

Return to the Playground: Truly Active Learning in the College Classroom

One current trend in higher education is the shift from passive to active learning. In modern classrooms, we rarely see an all-knowing professor standing before a chalkboard disseminating knowledge for two or three hours at a time, his students eagerly recording all that is said in a spiral-bound notebook. Today's instructors use technology to bring lectures to life, as well as group work to involve students in the process of learning. Students have also evolved. Many of them tote laptops or tablets to class for typing notes and accessing the internet via the college's Wi-Fi network. Yet active learning does not have to involve computers, document cameras, projectors, or mobile recording devices only, especially on campuses with older technology. Instead, involving students in active learning can be as simple as an old-fashioned race.

The Background

For much of my career, I have taught three-hour night classes in composition, creative writing, and developmental writing. Along with allowing for two five-minute breaks in the 180 minutes the students and I shared, I varied instruction to help time pass quickly. I would lecture, but then break students into groups for analysis and reporting. I might ask them to write independently and then present to the class. In other words, students shifted from desk to desk and around the room as the evening continued. Even in the shorter, two-hour blocks that I currently teach, I plan for movement to keep students awake and alert as well as engaged. But every discipline has its tricky content that students dread no matter how it is presented. For composition, that is grammar. Students know they have issues with sentences, spelling, and punctuation, but they do not know how to fix those problems. They grow exhausted by the words, "Open your handbooks to page 89." They begin to yawn and sigh, rubbing their eyes as if I have started strumming a harp and singing lullabies.

The Solution

I encounter this situation in all my writing classes, regardless of how much or how little time I devote to grammar and sentence-level errors. Students are bored by the topic of syntax, and though I find editing thrilling, they do not see the attraction. To fix this dilemma, I return to games I enjoyed most as a child—Round

Robin, Heads Up/7-Up, and basic, old-fashioned races, among others. When added to regular instruction, games provide a fun way for students to practice what was just taught. Also, in pairs or small groups, the threat of failure or the performance anxiety that may accompany quizzes or tests is almost completely eliminated. Students laugh and encourage each other. Those quiet students who sit in corners without speaking often become animated when faced with a little competition.

I like to administer extra credit points for each team, as well. Placing first earns the most extra credit, second a bit less, and so on until all groups have finished. However, every student earns something, even those who come in last. Extra credit can really motivate the hesitant student to participate.

The Logistics

One of my favorite games to play with grammar is a sentence race. Consider something like subject-verb agreement, an error with which many beginning writers struggle, especially when the subject and verb are far apart in the sentence. Before class, I type up 10-12 sentences that contain subject-verb agreement errors. I make one copy for every group I plan to have participate, and then slice these copies into individual sentences. The result is a set number of sentences with which each group competes.

In class, I lead students through a discussion of the particular grammar lesson for that day. For subject-verb agreement, I define it, give examples, and we complete a guided practice. I encourage students to take detailed notes, since they will not only need them later in the class for our game, but also for homework and quizzes. Before their eyes have glazed over, but after they can sufficiently identify a sentence's subject and verb, I divide students into small groups. Armed with their notes, students gather near their teammates. Two to three students per group is ideal, perhaps four if there is an odd number. The smaller the group, the harder it is for a student to hide behind another's prowess. Most likely, pairs and trios will all need to contribute for their team to succeed.

I explain the game's rules and students rearrange themselves as needed so they have a clear path to the front where I will stand. Once everyone has settled into their spots, I pass out the first sentence, face down. This is important as it heightens students' interest in the game—they *want* to know what's on that paper. As students wait, their hands poised over the thin slice of paper, I walk back to the front of the room and position myself over the remaining sentences, arranged in neat

piles for easy access. When I call “Go!” teams flip their papers and begin reading the sentences aloud. This is my favorite part. I hear students learning as they quickly discuss where the error is in the sentence and how best to fix it. I also hear where gaps in knowledge still exist and can make note of this for a later review session.

As a group, students manually correct the sentence, writing directly on the piece of paper. As soon as they are satisfied with their edits, one member from each team races to where I am standing at the front of the room. She hands me the piece of paper, and if her team has correctly eliminated the error, I hand her the next sentence and off she goes, back to her team. If the team has answered incorrectly, I return the slip of paper and she must go back to her team and reconsider the sentence. Students are often wrong, but this only makes them concentrate harder. Usually, one team member is keeping an eye on the other groups and noting who is moving quickly. This creates positive pressure to find the grammatical mistake and fix it. When the “aha!” moment comes, students are excited to move forward in the race with the next sentence, and they are better prepared for the sentences they encounter afterward.

The Follow-Up

I do not end instruction with a game. After students have earned their extra credit points and chuckled at their teams’ mistakes or triumphs, I introduce a homework assignment to give them even further practice with the topic. Games are perfect for in-class exercise, but they do need to be accompanied by more traditional means of assessment, such as a quiz or test that students for which students have had time to prepare, in order to ensure that they have fully grasped the concept. An important result of playing these games, however, is that students have tangible memory-links for the content. When taking a quiz or test, they can call to mind a similar sentence that their team struggled with during the race and translate how they addressed the error into a solution for the question on the exam. This leads to less stress about the exam and more confidence and overall success with the subject matter.

The Conclusion

When I have finished playing a game with my students, they are alert and ready to take on the next challenge of the class period. They smile and nod, and what was once an insurmountable task—learning how to write grammatically correct sentences, in this case—is now tame and manageable, demystified by child’s play. No longer is the content something owned by the smart or academic; it is accessible to learners of all abilities. Even students with physical disabilities or challenges can play games in the classroom, as all games should be modified by instructors to meet the needs of their individual classrooms, the particular group of students that semester, and of course, the unique subject matter.

The rules and procedures of any game are completely negotiable by the professor. There are times when I step in and help teams that are truly stuck, as well as times I adjust the number of rounds we play or the manner of presentation based on the unique class with which I am working. But that is what makes playing games so wonderful: they are highly adaptable and useful on many levels. They activate students’ minds and bodies. Physical activity coupled with the element of fun can equal comprehension for many students. Games also build comradery as students compete against other teams, as well as themselves, to improve their scores, earn extra credit points, and gain more knowledge of the topic. Taking something from the elementary playground and implementing it into the college classroom can transform the space into a realm of truly active learning.

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