

## **Taboo: The Game of Unspeakable Fun**

### **Description of Game:**

Taboo has been a party staple for the last ten years. The set-up and rules are simple: you need four or more players. Divide the group into two teams competing against each other. The objective: get your team to say the “Guess Word” without saying any of the “Taboo” words printed on the card before the timer expires. For example, the “Guess Word” is APPLE, but you cannot say RED, FRUIT, PIE, CIDER, or CORE. You cannot make gestures of any kind. You cannot say any for or part of ANY of the words printed on the card. You cannot make sound effects or noises. You cannot say the “Guess Word” sounds like or rhymes with another word. You cannot use initials or abbreviations. If the clue giver breaks any of these rules, the other team can buzz them and they lose a point. The team with the most points wins once all players have had one turn as the clue-giver.

On the surface, Taboo is a guessing game. The challenge is to create clues that stay within the set parameters. However, upon closer examination, I feel that Taboo relates to basic algebraic expressions. For example, in algebra, situations are represented in several different ways. Algebraic expressions use variables and other symbols to represent these situations. In order to evaluate an algebraic expression, one must substitute values for the variable(s) and calculate the result. In Taboo, a “Guess Word” is represented in several different ways. One must use various variables (background knowledge or schema) to represent this “Guess Word.” In order for the other players to evaluate the expression (guess the “Guess Word”), one must substitute the Taboo words with personal schema. The results are then calculated: “Am I close? Am I on the right track to guessing this word?”

### **Evaluation:**

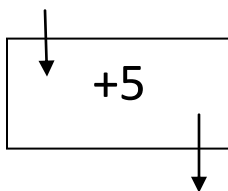
Although Taboo is a great game for parties, I find that the game’s rules are almost always altered in order to increase the amount of fun. The rules clearly state that in order to score a point a teammate must shout out the correct “Guess Word.” However, clue-givers can lose points if they get buzzed for saying one of the Taboo words or for passing on a card in order to try a new “Guess Word.” I have never played with this component of the game. Instead of looking at the game based on its mechanics (rules), I always approach Taboo from the Aesthetics and Dynamics perspective. This coincides exactly with the MDA Framework for the game designer versus player dynamic (LeBlanc, 2004b). As a player, I want to have as much fun as possible, as quickly as possible. Although this mechanical design influences Taboo’s dynamic aspect, it decreases the amount of fun because it adds a level of challenge not necessary for the aesthetic responses of the players.

Taboo does meet its own objectives. Teams have fun trying to guess the correct word while the clue-giver is mentally scrambling to earn a point for his/her team. Meeting these objectives, however, by forsaking an important component of the game says more about the society of people playing, then it does about the design of the game itself

### **Reflection:**

I feel that Taboo moves forward an understanding of algebraic expressions. In 5<sup>th</sup> Grade, students are introduced basic algebra beginning in 1<sup>st</sup> Grade using “What’s My Rule?” boxes. Students are given these function machines in order to solve problems. For example, a student may be given the following “What’s My Rule?”

IN	OUT
2	→
6	→
9	→
10	→



***Students practice computation using this function machine.***

Students then progress by having to guess the rule given an input and a certain output. If a student is given  $1 \rightarrow 3$ ;  $2 \rightarrow 4$ ;  $3 \rightarrow 5$ ; and  $7 \rightarrow 9$ , he/she would be expected to state the rule: +2 (add two to the input). Variations can include providing the student with a select number of inputs and outputs and observe how he/she computes using the inferred rule.

In 5<sup>th</sup> Grade, we introduce students to the use of algebraic expressions to represent situations and describe rules, again using the “What’s My Rule?” function machines. For example, a student may be given the following “What’s My Rule?”

X	Y
5	1
4	0
-1	-5
1	-3
2	-2

- A) State in words the rule for the “What’s My Rule?” table.
- B) Circle the number sentence that describes the rule.
  - a.  $Y = X/5$
  - b.  $Y = X-4$
  - c.  $Y = 4-X$

In Taboo, players are presented with a value to be solved (“Guess Word”). They must mentally evaluate the expression and communicate this to his/her teammates, all the while staying within the rules of the expression (Taboo words).

If I approach Taboo aesthetically, using the prescribed vocabulary (LeBlanc, 2004b), I think I can really teach the abstract concept of algebra. Taboo is a game as sense-pleasure, game as obstacle course, game as social framework, and quite possibly, a game as self-discovery (LeBlanc, 2004b). I can then use this same aesthetic to approach algebra. I can present various expressions as a game of self-discovery, while simultaneously using a social framework (cooperative learning) to solve a challenge.

## Conclusion

What does Taboo mean? Answering this question will definitely help me understand my students learning, and help to anticipate their confusion. People do not like penalties. Students do not like being told they are wrong. No one enjoys failing. These human characteristics explain why my friends and I alter the mechanics of Taboo. We just want to play without being penalized for making mistakes. In the end, we want a winner and a loser, but we don’t want a path resembling a gauntlet. In both analogies, the end results are the same: the players (students) have learned the concept (Guess Word) and discovered something about their own thought processes. If my wife and I are on the same team, I guarantee an unfair advantage because we can “speak the same language.” We have shared experiences that allow us to solve the answer. I need to build this relationship with my students and between my students so that they can solve the expression speaking the same language.