

OVERVIEW

Committee of N is a card-based design game, created to enhance student understanding of the grammar and history of schooling in America. By atomizing the ideologies, purposes, and practices of educators that have developed in over 100 years of institutionalized public schooling. Players design their own schools, investigating the design affordances of these ideas, but also engaging with their own creative ideas and values. In a tribute to the role of the “Committee of Ten” who developed the curriculum and structure for high school as we know it, students come to understand both the challenges of integrating inherited ideas and features in schooling while learning how to best combine the ideas of the past to produce the school of the future.

Play Summary

Committee of N consists of two decks of cards, one the “School Design Elements” deck and the other the “School Design Values” deck. The School Design Elements are features of school that have an influence on the experiences and ideas of a school and its denizens. The eight are:

Bell Schedule	Professional Development
Classroom Design	Building Design
Assessment Framework	Extracurricular Offerings
Technology Infrastructure	Graduation Requirements

The values are too numerous to list, but they are grouped into four families of values:

- Theories of Intelligence (i.e., Theory of Multiple Intelligences)
- Purposes of Schooling (i.e., Elite College Prep, Student Achievement)
- Theories of Learning (i.e. Behaviorism, Constructionism)
- Instructional Approaches (i.e. Flipped Classroom, Design-Based Learning)

Students are split into pairs and each pair is given a random School Design Element and three School Design Values (each must be from a different family, as described above). Students may then take as long as they like, use whatever resources they need (to look up more information about a card, for instance), to develop a design solution for their School Design Element. This solution is documented on an Element Sheet and placed to the side. Students repeat this process until they have a sufficient number have developed a few Elements they’re really proud of. In our case, we had students “check out” with a member of the teaching staff after each Element so that we could check their thinking and deal them a new hand of cards. More advanced students might be given their own decks with which to play. In the end, students should come together in groups and attempt to develop a school together based on their collected Elements, debating and performing some self-assessment along the way. We had two groups of twelve students, with each pair bringing three Elements – we’ll discuss how this played out next.

PLAY THROUGH

Committee of N was developed to help replace and enhance a unit on the history of US education – what forces have led to the current state of affairs? The idea was to use discussions in which students designed schools as a means to develop knowledge of the ideas and ideologies that have shaped schooling. The experience below was shaped by our previous unit, by the amount of time we could allot for the experiment, and a pretty rough estimate of what we wanted to do. We performed a few very light play tests in advance of this case, but this was the best-conceived and documented test we conducted. The game was divided into three phases across 4 sixty-five minute class periods. Below, we unpack what we did when and why in our playthrough.

PHASE I

In this phase, players focused on producing Element Cards based on hands of School Design Element and School Design Value cards. The preparation the students had done before this point was to read about the design of learning environments in *How People Learn*[\[link\]](#), participate in a jigsaw of Patricia Graham's *Schooling America*[\[link\]](#), and received a lecture on the development of the federal educational system from Brown vs. the Board of Education to the present day. They also took a brief pre-assessment so we might understand their understandings. Phase I was conducted over the course of one and three-quarters of a class period. We began with a brief presentation introducing Phase I[\[link\]](#). We avoided telling them too much about the other phases because we wanted them to participate in the design activity without doing any strategizing for the future. We allowed them to divide themselves into pairs, and then set about passing out cards and waiting to evaluate student work.

During this phase, it was important to be critical of the right things. Student ideas could be as wild and silly as they wanted them to be, so long as they a) had a proper understanding of the ideas on the cards and b) had done work to synthesize the ideas on the values cards. In the case of the former, where students had not quite developed an understanding of an idea, it was easy enough to send them back to the drawing board to investigate a gap in their knowledge based on our feedback. In the latter case, it can be somewhat more difficult. Students would describe a bell schedule that had a behaviorist component, a design-based learning component, and a “schooling as the bulwark of democracy” component, but they would not attempt to find a way to synthesize the three. Admittedly, when it came to values cards, some hands are simply better than others, and this is actually part of the learning goals. For a student to understand that “Design Based Learning” might be a challenge to fit with “Behaviorism” and “Theory of General Intelligence” reflects a real trajectory from novice understanding towards expertise.

PHASE II

This is a short but important phase, leading towards the third and final phase. We gave students approximately 20 minutes to complete this. We scheduled this, but we did shave about ten minutes off of our intended Phase II time so that we could allow

students a bit more time to build up a good bank of designed elements. The purpose of this phase is for students, still in their pairs, to whittle their bank of designed elements from about seven down to three. These are to be used in negotiating a school in the third phase, but we were circumspect about how these elements would be used in the third phase. We wanted to prevent students from “gaming” the system and instead to provide a rich, weird variety of designed elements to work from. We gave them the following criteria for making their decisions:

- *Do not repeat any Design Element cards*
- *Pick ones you are proud of*
- *Pick ones that are interesting to you*
- *Pick ones that are feasible*

The purpose of the first rule was to ensure that a diversity of elements made it into Phase III. Students were instructed that rules two through four should be read as hierarchical priorities – students should first prioritize elements they were proud of, then ones that were interesting to them, and *then* focus on feasibility. The intent was to ensure that some of the stranger elements would be brought into Phase III, which would make the debating and negotiation of that phase a more interesting experience for learning. Our assumptions were that the elements students were proud of and interested in might be some of the stranger ones, while having feasibility as a last priority might mean that the students’ last picks would potentially be more milquetoast so that the last phase wasn’t completely frustrating. In our wrap-ups, we heard that more students would have preferred to have a greater diversity and more strange elements in Phase III, so we will be tweaking these rules.

PHASE III

In Phase III, the essence of the activity is students in larger groups negotiating schools from pooled selections they made in Phase II. We took advantage of the natural break between classes, collected all of their designed elements, and entered them into a spreadsheet, using the cards from which they drew their values and elements, as well as what we knew about the students to that point to create two twelve student school-creation groups. Students were charged with picking one of each of the eight design elements from among their aggregated elements. We initially intended to have them debate the schools over one class period, but this proved to be too short a time period. Also, despite our best intentions, these discussions were a common sore spot at the end of the class. Groups of twelve were seemingly just too large, and students both felt that it was hard to have their voice heard and that the resulting schools were not particularly interesting because large groups working together (and particularly under time pressure, we think) have a result to make the safest moves possible.

In our case, the resulting schools were presented in another session, and were very similar. The schools converged not only on “safe” elements, but they also used the same “mulligan” (an allowed do over for one element) to build assessment frameworks from the bottom up. See our recommendations for more on this phase.

The Future

REVISIONS & EXPLORATIONS

Phase I seems stable and was pretty universally loved in the class. While changes may come to Phase I in the form of variants, the essential structure will likely remain. But there are a number of revisions we are considering

- The Designed Element Card, where students document the results of their design deliberations will probably change. These initial versions made for our test are good at capturing a lot of information, but our next pass will attempt to make them feel less bureaucratic (in response to student complaint).
- Phase III needs a complete overhaul. Currently, we are looking into literature on play, community, deliberation, and learning from argument to refine the process. Our next tested process will almost certainly involve smaller groups and a more structured, scaffolded process for conversation.
- We will develop more supporting documentation. Committee of N was developed very quickly, so students were left to research each of the ideas on the cards with little background of guidance, which lead to some misinterpretations along the way. We hope to develop better resources that do not necessarily provide answers, but provide guidance, questions, and carefully curated resources for further research.

VARIANTS & EXTENSIONS

- Two Values per Element: One of our design partners suggested we might need to onboard learners by providing only two value cards instead of three value cards, for the sake of onboarding.
- Context Cards: A mechanic that we pared away after initial testing, context cards were value cards that would give information about the community – economics, values, landscape etc. – where a school might be. We will experiment with moving these cards into Phase III, with hopes that they may create more variation in the types of schools developed. This would feed a subsequent discussion.
- Expansion Packs: The great thing about card games is that they can allow for easy modification by anyone. We hope to create expansion packs that will enrich the gameplay and allow for increased replayability.
- Online Version: In order to support the goals of the Woodrow Wilson Academy, we will investigate an online, asynchronous version to support their training teachers.
- Modifications for Other Fields/Disciplines: The basic idea of Committee of N is powerful, but simple. We hope to expand the game to other disciplines and forums.