"I Should Quit, Right?" And Other Things I've Said While (Trying) to Learn to Play Chess

Charley Koenig

In this article, Charley Koenig traces the many paths that could have led to quitting as she learned a new literate activity: how to play chess. Though more of a story about the practices of teaching and learning something new than actually learning chess, Charley weaves in the concepts of antecedent knowledge, multimodality, and uptake to relay her struggles with pawns and frustration.

"I Should Definitely Quit."

I cannot tell you how many times I said this to myself, to my partner Kyle, and to the universe. . . Chess simply did not feel like something I was capable of learning, let alone playing with any kind of understanding or enjoyment. Chess was just stupid. Or else, I was.

Chess was something that I hadn't previously found very interesting. I knew little about it and its rules, and my partner's level of knowledge and experience was intimidating. But chess has been experiencing a renaissance lately, with chess forums, like *Chess.com*, and live streaming, like on Twitch, gaining in popularity, and of course, the phenomenon that was *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix. And not to mention that my sweet husband had wanted me to play with him for years, though we had yet to sit down and try it together. Before starting to learn, chess seemed like an appealing way to spend our free time and challenge ourselves. It even sounded like it might be fun. However, after several attempts at figuring out this board game, I was profoundly questioning when the fun and appeal would come into play.

The frustration of trying to learn something almost entirely new put me in a disparaging state of mind.

Tracing the Many Paths that Could Have Led to Quitting

As happens a lot when you're learning something new, my expectations of what that process would look and feel like significantly differed from the reality of my **uptake** of this new **literate activity**. There were a lot of hurdles and stumbling blocks and straight-up brick walls that I had to adjust for in lots of big and little ways. The biggest was my intense frustration—with the game, with the process, with my teacher and tools. I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to make sense of this game. In the end, it took a great many attempts to simply get to a place where I finally thought, "OK, I maybe don't HAVE to quit."

> **Literate Activity**
>
> "Developed by Paul Prior (1998, p. 138), the term 'literate activity' is meant to address all of the many ways that texts are part of people's lived experiences in the world. It extends beyond our typical ideas about 'reading' and 'writing' to include the broad range of practices and processes we employ in the creation and use of a wide array of texts" (Roozen, 2021, p. 96).

Take 1: Kyle Tries Teaching Me How to Play Chess

Full disclosure, this did not go well. In hindsight, diving too deep too quickly into the terms, references, in-jokes, even the lore that surrounds chess was not the best way (for me) to go about learning how to play this game. In fact, this first take—and, to a lesser degree, perhaps takes 2, 3, and 4—could be read as to how *not* to learn how to play chess. So, if you, like me, are new to chess, and this section feels confusing, disorienting, or even frustrating, now you know how I felt!

Optimistically, ambitiously even, I started this journey by simply asking Kyle how to play. His face lit up as he brought out the chessboard someone had gifted him years ago, something which for me had just become this background fixture of our living space for years. It's a beautiful set: glass board and pieces, with half the pieces in transparent glass and the other half in this almost opaque, fogged glass. Similarly, the square spaces on the board alternated between transparent and opaque glass rather than the traditional black (or sometimes brown or dark tan) and white. At first, I didn't think anything of these aesthetic choices; it was just a pretty set. But as Kyle started to set up the board and talk through the basic premise and first steps, I noticed a problem. He had just explained that the white pieces always go first in chess (an arbitrary rule that impacts board setup and openings, or first phase strategies).

"Wait, which pieces are supposed to be black, and which are supposed to be white on this board?" I asked him. He stared at me for a few seconds before responding.

"Ya know, I haven't played with this set in so long. Let me see . . ."

We ended up having to Google how to set up a chessboard so that we could determine which glass opacity (clear or fogged) was intended to represent which color from a traditional board. That took a minute to figure out before we could move forward. To be honest, I *still* can't quickfire the correct answer. I have to look up the proper way to set up the board every time I play. But I digress . . .

Once the board was oriented correctly and the pieces were all in place, Kyle said I could play white, so, enthusiastically, I—

"—Uh, well, nope, you can't do that." He said this immediately after I made my move. "That's illegal." (See Figure 1 for my valiant effort.)

So that's how we got into how each piece moves, and wouldn't ya know it? They all move differently and adhere to different rules. We started with the pawns. Pawns are simple. They move directly forward, one square at a time. Except on their first move, then they can move two squares directly forward. But when they take ("Take?" "Yeah, like capture. You're trying to capture your opponent's pieces until you can take their king to win." "Oh. OK.") another piece, they do it diagonally. And if the circumstances are right, you can do an en passant capture—
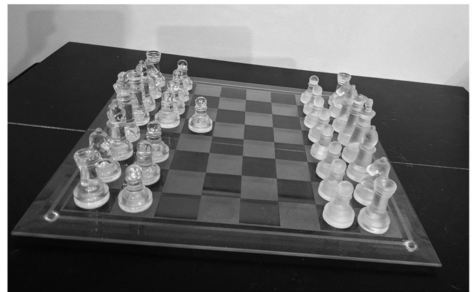

Figure 1: My first ever move—already illegal.

"WTF is 'en passant?!'"

I might have yelled this a bit, but I was getting exasperated. How can one *simple* piece move this many ways? Kyle smiled, then explained this super fancy and cool move, how it works, and the rules for using it. He gestured as he explained, which helped. I listened and concentrated and did my best to mentally take note of this mini process within the larger system of the game (I started to wonder whether I should be taking actual notes). And then he had the nerve to say, "But you hardly ever get to use the en passant move, so you don't really need to worry about that one."

Are. You. Kidding. Me.

I think that's about when I walked away the first time. Between the somewhat confusing board setup, the different pieces with their functions, the flood of specialized terminology—not just take/capture and en passant, but also threat, attack, checkmate, endgame, rank and file, Elo, and so much more—and the frequent references to chess Twitch streamers and their in-jokes (just because we constantly have these streamers playing in the background at home doesn't mean I understand what they're saying or doing), I was just so overwhelmed and fed up.

Unpacking that First Take

What's up with that? According to a study done by De Bruin et al. (2005) on novice chess players learning to play endgames (in other words, strategies for the final phase of the game), a learner's prior knowledge, and whether they have acquired patterns for organizing information on a specific topic, largely determines how that learner will process new information on that topic and whether their working memory will get overloaded. In other words, **antecedent knowledge**—or all the things you already know that come into play when you're taking up or engaging in something (Illinois State University, n.d.)—*matters*. The things we already know affect the way we approach, learn about, and participate in various literate activities, whether that be a kind of writing or more of a literacy, like being able to play chess. Sometimes it can be helpful; sometimes, it can hold us up. De Bruin et al. seemed to find that antecedent knowledge in playing chess was valuable in learning to play and preventing overload. I think this finding rings true: I had very little antecedent knowledge about the game before starting to learn to play, so it was difficult for me to gauge what information would be most relevant to me and where to focus my attention first. Thus, overload. Without any basic framework or context for how all of this chess information fit together, I became overloaded and frustrated.

But that was just the first take. We tried to learn from that attempt, but frustration can be a sneaky, complicated foe . . .

> **Antecedent Knowledge**
>
> According to Chapter 1 of *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Ambrose et al., 2010), drawing on antecedent knowledge effectively, or in a way that helps learning, depends on the nature of that knowledge. If someone is aware of their prior knowledge, and that knowledge is sufficient (there's enough of it), and that knowledge is appropriate and applicable to the situation at hand, AND that knowledge is accurate, it helps learning. When any one or more of those factors is lacking—when prior knowledge is inactive or unconscious, insufficient, inappropriate, and/or inaccurate—it can slow down, distort, or otherwise impede learning. In other words, antecedent knowledge can at times be problematic.

Take 2: Kyle Slows Down

Coming back to the board took some cooling off and thinking about what went so awry the first time. After talking through some of the things that might have gotten in the way, Kyle thought we should start again by slowing things down, taking it one step at a time. But first, what did I remember from the first round? What did I already know?

White goes first. I'm supposed to try to get to my opponent's king. Pawns move forward (NOT diagonally, yet), two squares on their first turn.

"See, you did learn a few things," Kyle pointed out. And he was right, I suppose. Even though I was still a long way from "getting it," there was significant **uptake** happening here—meaning, I was going through the process of taking up a new idea (in this case, playing chess) and thinking about it until it made sense (Illinois State University, n.d.). Now we just needed to keep that process going.

Kyle suggested we play it out, talking through each turn and the various move options as we went. It was a practice round, like playing an open hand of cards when you're still trying to learn the rules. I redid my first move, legally this time, and Kyle started demonstrating the variety of moves he could make, which ones he would most likely choose and why, and how I could try to look ahead and anticipate what's coming. Seeing the pieces move around the board and connecting those movements to what Kyle explained helped make concepts like threat, attack, and take more concrete. It also helped show which pieces could go where and how. We got through several rounds of turns (over a pretty long period, but still) before we hit a snag.

"Now what I want to do next here is called castling," Kyle said as he did several things at once. In the back row of his pieces, he moved his king two squares to his left and placed his rook on the other side of his king. With his rook protecting one side of his king and a neat little row of three pawns lined up in front of it, he had essentially created a mini fortress around his king.

"What is that?" I demanded. "You moved two pieces. That can't be legal. You're making that up."

Kyle smiled again and pulled YouTube up on his laptop. Perhaps seeing someone else use this technique in an actual game would help it to make sense (and confirm its legality). He was getting excited again, trying to use all the tools and resources at his disposal, including looking through clips of chess Twitch streamers. But as the live streamer started taking us through her game against another online player in this clip Kyle found about castling—

talking quickly and easily in what might as well have been an entire other language that I didn't know—I could feel myself starting to frown, lose focus, and want to walk away again.

The frustration was coming in hot, so I decided to try and head it off before it picked up steam: I suggested a break. This video, I explained, was not helping, and we had reached as good a stopping place as any. Kyle put the board away just as we had left it so that we could pick up where we left off when I was ready. At that moment, I could not see that happening anytime soon. I mean, how was I supposed to respond to something like castling?

Take 3: I Give Up on Kyle (For Now) and Switch to Chess.com

Key Strategies for Learners

Even learners with motivated, enthusiastic, kind teachers can get frustrated. That's why, when you're particularly determined to figure out a new skill or literacy, it's so important to be flexible, persistent, forgiving of yourself, and constantly on the lookout for any tools or resources that might give you an edge or some insight into the task at hand.

The solution to my second overwhelm slump? More tools and resources! This time, Kyle directed me to Chess.com and let me have at it, stepping back to give me some space to explore the site and learn on my own. This plan made sense: I now had just enough basic knowledge to navigate the site and even start a few games without getting too lost. From there, I could let the computer show me what to do.

This worked well for a while. I would regularly hop on and play against the easiest bot, again and again, to solidify what I knew about how the pieces moved and to start to look ahead at what my next moves might be. I even won a couple of times (though not without the help of the hint feature—see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Screenshot of *Chess.com* giving me hints as I play a bot.

What was especially helpful about *Chess.com* was the wealth of articles that I could look through as I needed them. Instead of getting overwhelmed with too much information to memorize at once, I could pick and choose which terms or moves I wanted to look up at a given time as they became relevant to me, and then I could take them in at my own pace. See Figure 3 for the terms that proved the most useful to me and how I've come to define them for myself.

Terms	My Definitions
Take, or capture	When you make a move that removes one of your opponent's pieces from the board
En passant	French for "in passing;" when your opponent's pawn moves forward to be adjacent to one of your pawns and you move diagonally forward, past your opponent's pawn, and take their pawn without landing on the same square as their pawn
Threaten, or attack	A tactic (move, strategy, etc.) against an opponent that they will need to defend against
Trade, or exchange	Back-to-back captures; you take one of your opponent's pieces, then your opponent takes a piece of yours in response (or vice versa)
Blunder	A significant mistake that negatively affects your position
Check and checkmate	Check is when a king is attacked or threatened; checkmate is when a king is placed in check and can't escape; checkmate ends and wins the game for the player who performs it
Endgame	The final phase of the game, after most of the pieces have been exchanged already; also used to refer to the strategies players use in this phase; where the magic happens, if you can get that far
Rank and file	Essentially just row (rank) and column (file) on the board, denoted by numbers (rank) and letters (file) and oriented from the perspective of the white pieces (e.g., square 1a is row/rank 1, column/file a, in the bottom left corner from the white side of the board)
Elo	A rating system used to measure the relative strength of chess players (apparently the term comes from the last name of the person who came up with the system, and it is not, as I originally thought, a phonetically pronounced acronym; who knew?)
Castling	A move to protect your king using your rook; you can only perform this move when neither the king nor the rook being used have moved yet and there are no pieces between them; the king moves two squares toward the rook and the rook moves to the other side of the king; this is the only time in chess when you can move two pieces in one move

Figure 3: The terms that I encountered the most and came to define for myself
(with some help from and credit owed to *Chess.com*).

But though *Chess.com* had its advantages, there were also downsides to playing on the computer. I would repeatedly turn to the hints and articles for mid-game strategies and explanations, so much so that I wondered if I was becoming *too* reliant on the computer's assistance. Thus, a new chess-related anxiety—and more frustration—was born.

Take 4: The Computer Again

At this point, I felt I had come too far to quit, though the temptation to do so was constantly, steadily increasing. I was just too invested in seeing this through to a point where I thought I could say, "Yes, I play chess," or even just "Yes, I know how to play chess." So, I decided that I needed to push myself. I played more/different bots, tried to use fewer hints, took more risks, and played out all the options before me to begin to look ahead and build a strategy. I had a plan—I was optimistic.

But I hit a wall. I couldn't get past the "assisted" setting on *Chess.com*— couldn't win a single game unassisted. I was stuck. The game wasn't clicking for me past a very general level, and I wasn't improving.

"I should quit, right?"

Take 5: Computer Knowledge + Practice with Kyle = Some Progress?

It was around this time that Kyle's glass board started to catch my eye. Wouldn't it be nice to move the pieces myself? After all, my body is a factor, an agent even, in the learning process as well—that's part of what can make "hands-on" learning so effective. And while the computer certainly had its advantages, the screen was only getting me so far. I was starting to feel like I needed to experience a different kind, a different *mode*, of learning— or perhaps a combination of modes would make the best use of the interrelationships between my mind, my physical body, and the tools and resources available to me.

Kyle was all too happy to sit opposite me again. But this time, I was the one talking trades and blunders (hell, I even knew what the Botez Gambit was). I had the manipulatable physical board in front of me and my laptop nearby if I got stuck or backed into a corner or encountered a new chess term. And though I didn't ultimately use it much, having access to a computer and a site like *Chess.com* gave me the comfort and confidence of having something to fall back on. Thus, combining computer knowledge and real-world practice seemed to be the recipe for a much more relaxed and enjoyable way to learn chess.

I ended up being able to do so much more with this combined approach: I could talk out possible moves with an actual human that I know well; I was able to see how some of the terms and strategies I was learning about played out in real life; I got the tactile satisfaction of moving the pieces on a physical chessboard; and I got to "castle" on my own, in real life, in a game, something I would never have been able to do in previous takes (see Figure 4!)!
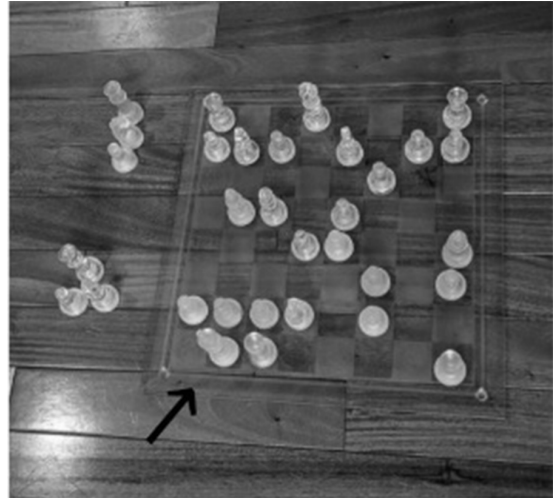

Figure 4: A moment where I felt like I knew things—when I castled all by myself.

I think the key here was **multimodality**, or using all the modes of human communication together, from alphabetical (writing) to visual (images and diagrams) (Illinois State University, n.d.). By adding Kyle's human component to the process, we were able to add the oral (speaking) and aural (listening) modes to the ones I was already using via *Chess.com* (alphabetical in the form of written articles, visual in the form of pictures and animations of chessboards, and symbolic in the form of specific chess notations, like "+" to indicate check). The multimodality of this approach to learning chess is what made this take different, and more hopeful, than the rest.

I don't know whether you could call this a major improvement in my chess skills. Kyle and I stalemated quite a few times, and I never won. But stalemating is not losing, and it *felt* better than before. It *felt* like an improvement from previous attempts. More importantly, I wasn't so frustrated anymore. That more comfortable feeling, that breakthrough, seemed more of an accomplishment than any quantifiable measure of success.

Chess Frustration = 4; Me = 1?

As this story draws to a close, or at least a stopping point for now, it ends on a hopeful note: frustration can be overcome, progress is possible, and chess might not be so stupid after all. Of course, in the winding and often diverging and multiplicitous path(s) to figuring out a new literate activity, there will always be stumbling blocks to your uptake, which can be incredibly frustrating. But sometimes, it's just a matter of finding the right combination of tools and approaches, modalities and resources, humans and computers.

Take 5 was my best, or at least my most promising, work. That try was the one where everything came together to create a rich, multimodal learning environment in which I could finally feel calm, even excited, about learning how to play chess. But this take could not have been as promising as it was without the work of the first several takes. Once I got through those frustrating, agonizing attempts and had built a solid foundation of antecedent chess knowledge, Take 5 was all but destined to advance my chess skills.

Still, I don't know that I have to go through all that same agony again the next time I want to learn a new literate activity. That's the thing about articulating your uptake—it helps you see what's going on beneath the surface as you're trying to figure something out, and then you can *use* that information going forward. So, what do I know now about myself, my process, and learning in general that I perhaps didn't before? Well, when learning something new, I can

- Consider multimodality—what other modes (alphabetical, visual, aural, etc.) could I use to approach, view, reorient, or accomplish the task or goal in front of me?

- Consider embodied learning—how might I experience this task or process more tangibly? How can I get my hands on this?

- Use more than just one method—how can I vary the ways in which I am doing and learning? What are some other ways of meeting my goals or getting the thing done? How can I change things up?

- Locate tools and resources—who else has done this before or is doing this now? How did they do it, what kinds of things did they use, and where might I find those things? Where might I find some help?

I must remember that this is just the beginning. My project of learning to play chess isn't over, it'll never be over (sometimes uptake just continues indefinitely, and that's OK). However, instead of wallowing in frustration at my current skill level as I might have before, I now find myself looking ahead at what's next. What's an endgame truly look like? *How* do you endgame? How do you win?? Maybe I should start watching chess Twitch streamers? LOL, yeah, right . . .

References

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. Jossey-Bass.

Chess.com. (n.d.). *Chess Terms*. https://www.chess.com/terms

De Bruin, A. B. H., Rikers, R. M. J. P., & Schmidt, H. G. (2005). Monitoring accuracy and self-regulation when learning to play a chess endgame. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 19*, 167–181. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1109

Illinois State University. (n.d.). *Key Terms and Concepts*. Grassroots Writing Research. http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/

Prior, P. (2006). A sociocultural theory of writing. In C.A. MacArthur, S. Graham, and J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 54–56). New York Guilford.

Roozen, K. (2021). Unraveling "writing": Interweaving maverick literacies throughout a literate life. *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, http://isuwriting.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Roozen-Unraveling-Writing-Interweaving-Maverick-Literacies-Throughout-a-Literate-Life.pdf

Charley Koenig is an English studies PhD student studying creative writing at Illinois State University. When she is not rewatching *Parks & Rec*, she is probably rewatching *Schitt's Creek* or listening to the *Harry Potter* audiobooks while trying to write, teach, student, parent, and crochet with her partner, daughter, and dogs in Bloomington, Illinois.