves. I try to ask deeper questions to prompt continued explorations. I suggest how they might use games and their knowledge to participate in society and reach their goals. I ask them (sometimes with the help of popular culture and media) big questions like "what is the purpose of an education?" I try to provoke them somewhat to open their eyes a little bit more to society and their place in it.

The learning in the Game Terakoya project is a multiplayer game. Students take time and effort to accomplish a task as best they can, but the learning doesn't stop there. They present their ideas and other students and I give them feedback which they make notes on. They then take time to improve their work based on the feedback and then re-present and discuss in the group until the student is satisfied with their own work. We discuss a growth mindset (I like to show and discuss the "[Austin's Butterfly](#) example of feedback and revision") and how we can work together to help each other get better. We try to learn from others and believe that others will help us become better versions<sup>9</sup> of ourselves.

### What students and I did:

- In my 2016 project, M's knowledge of "the magic circle" game studies concept developed in and through the project's stages and beyond. We played *UNO* by the rules, then examined the rulebook and actual gameplay videos. M connected the rulebook's use of "must" to the idea of "rules" and "a fair game" and "everyone has to follow" the rules "to have fun." I then extemporaneously played *tic-tac-toe* with M, and purposefully cheated (taking 2 turns in a row) to illustrate the effect that rules have on gameplay and fairness, and shared the concept of "the magic circle," which I had studied in school and in various game studies publications. I asked M to write an essay using readings to explain her experience of a concept. She chose "the magic circle," read information in her first and second languages, and wrote a 390-word essay, which we discussed.
- In the 2018 class, one group wanted to analyze the language from the game (one of the example projects I suggested to the class), but asked me "How do we do linguistic analysis?" to which I asked them to circle verbs and common language in the game rules. They circled "might happen" and several verbs. I asked them "why does the author use this language?" and I also asked them "would you see this language in other texts, like a recipe? Why? Why not?" which got them to work looking for patterns and explaining the language that they found.
- During the 2018 class, I talked with a group who wanted to analyze the class' strategies in our *Diplomacy* game, then create an article and post it online. Early in the project work, I asked them, "Who are you writing for?" and "Where will you post your article?" in order to help them write in a specific way and with specific content for a specific audience. The students did not have answers to these questions. I suggested that they find groups on Twitter or Reddit or Board Game Geek interested in *Diplomacy*. The students seemed shocked; one student blurted out that that idea was "too big." (Ultimately, they posted their work on Reddit and YouTube and Twitter.)

### What students and I did didn't always work:

- In my 2016 project (deHaan, 2019), M's post-game discussion questions dealt with play experience and opinions, not critical or cultural topics. In the post-game discussion, I described the board game's focused representation of consumption and tried to connect the discussion to her daily life. M could not participate in the discussion, saying "That is a hard question. I don't know how to answer." After I described the game's lack of environmental damage modelling, M could suggest additional rules to "make the player

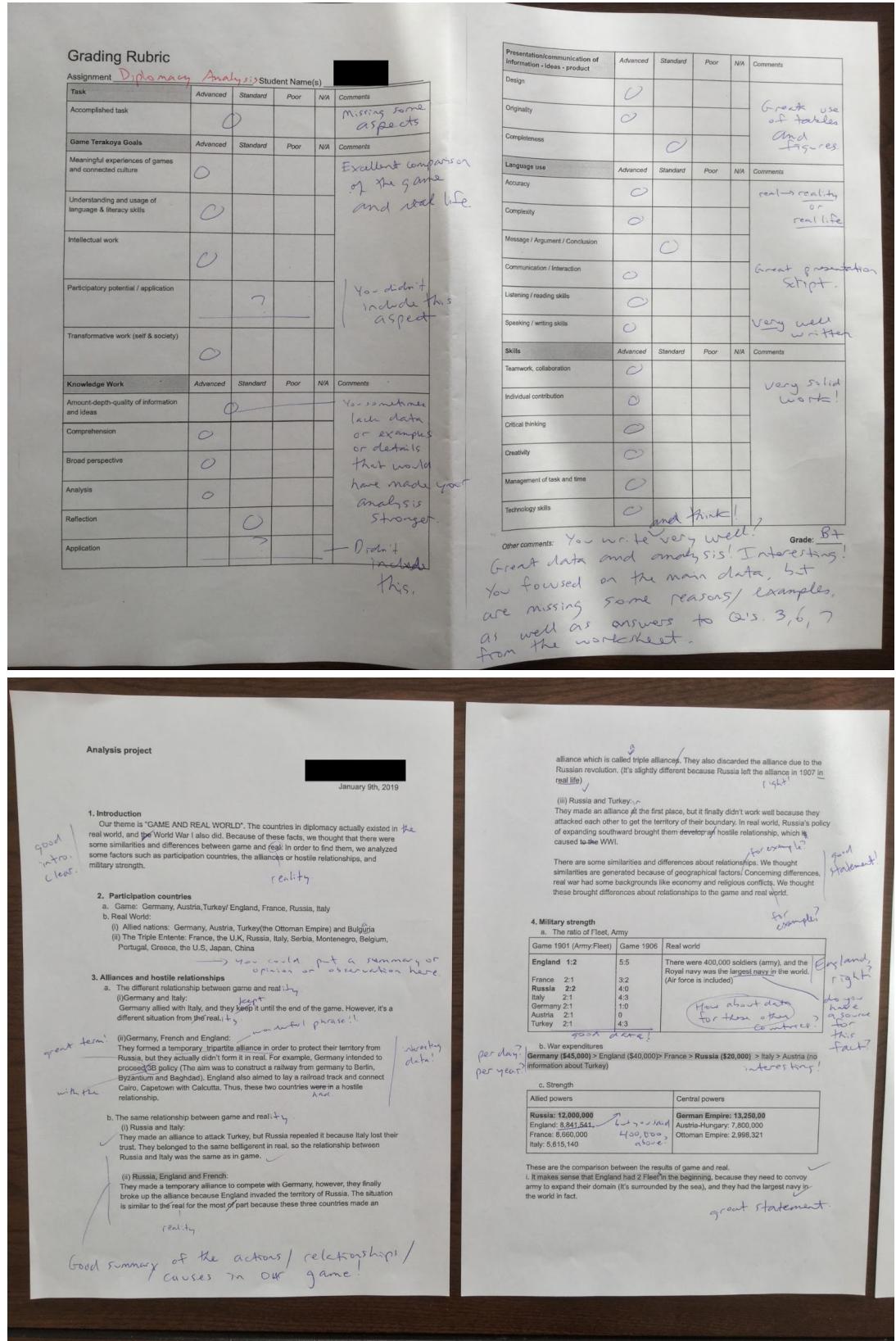
<sup>9</sup> Comment from Casey Nedry: "Towards the end of the video a young girl says, "You can make other drafts if it's not right." Well that seems to be what you're doing here. Getting feedback, tinkering, and putting it back into practice." (July 6, 2020, 19:31)

think" about environmental destruction. Later, M admitted to being unable to "connect the game and the aspects related to society or culture at that time" and could not remember the discussions.

- In my 2018 class (deHaan, 2020), the leader of a group who wanted to analyze how *Diplomacy* was created and use that information to create their own game approached me. She had sent photos of their analysis worksheet to me through email, and I gave them feedback on it. Their work was very shallow: they had only found the designer's name and the year the game was published, and even though they had the participatory project goal of making a game, and one of their group wrote that they "wanted to work at a game company," they had written that "this information was enough" on their sheet. Their analysis plan included items such as asking me for help, reading books, and searching Twitter for information. They did not seem to have done any of this (their sheet read "information of this game is not seen on the internet"), and I asked them to provide other reasons and details about their shallow statements, and told them I had books about *Diplomacy* in my office that they could borrow. They did not revise their analysis work for their submission; I asked them if they were working on revisions and the leader replied "I didn't change it."

#### What I did:

- In my 2016 project, I created a literacy-driven worksheet to help my student analyze various aspects of a text (e.g., style, context, author, purpose). When my student shared her worksheet answers in our next meeting, I realized that she was making claims without giving specific evidence to support her claims. I then [revised the worksheet](#) to require that she give specific details and examples to support her opinion.
- Near the end of the *Diplomacy* game in the 2018 class, two teams of students had been eliminated from the game, and I made them work with their destroyers (i.e., join those teams). This was not effective; they did not collaborate. A note in my teaching journal for that week read "you've never seen such sad students in your life." I tried to spark discussion with the conquered teams, asking questions extemporaneously such as:
  - "What happens when a nation conquers another, and has to manage the people they conquer? What do they treat them as?"
  - "Is this where some terrorism comes from?"
  - "Is society, like *Diplomacy*, a zero sum game?"
- In the 2018 class, I observed that a group who wanted to analyze whether *Diplomacy* was educational or not and then create a simpler version for children was struggling with what to do. I suggested a way for them to "break down" the game: to think about the pieces and rules in the game, and what experience those elements give the player. I shared a media education technique (from Buckingham, 2013) of describing an element, explaining the meaning of that element, and then judging the element. The students listened carefully then immediately began making tables using the steps I had suggested.
- A common theme in my feedback to my 2018 class was that many groups "did not provide enough evidence or detail to support statements." I pointed this out to them, showed them what kind of evidence would support their statements, and encouraged them to resubmit their work. The following figures (Figures 18-19) exemplify my feedback regarding students' lack of details and examples in their work:



**Figure 18-19** Feedback on student work

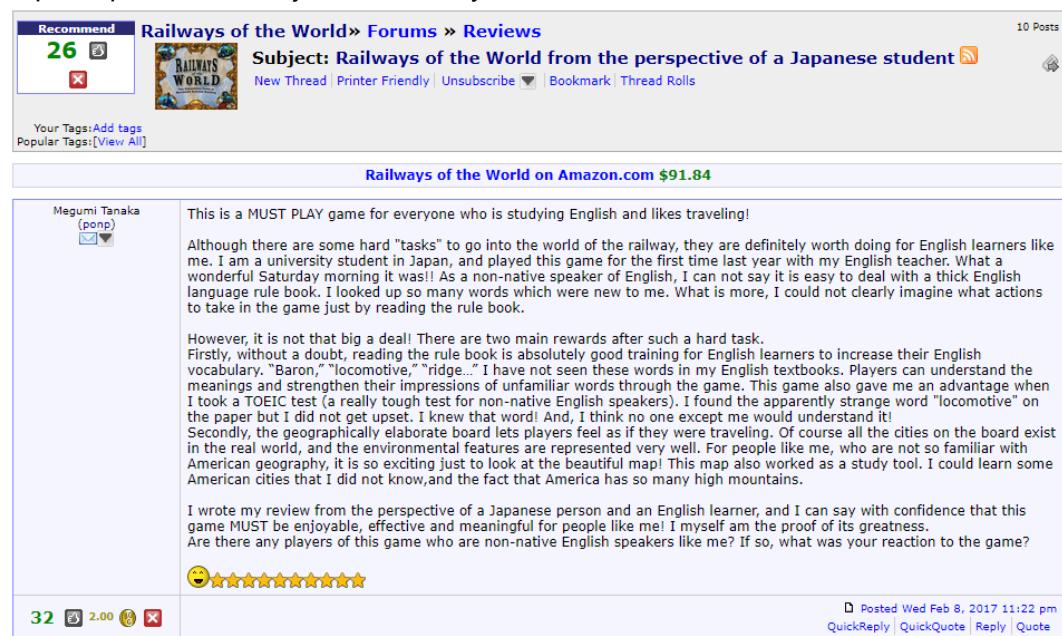
The learning in the Game Terakoya project is a multiplayer game.

## (7) Bridge, plan and brainstorm and make a huge effort (and revise)

Students, finally, use the knowledge and experiences they have deepened and acquired along the way to take a really big step for themselves. They plan their own actions. They brainstorm a participatory project that creates a bridge for themselves to who they want to be in the future. They take a big step out of their comfort zones and act. Some students conduct projects at the university (where they might feel safer), but many conduct projects outside the school. For example, students who want to become teachers might organize an afterschool program to teach using games, or students who want to be a parent might play games with children in their neighborhood, or students who want to be designers might design a game and share it online. Students use the answers to their research questions to select, plan and then actually do this project. They articulate to me and others how this project connects to their previous work and to who they want to be in the future. They make a huge effort to be the person they want to become.<sup>10</sup>

### What students did:

- This paper's introduction, especially Figures 3, 8, 10 show students' actions to participate in society through writing, multimedia work, and game design. These projects demonstrate students' having deeply analyzed texts, games and social connections in order to be able to participate deliberately and effectively.





<sup>10</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "I really like this. Motivation can take care of itself here, because the question of who do you want to be is a hard question, and in the context of the games in class and discussions around them the students can try to answer it with guidance from an instructor. Very cool." (June 26, 2020, 06:02)

### What students and I did didn't always work:

- In my 2018 class (deHaan, 2020) the leader of one group approached me about their participatory project (to design a game), saying “I don’t know how to make a game, can you please help me?” and I offered to meet her and her group outside of class to show them some game prototypes and help them with their work. They did not contact me to set up an appointment. Later, on the course evaluation, the leader of the group wrote that “a part of my group didn’t work.” Their final participatory project, initially pitched as being a version of *Diplomacy* rich in Japanese history ended up being explained during their final presentation as a *Pokemon*-themed game with few elements of Japanese history.

### What students said:

- “We participated in society.”
- “Assignments helped me to realize my participation project. In the assignments, I discussed which kind of games are good for my event with seminar students, read some articles to understand what a charity is and which kind of game charity events there are in the world, and made a proposal of my event.”
- “It was easy to find my own interest to pursue and become enthusiastic about it.”
- “Prof deHaan is thinking about our future jobs and learnings.”
- “Through the teacher’s comments on this project, I realized a strong characteristic of myself that I never really paid attention to. It opened my eyes to new possibilities for my future.”
- “To think the needs of targets who play a game is most important to make a new game. When we make a new game, knowing what is most needed helps us to make a good game. When I get a job, the skill to think about the customer’s needs will be very useful.”
- “I didn’t know how to participate in society but it is easy for us because of the internet. I will use this in the future.”

## (8) GOAL: Reflect and plan again



We work together to reflect and plan again. This is discussed in the next section.

### After: “Who have you become?”

Just as I realized I needed to directly ask students who they were in order to help them transform themselves and society, I realized that I needed to explicitly and thoroughly help students reflect on their journey and learning to uncover what, if anything, they had learned, how they had changed, and how they and I had transformed them. I created another extensive worksheet ([Google document](#)) that mirrors the before-sequence work and asks students to answer questions and complete work similar to the pre-sequence work. This again takes a lot of time for students to complete. They use all of their notes and reflections and steps along the way as evidence to help them see what and how they have changed. They thoroughly answer questions, then compare and contrast their answers and connect their actions and effects throughout the instructional sequence.

I realized that I needed to explicitly and thoroughly help students reflect on their journey.

This work is shared in group presentations, conversations with me on the Google documents, and also in graduation thesis work. I try to help them see connections they might not have seen in their data.

This after-action stage is not a “test” of their learning, but more of a conversation and a reflection. I ask students “what have you learned and how have you changed?” and I ask them to “prove” (in a broad sense) their answers using differences between their answers pre and post and also work and

reflections along the way in their journey.<sup>11</sup> I ask students to try to (and I help them to do this, since I am more familiar with educational research than they are) trace their learning, changes and transformation through the sequence.<sup>12</sup>

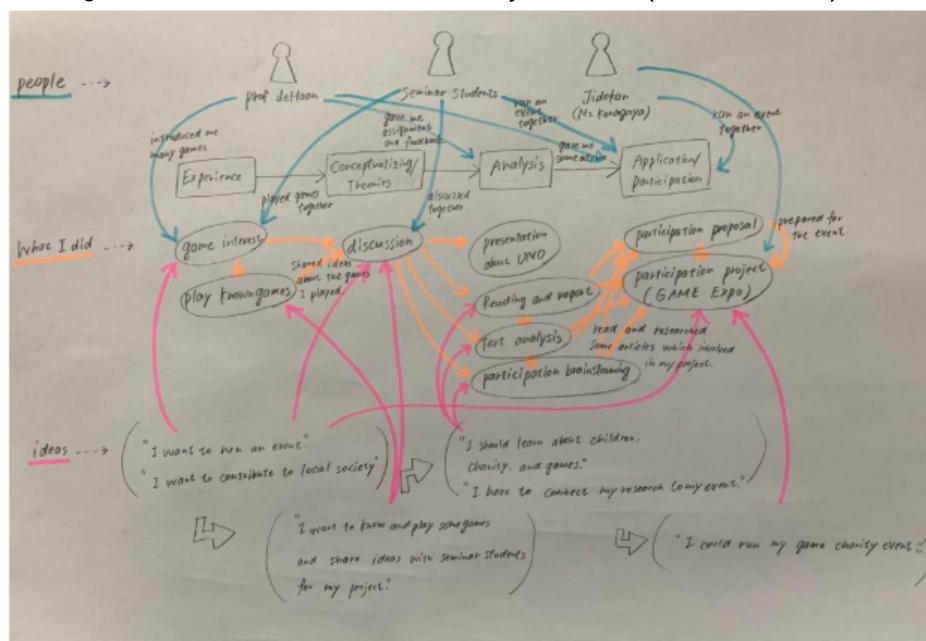
The document and work is not a "class survey" (of the "did you like this class?" type) either. These questions are much more about who they are now and their change, rather than questions that rate or critique the activities in the class. I ask my students to think about themselves, and what they did, and their answers seem to naturally and constructively critique the good and bad of what I do as a teacher. Students seem to naturally see their own efforts and their engagement rewarded by seeing their growth over the project (their knowledge grows and what they are able to accomplish expands as well) and outside the class (to standardized test scores, to general confidence, and connections to their careers and life after graduation).

The post-sequence work is always incredibly deep and meaningful in different ways for different students. This work reveals what they valued in the course work, and students share excitement and satisfaction in different activities and around various elements in the work that we have done. All students become able to point at experiences and articulate connections and explain what and how and why they have changed and who they are now and who they want to become next.

Both I and my students recognize that this conversation about them and their learning doesn't have to stop. I ask them to explain who they want to become next in their personal, public and professional lives. We all seem to recognize that we will all continue to learn and grow, and that life and learning is about the continuous development of ourselves.

## What students did:

- Yuna Ishikawa drew the following diagram (Figure 20) for her thesis that traced her learning in and outside of the Game Terakoya seminar (Ishikawa, 2020).



**Figure 20** A student's diagram of how different people and activities influenced her development

### What students said:

- “This project was almost life-changing for me.”

<sup>11</sup> Comment from James York: "This is another SOLID move. Asking students to show you what they have learnt rather than via a contrived test." (June 25, 2020, 21:11)

<sup>12</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "Definitely the role of the instructor to show them this. It's almost impossible to detect change in yourself without guidance. Students benefit hugely from being shown their progress and trajectory." (June 26, 2020, 07:10)

- “Why I came here and I want to join this project... to have better English skills and I want to use English more practically, in the real society [was] done” in the project.”
- “My way of thinking has completely changed through this project.”
- “Through all assignments, the Game Terakoya seminar gives students some opportunities to think and know about themselves. I changed to be more active and feel an interest to collaborate with someone and to do something contributing to society. I think all activities (they are connected with each other) influenced my future job. I will continue to work for local society. The theme that I have in the seminar, “contributing to local society” will be my future theme, too.”
- “I didn’t have such opportunities in school life. But I have to do it in my future job. Everything I did in the seminar can connect to my future.”

We all seem to recognize that we will all continue to learn and grow, and that life and learning is about the continuous development of ourselves.

#### 4. My reflection (a “quick save,” not quitting)

I’ve tried to focus on the “who” of the Game Terakoya in this article: the pre-work of students articulating who they are and who they hope to be, the students as actors and players during the main instructional sequence, and the post-work of students reflecting on who they have become and what they have done to develop themselves and to set the stage for continued self-improvement and future learning in their lives. I have also tried to show my role in working to help my students recognize who they are, what they are able to do and learn, and who they can become.

I still want to act and play more, though. I want to play around with the difference between (the balance of?) me suggesting games and activities for my students, and my students (hopefully after them thinking about their future and their role in society more) choosing and making their own paths. I want to play around with who we are as a group; we can act and play more (more seriously?) as designers, activists, researchers and other roles. I still have a lot of reading to do about the experiences of students, about interpersonal relationships, about how people develop, about different actors and roles in society and about so many other things. I need to continue to explore and improve the ways that I and my students evaluate whether our play and actions are successful at transforming who we are and what we do. I want to explore and better address the “who” of people outside the project (the context) and also the “who” of people in society that my students connect with during and after the Game Terakoya project. I need to learn more about society, and my students’ place in it and my place in it.<sup>13</sup> My students are just now beginning to graduate from university and I am in touch with some of them (e.g., M is working at an airport, other students are working at high schools). Continuing to communicate with them could be a great way for me to learn more about who my students worked to become, and could also give me valuable insights into Japanese society and how I might help future Game Terakoya students reach their personal, public and professional goals through my teaching.

I want to play around and explore the concept of “transformation” more as well. I shared my current understanding of transformation in the introduction to this paper, but I recognize that there are other ways of framing transformative teaching, and I would like to see what these different approaches might change or add to what I am trying to do in the Game Terakoya project. Should transformation focus more on the student, or more on society? Does transformation happen primarily in the creative application and transfer work that students do, or in the analytic or academic work earlier in the pedagogy of multiliteracies sequence? Is transformation largely about participation? Liberation? Agency? Intellectual growth? Are projects (and project based learning) largely responsible for students’ transformation? Would taking the frameworks of “reform” or “justice” better transform students and society? These are all questions bouncing around in my head, and I look forward to reading more, talking to other teachers more, and playing more with my students in the Game Terakoya.

<sup>13</sup> Comment from D.M. Jones: “It might be interesting to add a few profiles of what some of your former students are doing now and mention about how your relationship has changed.” (June 30, 2020, 17:52).

As my students use games to springboard to other activities in the Game Terakoya project, this paper, for me, is hopefully a foundation that I can use to continue to better unpack<sup>14</sup> who I am as a teacher<sup>15</sup> and who my students are and how I can help facilitate effective teaching and learning. The Game Terakoya is still very much a work in progress. It's not a "one-shot" research project. I feel like I can keep working on this for the rest of my teaching and research career. I'm continuing to refine the methodology, materials and mediation in the project.

But I'm encouraged by the transformation I can now see in my students over the course of the Game Terakoya workshops, classes, semesters or thesis projects. I know now that I am teaching who my students are (I'm meeting them where they are in their lives) and I am focused on who they want to be, and I can see them develop and together we can trace how their transformation occurs in our discussions and project work.

I'm really energized by the transformation I see in myself, too. What we do in the Game Terakoya takes a lot of time and effort. I've had to wrestle with, learn and adapt the methods and mediation of the pedagogy of multiliteracies for my context. But the discussions and research projects and participatory projects and my learning to ask better questions, to listen more to my students, and to act and play with students more has helped me become more than who I used to be, and I enjoy and am stimulated by my teaching more than I used to be. I've become more by learning how to help students become more.<sup>16</sup>

I'm encouraged by the transformation I can now see in my students. I'm really energized by the transformation I see in myself, too. I've become more by learning how to help students become more.

I've also realized that my focus on who my students are and my asking and understanding who they want to become has changed my teaching goals as well. I used to focus on the vocabulary or speaking practice that students could develop with games. Now I think more about "the purpose of it all;" what will really matter to my students immediately (when I am working with them) and in their future lives. Now, because we take time to think about who we are and who we want to be, I've started including and orienting students to and discussing goals and ways of reaching goals such as "happiness" and "curiosity" and "liberation" and "health" and "social capital." Orienting myself to my students has broadened my hope for what my teaching and what school can do for students and society.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Comment from D.M. Jones: "Just out of curiosity, when you have the students complete the pre- and post- class documents, do you do it as well? It might be neat to collect those over time and compare your own answers over the years. :)" (June 30, 17:53).

And my reply: "I don't, to be honest. I am so focused on their work and helping them see trends in their learning... that I didn't even consider doing it for myself. I suppose that the papers I am writing include a lot of reflection, but I can ABSOLUTELY see that a pre-post for me would be an amazing exercise and tool for my reflection. It is tricky in that I don't do the analysis work and participatory work to the same extent that they do, so I wouldn't expect to see "gains" in certain areas, but the introductory "values" questions could certainly be amazing snapshots of my development as a teacher and individual... I need to give some SERIOUS thought to this." (August 11, 2020: 8:52).

<sup>15</sup> Comment from Niall McFadyen: "This could be its own paper in the future. I really like where this could go." (June 26, 23:57)

<sup>16</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "There it is again. Love this help me -> help you cycle of development." (June 26, 2020, 07:22)

<sup>17</sup> Comment from Evan Bostelmann: "Yeah this is kind of it for me. Second language pedagogy has to extend beyond the 4 skills and into the world the students will actually inhabit post-graduation. Not to bad-talk my teachers, but I think I speak for many when I say that grinding out pronunciation activities (which did help my speaking, by the way) did nothing to prepare me for the day-to-day trenches of adult life." (June 26, 2020, 07:32)

The more I try to teach better with games, the less I actually focus on the games. I'm less and less interested in the "things" of games (the rules, the screens, the text, the tokens) and I am more and more interested in the **people** who play games and how they play and understand them. I think (and I think my research backs this up) that *any* game can be educational when people take time to orient and discuss and investigate and apply the fully present experiences they have together. I think that my teaching with games will continue to focus more and more on **who** I am teaching with games. I think that the more my teaching focuses on who I am teaching, the more effective and satisfied I will be as well.

I still mull: Is there anything special about game-based teaching or learning? The more I explore this teaching method, the more I think that there is nothing new to discover in educational research; that the only innovative thing that I can do is find and recognize good ideas and work to put them into practice. The more I reflect and the more I learn about teaching, the more I feel that what I am doing is "just" "good teaching."<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> And that's probably similar to what many people who dream about progressive education know, feel or practice; that the answers are "out there" and it's "just" a matter of thinking more and more about the "who" in education and figuring out how to put good ideas into practice more and more.

I'd love to continue puzzling this out with more people. I realize that I have quite a bit of freedom in my context, which has made it possible for me to play around with the methods, materials and mediation in my Game Terakoya project. I can imagine that other teachers are also thinking about how to transform their students and also to play and act more with them, but perhaps do not have the context or freedom to do so. I would be thrilled to try to puzzle out what teachers working under different constraints can do to help their students. Please find me on [Twitter](#), the [Ludic Language Pedagogy journal](#), or reach out [via email](#). I'd love to connect and act and play with anyone who is looking at the "who" in their teaching.

The answers are "out there" and it's "just" a matter of thinking more and more about the "who" in education and figuring out how to put good ideas into practice more and more.

<sup>18</sup> James York (2020) expresses similar thoughts in the conclusion to his "vaporwave" teaching exploration: "But I ask before I end this paper: Is this really anything to do with 「v a p o r w a v e」 or is it just 「g o o d☆t e a c h i n g」? That is, what constitutes "good teaching" in your mind? Is it one or more of these adjectives: creative, conscious, considered, fun, and engaging? Is "「g o o d☆t e a c h i n g」 with games" the use of a game at the end of a unit to treat students for doing the "hard work" of slogging through the textbook, or can the game be used in place of the textbook entirely? Is learning with games limited to specific skills acquired through gameplay or can you drop the BPM, and spread that gameplay out to act as the springboard for acquiring a variety of other skills?" (p.111).

<sup>19</sup> James joked in the LLP Slack that "GT is not Game Terakoya but Good Teaching ;)" I'll take it. :) I need to think about that a lot more. Could the Game Terakoya project explore Good Teaching in different or interesting ways?

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## Acknowledgements

Evan, Peter, DM, Niall, Casy and James: thank you SO much for all your comments and questions that helped reorganize, clarify, explain, give more examples and make the paper potentially much more clear for future readers. I'm really proud of this paper, and that's thanks to you.

This paper was written while listening repeatedly to My Bloody Valentine's "Loveless" album.

## Appendix

Here are some materials that have been useful to me on my "transformative teaching journey:"

- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds). (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
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