



# TEACHING FOR A SAFER WORLD



# LESSONS FROM THE WORLD PEACE GAME

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In an era of unprecedented volatility, ambiguity, impassioned conflict, and intractable problems that affect the basic living conditions and prosperity of many, education has never been more important or more in need of purpose, meaning, and applicability. The solutions to the dilemmas that define our world will be created and implemented in the future by students in schools around the world today. Their education *is* their preparation for that responsibility.



What skills, habits, mindsets, experiences, and knowledge do they need in order to lead the world — to solve its crises and create the possibility of prosperity for all? How can they best master the types of problem solving, leadership, understanding, and cooperation that they will need to succeed? Are we preparing our students to do the work of peace, be it developing sustainable communities or building their own internal resources of happiness and fulfillment?

Experience is the best teacher. Yet, too often in school, we seek to pre-load students with all the knowledge that they might ever need, filling their

ronmental dilemmas that we all face. For educators looking to offer students practice with solving real-world issues and problems, we offer one example that has proven to be highly successful: John Hunter's *World Peace Game*. The game offers students a learning space that is dynamic, meaningful, and challenging — and prepares them to understand and generate solutions for the world's dilemmas.

### John Hunter Explains the Game

The *World Peace Game* is a multi-dimensional matrix that contains a world ecosystem riddled with a host of situations and issues in flux and

In this geo-political simulation, there are complicated and intentionally poorly defined problems that the students — in nation teams and ethnic and tribal bodies — are charged with solving. The game's mechanics demand that contradictory elements co-exist because life is like this. Students are repeatedly and systematically confronted with issues and evidence that refute or undermine their prior understanding. They must work to combine the facts and evidence of a new reality to their own current beliefs and perspectives. If they stubbornly hold to a position that the facts no longer support, they quickly experience

RELATIONSHIPS ENCOMPASSING EMOTIONAL SAFETY, TRUST, MUTUALITY, CARING, GENEROSITY, EMPATHY, AND COMPASSION ARE BASIC ELEMENTS IN A TEACHER'S TOOLKIT AND ARE OF AS GREAT, OR GREATER, IMPORTANCE THAN SUBJECT MATTER CONTENT.



minds to the bursting point with no practice field on which to explore the application of that knowledge. In other words, we fall short in creating opportunities for students to apprentice themselves to the real world. If we want our students to care deeply and act wisely in their lives, we must give them practice in caring deeply and acting wisely. Of course, there are many ways to offer such practice in schools. In independent schools, there are many examples of excellent experiential education that connect learning to the major social, political, and envi-

at play. I have found the game to be a vehicle not only for stimulating higher-level critical and creative thinking, but also as a laboratory for eliciting the best in human intentions, not always without conflict, as conflict is a necessary element in creating stability and a solid foundation. Game play is combined with reading from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. My fourth-grade students can understand and use this text to look beyond the paths to power and destruction, beyond the path to war, or sometimes, *through* war as the path to peace.

the consequences of failure to adapt.

The ingenious, innovative, and often unpredictable solutions that the children develop are astounding and delightful. They are usually solutions that adults often never conceive of because of the ways in which our thinking is configured and confined. Children have an inspiring creative flexibility, much more of a positive "can-do" attitude, and a persistence in making things all right. The game allows students to arrive organically at collaboration as an effective problem-solving aid. As their thrill in problem

solving together heightens, they seem to move into a state of hyper-collaboration, or “flow” as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his insightful work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

A consistent by-product of the problem solving undertaken in the *World Peace Game* is a greater awareness of and a capacity for caring for others, be they of a competing country, a different religion or ethnicity, or a different class such as the nomadic, displaced people in the game. Compassion is not taught; it is “allowed” by the consideration of the perspectives of the various people who make up the dilemmas in the game. It is my hope that, in acting out their roles, the game players will act compassionately and peacefully, yet students can and do choose to act otherwise. Over time, however, the obvious benefits of empathy and compassion become apparent, without having to directly teach these ideals at all. The children apprehend them viscerally, experientially, in emotionally charged and conceptually challenging circumstances that unfold in the course of solving problems.

In the *World Peace Game*, a key aspect of its design is to allow space for a deep, extended, continuous review of the students’ ideas and thoughts. With sufficient time to think things over, brainstorm, and ruminate, students can often resolve even the most difficult problems. Allowing lengthy, unfettered thinking, musing, contemplating, and day-dreaming where one is at leisure to turn ideas, configurations, and constellations of thoughts over and over in one’s mind used to be seen as a virtue and commanded a certain amount of respect and admiration in our culture. At one time, we respected “deep thinkers.” Not now. Speed and correctness are the coin of the realm. Too often, those not presenting with the correct answer and work that is neatly and quickly completed find themselves at the end of the line. Depth of thinking, made possible by simply slowing down

# THE BASICS

## OF THE WORLD PEACE GAME

The *World Peace Game* is a structure of four 4 x 4 foot plexiglass layers stacked horizontally, one above the other. The game board matrix towers over most of the fourth-grade students who play. The layers include:

- undersea level with submarines, sunken civilization with valuable artifacts, and undersea mining;
- ground-and-sea level with hundreds of game pieces representing multiple militia, artillery, ships, tankers, natural resource depositories, nuclear and hydrogen power plants, mercenary troops, sacred native grounds, and disputed geographic territories and homelands;
- air-and-space level with big puffs of cotton for clouds that move as weather changes, territorial air spaces, and the four countries’ air forces;
- outer-space layer with black holes, satellites, international space station, and asteroid mining.

There are four countries around the board. Each country comes with its own profile, beginning budget, and state of affairs, which are outlined in each country’s secret dossier. Some countries are rich; some poor. Each has different commercial and military assets. The four nation teams of students name their countries. Each country has a cabinet that consists of prime minister, secretary of state, minister of defense, and a chief financial officer. The teacher chooses the prime ministers. Each prime minister chooses his or her own cabinet.

Other influential bodies in the game include a World Bank, arms dealers, and a United Nations. The weather goddess controls a random stock market, random weather, and makes official judgment calls as circumstances and issues arise. There is a covert saboteur who plays the dual role of publicly being helpful in supporting his or her team’s efforts to solve problems, but also of secretly making moves to undermine everything in the game through misinformation, ambiguities, and irrelevancies. Knowing this confusion agent is there, but not knowing who it is, causes all of the game players to have to think more deeply about every interaction and to learn to corroborate and validate information from multiple sources. Outing the saboteur is one of the game crises that must be solved.

Game players are presented with a 13-page crisis document outlining 50 interlocking and interdependent crises and world dilemmas that are inspired by real-world situations, but veiled so that the students are working in an imaginative space where they must generate their own problem solving and critical thinking. The game crises include ethnic, religious, and minority tensions; chemical and nuclear spills, oil spills, water rights disputes, and environmental disasters; nuclear proliferation; breakaway republics, famine, endangered species, and climate change. The ultimate challenge is for students to understand through game play that if one thing changes, everything else changes because problems are complex, interdependent, and far-reaching in their consequences.

The game, which typically takes 16 to 20 hours of class time and is played over two to three months (or during an intensive one-week course in summer), is won when every nation’s net asset value has risen beyond its starting point and all game crises have been solved.

the learning process, may seem counterintuitive to those hoping to attain the maximum results in the limited time we have with students, but it is the intended method in the *World Peace Game*. Slowing time to think, creating circumstances that require depth of thought, yields results beyond textbook answers, and generates more lasting learning than is possible through a focus on cramming information for multiple-choice testing.

The relationship between teacher and student is fundamental to the development of critical and higher-



level thinking skill. I throw my students into this complex matrix knowing they will be successful because of our trusting and reciprocal relationships. Relationships encompassing emotional safety, trust, mutuality, caring, generosity, empathy, and compassion are basic elements in a teacher's toolkit and are of as great, or greater importance, than subject matter content. Intellectual or interpersonal risk-taking comes readily in a trusted space, a deliberately fostered environment of psychological safety where children are allowed and supported in simply being themselves, accepted as they are and given time to discover their potential further. Recognition and respect for the validity of nonmea-

asurable outcomes are also prime ingredients in bolstering freedom from the fear of failure that hinders so many students' learning. Relationships in which risk-taking, failure, and success are all accepted as normal parts of the learning process are the key to serving students well. Ultimately, the success of a classroom or a whole school depends not solely on academic policy or specific pedagogy, but more fundamentally on the intentional cultivation, support, and maintenance of trusting, caring relationships.

### It's Up to Them

The *World Peace Game* is invigorating and fun, capturing the hearts and minds of students. It creates an open space for the application of knowledge and skills, for the combination of disciplinary knowledge and expertise that varies from player to player, and for real experience and opportunities to become better at teaming and collaborating, communicating and negotiating, winning through cooperation, and learning what real-time feedback in the form of a stalled or failed effort looks like and feels like. Students work hard, not for a grade, but to save the world. They learn through playing roles, intensely and intently, solving complicated world problems. The truth we must hold dear and clear is that this fiction will be reality for them soon enough.

We are not writing this article to promote the *World Peace Game*, but to highlight the core educational principles the game supports. The principles — not the game — matter most.

If it is to happen, world peace will be achieved through efforts of the next generation. That seems clear. They must bring to the task more actionable wisdom and mastery than our generation has in cooperating over resources and collaborating through dilemmas and problems. They will need well-honed skills of critical thinking and problem solving. Their interpersonal skills must encompass resilience, diplomacy, and deep compassion and

empathy for people and the quality of their lives. They will need a well of respect born through understanding people from different circumstances, religious beliefs, and traditions, people with different skin colors, languages, and cultural behaviors. And, most important, they will need a sense of ownership of this world and a confidence to contribute.

The *World Peace Game* seeks to embrace the complexity of life rather than parsing it out and simplifying it for children. Some teaching approaches hold that dividing knowledge and information into smaller, more easily digestible, pre-chewed bits is the best way to teach children. In contrast, the game asks students to dive headlong into the swirling rapids of an ambiguous, obscure, conflicting, and diverse information-laden problem stream. Success in thinking and cooperating their way through dilemmas that frustrate and confound builds not only students' intellectual and interpersonal toolkits, but also their sense of worth, sense of confidence, and sense of potential. This result of self-awareness and one's responsibility and possibility in making a difference is a path to world peace. The Dalai Lama expresses this idea beautifully: "With realization of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability, one can build a better world."

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