

Introduction

The inspiration for my Independent Inquiry comes from *Loved*, a platforming game by artist Alexander Ocias who refers to it as a form of short story. As the player begins and progresses through the game, they are engaged in thinly scattered lines of dialogue with a disembodied, guiding voice. The dialogue is expressed in the form of vague questions, specific instructions, praise or derision. Progression through *Loved* reveals divergent paths and endings as each player's experience is greatly influenced by the answers given and choices made. What is intriguing is the multitude of interpretations that can be drawn from the sparse conversations with the voice and from what is left unsaid. Discussion with my peers regarding the interpretations of their experience of *Loved* has unearthed a variety of perspectives ranging from relationship abuse, religious beliefs and parent-child conflict. My interpretation of *Loved* explores the themes of obedience, choices and self-esteem and how they correlate with different theories of teaching and learning.

In *Loved*, the player must ask, "Do I do as I am told and receive praise? Or do I disobey and do what I believe is best for me but be scolded for it?" Regarding the theme of obedience, I wish to inquire about it in the sense of teaching methods that motivate students to learn. Are teachers better off employing extrinsic (rewards, high grades) or intrinsic (learning for the sake of one's own interest) motivators? How effective are reward and punishment approaches to teaching in the long run? What are the differences between teaching methods that focus on achievement and performance (how students are doing) versus exploration and understanding (what they are doing)?

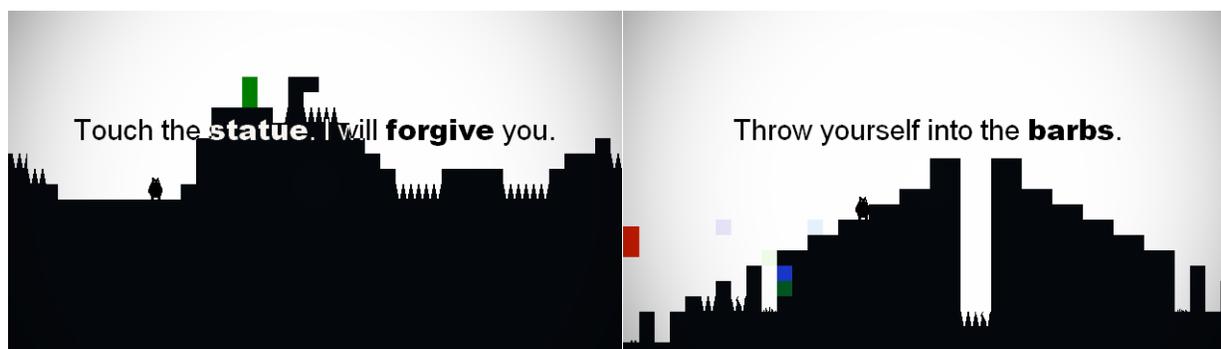
The guiding voice in *Loved* often imposes a singular task on the player or offers a limited number of choices for the player to choose from. Looking at the theme of choices, I am

concerned with the kinds of choices that are made available to students regarding their education in schools. How can a student's sense of control over what they are learning affect their motivation to learn? To what extent should students be involved in how the curriculum is shaped? What are the effects on academic achievement given that students have a say in what they are learning?

If the player disobeys or fails a given task, they are subject to insults and dialogue that evokes feelings of failure or shame. I want to explore the concept of self-esteem in students and its influence on their desire to learn. What are the factors that can affect the self-esteem of students? Is there a correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement? What are the criticisms expressed towards the promotion of self-esteem of students? I also want to extend my inquiry to the ideas of self-fulfilling prophecies and uncertainty-orientation found in the realm of social psychology.

The goal of my inquiry is to explore how the different themes of obedience, choice and self-esteem arise in education and how they can be utilized towards effective teaching. Within the analysis of each theme I will explore the ideas that I encounter in my research and reflect on my findings and the implications for my own philosophy of teaching.

Obedience and Motivation



As the player progresses through *Loved* they are faced with several commands that may either benefit or endanger you. Touching a statue will provide the player with a checkpoint to spawn from should you be killed but dropping down a pit of barbs will no doubt destroy you. The choice to either obey or disobey such orders is the player's to make.

Depending on the choices made, the landscape will be altered in different ways. Whenever the player obeys a command, the terrain becomes smoother, more detailed and easier to traverse but remains black and white. Obstacles and enemies are easier to recognize and avoid increasing the chances of survival. When commands are disobeyed, the world becomes more colorful but increasingly pixelated and more difficult to navigate. Though the appearance of color is dazzling, the colors obstruct your vision of the environment and the dangers that lurk.

Obedying an order results in comforting praise in the form of "Good boy/girl" and the reward for remaining obedient throughout the game is a single coin. If the player's goal is to be awarded that single coin they must please the voice through complete compliance and the sacrifice of the player's own interest. In this case, the player progresses through the game motivated by extrinsic factors rather than intrinsic factors.

Students are often expected to comply to rules and academic standards whether or not they are reasonable. They are expected to respect teachers and authority "regardless of whether that respect has been earned" (Kohn, 2000, p. 4). Some teachers attempt "to control students' behavior by dangling rewards in front of them or threatening them with punishments" (p. 5).

The reward and punishment approach to requesting compliance and obedience lends itself to a behaviorist model of teaching. Behaviorism is a theory based on the idea that behaviors can be learned through repeated conditioning or training. There two parts to the behaviorist model: Classical Conditioning and Operant Conditioning. Classical conditioning is

concerned with associating specific behaviors through neutral stimuli (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 92). Reinforcing a particular behavior through the use of rewards and punishments is known as operant conditioning. The basic idea behind operant conditioning is to punish unwanted behaviors and reward desired behaviors (p. 92). The subject will come to associate the reward with the performance of the desired behavior and unwanted behaviors will become subdued for fear of punishment. Behaviorism focuses on the manipulation of behaviors through external means while ignoring the higher cognitive thought processes of the brain (p. 92).

Assertive Discipline, developed by Lee and Marlene Carter, is a strategy for classroom management that stems from a behaviorist model of teaching. This approach is teacher-oriented and states that the teacher has the “right to do what is best for [the] students and to expect compliance” (McIntyre, 2006). The teacher alone formulates and imposes rules enforced through rewarding “good” behaviors and administering negative consequences for disobedience. The idea behind Assertive Discipline is to have students associate punishment with breaking the rules or relating obedience with receiving a reward. Though Assertive Discipline is an “attempt to engage students in ethical behavior,” it relies too much on the manipulation of behavior through extrinsic motivators (Kohn, 2000, p. 12). The problem with the use of rewards and punishments is that even though students may be coerced into compliance, “they will likely feel no commitment to what they are doing [and possess] no deep understanding of the act and its rationale” (p. 13).

Behaviorism is just one of the different theories of learning that address what it is that motivates students. Motivation is defined as the activation of goal-oriented behavior and can come from either external or internal sources. Motivation has with *why* individuals do what they

do and what kinds of goals they wish to achieve.

Extrinsic motivation is derived from sources outside an individual. Some forms of extrinsic motivators for students include rewards such as praise, grades and awards, or punishment and peer pressure. Such extrinsic incentives “may succeed in temporarily buying” desired behaviors (Kohn, 2000, p. 31). However, they rarely leave students with commitments to those behaviors, that is, reasons to maintain the behaviors outside receiving the incentives (p. 31). One of the problems with extrinsic motivation is that it is difficult to sustain. If the reward or punishment associated with the behavior is removed, the motivation to perform that behavior is reduced. Motivation through extrinsic means also tends to diminish in time since “the more we reward [students] for doing something, the more likely they are to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward” (p. 19).

Intrinsic motivation is motivation that comes from within an individual. Rather than being motivated by external forces to perform a task, the individual is driven by the enjoyment derived from the task itself. For example, intrinsic motivation can be observed in a student who works on a math problem for the sake of their own interest in the process or the mathematical theory behind it. When an external factor such as a reward from completing the math problem is introduced, the intrinsic motivation is undermined. The student begins to associate the act of solving the problem with receiving a reward rather than pursuing their own interests.

In one study, it was found that children who are rewarded for sharing with and helping others are less likely than other children to continue those behaviors. For children that are coerced to exhibit desired behaviors through heavy reliance on rewards, the rewards become a prominent focus for the children. As a result, the children are motivated to display helping behavior only when rewards are available but “are less willing to do so when they are not”

(Fabes, Fultz, Eisenberg, May-Plumlee, & Christopher, 1989, p. 514)

One study by Ryan and Grolnick looked at the degree to which students see themselves as either “origins” or “pawns” within the classroom environment. Students that identify as “origins” are those that perceive themselves as active and instrumental in the events of their own experience and having an internal locus of causality (Ryan, & Grolnick, 1986, p. 550). Seeing oneself as an “origin” is meeting the basic needs for self-determination that “energize intrinsically motivated behaviors such as those observed in curiosity, exploration and adaptation” (p. 550). Conversely, “pawns” perceive themselves as “passive, reactive and with little sense of personal causation for school-related behaviors” (p. 530). Students that identify as “origins” exhibit more internal control, that is, more personal influence on what happens to them in school and reported a greater sense of motivation as opposed to “pawns” who perceive their experiences to be in the “hands of powerful others” (p. 553).

Though the use of rewards and punishments appear effective in motivating students, they only temporarily buy desirable behavior. Students come to associate obedience with receiving something good or escaping punishment rather than developing a commitment to and intrinsic reasoning for their actions.

In my classroom, students are given detention as a punishment for misbehaving during class time, breaking school policies or hurting other students. Receiving detention means that the students forfeit their lunch break and remaining in class during the entire period. The consequence rarely succeeds at making a lasting impression on the students. Students that were given detention for texting on their cell phones in class still continue to do so despite the possibility of being punished. Because the punishment is detached from and unrelated to why they have received detention in the first place, the students are not given an adequate reason to

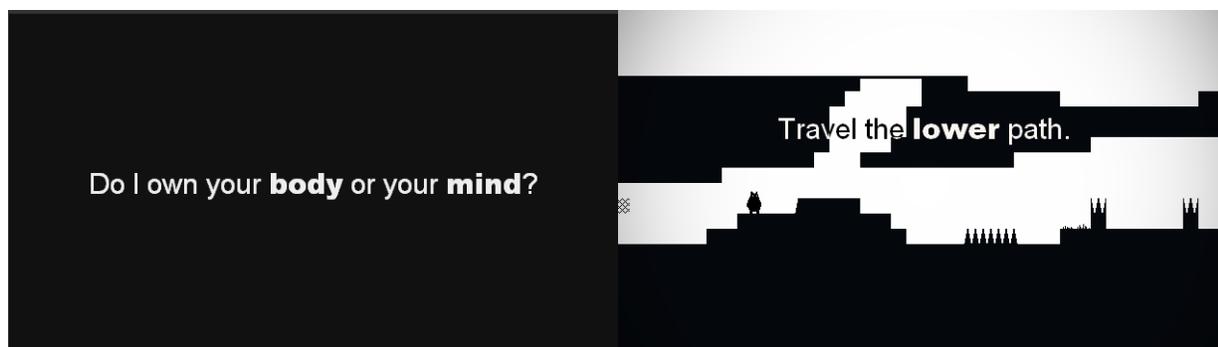
refrain from misbehaving in the future.

Bribing students with rewards like treats or free time tend to have little effect on sparking the students' interest in certain subjects. Students have been conditioned to think that doing work is only worth it if they get something out of it. Used excessively, the rewards tend to diminish in value until they have little effect in motivating the students. Either they rush through their assignments and present poor quality work in order to receive the rewards or be even less motivated to complete the assignments by reasoning that the rewards are not worth the effort.

What we as teachers need to do in schools is “work *with* children to tap their natural desire to make sense of the world and to play with words and numbers and ideas” (Kohn, 2000, p. 72). Instead of employing extrinsic motivators and incentives, we should place more focus on helping students develop an internal desire to learn. In order to do that, teachers need to work towards finding creative ways of making tasks engaging and interesting for students while addressing the goals of the curriculum. Teachers should get to know their students, acknowledging their interests and learning styles and adapt their lessons accordingly.

In Social class, the students are learning about Japan and one student that I worked with expressed a strong interest in Japanese writing. Inspired by his interest, I prepared and conducted a lesson about the Japanese language and taught the students simple phrases and how to write their names in Japanese. I had very positive feedback from the students after the lesson and by addressing one student's interests I also sparked the curiosity of many of the other students. A lot of the students were very engaged and put forth a lot of effort in learning how to write their names and Japanese pronunciation of several words and phrases. I was able to engage the students to have fun learning something new and meet a curriculum requirement at the same time.

Choice and Control



The voice in *Loved* explicitly states at the beginning that the player has no control. The voice constantly asks questions with a limited choice of answers or restricts the player to a single task though it is up to the player to comply or disobey. For some questions, all of the answers are undesirable but the player must choose one in order to move on. It is established that the player lacks any sense of control and motivation is reduced to merely continuing to the end.

Within classrooms, we often see students that are disengaged and apathetic towards the school material that they are tasked to do. They merely “go through the motions of learning, handing in uninspired work and counting the minutes or days until freedom (Kohn, 2000, p. 250).” What causes this lack of intrinsic motivation in students and what can teachers do to instill this motivation?

Alfie Kohn proposes that the absence of motivation in these impassioned students is “powerlessness - a lack of control over what one is doing” (2000, p. 250). This indifference is a result of students contributing little to the decisions made regarding their education. Students are compelled to follow school rules and policies, study a curriculum derived from powers outside their own as well as being subject to someone else’s evaluation. What happens to

students all day is entirely outside of their control. If teachers wish to see their students engaged and caring about learning, collaboration is crucial. There needs to be a negotiation between teachers and students about what is happening regarding their school life and education. The idea is that students will develop concern about their education if they have a strong sense of self-determination.

By giving students a chance to take part in the decision-making process regarding their education, they see that their opinions matter and that what they have to say has value. For students, being able to make choices is having “opportunities to assume responsibility,” an asset to becoming responsible adults (D’Amico, 1980, p. 44). If students are to learn how to make good decisions, they need to be making decisions rather than following directions (Kohn, 2000, p. 253).

Giving students the ability to make choices is not about relinquishing teacher control and allowing unstructured, absolute freedom. The teacher’s role is to guide students and “providing conditions under which students can choose productively and learn effectively” (Kohn, 2000, p. 263). The teacher provides a framework of appropriate tasks for the students to choose from, teach them the necessary skills to accomplish those tasks and supply adequate resources and assistance (p. 263). This collaboration between teachers and their students teaches valuable lessons in how to work cooperatively, developing negotiation skills and make good judgments while considering the perspectives of others.

In addition to developing effective decision-making skills, there are a variety of benefits to promoting student choice and participation such as effects on one’s general well-being and academic achievement.

In a study done by Kobasa, it was found that “hardy” persons, those with a strong sense

of control or ability to influence events of their experience, tend to cope better with stress and illness (Kobasa, 1979, p. 3). Also contributing to one's "hardiness" is an "ability to feel deeply involved or committed to the activities of their lives" (p. 3). Hardy persons are able to see change as a positive challenge and potential for personal growth rather than as obstacles. Subjects that possess a greater sense of self-determination tend to cope better with stress than those that have a general feeling of powerlessness and control over events of their own experience.

Kohn talks about a tenth grade geometry class that he experienced in which the teacher collaborates with the students regarding how to go about learning the curriculum and evaluation of grades (2000, p. 254). A student from the class explains to him that having the opportunity to make such choices "leads to learning rather than just remembering (p. 254)."

There is much available research into the positive benefits of choice and student participation on academic success. In a study involving second graders in Pittsburgh, it was found that given the choice of what task to work on at any given moment the students tended to "complete more tasks in less time" (Kohn, 2000, p. 255).

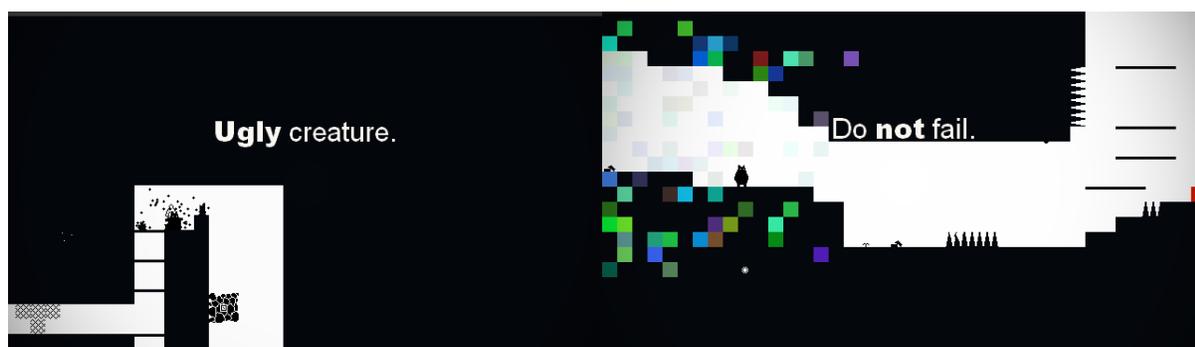
In another study, teachers were trained to promote students' sense of personal causation defined as "the initiation by an individual of behavior intended to produce a change in his environment" (deCharms, 1972, p. 2). The intentional behavior originates from the individual that is intrinsically motivated. The results showed that students with a strong sense of personal causation had less school absences and scored better on a national test than those in conventional schools (p. 13).

Allowing students to participate in making academic decisions has an impact on their devotion to learning. Students develop a sense that they are in control of their own experiences

and that their opinions matter and have value. Each student that occupies every classroom offers a different point of view and a set of experiences unique to that student. The diversity of students provides an amazing opportunity for teachers. Teachers that are willing to accept student input can benefit greatly as the collaboration between many different perspectives makes classroom life a lot more interesting.

The students in my classroom all have different strengths, capabilities and different preferences as to how they like to express themselves. For large projects, the students are often given the choice of how they would like to present their work. In the Science unit on Wind, some students displayed what they learned on detailed posters, some created models of the Earth and demonstrated how wind travels, and some filmed a short video documentary of harnessing wind energy using wind turbines. When given the opportunity to choose a topic that interested them, each student enjoyed doing research and had fun learning about their topic. No presentation was the same and each had an astounding level of creativity and provided new information for everyone to learn.

Self-Esteem



The punishment for disobedience or failure of a given task takes the form of insults such as being told that you are “Disgusting” or an “Ugly creature.” By being constantly berated and

told that I am a disappointment made me feel bad and reduced the confidence in my ability to accomplish future tasks. When the voice says “Do not fail” I found myself afraid to even attempt the task because failure would surely result in further derision.

Success in today’s society has become synonymous with the accumulation of wealth, power and status. Due to such a “materialistic notion of success, schools focus on external indicators that are ‘important’ for the students’ future, such as grades, titles, money, and so on” (Lin, 2006, p. 35).

It is taken for granted by teachers “that students must receive some grade and, by extension, that students out to be avidly concerned about the ones they get” (Kohn, 2000, p. 73). There exists a strong emphasis on doing well in school and students develop a sense that their worth is gauged by what their grades are. The pressure of obtaining good grades has a tendency to breed competition among students and places focus on comparing students in relation to one another. Segregating students by ability can be “destructive to students’ self-esteem” (p. 80).

The message ingrained in students’ minds is that unless they are exceptional academically, they do not deserve any recognition. After all, awards and praise only go to students who get good grades. Academic achievement at school can affect a student’s sense of self-worth. “Consistent success or consistent failure at school can strongly affect” a student’s self-esteem (Breckler, Olson, & Wiggins, 2006, p. 173). Students that possess modest or low academic achievement may become neglected in favor of the high achieving students that can set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without recognition or attention from teachers, lower achieving students may feel as if they will never improve, put less effort towards studying and eventually do poorly, thus fulfilling the original prophecy (p. 354).

Butler and Nisan found that grades “encourage an emphasis on quantitative aspects

of learning, depress creativity, foster fear of failure and undermine interest” (Butler, & Nisan, 1986, p. 215). The subjects in the study were divided into three groups: (1) Subjects that receive comments as feedback, (2) Subjects that receive grades and (3) Subjects that receive no feedback, and asked to perform tasks. In relation to the experimental group that received no feedback for performing the tasks, those that were graded reported a lower level of interest in the tasks and a higher desire to avoid poor achievement. Negative feedback or low grades undermined subsequent interest in the tasks and the confidence to complete future tasks. “Constructive, specific information about competence provided by written comments” were also found to be preferred over no feedback given at all (p. 215).

The fear of failure derived from negative feedback is debilitating for students and their motivation for attempting future tasks is reduced. With a decreased confidence in their abilities, students may choose tasks that will provide an “easy A” but are not necessarily challenging or involve deep learning. Students with a high fear of failure are less likely to be uncertainty oriented, that is, they are less motivated to learn from and incorporate new information when faced with situations where there is uncertainty about the self and the environment (Hodson, Sorrentino, 1999, p. 254).

It can be deduced that extrinsic factors like grades and teacher feedback can affect a student’s self-esteem either positively or negatively. The question is whether or not it works the other way around. Does promoting self-esteem in students have an effect on academic achievement? Though there have been many studies on the self-esteem of individuals, there is little evidence that shows a significant correlation between high self-esteem and academic achievement (Pullman, & Allik, 2008, p. 559).

In a study that looked at the relationship between general self-esteem and school

achievement, it was found that even though high self-esteem produced high academic results in students at the elementary school level, there was an inverse correlation between high perceived self-esteem and grade point average in students in sixth grade up to university. A proposed explanation for this is the possibility that “academically successful students have a more critical outlook on themselves” and rates themselves lower on general self-esteem (Pullman, & Allik, 2208, p. 562). A second explanation is that “students with more modest academic abilities compensate their academic deficiency by elevating their general self-esteem” (p. 562).

However, this is not to say that helping students feel good about themselves is unimportant. With low levels of confidence and self-respect, a student’s motivation to learn begins to dissipate. Students that are bombarded with negative feedback or even worse, ignored because of their low academic abilities, become debilitated by a fear of failure and are afraid to take on new challenges. As teachers, we need to acknowledge every student and not just the ones that excel academically.

The idea is not to shower every student with rewards and praise without doing anything and giving them little reason to work hard. Instead, teachers should help students “focus on effort rather than ability, to become absorbed with the learning itself rather than being preoccupied with their performance” (Kohn, 2000, p. 157). Teachers have the ability to influence students’ perceptions of their own abilities through encouragement and urging them to always try their best. To help students build confidence and feel good about themselves, teachers are better off focusing on developing their sense of competency instead of constantly praising them.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of my independent inquiry, I often had to reflect on my own teaching philosophy and how it should evolve by incorporating what I have learned. There are

beliefs that I hold as a teacher that have been reinforced through my research but also several aspects of my teaching philosophy that I now have to question.

As a teacher I wish to help students understand the importance of embracing their sense of curiosity, developing passionate interests and be motivated by an internal desire to learn. To address the learning opportunities that the diversity of my students offer, I believe it is important to provide different avenues for them to express themselves. I have encountered many new perspectives and ideas that I need to think about and be aware of. I have rarely questioned the use of rewards and punishments to coax desirable behaviors from students but now see the shortcomings of such extrinsic motivators. Also, I now have a better understanding of strategies of encouraging intrinsic motivation that have a lasting effect and positively influencing students' intellectual development. Every student possesses a unique voice and perspective and no student should be ignored in favor of another. Teachers have a powerful ability to encourage students' motivation and success in learning by capitalizing on their strengths rather than their weaknesses and letting their voices be heard. With our help, students will come to see that they are valuable and respected.

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