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THE LITERACY GAME AT PALM ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The commercially available Pictionary provides the basis for the game described in this paper and the outcomes of its introduction to a class of grade three aboriginal students on Palm Island in North Queensland are explored. Suggestions are made for the preparation and extension of the game into classes and topic areas specific to a broad variety of learning situations at both primary and secondary level.

THE GAME

There was nothing wrong with the idea. It was based on the best possible theories. There was nothing wrong with the game. It was based in sound principles too.

So it must have been the kids!

And there were only six of them. And they were the cream of grade 3. And they loved what they were doing. Squealed delightedly as they chose their coloured markers. Watched with rapt attention as the dice were set on the table - they were good with dice games. Gurgled at the game board as it unrolled across the table. Engaged in identifying the features of its simple map the airport, the school, the football ground, the aeroplane wreck on the beach. Malcolm even pointed out "Our dinghy is moored there". The others agreed. They listened attentively too as the instructions were explained. And they understood them. And they began playing with great gusto - and an apparently total lack of self-discipline.

With excitedly high pitched voices, Malcolm and Enid set about shouting their answers into correctness. Janelle and Natalie, kneeling on their chairs to gain height across the table are a little more reflective, a little quieter. Sandra, besides the teacher, watching every move, is silent.

The dice are rolled - two dice get you further at the start and separation between the players counters occurs quickly. Each child rolls the dice on the first move, adds the sum of the two dice and moves their counter over the board. The sense of movement, of early success is accentuated .

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Two dice give positive feedback. Sandra rolls the highest score so she begins. Rolls the dice again, adds, moves her counter. Chooses a card from the deck and reads the word upon it. The word is *cloud*. The others crowd and lean to see what she is reading but cannot. Sandra begins to draw, tentatively.

<i>Plane</i>	<i>plane</i>	<i>plane</i>	<i>bird</i>			<i>No</i>
	<i>Plane</i>	<i>boat</i>	<i>boat</i>	<i>bird</i>		
		<i>Boat</i>	<i>boat</i>	<i>bird</i>	<i>sky</i>	
			<i>Boat</i>	<i>bird</i>	<i>cloud</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Sandra smiles, sits back. Natalie smiles too because she guessed the right answer - by sitting and watching and waiting until the drawing and the apparent cacophony provided enough information to work with. The dice are passed to her, she rolls them, calculates the total in the time it takes the rest to watch them stop, grabs her counter and begins to move on eleven spaces knocking Gary's counter into the *bush* of the map. Gary reacts, noisily replaces his counter two places ahead of where it was. Enid objects, moves it back. Sandra helps.

Natalie selects a card but in the flash of time it takes her to read, Sandra and Malcolm have also read the word, "blanket". "Blanket" goes to the back of the pack and, more carefully, Natalie selects again. Quickly places the card face down. The others have not seen. The game can proceed.

Taking her pencil and pad, Natalie begins to draw a large square, she begins with a top horizontal.

Bed - bed - airport - bed - airport

The left vertical begins

Table - chair - car

Box - chair - sea

The guesses appear to tumble randomly but there is no response. A hush descends until a large square is completed. "Rectangle" say Malcolm, so far quieter than the rest but no less attentive.

"*Plane - plane - plane - plane*" says Gary.

"I couldn't see properly", complains Janelle.

"Plane" continues Gary, but less confidently.

"*Bed - bed - bird*"

"It's a frigerator - No."

"*A box - a box - a box*"

"You might have to do some more drawing on it," the teacher prompts.

Natalie begins to draw a vertical inside the box and then a horizontal.

"A flag" says Malcolm. "Not a flag" replies Gary confidently.
The noise has gone. The six watch closely as Natalie produces a chequer board pattern. She can't resist saying coloured. She is referring to a patterned bed sheet but the clue doesn't help. The puzzle continues.

"Book - pen - different colours" prompts Natalie again, referring to the squares - "close" prompts Natalie supportively.

"Rectangles" says Malcolm. They are - but it's still not the word.

"You might have to draw where it is so that they know what it is," prompts the teacher again.

Natalie immediately draws a horizontal under the chequered sheet. Interest rises and, as the legs of the bed are added - four chunky legs in a line - the response rate climbs again.

A board - a board - a box - "A table with a ... a thing on it" says Gary inspired, a "computer" adds Malcolm.

"Table - Table with foods on."

"We said table," chides Janelle who has been almost silent until now.

"A table - clock - a table cloth," says Enid.

"Mr. B. you show us" demands Gary.

"You may have to draw some more on still."

Natalie begins to draw a pillow. The curve provides Malcolm with yet another idea.

"A rainbow - a horse -" says Gary. "Plane" says Enid. Table-cloth says Malcolm picking up Enid's earlier response. But the answer is still not acceptable. Natalie begins to put a person in the bed. Body cut off at the chest as it goes beneath the sheets. The pace accelerates.

Bed - blanket - quilt - A person in bed watching TV.

There is a logic to the response but.

"Who's the closest?" demands Malcolm, more thoughtfully than his apparently erratic guesses would seem to support.

"A quilt" says Gary, "a sheet" says Enid, **"YEESSSS"** - says Natalie, finally, delighted at her success and sharing in the success of the group.

The quest for the word sheet has absorbed the six for the past three and a half minutes. How long is the school day ?

"There is no school tomorrow" says Malcolm, ever helpful - if not clairvoyant. It's Saturday.

The game continues. Enid draws a spider. Easy! Sandra draws an ant. Kidstuff! Gary tries to trick everyone by drawing the head of his fly first and leaving the wings off. The teacher intervenes by adding wings. Only one is needed.

INTRODUCTION

Pictionary is a game which requires both word and concept recognition and communication. The game involves individual players in selecting and reading a word or phrase from a randomly chosen card and then drawing that word/phrase in a manner which can be identified by fellow team members. Limited non-verbal feedback can be given by the drawer to spoken guesses to assist team fellows to interpret the drawing but, essentially, the game requires communication by drawing.

The author originally played the game with a group of adults and a year 9 student who reads only unwillingly. In fact, the student was initially unwilling to join with the adults in playing the game and sat on the margin as the game began. She did not remain on the outer for long, however, as she quickly realised that the game was a great leveller; that her artistic ability was no less than that of the adults involved and that trial and error and consultation were quite acceptable strategies. Her success in the game and her obvious involvement and enjoyment highlighted the game's potential as a learning experience.

It was recognised that several features of the game complicated it beyond the capacity of many unwilling or weak readers. Many of the initial problems experienced by both adults and students derived from such features as:

1. The cards contain a number of colour coded words/phrases and the word/phrase chosen depends on where on the game board the player has arrived (by rolling a die). Each square of the game board is a different colour according to a coding detailed on a separate card - of which each player/team has a copy to refer to at all times.
2. The colour-coding determines the category of the word/phrase and, as such, provides a clue as to whether the object being drawn is an action, an object or a difficult concept.
3. One coded colour allows for a breakdown of the initial team construct with two players drawing in an all play situation.

While the skills of matching to colour codes, sorting and developing problem solving strategies are all identifiable literacy skills (Searle, 1991),

the difficulty for the weaker reader applying these skills in an environment subject to random change provides substantial obstacles to the development of communicative site competence (Mickulecky, 1988). In fact, as Searle (1991) points out, "Success in communication depends on the ability ... to make predictions or inferences based on the underlying rules" ... (Searle, 1991:10). If the rules are complex or subject to random change then their mastery becomes problematic. In a game situation, lack of success usually leads rapidly to boredom and, ultimately, to rejection.

Having identified the desirable elements of the Pictionary game as a motivational classroom experience, the following stages determined a site for introduction of the game, explored the needs of the site and developed the game to match these identified needs (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

THE SITE

Palm Island lies off the coast of Ingham in the sugar belt of North Queensland. It is as close in appearance to a tropical paradise as one could hope to find. The coral reef that lies off clean sandy beaches is host to a myriad brightly coloured fish (and an occasional shark. Well fed, of course (Not dangerous!) and the school is clean, well maintained and staffed by a generally enthusiastic group of mostly young teachers under the guidance of a recently appointed, compassionate and helpful Principal.

Discussion of the difficulties encountered in teaching basic literacy skills when Australian Standard classroom cultural practices are not accepted led to a revisiting of Heath's (1983) observation of the difficulties encountered among American students in parallel circumstances. When *conventional* schooling is not matched to cultural expectations, learning difficulties are still frequently explained in the staff room by cultural deficit models. Christie's (1982) observation remains true a decade after he started saying it.

Forcing things to happen by developing structured plans and coercing others to fulfil them is seen almost as a form of violence (Christie, 1982:16).

The observation is as true of Australia's multi-cultural and Aboriginal classrooms as it is of America's. Against this stolidly deterministic background, the author negotiated time with a newly appointed grade three teacher and her Principal on Palm Island to work with small groups of students drawn from the normal classroom for one hour time blocks.

THE IDENTIFIED NEEDS

Initial discussions with the teacher suggested that while a small number of the students appeared to read quite fluently and might benefit with relief from the normal pattern of classroom interaction, the majority were unlikely to display any interest at all.

No-one takes full responsibility and people who try to take too much power are passively resisted. (Christie, 1982:17)

The students identified as most likely to benefit from involvement in the modified pictionary game were seen to be intelligent, interested and enthusiastic to learn. Their classroom behaviour was generally more conformable than that of their peers and their concentration span was seen to be greater. The description of the students offered was accepted without question and no formal testing for verification of its accuracy was undertaken. Instead, the students were accepted and able to "speak for themselves" during their involvement.

The words and concepts selected for use in the game were identified from the content areas with which the students had been working in the previous month. Sequences of words were developed around the topics of insects, the human body, eating and life on the island. Binary concepts descriptors such as up/down, in/out, push/pull were added to the list of words after further discussion of areas which produced substantial difficulty in reading comprehension. The numbers from one to ten were added as an afterthought when the final list had been examined by the teacher.

THE GAME - A DESCRIPTION

1. The Cards - were prepared as single word flash cards on large (A5) index file cards using a marker pen and the required primary school script for the year level.

2. The Game Board - was initiated by drawing a large outline map of Palm Island on a sheet of A2 drawing paper and adding simple sketches of major features like the school, waves, fish and the jetty. Within this map, a chain of attached squares (approx. 2cm) snaked around the basic path of the Island's major road. This path began with a six square chain across one end of the island representing the airstrip and ended at a pool (actually the Island's water supply). The path was an arbitrary 50 squares long but the squares were colour-coded so that the first 20 [red] culminated at the jetty, the next 10 [blue] reached the end of the island and the final 20 [black] completed the path to the pool.

3. Dice and Counters - a pair of 2.5 cm dice were used for their manipulability and the counters consisted of 2 cm building blocks of varying colours which just fitted the squares on the game board.

4. The Rules

[While the rules finally agreed upon/negotiated for the game at grade three level are reproduced below, it is not useful to use them as a description for this paper and as a guide for extension to which ever level as a teacher, may be directed. The author has developed versions of the game for a variety of sites since this study was initiated.]

PALM ISLAND PICTURE GAME

HOW TO PLAY

- 1. ALL PEOPLE COME TO THE ISLAND BY PLANE.**
- 2. EACH PERSON THROWS TWO DICE TO LAND PLANE. HIGHEST NUMBER LANDS PLANE AND DRIVES BUS IF TWO PEOPLE THROW SAME HIGH NUMBER, THROW AGAIN TO SEE WHO DRIVES BUS.**
- 3. DRIVER THROWS DICE AND MOVES ON TO FIRST STOP.**
- 4. STOPS AND PICKS CARD - DO NOT SHOW OTHERS.**
- 5. DRIVER BEGINS TO DRAW PICTURE OF WHAT THING IS AT THE STOP.**
- 6. OTHERS GUESS WHAT THE PICTURE IS IF GUESS IS CLOSE, DRIVER SAYS YES. IF GUESS IS NOT CLOSE, DRIVER SAYS NO.**
- 7. PERSON WHO GUESSES THE RIGHT THING IS THE NEW TEAM DRIVER. THROW THE DICE. MOVE TO NEW STOP.**

[IF NEW DRIVER CAN SPELL THE NAME OF THE THING OR WRITE IT, THEN HAVE TWO THROWS OF THE DICE]

PICK CARD - DRAW.

- 8. GAME IS PLAYED UNTIL DRIVER GETS TO THE END OF THE ROAD.**

[GAME CAN STOP AT SCHOOL OR JETTY OR FOOT BALL GROUND OR WALLABY POINT]

PLAYING THE GAME - ROUND ONE

The initial game was played on a Friday afternoon with six grade three students at a large table in the often unused home economics room. The students knelt on the adult size chairs to extend their view and, no doubt, to reduce their sense of smallness in the cavernous room. The game lasted for forty minutes and used twenty word-cards - all twenty words were easily read and all twenty drawings were eventually guessed or arrived at correctly.

As the transcript extracts presented in the preamble demonstrate, the game was enthusiastically received and while some of the strategies used to achieve success differed from those normally accepted in a classroom, none was unacceptable in the world of *real* or adult literacy (Falk, 1991).

While the success of the initial game was heartening, it begged substantial questions of the remainder of the class. Could they still play if they had difficulty reading the flash cards. Would they play if they were told the word while they looked at it? Would they play if it was not their turn ?

A further series of questions developed. If students lost interest in the game in its intended form, were there alternative strategies for utilizing the distinct elements of the game - the word cards, the board, the dice ?

PLAYING THE GAME - ROUND TWO

Following discussions and preliminary analysis of the audio-tapes of the first game, it was decided to repeat the game with successive groups of students.

Students were grouped in fours according to their perceived reading ability by their teacher and the game was played with each group in turn.

The final group were accompanied by the full-time Aboriginal teaching aide who divides his time between the two grade threes and the grade twos. As this group (of five) contained four players from the initial group, it was proposed that they would be the ideal group from which to quickly learn the way of the game, its strengths and necessary modifications.

WHAT HAPPENED IN ROUND TWO

Very Weak Readers

While all students presented with the option of playing a game began enthusiastically, the pace of the game was apparently too slow for very weak readers.

They lost interest quickly if they were defeated by the attempt to read the card or if their turn did not come quickly. Players in this group were unwilling to listen to the word on the card being read to them by the teacher so that they could draw and their drawings tended to be too poorly formed for the others to attempt identification.

Interest was revived in the game when a tour around the map was introduced as an alternative. Places were identified on the map and further information volunteered about features which were absent - the location of the town itself, the shops, the churches, beach houses away from the main settlement.

When the tour began to pall, play with the dice alone as a mental arithmetic quiz regained interest. Two girls who had refused to play with words or maps became intensely involved in a competition to add the dice - often achieved before the dice came to complete rest. Success belied their previous disinterest.

Weaker Readers

While the very weak readers became bored and disinterested very quickly, the stronger readers showed little more endurance. Again, their interest was regained with a map tour and with dice computation. In addition, this group entered spiritedly into a reading competition when the word cards were used as flash cards and the strategies used to identify and differentiate homophones suggested an active engagement with the reading process.

Confident Readers

While the attention span of the designated confident readers was clearly greater than that of their less able peers, success at holding the turn appeared to be a greater motivator for individuals than progress around the board.

A variety of interesting strategies for turn-holding developed among the most fluent readers.

Deliberately misrepresenting fundamental information until late in the drawing was quickly recognised as a useful strategy - even among quite weak readers. Drawing the complete handle of a fork before adding the tynes, or drawing the legs of an insect before showing its body were effective ploys. Concentrating on inconsequential detail rather than substance was successful. Drawing the outline of a bed-sheet and then adding a pattern to the fabric before showing the bed or the sleeper was usefully diverting. Overly detailing the features of a patch-work blanket by drawing the individual squares and decorating them as the blanket built looked like becoming a whole day exercise before the teacher intruded. The tenacity of the better readers as game players suggests that for any game to be successful at a given level, the elements of the game must be confidently controlled.

Map reading appeared to attract the interest of even the non-readers. Dice arithmetic could be confidently approached by non-readers because all of the elements essential for success are withheld until, but present at, the point of need for computation - the point at which the dice rest. The game is "fair" and it is seen to be fair.

Flashcard identification, often a favourite among early readers, worked well with these children because they were approaching the exercise as a group. The chorus of identification did not signal simultaneous word recognition but it demanded, and achieved, attention to both the written word and the initial sounds of peers as they responded. Reading *seemed* to be equally fast for the whole group.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN ?

When John, the teacher aide, reported back to the class teacher, he was going home to draw a map of the walk the class had been on during the previous week. The new map was to form the basis for a game using only words which had arisen from that walk.

When Russ learnt what was happening in grade three, he began to consider the possibilities of the game for Gary Crew's novel, *The Inner Circle* for his year 8 class.

The librarian felt that students from about grade five onwards should be able to develop a game board based on the plot for each book they read and make up sets of words which they found new or interesting in the text. By this process, frequently-read books could be audited for plot interest and vocabulary level by incoming readers before they were borrowed.

At a senior secondary level, specific technical terms and processes in a subject (such as Biology) by development of a game board to map the process and a set of cards carrying specific terms to be drawn - or communicated by drawing - would add interest to the odd five minutes in a prac when wait-time is otherwise poorly utilise.

The potential for modification of Pictionary to generate an involving yet specifically tailored educational game for any subject at any level is at least as appealing as the tendency to apply Trivial Pursuit to the same range of subjects and levels.

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

The initial inspiration for the concept developed in this paper arose from the developing recognition and acceptance that literacy is not acquired by continuous and sequential development but on a random need-to-know basis (Scribner, 1984) which tends to confound class-room teachers and, until relatively recently, language acquisition researchers (of Halliday

& Hassan, 1986). Grasping for logic in the acquisition of literacy, I met only a pessimistic confirmation of personal experience.

Each summer, at-risk youth lose a significant proportion of the meagre reading gains they have made during the year. (Mickulecky, 1990:516)

There had to be more to life than this.

It is observable that in the development of a child towards literacy there is a period where the picture provides an apparently essential scaffolding to reading comprehension. During this period, the drawing and the word appear to become simultaneous. The recognition of the word appears to be the recognition of its representation. Perhaps this is Derrida's (1967) moment of disseminated meaning, the point when the reader plays the text as a game - once for meaning and once for the music of its soul; signifier and signified become contiguous, Barthe's (1968) author dies at last and effective literacy is initiated. It appears to parallel that point in second language acquisition when the speaker begins, for the first faltering time, to think in the acquired language rather than to translate after the initiating thought process is completed.

If this observation of the relationship between picture and print is accepted then there should be a point at which it is simpler to represent a word pictorially, to draw an object, action or concept, than it is to write it. In this immediately pre-literate stage, the maximum value of drawing as a means of graphic representation is realised. After this point, the written word assumes increasing importance, the ability to communicate by drawing is, if not discouraged, at least devalued and the concept of literacy acquisition assumes *literate* proportions.

The game outlined in this paper, the responses reported and the few variations suggested across both content and grade level provide a halting attempt to articulate a picture/word relationship which has, as yet, been largely neglected by educational researchers proposing more apparently obvious links between speaking and writing, listening and reading.

Increasingly, adult educators acknowledge the breadth and complexity of the grapho-phonetic information processing demanded in the home, the work-place and the social institutions which complicate these areas (Searle, 1991). The demands of government, union and employer groups (Long, 1989) provide a challenge to teachers in schools to look to ways of expanding reading strategies to match real-life literary demands. More importantly, perhaps, these demands are challenging our traditional views of literacy. That literacy is more than reading and writing in a school context is no longer disputed. "How much more?" and "How do you get it?" are still the hard questions.

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