

# Teaching Bad Apples: A Fun Way to Tackle Difficult Teaching Situations

Nathaniel Turcotte<sup>1</sup> · Anthony Betrus<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract** *Teaching Bad Apples* is a game developed in 2014 for current and future teachers. It plays much like *Apples to Apples* or *Cards Against Humanity*, with each player in turn reading a situation card, followed by the other players choosing their response cards. Each situation, however dramatic or bizarre, is authentic, obtained through crowdsourcing, social media, and online teacher forums. After many playtests, including feedback from practicing teachers and teacher educators, we concluded that the most effective way to teach people to deal with these dicey situations is to have players provide wildly inappropriate responses to the authentic situations, and then in the debriefing talk about “what you would really do.” Effectively the game teaches by counterexample, and by making light of these situations it breaks down conversation barriers and then gets into authentic and appropriate reactions. This game format lends itself to teaching content in a variety of areas where dealing with difficult situations is important.

**Keywords** Teaching · Learning · Games · Pre-service · Education · K-12 · Classroom management

*Teaching Bad Apples*, originally named *Teach Me to Teach*, began as basic card game created for both pre-service and in-service teachers. The gameplay mirrors popular games such as *Cards Against Humanity* and *Apples to Apples*, and it is easy to pick up and play. The idea for the game originated at a

conference after an awards session, where someone pulled out some *Microsoft* product playing cards to share. A spontaneous play session ensued, where each person took a turn proposing something hypothetical to teach, while others would attempt to match their product cards with what was to be taught. While this sounds as if it might be pretty dry and boring, the participants ended up having quite a bit of fun, largely due to the outrageous teaching situations that were proposed. It was then concluded that if the *Microsoft* product playing card game could be made interesting, then it was likely that we could create a game which would be similar in play, but more enjoyable and educational. Of course the challenge was then to create a game that would be both *educational* and *fun*, and to align our game activities with our intended learning outcomes (Shelton and Scoresby 2011). We followed a rapid-prototyping model as we designed the game, and allowed both our gameplay and our learning outcomes to evolve and emerge naturally throughout the process.

## Game Development

As we started our journey, we were very aware of what Squire (2015) reiterated in a recent article, that is: “Just because something is labeled ‘a game’ does not mean that it is necessarily fun, interesting, or good education.” And while we started with the familiar idea of “content cards,” which were teaching oriented, and “method cards,” which proposed how to teach the given content, we always remained flexible, willing to adapt and change as we received feedback after each iteration of the game. In the beginning, the content cards tended to be plain and generic, for example, “teach students to formulate a hypothesis,” or “teach a non-English speaking student how to use

✉ Nathaniel Turcotte  
nturcotte22@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA

<sup>2</sup> State University of New York at Potsdam, 515 S Canton Rd.,  
Potsdam, NY 13676, USA

Adobe Photoshop.” Method cards followed similarly, like “use an instructional video,” or “craft a motivational lecture.” The game was played with each player randomly picking a content card, reading it to all the participants, and then the other players submitting their method card for possible selection. The player who read the content card then picked what they thought to be the most appropriate method card for the situation.

After the first playthrough of the game we not only found that we had problems having enough available method cards to match to the teaching cards, but as it stood, the game was rather boring and missing that certain *something* that made games like *Apples to Apples* so successful. So just for laughs, a few offbeat cards were added into the mix, such as a content card that read, “teach your colleague how to clear porn off his classroom computer,” and a few method cards like “watch your mother do it.” With this same idea, we added in “wild cards,” like “while sailing on a yacht,” or “in a noisy subway,” which modified what was to be taught. These wildcards offered a variable that would change the location, environmental conditions, or audience and could be played by any player to augment the situation. While we ultimately found this idea of wildcards to be unsuccessful, the idea of off-beat cards did make its way into the next iteration of the game.

Fortunately, at one of the early playthrough sessions, we happened to have some experienced teachers participating, including a former New York State teacher of the year. The feedback and insight from these participants was both helpful and supportive, with one of the greatest suggestions supplied by the former teacher of the year: “get rid of the boring cards and keep the fun cards.” Her advice was simple, but profound, and it dramatically changed the game. We began coming up with dozens of outrageous content and method cards and really allowed for the creative juices to start flowing. However, as we took on this new direction, we found that these new cards that were being created could not be classified strictly as “content” and “methods.” Instead of creating content for teachers to teach, we were coming up with situations for teachers to react to. For example, one of our playtests led to a teacher revealing that during a senior field trip she smelled marijuana coming from a students’ room. We found that this was more of a *situation* than *content* to be taught, but ultimately believed that this could still be classified as a teachable moment. With this new transformation from content cards to situation cards, we found it necessary to revise a majority of our method cards. Hence, when faced with the card “you are on a field trip and smell pot coming from one of your students’ rooms,” players could lay down response cards such as “watch Reefer Madness with them,” “first come first served,” or even “#YOLO.”

At this point it is important to note that while we were indeed searching for outrageous content, it was critical that the situations themselves be *real and authentic*. And so began the task of finding additional offbeat situations through multiple channels, including crowdsourcing, online teacher forums, social media, and personal contacts. As far as responses go, this is where we explored what might be called our “Heart of Darkness.” That is, we came up with the ideas that we might think about doing, but would never really do (or at least we hope we would never do!). For example, “bob your head and say *what is love*,” “make a ‘your mom’ joke,” and “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” were a few of the 150 response cards created. We were on a path similar to what Kisko and Richardson (2010) proposed, that is “educators must move beyond their comfort zone to see their world from a different perspective, discover alternative solutions to problems they face and create new approaches or integrate appropriate ideas into their setting” (p. 92).

Following this was the long process of playtesting, which involved culling out boring situation and response cards and adding in improved replacement cards. Slowly and surely the game was becoming more and more *fun*. About mid-way through this process something seemed to click. In one particular session we looked around the table, and the players were animated, laughing, and having great conversations. They really were having a fantastic time, and we knew something “right” was going on. All of the participants were sharing their own crazy classroom stories, and conversations on how to handle these situations were developing on a continual basis. Along with this we found that after each hand players spontaneously followed up with statements like: “Well this is how I actually would have handled it,” “You definitely can’t do that today,” or “This is what I actually did.” In a natural and organic way the game had evolved to take on the four main beneficial characteristics of using games to teach: Increased Motivation, Complex Understanding, Reflective Learning, Feedback and Self-Regulation (Botturi and Betrus 2010).

What had ultimately emerged was an instructional process of exploring what not to do, thereby breaking the ice and creating a safe environment to reflect about what actually could or should be done. Essentially we found that the game was teaching by counterexample, and as more and more play testing occurred we found that this approach was not only extremely fun, but it really worked. We more-or-less stumbled on something that Durkin and Rittle-Johnson (2012) found in their study of fourth- and fifth-graders, that is, comparing incorrect examples to correct examples was more powerful than just comparing correct answers. After every hand, both the prospective and current teachers were revealing insights as to how they would have dealt with the situation if they were presented with it, and in many cases they were revealing how they actually dealt with a similar situation that happened to them in the past.

**Fig. 1** First complete boxed version of the game



## Future Directions and Next Steps

So far the faculty in the school of education at our university have adopted the game for use in their classes, and we hope to spread the word to education faculty in other universities. Additionally, in July 2015 the game was used as an optional activity at two teacher development days in Malone and Canton, NY, with thirty-two veteran teachers attending each day-long session. The game was extremely well received, so much so that on a number of occasions we had to pry them away from playing so they could move on to other activities. The common theme was that they thought it was a great cathartic tool for veteran teachers, and it is extremely useful for fostering conversations between experienced teachers and less experienced teachers. As there seems to be a never ending supply of situations teachers can find themselves in, we have continued the developmental process in order to create an expansion pack, with many good ideas coming from the veteran teachers we played it with. We will continue to crowdsource for situations, as well as add to our stash of inappropriate responses. In addition, we have found that the basic frame of the game can be used in other areas, both inside and outside K-12 and teacher education. In terms of where it should be placed in a curriculum, Mariscal et al. (2012) suggest that educational card games can be an excellent tool to introduce topics and supplement lectures and seminars, and we believe that our game is no exception.

We have also found through player feedback that this method of using authentic situations followed by counter-example style responses is suitable for a variety of professions. One example of this involves athletic counselors who work with Division I college football athletes who

played the game. They are now creating their own game parallel to ours, which helps their players explore ethically difficult situations, and provides advice as to how to deal with those situations. They have found that so often their college athletes have had a difficult time talking about the potential dangers a college athlete can face, and believe that this game will really open up the communication barrier and get the athletes to start talking.

Games, in general can exhibit “Both usage (motivation to play) and in-game (motivation for game action) motivation patterns.” (Lang et al. 2012). In our experience, *Teaching Bad Apples* has both, that is, people are interested in joining in, and they do not want to stop once they start. Overall we believe our game is a fun, new twist on exploring difficult situations and how to respond to them, as well as lending itself as a frame game for others to follow. Figure 1 shows the first complete boxed version of the game, with the situation cards in white with red text, and the response cards in red with white text.

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