

Games Students Play by Ken Ernst, published 1975 by Celestial Arts, ISBN 0-912310-16-2

This book uses the concept of Transactional Analysis from *Games People Play* and applies it to the classroom.

Games Students Play (GSP) is an application of transactional analysis techniques specifically for the classroom. Transactional analysis is defined by Wikipedia as

a psychoanalytic theory and method of therapy wherein social transactions are analyzed to determine the ego state of the patient (whether parent-like, child-like, or adult-like) as a basis for understanding behavior. In transactional analysis, the patient is taught to alter the ego state as a way to solve emotional problems. The method deviates from Freudian psychoanalysis which focuses on increasing awareness of the contents of unconsciously held ideas. Eric Berne developed the concept and paradigm of transactional analysis in the late 1950s. (Wikipedia, "Transactional analysis", accessed 21Feb2018)

The book starts out with a description of what the "games" are and how the "players" operate in them. In particular, how the students are the players and how they use the games to disrupt the teacher and the classroom goals.

The word "game" in this book is used in a specific sense. A game has a seemingly plausible and innocent surface statement, or opening move, which is aimed at getting a sympathetic response from a listener. If this response is given, the game goes into more detailed maneuvers, with two or more players engaged.

The players choose specific rules which are interchangeable, and the play is conducted in a way ranging from passive to aggressive – that is, to a soft, medium, or hard degree. These psychological games are not much like childhood games; they are more closely allied to thoughtful activities like chess, contract bridge, or puzzle-solving.

Every game has predictable causes, moves, and payoffs. Of course, no two games ... are exactly alike... But the moves are not random. The informed teacher or parent can spot the rules governing the seemingly random moves made by the players.

The essential characteristics of a game is that it has two levels – one obvious and the other ulterior.

(GSP, page 9)

It also points out how someone who is savvy to these games can begin to identify them and shut them down.

When anything goes badly in school, this "game detector" can help him figure out who is trying to do what to whom and how to stop it, if it needs stopping. *Games Students Play* is designed for this purpose.

Everyone, in effect, plays some sort of game; but some players address themselves to the constructive side of life and should be encouraged, while others are playing for ends that can only be called anti-social. The first problem for any player, of course, is to know what game he is playing, and then to follow the rules as carefully as possible. Knowing them, he can avoid games and get on with more creative objectives.

(GSP, page 10)

The book presents a fictional teacher, Mr. Johnson, whose students are playing various games in his classroom. We access his thought processes and strategies to see how he begins to deal with these games.

Teachers are paid to teach. Disruptions interfere with the job. What does the teacher do with a disruptor?

...

He had long ago learned to listen carefully to roll responses. He had learned to listen for the opening move in a long series of transactions that are not happenstance, not coincidental, but as subconsciously calculated ... Each student had an objective in mind and a favorite strategy to use.

...

Every student ... had long ago learned what to expect from his mother and father and other grownups. Each had learned the best way of getting along in the world of mom, dad, and other big people.

...

By watching someone's behavior, words, intonation, facial expressions, gestures, and mannerism a person can begin to see basically three distinct ego states or personalities. With practice he can see which of these is in control of a person at any one time.

(GSP, pages 13-14)

The ego states are listed without much definition. See *Games People Play* for more details.

These three distinct personalities will be shown as three circles: Parent, Adult, and Child.

The Child ego state or Child personality is the same one the person had when he was eight or younger.

(GSP, page 15)

The book gives an example of one type of Child state and how to recognize it from its physical manifestations.

... her head was tipped up and tilted to one side. There were already visible horizontal lines etched on her forehead. Her jaw jutted. Her eyes would snap shut for two or three seconds at a time with the eyeball looking up. She was a perfect example of the defiant Child listener.

(GSP, page 15)

It then continues to give a description of the other two states.

The Adult ego state is basically a computer. It receives information through the senses, stores it logically, recalls data, and makes predictions. The Adult, like a computer, has no feelings or emotions. It develops gradually during the years of childhood and, if given a chance, throughout life.

...

Mr. Johnson's Parent ego state is behavior copied from his own parents and modified by copying other authority figures. When he is in his Parent ego state, Mr. Johnson is like a cassette recorder. He plugs in an old tape that his mother, father, uncle, or someone else gave him. Then he will play it through, often with his father's mannerisms and inflections.

(GSP, page 16)

The Parent state has parts or functions, along with cautions on how they can be overused.

The Parent ego state has two basic functions. One is nurturing, taking care of the young and protecting them without qualification. This is a good and necessary function, even though it can be overused to the point of being smothering and over-protective. The other function of the Parent is to act on prejudiced ideas, which have been accepted uncritically, and which came largely from one's own parents, grandparents, and teachers. It is a real advantage to be able to act quickly and without much thought in solve many everyday problems; it would be enormously time-consuming to subject every small daily problem to careful rational scrutiny. But the prejudiced or critical Parent can also be overused, filling the person in that ego state with many inappropriate "Do's" and "Don'ts."

(GSP, page 16)

Similarly, the Child state has two parts.

The natural or free Child is curious, fun-loving, spontaneous, creative. The adapted or compliant Child state developed in response to pressure from one's own parents, and acts in ways calculated to please or satisfy them.

(GSP, page 17)

Finally, we get a glimpse of the motivation behind the game playing.

... will play their games ... with those persons who promise the most attention in return. The “when” can be explained by the concept of “trading stamps.”

... Psychological stamps, like the paper variety, come in regular and giant sizes.

There is a physiological reason for collecting psychological trading stamps. It is that one of the main functions of the brain is to store energy. Sometimes when we can't get what we want immediately we have to wait. We store the desire until we can satisfy it later.

...

Children learn early how to collect psychological stamps and what to trade them for.

...

The only difference between paper trading stamps and psychological stamps is that the latter can be reused.

(GSP, page 18)

After this introduction, the book lists game types, varieties, and categories. The first category is the “Trouble-Maker Games.” Its first variety is “Disruptor Games” and the first game listed is “Uproar.”

Uproar

In this scenario, the fictional student, Muriel, initiates the game with a loud, whining response to Mr. Johnson's mispronunciation of her name. Mr. Johnson has to analyze Muriel's approach and determine an effective response.

The book gives us a description of how “Uproar” is played.

... an advanced “Uproar” player, is determined to get all authority figures to play “Uproar” or an allied game. Her opening attack included knuckle-cracking, gum-popping, finger-tapping, pen-clicking, hair-combing, dress-straightening, pencil-sharpening, paper-rattling, clock-watching, coughing, whispering, pencil and book-dropping, paper-tossing, note-passing, turning around, wiggling, coming in late, acting stupid, and trying to sidetrack the lecture.

... “bugging” the teacher with a series of small incidents to force him to blow up at her. If Mr. Johnson controlled his temper, she had him at bay and could continue to goad him until he did blow up. Then she would win; she could complain to her friends, other teachers, the principal, and to her parents that he was “unfair” and had picked on her. Her whole aim was to get a game of “Uproar” going.

(GSP, page 17)

Mr. Johnson has several possible responses.

1. Blow up and bawl out Muriel, as the Tyrant Teacher might.
2. Suffer in silence, as the Martyr Teacher might.
3. Feel hurt, as the Whining Teacher might.
4. Argue, as the Scrapping Teacher might.
5. Kick her out, as the Impatient Teacher might.
6. Fear her, as the Timid Teacher might.
7. Turn her game off by using the Transactional Analysis suggested in this book.

(GSP, page 19)

The book gives descriptions of the different “teacher types”. As you can see from the list, all are reactions a person might have in this situation and the book gives reasons why the first six are not effective.

The seventh item, using transactional analysis, is explored in detail.

...He should look for the reasons people play this game, and very carefully the antithesis, or how to turn off the game. ... She wants attention.

(GSP, page 25)

Mr. Johnson also needs to form a very specific goal for his response.

Muriel is an “Uproar” player with sixteen years of experience. Mr. Johnson has to remember that he is not likely to change her life style. What he aims for is to knock off the disruptive part of the game in his classroom.

(GSP, page 28)

The book then lists the steps Mr. Johnson can take to shut down Muriel’s game of “Uproar.”

1. He confirms she is an “Uproar” player. ... If she gets punished regularly for noisy and provocative behavior, he can be sure she is a game player.
2. He tells her in a calm and firm Adult voice to see him after school. This is a critical point. Mr. Johnson has practiced his Parent, Adult, and Child voices, using a tape recorder to learn the difference. Muriel is looking for a Parent voice, so he must take special care to be clearly Adult.
3. This step is taken when Muriel comes in after school. It will only be effective if made without a Parent criticism. ... Mr. Johnson tells Muriel about the game of “Uproar” and explains how the game interferes with work and interferes with friendship.
4. Mr. Johnson explains that he is a teacher and that he is paid to help students learn. He must also prevent disruptions.

5. He tells her that school is like a free supermarket. The student can go in, load up, and leave without paying because her parents have already paid. If Muriel does not like the grocery clerk she can get even with him by not taking the goodies, or she can ignore her dislike for him and load up anyway.
6. Mr. Johnson does not reply directly to any of Muriel's "Uproar" comments. His reply is to listen. Active or reflective listening gives verbal feedback of the content and a guess at the feeling implicit in the spoken words or acts. Mr. Johnson might say to Muriel's complaints, "Class seemed boring today and you are angry at having your name mispronounced. Is that right?"
7. The final step is for Mr. Johnson to establish some sort of rapport with Muriel or get another faculty member to do so.

(GSP, pages 26 - 27)

The point of the last step is to give Muriel positive attention, to give her the opportunity to stop the "Uproar" game because she can get the attention she craves in a meaningful way.

The next game is a variation of "Uproar" but differs in a significant way.

"Chip on the Shoulder"

In this scenario, Dean is a student who only initiates his game when he has his "chip knocked off his shoulder." Dean has a sensitive spot, his "chip", and creates a ruckus to deflect attention away from himself when that chip is knocked off, whereas Muriel actively looked for opportunities to play "Uproar."

The given antithesis is "to find out what the student is trying to avoid and then offer him a mutually acceptable alternative." (GSP, pg 30)

Stupid

Here Denny would do things that others would find "stupid", like bringing the wrong book to class or holding the wrong end of the baseball bat. He did this so often that after a while, people would call him "stupid" while others would make excuses for him.

Mr. Johnson observed Denny and noticed a pattern in his behavior. Basically, Denny would initiate a "stupid" move in front of an audience, be made fun of, then would smile slyly. Apparently, Denny used this game to get attention, much like Muriel did.

From this observation, Mr. Johnson confronted Denny in a friendly way, letting Denny know he was aware of the game playing. Although it did not cure Denny of the behavior entirely, it did stop the game in Mr. Johnson's classroom.

Clown

This student would imitate Mr. Johnson to make the class laugh. The book points out that this isn't necessarily a game, however Mr. Johnson needs to make sure he doesn't react negatively as long as the behavior is not disrupting class.

Schlemiel

This student causes problems by "messing up" other people's possessions. For example, knocking papers off a desk or stepping on someone's purse on the floor. Most reactions fall in two categories, "persecutor" or "rescuer." The persecutor gets angry and the rescuer forgives. In either case, the "Schlemiel" gets the attention he or she seeks and is tempted to behave this way again. The antithesis offered is to "be told plainly and in an emotionless Adult voice" (GSP, pg 36) not to handle or touch things, and if the student complains that is unfair, to agree.

Make Me

This student doesn't do the required work and, in some way, demands that the teacher force them to do it. This is a challenge to the teacher's authority. The antithesis is for the teacher to "set up clear choices and consequences. If Laura does the work, fine. If she doesn't, that is her problem." (GSP, pg 37) The book also recommends reducing "I" statements from the teacher, like "What I want you to do is this" since that now makes the work to be done for the teacher, instead of for the student herself.

The book summarizes these six disruptor games by emphasizing that the teacher does not provide the "payoff" the player is looking for. The responses should be in the calm Adult voice and the teacher should look to give positive attention to replace the negative attention the student may be seeking.

The next variety of disruptor games is the delinquent variety. These are "Let's Find", where the students get into trouble; "Cops and Robbers", where the students break rules and try to fool the teachers; and "Want Out", where the student works to get kicked out of school but then sneaks back in.

Delinquent games are especially likely to be played by those who are having identity problems. To help in establishing his identity to himself and others, every growing youngster makes some identifying mark on a wall, a piece of furniture, or a tree. As he grows and proceeds through school he will decide on a series of best ways to "leave his mark." ... If a delinquent game player leaves a mark he is assured that his mark is more likely to be permanent. (GSP, pg 45)

The book lists a variety of physical cues to help the reader identify the various ego states on pages 49 through 51. It emphasizes that these cues must be taken in their cultural context and that the manifestations may be only a few seconds in duration, so often the teacher has a subliminal feeling for the situation.

It also cautions,

Each student sees and hears those things that fits his script and the games in it. No psychological game is played alike twice, ..., but the patterns, the rules, and the positions remain alike.

...

Each game a student plays will be played only as long as the teacher and/or the students also play. Learning about the games that are played in the classroom will help to turn off the one which interfere with education.

...

There will be cases in which the teacher cannot turn off the turmoil. The choice of action cannot be random. Each action must be antithetical to the specific game. What game a person plays is determined by the person's script, or unconscious life play, and his position, or how he sees himself or others.

(GSP, pg 53)

The second category of games is called "Put-Down Games", with the goal of psychological one-upmanship. The variety is "Discount."

Sweetheart

Take an insult or a hurt for someone, disguise or sugarcoat it, and you have the game of "Sweetheart." The reason for sugarcoating is the rule of politeness. ... The only way to disagree and at the same time be compliant is to disguise the disagreement. (GSP, pg 59)

Antithesis: This is a harmless game in itself. When it is pulled on Mr. Johnson, he has learned to not take offense at the remarks. He refuses the depression or anger stamps. He looks at the comment, picks out the "nice" candy-coating part and thanks the "Sweetheart" player for that. (GSP, pg 60)

Blemish

Basically fault-finding, no matter how small, by the player who wants the "perfect" teacher. Generally, not a disruption in the classroom. Sometimes shows up with administration.

The second variety is “Complainer.”

Why Does It Always Happen to Me?

The student feels sorry for himself and complains about how everything wrong always happens to him. The way to reduce this game is to have a list of assignments or duties that the student is aware of and removes the teacher from the responsibility of it.

Indigence

The student claims interest in getting the work done as long as the teacher is reminding him of it, but when left to actually do the work, fails to accomplish it and has a lot of excuses. The goal is to put in minimum effort and get the Parent ego of the teacher to be in charge. The antithesis is to put the responsibility onto the student with clearly defined goals and deadlines.

Why Don't You – Yes, But

The student has many excuses why the work can't be done. The teacher offers suggestions, but the student always has a reason why it won't work. One way to shut this down is for the teacher to say, “That is quite a problem. What do you intend to do about it?” (GSP, pg 67)

Late Paper

The student claims the work is done but forgotten at home and says he will bring it in later. However, it never makes it in. The book suggests that the deadline be made earlier than really wanted or made flexible.

Wooden Leg

The student uses a real or imagined disability as an excuse to avoid doing work. The suggested solution is to offer an alternative assignment, which diffuses the complaint in the classroom.

The third category is “Tempter Games.” These are games of subtlety and its variety is “Kissy.”

Disciple

The student is willing to work for one teacher but not another. Often the student sees the preferred teacher as a parent figure, and he wants to please him or her. The solution offered is for the second teacher, and suggests that teacher try to make a connection with the student, too.

Lil Ol' Me

The student attempts to manipulate the teacher by agreeing with everything he says and proclaiming her life has been changed by the teacher's words. The teacher avoids this manipulation by recognizing the game.

The next tempter variety is called “Trap-Baiter.”

Let’s You and Him Fight

The student tries to get two people (presumably the teacher and another student) to argue by making provocative statements. The trap-baiter then watches the battle ensue. The antithesis is to put the question back to the baiter.

Miss Muffet

The student tells his parent or non-teacher authority a twisted version of what the teacher said or did in the classroom. This gives the parent an opportunity to react strongly and become enraged at what was said or done around their darling child. The antithesis is to explain using the Adult ego state and, under no circumstances, try to defend against the accusations.

Let ‘em Have It

The student bothers the instructor repeatedly until the instructor tells him to make an appointment or to quit bothering her. Then the student tells a parent or non-teacher authority that the teacher doesn’t like him or is picking on him. The solution is to tell the student early on in the game to stop being a bother.

High and Proud

The student flaunts foul language, rude or offensive images, or poor behavior, intending to provoke a reaction. The solution is to ignore it unless it breaks a school rule, then respond with a calm Adult voice to define the rule.

Do Me Something

The student’s attitude is “Try to teach me” with the obvious goal of showing the teacher he won’t be taught. The antithesis is to avoid “I” statements.

The other listed games deal directly with students who tempt the teacher or classmates with sexual behavior. The best deflection is to avoid any sort of response that could be interpreted as an interested response.

The final category is “Teacher Games”, game that teachers or administrators might play with other teachers. Many are variations on the student games listed above.

My Response to Games Students Play

I found the game descriptions to be helpful as I could bring up an example from my own teaching experience for many of them. I realized that I had identified them as a sort of game-playing, although I wasn't aware of it in the same detail as pointed out in the book. "Uproar" is one that I have seen many times, with variations, and the behavioral cues the book listed was astonishingly enlightening. I hope to be more adept at shutting it down the next time it occurs.

Some of the games listed I felt were not ones that would occur in a community college classroom. The fact that we only have our students for short times a few days a week cuts down on the solution of spending time getting to know them better outside the classroom or talking to other teachers about the student's previous behavior. Those are the games that I either summarized very quickly or just mentioned in passing.

Some of the solutions are also not ones I would use as a professor. For example, allowing flexible deadlines or alternative assignments because a student plays some sort of delaying game. I feel this does the student a disservice in making him believe deadlines are negotiable or worthless. And although the book claims that removing a student from the classroom is not a solution and just passes the problem on to someone else, I feel it is a valid solution for a student who refuses to stop disrupting my class.

My thoughts focused strongly on the idea that my job is to teach, and I should not allow any student to disrupt that. I appreciated how the book emphasized the need to shut down the game playing quickly, before it escalates. I also have a better understanding of my own ego state reactions to the situations, so I might be able to shift from a reactive Parent state to a more thoughtful Adult state.

What I hope to apply to my classroom is a heightened awareness of the game-playing, an appropriate set of shutting down strategies, and better control of my own emotional reaction in the classroom.