

Homebrew Letter Response

Grade Levels: 4th – 8th

Time Requirement: Approximately 20 minutes to prepare and 90 minutes to complete.

Objectives:

The student will:

- After group discussion and individual writing, students will know the arguments for and against proprietary software.

Activity Summary:

Students read a letter that Bill Gates wrote to the editor of HomeBrew Magazine and write a response. In the process, they explore the question of whether software should be free or proprietary.

New Mexico Standards:

Modern, Classical and Native Languages Content Standards 1, 2, and 6
Social Science Benchmarks IV-A

Materials:

Chart paper and pens, copies of Gates' letter in HomeBrew, paper and pencils.

Background Information:

During the 1970s, computer "hobbyist" clubs became established all over the country. In California, one such club, the "HomeBrew Computer Club," was founded out of someone's garage and soon became a popular hangout for young computer hobbyists to get together, trade ideas, and share inventions. These hobbyists were developing some important innovations. Some chose to capitalize on their innovations, while others felt strongly that innovations should be kept within a communal network of "hackers."

Procedures:

1. **Prepare** for this lesson by finding Bill Gates' open letter in HomeBrew magazine at:
http://www.digibarn.com/collections/newsletters/homebrew/V2_01/gatesletter.html
2. **What is the Hacker Spirit? What is the Entrepreneurial Spirit?**
As a class, discuss what is meant by the phrase "Hacker Spirit" (joy of experimentation and innovation, the competitiveness with friends to build upon discoveries, the communal nature of dialogue). Brainstorm some terms and list these on chart paper. Then discuss what is meant by the term "entrepreneurial" (risk-taking, extreme commitment, competition, improvisation and innovative approaches). List these terms on paper. Taking direction from students, create a Venn Diagram, listing descriptive words and terms that fall into the "Hacker circle," the "Entrepreneurial circle" and the area of overlap.
3. **What was HomeBrew?** Discuss the development of computer hobbyist clubs like HomeBrew. These groups felt strongly that computer enthusiasts should share. As Jim Warren states, "The whole spirit there was working together.....was sharing."
4. Individually, students **read Bill Gates' letter** to the editors of HomeBrew magazine.
5. As a class, **discuss** Bill Gates' letter. What was his opinion? Do students have questions about his argument? Gates felt not having proprietary influence over software prevented good software from being written – why would a professional work for free? Others who defended a more communal nature software development argued that an ethos of community and sharing would produce more innovations, with developers building upon and improving each other's work.
6. Individually, students **write a letter** to Bill Gates, responding to his arguments and substantiating their point of view.

Vocabulary:

Proprietary

Entrepreneurial

Extensions:

1. Divide class in half and assign each group to be either for or against making software proprietary. Then hold a forum to discuss its merits and detriments. Students present their arguments with evidence and compelling rationale.
2. Students do more research into the history of this issue in the development of computer programming. They look specifically at the history of Open Source and Linux.

Modifications:

1. Rather than individual analysis of Bill Gates' letter, students work in small groups or as a whole class to closely read the text and identify his arguments.

Assessment:

- Observation of students' comments and participation in class discussion
- Evaluation of students' written responses to Bill Gates' letter

References:

Revolution OS, documentary film

Student Datasheets/Worksheets:

n/a