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Structured Academic Controversy

Context:

Title: "Do violent video games contribute to violent behavior?"

Overview: In this SAC, students will debate the question: Can playing violent video games cause a person to commit acts of violence? I will start by showing students a brief video from a national news outlet that examines the issue with evidence from both sides of the debate. Then, I will assign students into "sides" and ask them to use the information I provide to engage in a structured debate about the nature of violent video games' effects on players. The lesson plan asks students to research and present one side; swap positions, research, and present the opposite side; and then attempt to create a group-wide consensus.

Grade/Class: Psychology (11th and 12th grade)

Length: 55 minutes

Background Information: Since the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, the media has presented a fierce debate about whether playing violent video games can cause children to become violent in reality. Scientific research has had difficulty proving that this is in fact not the case. The main argument that anti-video game advocates employ is a study that claimed gamers felt more aggressive after playing violent video games. By contrast, pro-video game advocates have argued that no study has ever proven a positive link between violence and gaming.

Rationale: The foundational debate in psychology of nature vs. nurture is still unsettled; the selected topic strikes another chord in a centuries-long discourse on the cause of human action. Some believe that when humans immerse themselves in an alternate reality, their experiences and emotions sometimes begin to change those they would feel in their real world. On the contrary, others argue that "sane" humans can differentiate between reality and simulation and are not affected by exercises like video games.

Instructional Model: The structured academic controversy is a fast-paced, high intensity lesson model. It is focused primarily on presentation and deliberation. Deliberation is about gaining an understanding of a specific issue from both perspectives as well as the possibility of consensus building. Students will begin to understand the differences between "arguing" and debating. In their presentation, because of the rapid-fire nature of the lesson, students learn to present the thesis of their argument quickly and with concision. This model can end with either an effort at group-wide consensus building or with students taking a firm stance on the issue and presenting their case in writing or verbally. This topic is a good match for the structured academic controversy model because it is still very much an evolving debate that keys in to a fundamental question in psychology (nature vs. nurture) that has not been definitively decided upon by the experts.

Objectives:

The American Psychological Association has published a series of high school psychology standards from which I will build my lesson. In content standard 1, social cognition, "Students are able to (performance standards):

1.1 Describe attributional explanations of behavior.

1.2 Describe the relationship between attitudes (implicit and explicit) and behavior.

1.3 Identify persuasive methods used to change attitudes."

For my own lesson's specific intellectual objectives:

Students will research from a provided list of evidence which argument is best to present in their case.

Students will make strong thesis statements with their debate partners to build their rhetorical organization skills.

Students will each present one piece of evidence per debate and field any clarification questions asked by their opposition.

Students will ultimately engage in a consensus building exercise where they discuss the merits of each side's evidence and decide as a group how they feel about the issue.

Students will write a brief reflection indicating their feelings about the issue using at least one piece of evidence from the list provided; they will be evaluated based on their use of tenable evidence and their ability to write a strong thesis.

Assessment: This is designed to be a brief lesson, so the summative assessment is brief. However, the formative assessment that will take place is designed to be exhaustive. This is likely to be the first time the students have engaged in a structured academic controversy so in order for the lesson to run smoothly, directions need to be clear, concise, and encourage constant clarification. At each stage of the lesson, making sure every student is following along with the directions is critical for the structured academic controversy to operate smoothly. Verbal and visual formative assessments will ensure that students do not fall behind and every student will be able to contribute to the conversation. This all serves the purpose of maintaining clear expectations throughout the lesson. The most important thing that students will learn during the course of the lesson is how to choose and present evidence in an academic format. The most organic way to assess that ability is by observing students making those intellectual judgments. The summative assessment will be two brief activities. First, the students will attempt to build consensus and each group will answer inquiries about the course of the discussion. Second, each student will summarize in an essay briefly his or her position on the issue. These last two pieces will allow me to give students feedback on their performance in the lesson.

Content and Instructional Strategies:

Hook/Background of Controversy: (10 minutes) As is mandated by many schools in Virginia, this lesson will begin with a detailed explanation of the learning goals for the class. During the conversation about the learning goals, I will present students with a brief reintroduction to the "nature vs. nurture" debate in psychology. I will simply refer students back to a prior class in which they discussed "twin studies" and how psychologists use them to attempt to predict behavioral outcomes. I will then present students with a *brief* video that introduces the case issue, which is "Do violent video games contribute to violent behavior?"

The desks will be organized into groups of four with two students on each side facing one another. If the class does not break evenly into fours, the groups will be dispersed as evenly as possible. Depending on the busyness of the schedule, the desks will either be arranged before class starts or by students when class has already begun. Students may group themselves by proximity.

I will also take this time to set the norms for the academic controversy. I will remind students that this is not a debate, speakers cannot be interrupted, and the goal is to convince the other side using evidence. Each person is required to present one topic from the list below. The topics listed are essentially thesis statements themselves, so I will ask students to be sure to expand on their responses slightly (so they have enough to fill the 2 minutes).

Round 1 Present Positions: (20 minutes)
    Step one: remind students of the norms established. (1 minute)

    Step two: assign students to either "yes" or "no" positions. My left hand side will be "yes" and my right hand side will be "no". Each group will be given a laptop and access to the website below. (1 minute)

    Step three: pass out the handouts that correspond to each side's position (see position papers attached below) (2 minutes)

    Step four: ask students to research which arguments to make, if the groups are two students per side, ask them to present two of the bulleted points each. If more than two per side, ask for one point each. (10 minutes)

    Step five: students present the "yes" case, remind students that they have 2 minutes to present their argument and reiterate that a strong thesis statement is important (2 minutes)

    Step six: "no" side asks clarifying questions of "yes" side. Remind students that clarifying questions are not designed to interrogate the defending side's position. (1 minute)

    Step seven: "no" side presents case, again remind students that a strong thesis is critical for an effective argument (2 minutes)

    Step eight: "yes" side asks "no" side clarifying questions (1 minute)

Round 2 Present Positions: (18 minutes)

        Step one: If norms were not well-observed, remind students of them. (1 minute)

        Step two: have students switch roles (and handouts) (1 minute)

        Step three: direct students to research *new* arguments to make on either side (10 minutes)

        Step four: students present the "yes" case, remind students that they have limited time to present their argument, strong thesis statement is important. (2 minutes)

        Step five: "no" side asks clarifying questions of "yes" side. (1 minute)

        Step six: students present the "no" case, help students who are struggling forming a thesis statement (based on your observation of first round). (2 minutes)

        Step seven: "yes" side asks clarifying questions. (1 minute)

Group Discussion / Attempts to Reach Consensus: I will give students 7 minutes to discuss a possible consensus. I will direct them to continue to refer to their source information and try to find an answer to the debate that they can all agree upon. They should also discuss their reasons for not employing the sources that did not make the presentation portion. (7 minutes)

Unpacking Essay: Once they have completed the consensus portion, I will ask students to independently write a brief essay on their own position that makes reference to at least one source that I presented in the list below. (10 minutes)

Resources:

Hook video link: ["New Debate on Violent Video Games"](#)

The following points came from http://videogames.procon.org/ - the website is specifically designed as a resource for educators to help students engage in academic debates. The points below all have citations linked on the website.

Video games contribute to violence:

Round 1:

1. Increasing reports of **bullying** can be partially attributed to the popularity of violent video games. The 2008 study *Grand Theft Childhood* reported that 60% of middle school boys who played at least one Mature-rated game hit or beat up someone, compared to 39% of boys that did not play Mature-rated games. [2]

2. Video games often **reward players for simulating violence**, and thus enhance the learning of violent behaviors. Studies suggest that when violence is rewarded in video games, players show increased aggressive behavior compared to players of video games where violence is punished. [23] Violent video games teach youth that violence is **an acceptable conflict-solving strategy** and an appropriate way to achieve one's goals. [26] A 2009 study found that youth who play violent video games have lower belief in the use of nonviolent strategies and are less forgiving than players of nonviolent video games. Violent video games cause players to associate pleasure and happiness with the ability to cause pain in others. [3]

3. Violent video games **desensitize players** to real-life violence. It is common for victims in video games to disappear off screen when they are killed or for players to have multiple lives. In a 2005 study, violent video game exposure has been linked to reduced P300 amplitudes in the brain, which is associated with desensitization to violence and increases in aggressive behavior. [24] A 2000 FBI report includes playing violent video games in a list of behaviors associated with school shootings. [25]

4. Young children are more likely to **confuse fantasy violence** with real world violence, and without a framework for ethical decision making, they may mimic the actions they see in violent video games. [4] Violent video games require active participation, repetition, and identification with the violent character. With new game controllers allowing **more physical interaction**, the immersive and interactive characteristics of video games can increase the likelihood of youth violence. [5]

Video games contribute to violence:

Round 2:

5. Playing violent video games **increases aggressive behavior and arousal**. [27] A 2009 study found that it takes up to four minutes for the level of aggressive thoughts and feelings in children to return to normal after playing violent video games. It takes five to ten minutes for heart rate and aggressive behavior to return to baseline. Video games that show the most blood generate more aggressive thoughts. When blood is present in video games, there is a measurable increase in arousal and hostility. [28]

6. Playing violent video games causes the **development of aggressive behavioral scripts** [29]. A behavioral script is developed from the repetition of actions and affects the subconscious mind. An example of a common behavioral script is a driving script that tells drivers to get in a vehicle, put on a seat belt, and turn on the ignition. Similarly, violent video games can lead to scripts that tell youth to **respond aggressively** in certain situations. Violence in video games may lead to real world violence when scripts are automatically triggered in daily life, such as being nudged in a school hallway.

7. A 1998 study found **that 21% of games sampled involved violence against women** [23]. Exposure to sexual violence in video games is linked to increases in violence towards women and false attitudes about rape such as that women incite men to rape or that women secretly desire rape. [30]

8. Several studies in both the United States and Japan have shown that, controlling for prior aggression, children who played more violent video games during the beginning of the school year **showed more aggression** than their peers later in the school year. [31] Violent video games **can train youth to be killers**. The US Marine Corps licensed *Doom II* in 1996 to create *Marine Doom* in order to train soldiers. In 2002, the US Army released first-person shooter *America's Army* to recruit soldiers and prepare recruits for the battlefield.[6]

9. Exposure to violent video games is linked to **lower empathy in players**. In a 2004 study of 150 fourth and fifth graders by Professor Jeanne Funk, violent video games were the only type of media associated with lower empathy. Empathy, the ability to understand and enter into another's feelings, plays an important role in the process of moral evaluation and is believed to inhibit aggressive behavior. [32] When youth view violence in video games, they are more likely to **fear becoming a victim of acts of violence**. According to a 2000 joint statement by six leading national medical associations including the American Medical Association and American Psychological Association, this escalated fear results in youth not trusting others and taking violent self-protective measures. [33]

Video games *do not* contribute to youth violence:
Round 1:

1. Violent juvenile crime in the United States has been declining as violent video game popularity has increased. The **arrest rate for juvenile murders has fallen 71.9%** between 1995 and 2008. The arrest rate for all juvenile violent crimes has declined 49.3%. In this same period, video game sales have more than quadrupled. [7] [8] Playing violent video games provides a safe outlet for aggressive and angry feelings. A 2007 study reported that 45% of boys played video games because "it helps me get my anger out" and 62% played because it **"helps me relax."** [37] In 2005, the US had 2,279 murders committed by teenagers (27.9 per million residents) compared to 73 in Japan (3.1 per million). Per capita video game sales were $5.20 in the US compared to $47 in Japan. This example illustrates that there is no connection between violent behavior and playing video games. [11] [12] [13]

2. A causal link between **violent video games and violent behavior has not been proven**. [34] Many studies suffer from design flaws and use unreliable measures of violence and aggression such as noise blast tests. Thoughts about aggression have been confused with aggressive behavior, and there is a lack of studies that follow children over long periods of time. Playing **violent video games reduces violence** in adolescent boys by serving as a substitute for rough and tumble play. [36] Playing violent video games allows adolescent boys to express aggression and establish status in the peer group without causing physical harm.

3. A 2004 US Secret Service review of previous school-based attacks found that one-eighth of attackers exhibited an interest in violent video games, less than the rate of interest attackers showed in violent movies, books, and violence in their own writings. The report did not find a relationship between playing violent video games and school shootings. [35]

4. The small correlations that have been found between video games and violence may be explained by violent youth being drawn to violent video games. Violent **games do not cause youth to be violent.** Instead, youth that are predisposed to be violent seek out violent entertainment such as video games. Video game players **understand they are playing a game.** Their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality prevents them from emulating video game violence in real life. [9]

Video games *do not contribute* to youth violence:
Round 2:

5. Violent video games provide healthy and safe opportunities for children to virtually explore rules and consequences of violent actions. Violent games also allow youth to **experiment with issues such as war**, violence and death without real world consequences. [38] The level of control granted to video game players, especially in terms of pace and directing the actions of their character, allows youth to regulate their emotional state during play. [39] Research shows that a **perception of being in control reduces emotional and stressful responses to events.**

6. Alarmist claims similar to current arguments against violent video games have been made in the past when new media such as radio, movies, and television have been introduced. Claims that these various mediums would result in **surges in youth violence also failed to materialize**. Violent video games may affect the form of violence, but does not cause the violence to occur. [40] **Youth might model violent acts** on what they have seen in video games, but the violence would still occur in the absence of video games.

7. Exposure to violent video games has not been shown to be predictive of violent behavior or crime. Any link found between video games and violence is best explained by other variables such as exposure to **family violence and aggressive personality**. [10]

8. When research does show that **violent video games cause more arousal and aggression, it is because the comparative game is less exciting**. [41] A short-term increase in arousal and aggression does not mean a child is going to leave his or her house and commit a violent act.

Footnotes:

1. "Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry," ▨ (800 KB) Entertainment Software Association website, May 2009
2. Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olsen, *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do*, Apr. 2008
3. Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action against TV, Movie & Video Game Violence,* 1999
4. Susan Villani, Cheryl Olson, and Michael Jellinek, "Media Literacy for Clinicians and Parents," *Child Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, July 2005
5. Elizabeth Carll, "Violent Video Games: Rehearsing Aggression," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 2007
6. Michael Reagan, "US Military Recruits Children: 'America's Army' Video Game Violates International Law," Truthout website, July 23, 2008
7. "Crime in the United States, 2008," FBI website, Sep. 2009
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9. Steven Malliet, "An Exploration of Adolescents' Perceptions of Videogame Realism," *Learning Media and Technology*, 2006
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13. "White Paper on Crime 2006," Japan's Ministry of Justice website, 2006
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15. John Harlow and Sarah Baxter, "Hillary Opens up Morality War on Violent Video Games," *Times Online*, Mar. 27, 2005
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18. Andrew Heining, "Modern Warfare 2 Airport Terror Attack Stirs Controversy," Christian Science Monitor website, Oct. 29, 2009
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21. Pete Williams, "Police: 'Mere Speculation' That Adam Lanza Was Motivated by Obsession with Other Mass Killers," usnews.nbcnews.com, Feb. 19, 2013
22. US Supreme Court, *Brown vs. Entertainment Merchants Association* ▨ (485), June 27, 2011
23. Tracy Dietz, "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior," *Sex Roles*, 1998
24. Bruce Bartholow, Brad Bushman, and Marc Sestir, "Chronic Violent Video Game Exposure and Desensitization to Violence: Behavioral and Event-related Brain Potential Data," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, July 2006

25. Mary Ellen O'Toole, "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective" 📄 (185 KB), FBI website, 1999
26. Ingrid Moller and Barbara Krahe, "Exposure to Violent Video Games and Aggression in German Adolescents: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Aggressive Behavior,* Oct. 2008
27. Christopher Barlett, Omar Branch, Christopher Rodeheffer, and Richard Harris, "How Long Do the Short-Term Violent Video Game Effects Last?,"*Aggressive Behavior*, Feb. 2009
28. Christopher Barlett, Richard Harris, and Callie Bruey, "The Effect of the Amount of Blood in a Violent Video Game on Aggression, Hostility, and Arousal," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Oct. 2007
29. Jeanne B. Funk, "Exposure to Violent Video Games and Desensitization to Violence in Children and Adolescents," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, July 2005
30. "Resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media" 📄 (45 KB), American Psychological Association website, Aug. 17, 2005
31. Craig Anderson, Akira Sakamoto, Douglas Gentile, Nobuko Ihori, Akiko Shibuya, Shintaro Yukawa, Mayumi Naito, and Kumiko Kobayashi, "Longitudinal Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression in Japan and the United States," *Pediatrics*, Nov. 2008
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45. Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, "Chapter IV: Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho" 🔴 (280 KB), governor.virginia.gov, Aug. 2007

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48. "Video Games and the Economy," 🔴 (2.7 MB) Entertainment Software Association website, Nov. 2009

Differentiation: The main step that I have taken to differentiate the lesson is to give students access to the website that has a plethora of fantastic sources on this debate. The sources range in difficulty from simple news articles to scientific studies to FBI official documents. Truly, any student can find a challenging source and explore its merits. Additionally, the website also offers students a chance to watch videos on the subject, so ELL and/or low reading level students can still get valuable information from their time researching. This lesson also has the benefit of being extremely unique when placed against the typical lessons students experience in my psychology class. This should allow new students to shine and let their feelings be heard. With quiet and disengaged students, this lesson is one of the best types of oral lessons for allowing those students to dabble in verbal participation. The information is mostly given, they have a specific time to talk, and the whole exercise is brief. I also picked this topic because it will appeal to many of the students in my class who are disengaged but are "gamers" and have an opinion on this issue.

Adaptations: I am planning this lesson for students in two classes. Neither have any students with accommodations and/or modifications. However, if a student had a standard accommodation like being "seated at the front of the room," this lesson could still give that student the legal requirements. Aside from common adaptations like seating arrangements, it would be hard to speculate what specific needs students may have in future times that I teach the lesson.

Reflection: There are two main issues that I see with this lesson. First, it is highly structured and requires a great deal of instruction to establish with students what exactly the teacher expects them to be doing. The classes that I will be teaching this lesson in are the best-behaved classes my CT has, so this will work in my favor when I am transmitting the particulars of the lesson to

students. Second, students have likely never done a structured academic controversy before, so they will probably need guidance on how to effectively articulate their arguments and find the best possible data sets. I expect students to be confused when they are looking through the data because they will be combing through information with which they have little familiarity. They will need to pay close attention to the introductory video to ensure that they understand the basics of the issue and can then build more complex arguments for both sides. I also expect students will be somewhat confused by the idea of "switching sides". For better or worse, few people in politics ever "switch sides" on issues, so students may need a few minutes to consider the issue from their newly assigned perspective.

Post-Teaching: I had the opportunity to teach this lesson with an AP Psychology class at Phoebus High School. I had a free period before class time so I could set the desks up in a way that was conducive for the SAC. Students filed in to find their position papers ready on each desk. They quickly filled each group, though I found it difficult and somewhat time-consuming to balance the groups perfectly. During the shuffle of balancing the groups, some students mistakenly took their position papers with them, which had to be sorted out. Eventually, all the students were in position and I gave a brief lecture on the "nature vs. nurture" debate. Because this was an AP course, I decided to present the scientific data behind twin studies. Students discovered through this lecture that behavior is one trait that is not evenly passed down through genetic transfer. Then, I described the lesson that would unfold for the next hour. The class was excited to "debate" because many students had interest in becoming lawyers. I established the norms, but the first round saw many students interrupting others. They were also somewhat frustrated by the restrictions of the "questioning" portion.

So, to respond to their interests, I decided to allow them to "cross-examine" each other in the second round. The presentation periods were much more quiet; students were taking notes on the other team's contributions so they could ask "gotcha" questions. In the future, I will try to help students structure this part of the lesson. I think they understood the necessity of all the other parts of the lesson (opening video, research, presentations, consensus) but many did not "get" the clarifying questions. I was absolutely blown away by the essay responses after we completed the SAC. Students incorporated evidence, personal anecdotes, and evaluated the opposing side's arguments in concise and effective essays. Going forward, I would change the video opening and look hard at the purpose of "clarifying questions". In terms of the PASS standards, this lesson definitely relied heavily on HOT thinking, deep knowledge (of the video game controversy), and substantive conversation.