

Professors at Play

ONLINE

PlayBook

**Real-world techniques
for a more playful
online classroom**



EDITED BY LISA FORBES AND DAVID THOMAS

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ONLINE
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This book is for all the “Professors at Play” who have contributed, participated, or even just silently lurked in the forums. This book is for everyone who has the courage to risk looking foolish in the interest of making their teaching more vibrant and more effective.

And a special thanks to all our students who may or may not have rolled their eyes at our weird ideas and antics but mostly played along and allowed play into their learning experience.

Each of you, players, one and all.

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Forward

So, You Want To Be An Online Educator?

Not too long ago, online learning was a niche endeavor, tucked away in some remote corner of academia. Back then, if you worked in online education, you might have found yourself relegated to the basement of the ivory tower, away from sunlight and human interaction. If you did see humans, you'd likely have to defend online learning against claims that the courses were inferior to face-to-face experiences or that students only choose online courses because the class wouldn't be as "rigorous."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was uncharted territory, navigated by a small percentage of brave faculty members: adjuncts piecing together teaching loads, reclusive professors lecturing from remote cabins, contrarians who relished breaking norms, or simply those drawn to the promise of pants-optional teaching.

Then, academics were forced to take the COVID-19-induced, shift-your-classes-to-an-online-format-instantly challenge. Since that watershed moment, teaching as we know it has changed. Through the convergence of necessity and technological advancement, we have all become, to some extent, cybernetic instructors and machine-enabled professors. This shift prompted some crucial questions:

- Without physical presence, body language, or the elusive "professorial aura," (if you believe in that kind of thing), how can online learning be engaging and interactive?
- How do we promote attention and engagement when students are one click away from a hundred other distractions?
- How can we make online learning more dynamic and novel?
- And, someone please tell us, how can we escape the norm of lecturing into the "black box student abyss?"

The Professors at Play Online PlayBook

If these questions resonate with you, you're in luck! *The Professors at Play Online PlayBook* is here to offer some playful solutions to those everyday struggles of online teaching. In our original *Professors at Play PlayBook* — a "butts-in-seats" version, we explored the magic of playful pedagogy which included research, theory, and over 100 playful teaching techniques shared by more than 65 professors across the globe. It got a lot of love from educators, but there was one problem: it leaned heavily on traditional, in-person classrooms and didn't offer much for the online crowd.

Since the release of the original *PlayBook*, we have been fielding a common and recurring question: "What about playful pedagogy for online courses?" Since we can't resist giving the people what they want, we put out a call for examples of playful pedagogy, this time focused on the digital space, and—Voilà—the *Online PlayBook* was born.

Why A Book Dedicated Specifically to Online Learning?

Let us answer this question with some questions (because who doesn't love that).

How are you reading this? Are you at work, sneaking a peek on your laptop between emails? Are

you reading this while lounging in a hammock on a tropical beach somewhere? Commuting on public transport, squinting at your Kindle? Or, dare we say, scrolling through it on your phone?

(No judgment, but if you're reading this on a phone... Are your eyes okay?)

Or maybe you've gone old school—highlighter in one hand, sticky notes in the other, turning actual paper pages. Perhaps you're doodling in the margins with your favorite pen.

However you're reading, one thing is certain: you had your reasons for picking that format. Maybe it's due to convenience. Maybe it's the cost. Maybe you just love the smell of books or the feel of digital tagging tools. Whatever your medium, it matters—and that's exactly what this book is about.

This is your *Online Playbook*, and we're here to help you think about the tools you use and how to make them work *for* you, not against you. Yes, that can include a bit of fun. Dare we suggest you *play* with your media?

Let's talk about a little thing called “affordances.” (Stick with us—it's not as fancy or boring as it sounds. Well, maybe it is.) In design-speak, an affordance is what something can do or how you can use it. For instance, digital books are portable and perfect for that beach hammock, while printed books practically scream, “Highlight me! Scribble in my margins!”

Understanding affordances is important because it prevents frustrating missteps—like clicking on underlined words on a website only to find out they aren't links. (The audacity.) It's also a great way to figure out how to optimize tools, like making sure your Zoom chat message goes to one person and not the whole class.

When it comes to online teaching, affordances are a big deal. Why? Because educators often fall into one of two traps.

Trap #1: Believing online teaching is totally different from traditional teaching.

We've heard it all: “I can't teach my subject online. I need *props!*” Often, “You can't do that online” just means “I haven't tried yet.” (Oh, burn!)

Trap #2: Assuming online teaching is exactly the same as in-person teaching.

This one's even more common: The endless recorded lectures, followed by a halfhearted discussion post. (Yawn). If lectures don't always shine in person, turning them into an online snooze-fest definitely isn't the answer, people.

The truth is somewhere in the middle: online teaching is different, but it's not *that* different. Some things translate beautifully—like showing videos or leading discussions. Other things, not so much. For example, in an online class, you can't exactly have everyone shout answers at once (chaos), but you *can* use discussion boards to hear from every single student.

And that's where this book comes in. We're here to help you break the so-called “rules” of online learning, rebuild them in a way that works for you, and have a little fun while you're at it.

Playful pedagogy isn't just a buzzword—it's a movement. The pandemic forced educators to rethink their approaches, and playful teaching is the perfect antidote to all that emergency-induced Zoom fatigue. So let's roll up our sleeves, embrace the chaos, and rediscover the joy of teaching online—chat glitches, and all.

The Power of Playful Pedagogy

Online teaching is a whole new frontier. It's a land of learning, experimenting, and innovating, all shaped by creativity and the tools we use. But here's the exciting part: online education gives us another chance to play with the norms of education and find a better way.

That said, online pedagogy has the same blind spot as its traditional counterpart. Both focus on traditional practices focusing on disseminating knowledge from an expert to the student, followed by rigorous testing to ensure that the content transfer is complete. Both online and traditional pedagogy are often about molding students to fit into a narrow, orthodox view of the world—or at least their discipline. And as much as we talk a big game about critical thinking in higher education, the truth is that our teaching methods usually reward students for meeting our expectations rather than questioning them.

Enter *play*. Play shows up at this rigid party (that no one wants to be at) with a different agenda. Play empowers learners and asks questions without offering easy answers and encourages creativity, community, and enjoyment. People play for the challenge, the thrill, the sense of camaraderie, and accomplishing something meaningful on their own terms.

Because of this, playful pedagogy is a disruptive force. It invites professors to coordinate rather than control, to co-create rather than dictate behaviors in advance. Playful pedagogy trusts students to make meaning for themselves, find their purpose, and discover their passion while learning. Unlike traditional pedagogy, which sees student engagement as an ideal means to an end, playful pedagogy doesn't even start without engagement. Where traditional pedagogy often laments that students don't master the critical thinking they have been taught, playful pedagogy thrives by empowering students to actively engage, question, and make meaning as they learn.

Playful pedagogy also challenges hierarchy. It calls out power structures, mocking authority, and stirs up a bit of revolution. That's why it often feels "outside of the box" of mainstream approaches. When it comes to online pedagogy, playful approaches are still the outliers' outlier.

That's where the *Online PlayBook* comes in. Whether you are holding it in your hands, scrolling on your phone, scanning it on a printed copy, or projecting it on the biggest screen at your institution, this book is about breaking the rules, assembling the pieces, and having fun along the way. Building a new science of playful pedagogy is exciting work taking place at countless institutions across the globe—and you are invited to join the fun.

The Elephant on Campus

Before COVID, most professors were perfectly comfortable in their lecture halls, seminar tables, and labs. Online learning was something for continuing education departments or adventurous colleagues on the fringes. It wasn't exactly unknown—it was just largely ignored. Many faculty members weren't trained for it, and for every new online campus or degree, there were ten who sniffed at the idea of teaching online.

The pandemic changed the online calculus. While the status quo had long held, explicitly or implicitly, that online education was an inferior good—sort of the Walmart of education in the mall of luxury good learning—suddenly institutions were faced with a choice. Refund student tuition, ignore the public health crisis, or pivot to online learning. Most chose the pivot. Suddenly, that so-called "inferior option" became the best shot at keeping education alive during a global crisis.

The results were mixed, to say the least. Faculty did their best to conjure the classroom magic in a digital setting, but it wasn't easy. Many students struggled to know how to be a student in this new format. Many found the job unrewarding, complex, and soul-sapping. Professors were unsure how to bring life and engagement to the dreaded and endless Zoom meetings that suddenly became their classrooms. Zoom fatigue is real, people! Professors used to the sterile testing environments of the large lecture hall had the sneaking suspicion their students were cheating willy-nilly.

Still, the pandemic helped academics see that online education works. Love it or hate it, it's here to stay. Kind of like artificial intelligence but you can read about that in the *AI PlayBook*.

That's where the *Online PlayBook* lands—right in the middle of a messy and complicated conversation about the purpose, practice, and value of online learning.

Interestingly, Professors at Play owes much of its existence to the pandemic. What started as a small email list of six play-minded educators grew into a thriving community during COVID. Lisa wrote an essay about her playful teaching experiences and it seemed to strike a chord with professors desperately seeking ways to engage students in their online classrooms. In the essay, she mentioned the Professors at Play listserv, and just like that, the community exploded, bringing hundreds of educators together to reimagine what learning could look like—even in the digital age.

Now More Than Ever

COVID came in like a wrecking ball and left just as chaotically. Yet somehow, we've drifted right back to the same old teaching methods we were so eager to question during the pandemic. If insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results, higher education might need a wellness check-up. Returning to the way things were also meant returning to the problems that those old ways never solved. Let's take a look at the stats:

- 65% of students meet the criteria for at least one mental health issue (Lipson et al., 2022).
- 75% of students report moderate to severe psychological distress (ACHA, 2021).
- 1 in 5 college students struggle with suicidal ideation (College Pulse, 2022).

And yet, we expect these students to sit in our classrooms, stay engaged, and conquer complex material like everything's fine. Spoiler alert: everything's not fine. Students wrestling with mental health challenges are going to be less likely to thrive academically. Professors should be the first ones to raise the issue and demand solutions.

Of course, it's not just students struggling. Faculty and staff are feeling the heat too. According to The U.S. The Department of Health and Human Services:

- 76% of U.S. workers reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition.
- 81% said they actively seek workplaces that support mental health.
- 84% identified at least one workplace factor that negatively impacted their mental health.

We don't see any signs that our colleges and universities sit outside these trends. Faculty, staff, and students are all riding the same stress train. In any other industry, we could characterize this kind of data as a crisis. Yet, higher education mostly ignores the problem without seriously exploring innovative solutions.

This leads to the question: Could *play* be a part of the answer? Science gives a big ‘ol “yes.” The National Institute of Play recently declared play “an urgent public health necessity.” Their 2024 report, *“The Power of Play: Losing and Finding Ourselves Through Everyday Play”* highlights the mental health benefits of play and urges policymakers and leaders to fully embrace play at all levels of society and across all age groups. At Professors at Play, we couldn’t agree more. We’ve seen firsthand how introducing play into the classroom benefits both students and faculty. It’s a simple yet powerful tool to boost engagement, creativity, and well-being. The power of play is real, and it’s time to harness it whether in-person or online.

Play is Not Just Fun and Games

For a deep dive into the power of play and our perspective on legitimizing play in adult learning, check out the first *PlayBook*. However, to summarize: Play has an incredible power to boost student engagement, foster connection, encourage risk-taking, ignite curiosity and more. Play is not just silly child-like activities that “waste” precious class time. Play is about something much deeper. Play can be understood like this:

- 1. As a way of being:** Loosening up and not taking ourselves so seriously
- 2. As an activity:** Harnessing the power of play to supercharge learning
- 3. As a philosophy:** Playing with the status quo to break and then remake learning to be more flexible, inclusive, and expansive

A Way of Being - The Playfulness in You

Our argument is straightforward: You can’t effectively use playful techniques if you apply them rigidly and scientifically. To play and to encourage play, you must embody playfulness yourself by embracing your authentic, human self. Our playfulness is a vital part of play in learning because it fosters relational safety, which enhances the learning process (Forbes, 2021). Being playful, genuine, and authentic is crucial because the power of play in learning is rooted in relationships. Students will more likely speak up, take risks, make mistakes, and engage deeply in their learning if they feel safe and trusted. Stronger relationships lead to higher student engagement, stronger motivation, and deep learning. And you never know, you might just end up having more fun yourself.

An Activity - Using Play to Design Learning Activities

Playful pedagogy allows you to shake up the old, stale teaching methods to transform the typical content into a more playful and novel experience. Play can be games in learning, creative simulations, role-plays or using novel approaches like children’s books for case studies. Play as an activity transforms the typical content delivery into a memorable experience.

A Philosophy - Challenge Status Quo

At the heart of it, playful pedagogy promotes a philosophy that invites us to rethink the rules and norms. A playful philosophy might help us look beyond what we’ve been told we “should” do or the “rules” that are so deeply ingrained that we don’t think to question them. This philosophy of play can spark ideas to reimagine assignments, redesign courses, or even approach teaching with a fresh, creative perspective. This philosophy and way of thinking might turn you into a more playful person even outside of work.

The Pyramid of Play: Approaches to Integrate Play

To make sense of the types of play, we developed a simple model, the Pyramid of Play, that was first published in the original *Professors at Play PlayBook*. The Pyramid of Play is a framework that shows various ways to infuse play into higher education. Below is a section taken from our first *PlayBook*, which describes each level.

Playful Professor: The Foundation — The base of the pyramid of bringing play into higher education starts with you. You can have amazing playful techniques or activities, but if you, as a faculty member, are rigid, overly serious, and allergic to fun, the techniques won't land. Play starts with not taking yourself too seriously. Loosen up, laugh, approach things playfully, and set the tone for a playful classroom.

Connection Formers: Icebreakers That Aren't Terrible — The next level of the pyramid is connection formers (icebreakers that are unexpected and not terrible). Connection formers are simple activities, often unrelated to course content, designed to build trust, reduce stress and anxiety, and help students feel a sense of belonging. Think of it as getting students laughing, connecting and centered so they can do their best learning.

Play to Teach Content: Making Material Memorable — This level is about using play to teach content. Whether it's turning a lecture into a game, running creative simulations, or adapting group discussions to secret missions, this is where play meets pedagogy. Maybe the examples in this book don't perfectly fit your discipline. That's okay, part of the fun is letting someone else's idea of play spark other ideas or creativity.

Whole Course Design: A Theme or Topic as the Skeleton Key — Finally, the holy grail: designing an entire course around a playful topic or theme. This level is more challenging and more time-consuming to implement, but the results can be exceptional. An entire law course designed around *Jurassic Park*? Yep, it's possible. Play becomes the framework for everything, not just an occasional gimmick.

Inspiring Online Playful Pedagogy

Play in learning can look many different ways and it can vary from online settings to in-person learning. We hope to demonstrate the playful possibilities for an online course. But, don't take it from us. Instead, we invite you to explore the playful online worlds of 30 of our closest playful professor pals. They've generously shared their ideas and examples in the following chapters.

This collection is your invitation to reimagine what's possible in online teaching. Dive in and embrace the quirks of the online medium, and discover how play can transform online learning into the next best thing since sliced bread.

A Note on Methodology (How the Sausage Gets Made)

By its nature, the creation of a *PlayBook* is a collaborative process. While we, as editors, set the theme, provide the guidelines and select what to include, this is very much a snapshot of the larger Professors at Play community. What that means in practice is that we accept submissions liberally, edit lightly, and encourage those who submit to rewrite only when we think the central ideas fit the format, but the prose could use some clarity. We think of the *PlayBooks* not as a polished list of "best practices" (don't get us started on "best practices"), but as an ethnography, capturing how our colleagues conceptualize play in teaching and how they enact these playful techniques in their classrooms.

You might find some of the techniques in this book are more interesting or helpful than others. Some are novel and some may seem obvious. There might be techniques that you don't view as playful at first pass, and others might demonstrate a level of playfulness that you or your courses can't accommodate. That's all good. We want to stimulate dialog and inspire invention and creation, not dictate rules. If a technique makes you think, "I could do better!" Then we would say, "Great, do it!" If an idea seems like it would shine with a little revision, then please, revise away! And if something catches your attention and you feel like it deserves discussion, use the provided email contacts to reach out to the contributor. Collaborate. Share. Play together.

At its heart, this *PlayBook* is about praxis—bridging the gap between ideas and action. If it doesn't nudge you toward change (or at least make you consider it), we've missed the mark. We hope this book inspires you to play, question, create, and deviate.

— Lisa Forbes and David Thomas

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Playful Professor

“We have been taught to distrust play. Worse, we have been taught that we are not and should not be playful. We have been taught that play is childish, immature, destructive. Taught by people who have themselves lost the path, who were themselves taught by people who believed that fun was, can you believe this: sinful. Taught by people who have inherited a broken culture where common sense has been replaced by common senselessness. Taught that if we work hard enough and long enough and live a life that is dull enough, we will be rewarded — when fun is the reward.”

—Bernie Dekovenn, The Playful Path (2014)

It Starts With You

If you want to unlock the benefits of playful pedagogy, it starts with you being a playful person. Becoming a playful professor isn't even about techniques at all. It's about embodying playfulness yourself. What does this have to do with teaching or online teaching? Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. Online teaching can feel like another step removed from the authentic connections that fuel learning. Sure, there's a lot about online learning that makes it harder to connect, but that's what your playful fire is for. Let it burn bright.

To explore this journey — transforming from professor to playful professor — we gathered four major contributors to this book for a roundtable discussion. We asked them a series of questions regarding what play in teaching means to them and how they bring it into their teaching, especially online. Oh, we also ask them some weirdo questions about their playful mythical creature pals.

Their answers are honest, insightful, and sometimes delightfully unexpected. We think this discussion is a great starting point for the larger conversation about bringing play into academia. So, read on and check out their journeys to playfulness.

Professors at Play Roundtable Discussion

During the production of the PlayBook, David and Lisa invited four contributors to participate in a roundtable discussion of what it means to be a Professor at Play. This hour-long discussion ranges from personal stories and techniques to insights about how and why to bring play to the higher education classroom. This roundtable has been lightly edited for clarity. Otherwise, this fascinating discussion provides a diverse set of perspectives on the notion of play in teaching from people who bring fun to their classrooms every term.

INTRODUCTIONS

David Thomas: Welcome! Thanks, everyone, for joining our first-ever Professors at Play Roundtable. *What does it mean to be a playful professor? Why don't we get started with some short introductions? Who are you? What's your title? And what was the last fun thing you did?*

Mysti Gates: Hi! I'm Mysti Gates. I am an English instructor at the University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain. The last fun thing I did was I hosted a cooking club on campus. We bring in people from the community and students on campus, and we cook and eat. We have a great time. We make mistakes. But everything goes well in the end.

Andrew Davies: Hello, everyone! I'm an adjunct professor in the Communication Arts Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. And the last big fun thing I did was I organized an epic game night for my friends, fashioned after the Hollywood game night that you see on TV shows where they have a whole bunch of different games. We had a potluck, and I played gamemaster. It was a beautiful mess, I would like to say, because every game went wrong. But because it was a whole bunch of friends. We enjoyed it even more because it was so messy. I know what to do for next time, but I kind of like the fact that so many things went wrong.

Peggy Holzweiss: Hi! I'm a professor at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, just north of Houston. I like to explore so I took a friend, and we went to Vegas for the first time. And I went to every single hotel on the strip just to see what it was like. So that was over four days. There was a lot of walking and a lot of exploring going on, but I enjoyed the heck out of it.

DT: Which hotel was your favorite?

PH: New York, New York. My husband is from New York, and the interior of that hotel really felt like you were in the streets of New York, so I really enjoyed that.

Margaret Lamar: Hi! I'm an associate professor at Palo Alto University out here in California. I'm in a counseling department teaching mental health counselors. The last fun thing I did was actually just yesterday. I went to the Zoo with a bunch of family members and just watched animals. It was so fun. And then they turned on the fancy holiday lights, and we walked around through all the holiday lights and played games, and just had a grand old time.

DT: Welcome to you all! Let's get into the questions.

INSPIRATIONS

Lisa Forbes: Alright. Try to make this personal if you can. If there's a story to tell, tell a story; if there are examples, give examples. Just be playful. We'll start off by talking about being a playful professor. The identity of it. We were curious to know if you have key figures in your life, maybe past or present, that invited you to see yourself as a playful professor or someone who invited you to bring more play into your life and to your work.

AD: I have an indirect answer. The first name that popped into my head whenever I think about not taking a very serious job too seriously. It doesn't directly relate to teaching, but I remember at church I used to attend the organist. He doesn't play the keyboards with a band. It was a very traditional church, and he would always look like he had so much fun. He became a close family friend, and his approach to everything was—life is too short to take things too seriously. He modeled the idea that just because you're being playful about it doesn't mean you're not serious, that there isn't value to the activity that you're endeavoring in.

So my approach to teaching is very much like that, I would like to have fun. But that's not an indication that the material I'm teaching is lighthearted or childish. It's very serious. I want you to learn this. That's the reason why I want to have fun with it because I feel like you will learn it more. It will stick better if we have fun interacting with it. So, I think about that.

PH: I don't really have anyone that I could point to that was my role model to get into more of that playful mindset as a professor. It was more of me inviting myself to do it and breaking the norms. I noticed when I was a doctoral student, I'd already been working full-time on a college campus as an administrator when I started my PhD program and I recognized that there were a lot of people that didn't know how to navigate the administration, the forms, the documents, the policies. I knew how to do that, so I would help them out. But then I would see other people making it more difficult and throwing obstacles in the way, I was asking: Why? Why are we doing this? Why are we making this so difficult? This should be an enjoyable experience to learn more, to become an expert in your field. And we're just taking all the joy out of it. So I said, there has to be a different way. When I became a faculty member, I invited myself to do it a different way.

MG: I'm kind of in the same boat as Peggy, and I can't come up with anybody who really was playful in public school education, in college, or in grad school. But, I was a student who had a passion for learning, so I wasn't disengaged from the content. But a lot of my peers were, and I didn't want to be that kind of teacher. I started out in public school education, and I do have some early childhood education in my background. I do think that that's a factor. But, you know, I want to have a good time, and I want the students to learn. I think they'll be more likely to learn if they're also having a good time. It wasn't until I went back to get my ESL endorsement for a second master's that I saw anybody doing anything that was playful. They really emphasized the importance of play with ESL students of all ages. I just try to embody that in my classroom so that I have more engagement.

ML: I have a background in theater and I would teach kids' theater classes. That was always very playful. But that just seemed like it was fitting within the context of theater. It was kind of fun but school felt like something different until I was in my doc program. I was doing a minor in higher education. I was in a class with a faculty member there who, I don't know if I would say was so much playful as just very experiential. She would have people moving around the rooms and doing just things in very creative ways. I don't know if her intent was to be playful, but I think it was there. She would have her classes sometimes on the weekends, and we would meet in the residence hall on big comfy couches with everyone just lounging around. And so just even the space was made a little more playful in that way. Then I didn't really kind of put all this together until Lisa. So my person would be Lisa, she and I went to school together. When I found out what she was doing [co-founding Professors at Play], it really resonated, like, "Oh, that that's a name for something that I do!" This is something that I try to incorporate with varying levels of intention throughout my professional time, now, much more intentionally. Before it was like, "Oh, well, what am I doing with this content? Nobody actually wants to learn. Let's just make a game or do something fun." And then, meeting Lisa, I was like, "I guess that's what I am—a playful professor." I didn't really get that before, so, this community was important for me.

LF: Yeah, we've heard that a lot, "I've been doing this but I just didn't know it was a thing. I didn't

know it had a name. I didn't know it was okay to do. I didn't know other people were doing it." It gives people more confidence to keep going.

AD: I did a quick side note here. I spoke at a conference in New Orleans and this group [Professors at Play] got a shout-out because there was a session on play. It was done by nurse educators, and they were talking about being more experiential and playful with teaching nurses. Of course, I see play in the description so I have to go.

And in the mix they were talking about, "Oh, yeah, and if you want to learn more, there's this great Google group, you got to go, you know, join up with the group. It's called Professors at Play." And I proudly thought, "That's my group!"

PROFESSORS AT PLAY

DT: Let me ask, we've named it—We're Professors at Play. For each of you, what does being a Professor at Play mean to you?

MG: For me, being a playful professor is being not only someone that the students can maybe joke with, and, you know, cut up a little bit with, but trying to present the content in a way that students want to come to class, or they want to be engaged, or they're coming to class thinking, "What are we going to be doing today, Mrs. Gates? What do you have planned for us?" Or they come in, and they see things out on the tables and they're like, "Oh, what are we doing today? What does she have in store for us?" Just always wondering what the next day is going to be about, even if they know what content we're going to be covering.

AD: Yeah, for me, I feel like it's the attitude of being experimental and open. Being willing to get more active with your course material. You have a reading assignment—o they need to just read it? Is there another way in which they can show you they've read it other than writing a paper or something like that? And being open to when something's not working. I feel like sometimes the playfulness comes in not just because you incorporated a game in the lesson plan. It's the idea of "we're going to try this, let's see if it works. And if it doesn't, okay, we won't try that again. Let's try something else. It didn't work, and then we'll move from there." And I feel like that attitude, even if you're not doing a game, is part of the playfulness of being, you know, an educator.

ML: I have a similar approach. I'm in a mental health counseling program and there's like all these fun classes. People get to learn family theories, people learn how kids develop, and I don't teach those classes. I teach the research class, which nobody wants to take. I think my playfulness is really about creating an attitude of, I am a cheerleader. I am going to get them through this class that they don't want to take. I'm going to dare them to have fun.

Even though we may not always do something very gamey, which we do that a lot, it is about creating an atmosphere of: "We can have fun, even if we're learning something that feels really foreign to you, that doesn't fit with your idea of what a counselor should really be learning about." On the other hand, it helps to disarm their anxiety because, for some reason, I have always gotten the classes that create a lot of anxiety for students. It is really about trying to get them out of their heads enough to stop thinking, "Oh, my gosh! This topic is so big and scary!" Or, "I'm going to have to sit in a room and do a roleplay with somebody in a counseling skills class, and I'm absolutely terrified of that!" It's to get them into the space and to think, have fun, and do something different and approach it in a different way. For me, it is about, "Let's break down this nervousness that you have," or "Let's break down your ideas about what you think you're going to do in this class."

MG: As a writing instructor, I feel that one hundred percent.

PH: I would also say, that's kind of my experience as well. I tend to teach classes that the students will come in and say, "I can't do this class. I don't know how to do this. I can't be successful." And so I spend a lot of time saying, "Yes, you can. You can do this." And I break things down into really small steps, and I try to make it fun. So they look forward to coming to class. I also try to keep things different. Even my lecture slides—if I have to do a lecture. Every single slide deck is different, and it's colorful. It's inviting. And I find that the students start responding to that. So when I ask them to do things like a presentation, they start adding a lot more creativity than I might see in another class.

AD: I think the aspect of play that I find the students respond to and is surprising to them, is the idea that it's okay to fail because you'll have a chance to try it again. I think there is a context in most classrooms where you get one shot. You have the exam—one shot. If you don't do well on the exam, that's it. You're going to have to wait for the next project or the next assignment. But when I tell them, once we finish this project you'll have a chance to resubmit, and then you'll try and work your way up to an "A." That attitude is always surprising to them, and I'm thinking that is an aspect of being playful, that I didn't think would be so such a big deal to the students. But it actually is.

PH: I would actually echo that because I think being playful is also a mindset that you adopt in terms of, How do we focus on learning rather than performing on an academic exam or a paper? You know, how do I ensure that you've learned something? Can we focus on the learning rather than the grading or other formal assessments that we might have to do by the end of the course? Can we get there through other means?

It might help the students' anxieties, it might help them actually learn, allow themselves to feel like they could fail and still be okay in the class.

IDENTITY

DT: Let me ask a quick follow-up. These are great examples. I love these. How important is it to your professional identity that you're a Professor at Play?

PH: It's become very important to me. I mean, I didn't have a name for it, and I didn't do it to the extent that I do it today without Professors at Play. But it is incredibly important to my identity as an instructor. I work in the education field in higher ed. But I also work with K12 principals, superintendents, and instructors. I have had them come to me and say, "Wow! I didn't even know we could play with our material and play with students. And I'm going to do this now, too." So I feel like I'm being an ambassador even just by teaching classes in the way that I do.

LF: Peggy, I see in your email signature you've got your Catalyst 2023 award-winning logo and then there's a Professors at Play logo. I love that—I'd say it's definitely part of your identity.

PH: Yes.

MG: I would say it's a big part of my identity as well, and I really like being a part of this group. You know, I feel like I was playful before, but I'm constantly being able to see new ideas, and how other people are doing things and try incorporate those. I like being able to share that with other people. Since I've been a part of this group, I've actually presented on play in higher ed at conferences in the last two years at our state conference.

This year, I actually designed and set up an escape room for the attendees as a pre-session. Then,

we did some activities where I had a box with 13 items in each one, and they had to think about how they would use each of those items in an escape room. Would it be a prop? Would it be a clue? Would it be a decoy? What would it be? Then, they got to plan one [escape room] out before they left. So, I've really enjoyed being able to share that playful aspect in the classroom with other college instructors. I don't know that I would have just jumped in there to do that without being a part of this group.

ML: I think for me, it's less about my identity as a professor as it is just about my identity in general. I think it's really important. I think about it a lot when I'm hanging out with my kids or hanging out with friends, or just sort of in my life in all aspects of it—what am I doing for myself that's fun and playful, which I think can be hard as a mom to be able to have anything for yourself. If you have young kids, it's about how it is integrated throughout your life altogether. I think for me it's a little bit less of who I am as a professor, it's just who I am authentically. And I bring that authentic self into the classroom.

AD: Same here. I couldn't think of teaching any other way, now that I have my class the way I have it set up. Someone approached me at a conference, saying, "Have you ever thought of studying which component is accomplishing the educational goals more?" And in order to do that, you would need to set up a control group where you teach one class traditionally and another class with the gamified components, and see which one works better, I thought, "How do I even teach this class without my gamified components?" I don't even know what that looks like.

LF: I actually was thinking of that exact study. And then my research support person had two questions: Is it ethical? If you think that playful pedagogy is more effective, is it ethical to run a different class without it? Number two: Are you gonna wanna do that? [teach a class that's not playful]. I was like, "No, I don't." So I didn't do that.

MG: I try to keep the play aspect in other areas, too, like Margaret was saying. I plan minute-to-win-it games for my family to do every Christmas. We have competitions, and we do gingerbread house decorating competitions, and we put the pictures out on social media for people to vote. I teach in the summer for our Upward Bound program, which serves low-income students who plan to attend college. I work in playful aspects there as well. And I teach *Kids' College*, which is a week for K-5 kids. I don't want to go back to public school early elementary but, I get a nice little dose of those kids in the summer, just a little bit at a time, and they remind me constantly of the importance of play.

BREAKING NORMS

LF: Peggy, mentioned this earlier—Breaking norms. That's a big part of it because higher education has different values and norms and very traditional ways of teaching and learning. It's very deep in the water supply of how we think about teaching and learning, and sometimes, being playful and using play in teaching is breaking norms and being rebellious, in a sense. Stepping outside that norm and going against the grain. I'm wondering about that. Are you going against norms and traditions and being a rebel? Or is it just so innate for you that it doesn't feel like you're really being a rebel? It's being who you are? What are your thoughts about that?

PH: Initially, I thought I was being a rebel, that I was fighting against the establishment. Sometimes, you want to feel like you do that because higher ed kind of contains you and makes you follow a certain path. I really did feel like a rebel at first, and I would ask for forgiveness rather than permission because I knew if I asked for permission, they would say no. So I just did stuff. Then, they would start finding out about it. And, you know, if they got mad, it's okay—I won't do that again, or I won't talk about it as much so you're just not going to find out about it. Then, students started speaking positively about their experiences with playful instruction. And then other people became interested in it. So it became something I got permission for after I asked for forgiveness.

ML: In the counseling field, and maybe others are similar, we do a lot of circle teaching. Get those tables out let's make a circle and we're going to talk about things. There's already a little bit of room, a little runway to do things differently. It's just reconceptualizing circle teaching, making people walk around campus and do a mindful activity, or getting them throwing paper airplanes, or whatever. I think that for me, I've reconceptualized that. I have also been teaching in a program that has a very strong online presence and has since I first began teaching. When I started teaching, people were primarily doing asynchronous work. We were one of the first counseling programs to say, "You got to show up on Zoom at 6 o'clock on a Monday night." I think I have always felt a little bit outside of the box and a little bit of a rebel in that way. And so it was just a reconceptualization of, "Hey, I've been doing this now for 13 years!" I was already on the cusp of what people were really doing. I mean, now everyone's doing it. So now I have to figure out other ways to push the envelope. I think it's easier to think about incorporating play when you're already doing things in ways that are not old-school, traditional, higher education.

AD: For me. I never considered myself a rebel until I started teaching this class. I'm not rebelling for the sake of rebelling. It's not part of my identity that I want to just do things because they're counter. It's just that the way I was doing it before was so terrible and was not working. I felt like I had no choice.

Last week we had a faculty meeting where we're going through different professors and their syllabi, and how they teach their classes. And it was because we've been remote for so long, it was the first time in a long time that I got to compare how I'm teaching my class with other professors who teach the same class. And it was really stark. I thought: "Oh, I am out there!" I didn't realize how many risks I was taking and how many deviations from a standard lesson plan, and even my syllabus, the way it looks. I have levels and students can level up and earn XP and everybody else's syllabus was typeset in one font. Here are the learning outcomes. It's written very much like you would expect the syllabus. And I thought, "Am I a rebel? Am I the drama?" I don't know, you know. It was that stark contrast that I hadn't realized because it just felt natural. It's sort of like what Margaret was saying. It just felt authentic. Therefore, I didn't see it as rebelling, and it's only when I look back and see everyone else going over there that I go, "Oh, okay, I'm off in the left field."

MG: I don't feel so much as a rebel as maybe an outsider. At my university, our faculty is wonderful, and our Chancellor is always saying, "If you're still doing what you did 10 years ago or 15 years ago, you need to be doing something different." So, I don't feel like I'm a rebel because I feel like he's asking people to do something different.

But, I do feel like I kind of just go my own way and that I'm always going on a different path from everyone else. I try to encourage people to jump on that path with me. They're a little reluctant because of the extra work that it might take to do something different or the uncertainty that comes with it: How is this going to go in my class? Is this going to fall flat? I've been doing this over here, and it's working; why should I change?

For me, I changed just for the sake of change. I don't want to be bored. I don't want to read the same thing every semester in a comp class or a lit class. If I'm bored, the students are going to be bored. I am constantly just trying to do something different, especially if I'm teaching more than one section of a class.

OBJECTIONS TO PLAY

LF: Follow-up question to that. You all talked about this, but if a colleague came to you and was like, "That's cool, the playful pedagogy that you do. It looks really fun. It looks like a good opportunity for students, maybe less boring for you, but I don't know if I can do it. I don't have enough time to redo

things in my classes, and I'm going up for tenure soon and I don't know how that's gonna look for my students' responses at the end of the semester." What if they have all these concerns about time and maybe perception? What would you say to them?

AD: Baby steps. I feel like there are ways in which you can implement specific things, and I think the *Professors at Play PlayBook* is going to be good for that. You can find something that is easy to implement and try it out. But at the end of the day, I feel like it's the attitude change that is going to mark the biggest difference. Something Misty said that is important: The idea that if you, as a professor, are having fun, your students are going to pick up on that. And the inverse is the same. If you are bored to tears of your own material, your students are going to pick up that vibe. If you're worried about outcomes, there's enough research in the literature to say that there's something there. There are good outcomes—properly applied playfulness has good outcomes. If nothing else, start small and shift your attitude about being open to failure, being experimental, trying things. To me, that's the biggest shift. It's the mentality shift first.

MG: Jump in and be willing to help. For example, the lady who has the office next door to me is over our Career Center and our medical billing and programming classes. She said, "You know, I hear about these escape rooms that you're doing. I'd really like to do one of those with my classes. Would you be willing to help me?" It was a lot of extra work to help her get that set up. We went through that. I talked to her about how to set it up properly so that the next time she wanted to use the technique, she was capable of setting it up herself. She can use that as an example to create another one for another course. I think a willingness to help your colleagues is an effective way to encourage play in other courses and disciplines.

ML: Those are very real concerns that I can appreciate—the time component, the evaluation component. For me, I think about where it benefits you as a person to do this. Selfish reasons. I think about all the ways that you can incorporate play in very small ways that don't take a lot of time and can help you build relationships with your students. Having positive relationships with students means you're going to get better evaluations. And that's important in our world. Even though they lack all kinds of credibility and validity, it's still a thing we do, and it's a hoop we jump through. So those things are important.

If you can invest a little bit of time, you can see a lot of great returns in things like evaluations. It doesn't have to be huge things. It can be a connection-former or an activity at the beginning of every class. It can be putting M&Ms on the back table and putting a survey up to see which one is the best, doing an M&M tasting. It can be an attitude shift and change, being willing to just laugh at yourself in front of the class and admit, "I actually don't know," or "I said that wrong." Whatever that might be, those kinds of things can benefit us professionally in ways that we might see in terms of promotions or monetary resources or things like that. I do think there's real measurable value in it as well.

PH: I would agree with everything everyone has said. The only thing I would add is that if someone came to me and said, "How do I get started?" I would actually tell them to offer students choices because I think that's a really good entry point. If you're always asking them to do a paper, flip it around and offer a couple of different options of how they could present what they learned. Whether it's an infographic or a presentation, you could even offer different things to learn. Rather than one type of topic, let them propose something. Because when you're getting them engaged in their own learning, they become more open to different ideas, they become more creative, and that starts coming out as well.

WHEN THINGS DON'T WORK

DT: Is there an example of a time that you tried something playful, and it just didn't work? How did you respond? Or vice versa, did you try something and you felt really sweaty trying it, but it worked out, okay?

PH: Like Mysti, I do escape rooms. But I usually do them online, a lot of virtual escape rooms. And I teach a law class. I decided to have a little fun with the final exam, and I had them do a virtual escape room, final exam. I had one student who just ripped me to shreds on the evaluation. "I hate escape rooms. I don't like this. I would rather take a traditional quiz." That was last year. This year, I added a choose your own adventure final exam. You could do the escape room, or you could do a traditional quiz-based exam. I let the students choose, and interestingly, about half of them chose the quiz, and half of them chose the escape room. I'm still trying to parse that out a little bit. But I have had students push back very strongly on some things that I've tried.

AD: I still remember, like I have PTSD, about the first time I tried a retrieval practice exercise I wanted to be more playful in getting students trying to retrieve the information. There's a game called a snowball fight. You write down a question, you bundle it up into a ball and you throw it to challenge someone else in the class. Of course, you have to factor in the smart-ass component of your class. You have to know your students. I had this one student who was finding a way to word the questions so that nobody could answer them except for him. I don't even know how you could predict this or plan for that. But he was just constantly writing questions which, on the one hand, had a silver lining. He obviously knew the material enough to construct these convoluted questions. But, on the other hand, it was just him, and he made it miserable for everybody to the point, and I usually do whenever I try a new exercise. I have students do a little end-of-assignment assessment, write on Post-It notes, and they write down: How did you feel this exercise went? And everybody was just, don't ever do this again, so don't ever do this again. So yeah, I remember lots of failures like that.

MG: There are some things you can't account for, or a particular student. I had something similar happen with a Grudgeball review. Grudgeball is something you use when you're trying to review for a test, or a unit for a quiz. You don't earn points. You are able to take points away from other teams, and then you can team up because they all have a grudge against the same team and take points away from them. There was one class made up of a bunch of athletes. You think that they're going to be pretty competitive. This one particular class just did not want to take points away from other teams. So, it was kind of a struggle to get them to "attack" another team as far as taking away their points. It was a fail for that particular class because they didn't want to be mean. They didn't want there to be a post-class grudge between the students!

ML: I think about the times when you're staring at a group of people on Zoom, who are clearly exhausted. They don't really want to engage with you. You're trying to be the entertaining one and do all the things. And they're just staring back at you. In those moments, I try to say, "Okay, clearly no one's feeling this." And I just try to be authentic about or acknowledge it. When clearly no one has done the reading, I have this quiz that I pop up with responses like:

- I just did a graduate student scan 30 minutes before this class started
- I read everything in detail
- What reading?

I just try to do things like that, sort of lighten the mood and recognize that we're all human. These are adults who have busy lives, and it's just not our night. I kind of throw in the towel a little bit.

DT: I appreciate you all offering some of the failures because it shows that you're resilient. You still find your playfulness coming out, even though sometimes that wasn't as fun as it should have been.

HAVING FUN ONLINE

LF: I've had those moments for sure. Margaret, you mentioned something about being in an online class and looking at all the boxes of faces, and they're just staring back at you. Online teaching is pretty different from in-person teaching. We want to shift to that question. This second *PlayBook* is about online teaching. There are a lot of perceptions about online teaching and biases and values and all that. What is your understanding of the difference between teaching with play in online versus in-person teaching?

AD: There was one difference that was very surprising. I like to divide my class up into small groups for certain activities. When we're in a physical classroom, students tend to clump based on who they already know. All my groups would look the same. But when you're on Zoom, there's a randomness component when I want to make breakout rooms and I let the Zoom fate decide who's in a breakout room. I find students who wouldn't normally talk to each other end up in these small groups and that was something that wasn't planned. It was just sort of a happy little accident that I realized. There are these people who are always in the same group when I was in a physical classroom. And now students are talking to each other in different configurations, purely because there's more randomness in a Zoom classroom than in a physical classroom.

ML: I think some things are easier because students have the internet at their disposal in a way that they don't in a physical classroom. Most of the time, I approach playfulness online, and I think about, "Well, what would I do if the students were in a physical space? What would I do there? Because that is the more, more the fun or easy way to do something. Then, how can I translate it?" And I find that there are a lot of ways you can direct them to websites. Or you can say, "Go find a GIF about this," and they can do that in a way that's a lot easier and faster than if they were in a classroom space where maybe not everyone has their computer. In some ways, I think there can be a seamlessness in asking. You're also asking them to engage in the Internet in ways that you know are specific to what you're asking. They're probably already scrolling around and doing other things than what is going on in the classroom. But you're actually saying, "Hey, go find this or go like type something silly into ChatGPT and tell me what it told you." There's a lot of just quickness about it and access to other resources that you don't have in quite the same way as in a physical space.

MG: How I think about things is: Okay, this is what I would do in a traditional classroom. How am I going to translate that to an online class? I do find that I get more responses for polling in an online class than I do in an in-seat class. So that's helpful.

I also find that the prep is a little different, but the number of resources that I have to gather are fewer for an online class than an in-seat playful activity. I can embed links and websites and different things that they themselves have to go out and try to do independently instead of me doing a lot of the prep for them—maybe creating a meme for something that we've read or creating a point of view video. You know they already have those resources at their fingertips. I don't have to bring those to the table.

PH: One thing I will say is that teaching online, whether you're in a kind of a blended format or hybrid format, where you're teaching live online or asynchronously, there are so many instructors that are, for better or worse, boring. You know, a boring screen of resources and things you've got to do, the

tasks that you have to check off. You're doing it independently by yourself. It feels isolating, even if you're in a Zoom class. You're listening to an instructor talk to you just like they would in a lecture format. And you're not necessarily getting a lot of interaction time there, either. So I think if you're trying to be playful in any way in an online space, whether it's live or asynchronous, you have an easier time impressing students and getting their attention because they're not used to it. I think that it is much easier from an online perspective than it is even in a face-to-face perspective because students will at least run across some instructors that, even if they're lecturing, have some charisma, which I don't necessarily have. So, I have to have different techniques when I'm in a face-to-face class. But I can do a lot of minimal things in an online space and have students respond very positively.

ML: I think that the asynchronous piece is key because I used to really hate the asynchronous part of online teaching, like absolutely despised it. And then, when I started thinking about it, really just in the last year in conversations with the Professors at Play community folks, I thought, "How can I make that asynchronous more fun?"

And then it really changed my perspective on it. At that point, I was just doing away with discussion boards, because I didn't want to read 25 people's random thoughts on the reading. But when I could say, "Let me have them play Wordle for a week and calculate their statistics, and they can share those out." They can create a fun thing. There's just more fun, you know. It's like the fun that you can fit into a 3-hour class, but now you have a whole week or two, depending on how you're structuring things. That became really interesting to me. And I'm still playing around with that idea of, "What could I do that's more long-term? What are the fun things that I do in my life?"

For example, I can have them set a timer and do something fun at the same time every day, and then report back, "What were your feelings after those things? What were your feelings before? After?" You can take these other concepts and play with them over a longer period of time. You're not tied to a short class period. I think that asynchronous piece has been a key thing for me lately.

IDEAS INTO ACTION

DT: I'm curious, when you approach your content, you all are super sparkly, jangly, creative people. It just bubbles out of your head. But if I ask you to extract your design process, how do you actually go about identifying these opportunities? How do you find the places where play could make a difference or places where you can bring in some playfulness? Then, how do you build up an actual activity? Any insights into how you turn this play instinct into practice?

ML: Sometimes, I start with the content. What's an interesting way to think about this? What would be another way to think about this? Sometimes I think, "What are the things I'm already doing in my life that are fun?" I make my students do a lot of New York Times word games. We do Wordle to talk about statistics. We play *Connections* or *Strands* because those are the things I do in my daily life. And I have my little Wordle discussion threads where we're all sharing our scores and our *Strand* scores or whatever. But then I thought, "Oh, my gosh!" When I'm doing *Connections* that's qualitative data analysis. When I'm doing *Strands*, that's data analysis. That's what that is.

Then I ask myself how I could make that fit into my class. I think ask myself, "What are the things I'm already doing in my life that are fun?" And "how could I bring those in and work them in and make them fit?" That's fun for me to realize, "Oh, my gosh! This thing I'm doing has this great lesson in it." But sometimes, it's a little harder work because I need them to learn about standard deviations. How are we going to do that in a way that's fun and work back the other way to figure out what would be a fun thing to do?

AD: I think that is the key question. What are some other ways that you pick any learning outcome?

Say, writing a paper is one way they can show me they've learned "X." What are some other ways? If writing is off the table, what are some other ways they can show me they've learned "X?" For example, make a post on Instagram of a particular image and caption it with a relevant thing or make a TikTok video. I met a professor who had students prove that they did the reading by posting a TikTok video, and the more obscure the connection the better. The assignment was to get students to think abstractly and think about metaphors. In order for them to show that they're shooting for an abstract metaphor for the reading, they had to have done the reading, and they have to jog their brain and figure out, how to make this connection. If I take a picture of a tree, how does that relate to Kafka? And I have to now put that in the caption. You could have asked them to write two paragraphs, or you could tell them: We know you're on TikTok half the time, anyway. How about we just use that medium? And I think a solution only comes up if you tell yourself, I don't have the traditional method at my disposal. What are some other ways to see what happens?

Sometimes, I like giving myself a time limit. I say, "Okay, for the next five minutes, all I'm going to be doing is think about other ways that students can show me they've learned material." I just write down all the different ways. Sometimes, there's gold when you can mine for gold after you finish that five minutes and look at some of the ideas.

ML: I really appreciate all of these, and this reminds me of the other way that I do it— by brainstorming with people. The Playposium last February was a great opportunity to just talk through ideas. If I'm co-teaching or I'm working with someone who's teaching another section of the class, I ask, "How do you think about this?" I'm pretty fortunate to have some other playful folks that I work with. So brainstorming with people has been really helpful to get out of my way of thinking. How do other people play? And how can I bring that into my teaching?

MG: Mine's kind of a multitude of processes. Is this a topic that students traditionally disengage from? How am I going to make this more fun? Or, maybe I really hate teaching this particular concept, but it's something I have to cover. How can I make this more fun and make the time pass a little bit quicker for myself and others? Sometimes it's "What are the students really engaged in? And how can I work those types of activities into my content?" Sometimes, I'll come across a game or an activity that I really enjoy, or I was recently introduced to, and I'll just make myself a note. I'll find a way to work this in. For example, I wanted to find a way to work in a Poker Run, and I ended up finally being able to do that with the first week of classes.

As a community college, we have freshmen and sophomore-level students, and they're not accustomed to knowing where things are on campus or where to go for assistance. Our Program Review Committee decided we'd do a Poker Run and then try to address some of their deficits. They're used to using Google Classroom. They don't necessarily know how to attach a file to an email or save something to a flash drive and upload it to the learning management system (LMS) — several of those types of things. We all got together for our program and made a list of things that they struggle with in the first couple weeks of classes. We created stations, and at each of those stations, the students had to report and learn how to do that task and get it signed off on. Then, they got to draw a card at each station; they ended up drawing eight cards and could discard three for their best Poker hand. Then, we had prizes that we offered to students and an overall winner got something from the bookstore and gift shop.

We switched it to a *Yahtzee Run* the next year. The students really seem to understand the concept of Yahtzee more than Poker, even though they are very similar. Students just didn't have the concept of how to get a good poker hand, but they understand how to get a good *Yahtzee* hand, so we transitioned it to that.

PH: For some of my classes, I actually use themes. I start with, "What do I want this class to be about

rather than just the topic?” What can I do to immerse my students in a scenario of some kind? I start there and then try to keep that theme going. That allows me to be a little bit more creative in what I’m doing, how I’m approaching assignments and tasks, even what they read. You know I’m trying to make connections between the theme and what we’re doing in the class, either content-wise or task-wise.

A REALLY WEIRD QUESTION

LF: I need to ask a really weird question. If play were a mythical creature living on your campus, where would it hide, and what mischief would it get into?

ML: I will say, because this is my kids’ current obsession, is that it would be an axolotl. They’re just these really cute little fish creatures and they have these smiley faces.

We have a physical campus, but mostly I’m online. So it would be lurking around on my computer, popping in like that old-school Microsoft Word paperclip. It would say, “Do you need any help!?” It would be just like pop in and be like, “Do you need a play idea!?”

AD: I was born in Jamaica, which is in the Caribbean. In our culture, we have a character called Anansi, who is known as the Trickster God. He takes the form of a spider; sometimes, he’s a man with extra legs; sometimes, he’s a physical spider. If play were on my campus, in my head, the first image that came up was Anansi. Our campus is spread out over the downtown. But one building that is a common collection point for students is the library, which offers a lot of opportunities for cross-pollination. Students bump into each other and sometimes physically bump into each other. I can see Anansi tying shoelaces together and bumping students so that they force serendipitous meetings and collisions of different student populations—just so that mayhem and chaos could happen!

PH: Mine would be a very large dragon that sat on the top of the main academic building and interrupted any meeting that wasn’t necessary. In the online space it would hide in my emails and then breathe fire on any emails that were not necessary.

MG: The first thing that comes to mind for me is Loki from Norse mythology. As an English instructor, I guess that’s not surprising. But, you know, there are two places that students really congregate on campus: the library and The Rack, which is their student union. Our mascot is the Bucks, so that’s why it’s called The Rack. There’s shuffleboard, a pool table, arcade games—lots of things going on there. I have a feeling that Loki would hang out in those two areas, creating mischief there. I really liked Peggy’s idea of interrupting the meetings and setting fire to the emails; I would like for Loki to just really jump in and interrupt when somebody’s being such a naysayer in some of our meetings, particularly, those resistant to change. I want my creature to just jump in and make them vanish into thin air or sew their lips shut, or something like that! We are working in a profession where we constantly have to monitor and adjust, and if you’re not willing to reflect and make changes, in my opinion, you’re in the wrong profession.

DT: Thank you all so much! This has absolutely been the best part of my day, and probably for many weeks. Higher ed gets so serious so fast and you remind me that the good work that we can do can be so much fun. You’ve lifted me up. I just want to say, on a personal level, thank you for sharing your experiences and your lives with us.

LF: I agree. Now, I dare each of you to somehow construct your mythical creature and have it as a little figure next to your computer to remind you of play!

Connection Formers

“Wanna play?”

— *Every kid, everywhere*

If you dive into the play literature, you will find a cornucopia of reasons and benefits that people play. At the center of all those wonderful things sits the simple fact that play connects us to the world and to each other. That’s why, when it comes to the topic of icebreakers, we prefer to call them “connection-formers.” Because isn’t that what it’s all about? Connection. When you decide to implement one of these simple ideas in your class, isn’t it an invitation? Wanna play?

Two Truths and a Lie

A Classic Game Goes Digital

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Any number of students will work.

Technology Requirements

The instructor will need screen-sharing capabilities and a template for adding the questions and/or answers. Kahoot! or Quizizz works well. Both provide free account options.

Technique Summary Description

Two Truths and a Lie is a great way to get to know students, introduce course content, or review assigned readings in a fun and engaging way.

Technique Description and Instructions

As the title indicates, the instructor creates a list of three statements – two truths and one lie. In the first week of class, these statements could be about the instructor. The students would then attempt to guess which statement is the lie. Students can vote through polling software, by raising their hands, or by shouting out the answers – that's up to the instructor. This is also a great way to cover content on the first day – policies, procedures, and myths. I use this in my freshman-level courses where we cover myths about the college experience, tutoring, etc.

Additional Comments

Of course, this can be adapted in many ways. It works for analyzing characters in assigned readings, etc. It would be a quick way to assess students (or see who's doing the reading and who isn't) without the heavy grading load. For some ideas on what the statements might look like, or some to modify, visit <https://parade.com/1185071/maryniles/two-truths-and-a-lie-ideas/>.



LIES

Spot the LIE

I enjoy wakeboarding,
parasailing, and
snorkeling.

My hobbies include
cooking, canning, reading,
and gardening.

I have an irrational fear of
spiders, snakes, and the
number 13.

Editorial Comment: This is a great example of taking a technique that you may be familiar with as an icebreaker from meetings or classes, and simply reformatting it for the online medium. The suggestions here also encourage you to take advantage of the affordances of online, bringing a classic connection-former to the digital age.

Mini Photo Scavenger Hunts

Imaginative Play with Images

Andrew Davies

Adjunct Professor

Communication Arts Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

ardavies@vcu.edu

Number of Students

Any number of students

Technology Requirements

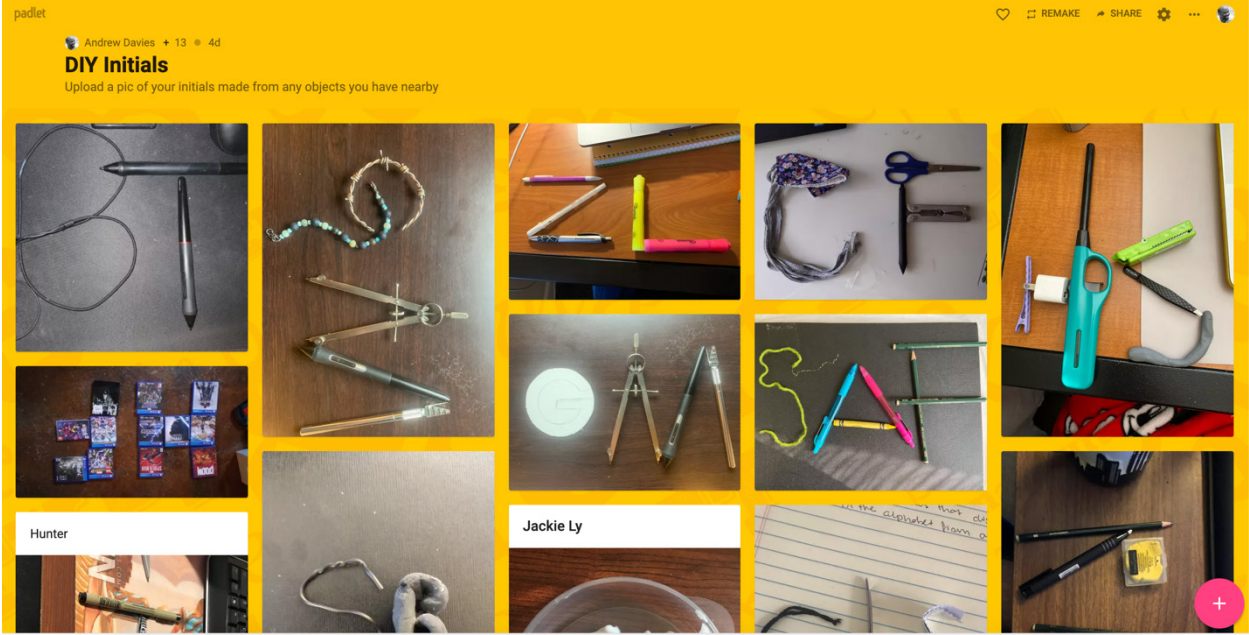
Students need an internet-connected cell phone.

Technique Summary Description

Ask students to take a picture of nearby objects that fit certain criteria. Then share those pics in a discussion forum or on a public Padlet.

Technique Description and Instructions

Prepare a Padlet to receive student entries and make it public. It would also help to have a shortened URL and QR code created to make it easy for students to access. Then create a slide with the photo scavenger hunt instructions, URL and QR code displayed prominently. Two examples I like to use are asking students to take a photo of any nearby objects that look like a letter, or creating their initials using nearby objects.



Flappy Bird

Silly Games Breaks The Ice

David Thomas, PhD

Assistant Professor Attendant

Department of Architecture

University of Colorado Denver

david@professorsatplay.org

Lisa Forbes, PhD, LPC, RPT

Associate Clinical Processor

School of Education and Human Development

University of Colorado Denver

Lisa.forbes@ucdenver.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Students need to access the free web game Flappy Bird: <https://flappybird.io/>

Ideally, students will have web cameras and microphones

Technique Summary Description

Students challenge themselves and their classmates to earn the highest score in a simple, but quite challenging online, arcade-style game.

Technique Description and Instructions

Flappy Bird is a popular phone game that you can play on your computer browser. Unlike many games, Flappy Bird was designed to be incredibly difficult. Scores of 4 or 5 are quite common.

We use this game early in an online term to introduce play into the course and give students a taste of how much fun failure and challenge can be. The rules are simple:

1. While in the synchronous classroom (we use Zoom), go to the Flappy Bird game site: <https://flappybird.io/>

2. Play the game.
3. If you want to be eligible for prizes (we mail stickers at the end of the term), you have to keep your webcam and audio on. This allows everyone in the class to hear and see your triumphs and tribulations.

After a few minutes of play, the class shares their scores.

We use this as a connection-former activity to get students playing together, feeling safe about being on camera and bonding as a group as they try to beat this impossible game! We use other simple but challenging games such as QWOP (<https://www.foddy.net/Athletics.html>) and Draw a Perfect Circle (<https://neal.fun/perfect-circle/>) similarly.

Additional Comments

Sometimes, just getting students to play is the heart of playful pedagogy. We find that easy-to-learn and hard-to-master games give students a safe place to interact with the class and each other before we challenge them to play and learn together in more serious contexts. For the price of five minutes of play at the beginning of each online class, we earn trust, attention and connection that translates into real learning.

Online Community Building via “Speed Dating”

Asynchronous & Synchronous Options for Forming Connections

Kristi Girdharry, PhD

Associate Teaching Professor of English

Arts & Humanities

Babson College

kgirdharry@babson.edu

Number of Students

I’ve used this in writing-intensive classes that are capped at 20 students.

Technology Requirements

Asynchronous: An online blogging platform (could be through your LMS or any of the free versions out there, such as WordPress or Wix—should be password protected)

Synchronous: A platform allowing synchronous video meetings and breakout rooms (e.g., Zoom, Webex).

Technique Summary Description

Students engage in quick getting-to-know-you activities (i.e., speed dating) to form groups based on natural connections and interests.

Technique Description and Instructions

Option 1: Asynchronous Speed Dating Activity

Objective: Students explore their peers’ self-introductory blog posts to identify potential connections and build community through writing and reflection.

First, instructors should ask each student to write a self-introductory blog post. Instructors should provide guidelines for the post to ensure it includes enough detail for others to make connections but also understand students’ rights to keep certain information private (good examples of prompts include, “Share your hometown, favorite activities, professional interests, and a fun fact about your-self”). While this can also be accomplished via a discussion board, a blog offers the ability to add multiple photos, links, videos, etc. Also, it gives students other ways to personalize their spaces, which is an opportunity to enhance their multimodal, digital literacies (this is something important to my writing classes. I do think blogs are a little more fun than discussion boards!).

Next, set aside a specific timeframe (e.g., one week) for students to read through all the self-introductory blog posts. Instruct students to spend approximately 2 minutes per blog post jotting down notes on any connections they notice (e.g., similar interests, same favorite book, shared hobbies).

Then, ask students to compile a list of peers with whom they found connections. Have them write a short reflection summarizing their connections based on particular facts and/or other intangibles. My students might express liking the “vibe” of a certain blog instead of something more specific, for example.

Finally, instructors can use the identified connections to form discussion groups, project teams, or peer review pairs for future assignments.

Option 2: Synchronous Speed Dating Activity

Objective: Students interact in real-time to identify potential connections and build community through structured breakout sessions.

To prepare, schedule a synchronous class session using a video conferencing tool with breakout room capabilities (e.g., Zoom) and craft a list of icebreaker questions or prompts to facilitate discussions that perhaps start with the more traditional questions, such as, “What’s one hobby you’re passionate about?”, “What’s your favorite book or movie?”, “Why did you choose this course or major?” From here, you can move towards the more playful, “If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?”, “If you could instantly become an expert in any skill, what would it be?”, “If you were an animal, what animal would you be and why?” You might even explore the downright silly. “Would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or 100 duck-sized horses?”, “Would you rather have a permanent clown nose or clown shoes?”, “If you could have a conversation with any inanimate object, what would it be and what would you talk about?”

During the class meeting, divide the class into two groups: one group will remain stationary in their breakout rooms, while the other group will rotate. For example, if you have 20 students, create 10 breakout rooms. Each room will have 1 stationary student and 1 rotating student.

Each “speed dating” round lasts for a set amount of time (e.g., 5 minutes). During this time, the paired students will introduce themselves and discuss the icebreaker prompts, which can be broadcast to the groups, emailed or posted on your class’s LMS. After 5 minutes, the rotating students will move to the next breakout room, and the process repeats.

After the speed dating rounds, bring all students back to the main session. Have a group reflection in which students share any interesting connections they made or surprising discoveries about their peers. You can also assign a reflection activity for each student to complete individually.

Like the asynchronous option, you can use the connections made during the speed dating session to form discussion groups, project teams, or peer review pairs for future assignments. Or, you can just leave this as a connection-forming activity that represents the kind of robust conversations you expect in future breakout sessions about your course material. It’s a great way to practice communicating in online classes in addition to the elements of community building.

In addition to having a variety of engaging icebreaker questions to keep the conversations lively and interesting, here are two more tips:

- **Technical Setup:** Ensure students are familiar with the video conferencing tool and know how to navigate breakout rooms.
- **Timing:** Be mindful of the session's length and schedule enough time for multiple rounds without overwhelming students. Keep in mind that online learning can be a doozy on mental processing!

Additional Comments

By setting up “speed dating” activities in asynchronous or synchronous formats, you can help students build connections and foster a sense of community in your online course—simply using the term “speed dating” adds a bit of levity and even silliness to the format, though this language could be tailored to your context and comfort levels. By allowing students to naturally connect over their interests, this activity can promote deeper peer connections and a more cohesive learning community. The playful nature of the activity can also help to reduce potential awkwardness around online interactions and enhance a sense of belonging to make the online classroom feel more like a supportive community.

Subject Matter Mood Check

Mapping Moods to Objects

Andrew Davies

Adjunct Professor

Communication Arts Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

ardavies@vcu.edu

Number of Students

Any number of students

Technology Requirements

Students need the ability to see and use the annotation tools available in Zoom or other web-conferencing software.

Technique Summary Description

Students pick one of the images displayed on the screen that they think best represents their current mood. The trick is that the image options are not facial expressions of happy, angry, or sad, as we would expect, but instead are related to the course's subject matter.

Technique Description and Instructions

Create a montage of images depicting various examples of objects relevant to your subject matter. Label each image with a number or letter for ease of identification. Above the montage, write the headline, "Which of these [object name] matches your mood right now?" with instructions on where students should indicate their answers. I've found it helpful to suggest students use the annotation tools available in Zoom and other web-conferencing software.

For an architecture class, you could use pictures of different building styles. For my typography class, I use depictions of words in different fonts.

Additional Comments

This mood check taps into our innate ability to personify inanimate objects. Of course, accuracy isn't the goal. Just the opposite. It's the subjectivity of the exercise that makes it a great conversation starter. For example, if you taught an architecture class, you could use images of different building styles to see what kind of emotional association different structures elicit.

For my typography class, I use words rendered in different fonts. Then, when I ask them to explain why a specific font matches their mood, invariably, they use familiar, intuitive terms like the "swooshiness" of this or "squiggleness" of that. This leads perfectly into the lesson on the actual terms designers use to refer to those aspects of letters.

Which font matches your mood right now?

Click "View options" then "Annotate" at the top of the Zoom panel.
Use any stamp to leave a mark next to your vote.

Bunch Blossom

ADVENTURE

Senzsch

PARLIAMENT

Helvetica Ultra Light

Alpha

✓ Comic Sans

♥ KINGTHINGS

★ Cooper

Zoom Coloring Book

Digital Doodling

Andrew Davies

Adjunct Professor

Communication Arts Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

ardavies@vcu.edu

Number of Students

Under 20 students

Technology Requirements

Students need to be able to access the annotation tools included in Zoom or other web conferencing software.

Technique Summary Description

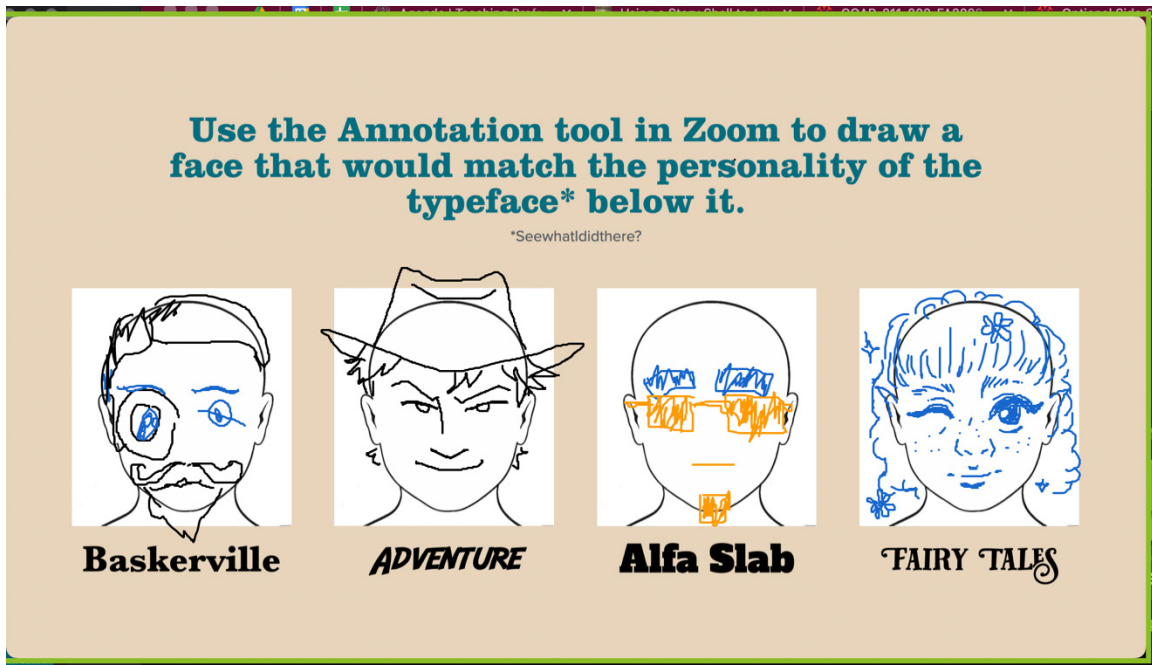
Invite students to flex their creativity by sharing a coloring book page on the screen for them to collectively fill in with whatever drawings or marks they want.

Technique Description and Instructions

Find or create a black-and-white coloring book image. Have this image prominently displayed in your presentation software. Then, share your screen so participants can draw on the image using the annotation tools available in Zoom or other web-conferencing software.



This is an example of my students' work on one of the coloring pages I use in my class.



This variation asks students to go beyond coloring and add their own drawings to the blank spaces given.

Puzzle/Question of the Day

Playful Headscratchers

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Instructors will need a free account for Poll Everywhere or a paid subscription for Breakout.edu. All other tools have free daily puzzles.

Technique Summary Description

This technique resembles the concept of bell ringers in an in-seat course. Students log in and access the puzzle or question of the day as they wait for the day's session to begin. It functions much like a water cooler discussion area where students can interact with one another, and the instructor can facilitate regular conversation and critical thinking skills.

Technique Description and Instructions

The instructor selects one of the following platforms for the Puzzle/Question of the Day: [Wordle](#), [Murdle](#), [Breakout EDU's Lock of the Day](#), or [Poll Everywhere](#). The instructor may wish to choose one per week, rotate them as desired, or select one for the duration of the course.

Students attempt to solve the day's puzzle, usually before anyone else. This adds an element of friendly competition to the course. After a specified amount of time (depending on the platform and the instructor), the instructor reviews the correct solution and moves into the instructional portion of the day's session.

With Poll Everywhere, the instructor reviews and/or shares the class's responses to the day's question and elicits feedback or discussion as desired and transitions into the day's instructional content. Generally, these questions relate to the day's lesson and get students thinking about the topic. Of course, the instructor may simply wish to pose an entertaining question, one that does not relate to the day's content at all. "Would You Rather..." questions are ideal for this type of question. There are many online resources for sample questions or feel free to create your own. Some examples of questions that generate extended discussion include:

- If you were on a deserted island – and access to food and water were not an issue – what three items would you take and why?
- Who is the best/worst superhero of all time? Justify your answer.
- If you found yourself in a situation that required you to dispose of a dead body, how would you do it? Why would you go about it this way?
- What is an invention you wish didn't exist? Explain your reasoning.
- If you could meet any one person from history – dead or alive – who would it be? Why did you choose this individual?

Ideally, the questions posed tie into the topic of the day or a student writing prompt, but that is not required. The answer + justification method is always helpful for online discussions and academic writing, regardless of the topic.

Additional Comments

If using Poll Everywhere, the instructor must create the daily questions in advance and have them posted in the course where students can access them.

For Breakout EDU, the instructor shares the class code on the first use and asks students to create an account using the class code. Students will simply log back in each class after that. Puzzles are available each week, Monday through Friday. Students may complete puzzles for previous days – or days the class does not meet – if desired. Lock combinations (aka solutions) rotate each day and may comprise numbers, colors, words, shapes, directions (up, down, left, right), etc. Each day's puzzle includes a theme or story.

Wordle and Murdle can be accessed online for free each day without any work from the instructor.











Murdle – so named because of its content and the Wordle phenomenon – is a daily puzzle that resembles the board game Clue. It includes suspects, locations, murder weapons, and clues where participants use the process of elimination to identify the killer, etc.

I have even used this as a whole-class theme focusing on various codes and ciphers.

CLUES & EVIDENCE











- A Holy Drakonian award was certainly not in the main house.
- Président Amaranth was seen outdoors.
- Président Amaranth was seen with a briefcase full of money.
- Secretary Celadon brought an angry moose.
- A Leo was in the guest house. Classic Leo.
- A Pisces was at the statue of Lord Violet.
- The suspect on the docks was born on January 15.
- Earl Grey had a weapon made of ceramic.
- A page with a cipher on it was found beside the salty sea captain.

SUSPECTS
LOCATIONS

WEAPONS

LOCATIONS

Tongue Twister Connections

Investigating How Much Wood a Woodchuck Chucks

Margaret R. Lamar, PhD, LPC, LPCC, NCC

Associate Professor

Department of Counseling

Palo Alto University

mlamar@paloalto.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students, broken up into smaller groups

Technology Requirements

NA

Technique Summary Description

I use this in my research class to start the class and build connections.

Technique Description and Instructions

After welcoming students to class, I ask them to introduce themselves and work as a group to develop potential ways to find answers to the age-old question:

*How much wood could a woodchuck chuck,
If a woodchuck could chuck wood?*

I also tell them that I don't want the actual answers to the question but that I want them to focus on discussing the process: How would they answer the question?

I put them in breakout rooms for around 10-15 minutes.

When they return to the large group, I ask them to share highlights of their discussion, where they disagreed, and what interesting questions came out of their discussion.

Additional Comments

This could easily be adapted to an asynchronous activity. You can provide the same prompt and leave them in a large group or break them into smaller groups. Depending on the size of your synchronous class, you could keep students in a large group and have them introduce themselves and share an idea about investigating this question.

Another option for a question is:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.

If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers

Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

Editorial Comment: *Asking students to ponder an absurd question can help playfully break them out of the patterns of over-confidence or fear of failure. The group nature of this silly endeavor also emphasizes the value of difference in problem-solving and perspective. While this might seem like a simple thing to do in a class, we see a depth of possibility here. The absurdity lowers resistance and fear, inspires creativity and problem-solving, provides a means for students to connect and primes them for more serious work to come!*

BuzzFeed Personality Quizzes

An Online Introduction Icebreaker

Kelly Soczka Steidinger, MA

Behavioral Science & Communication Instructor

General Education

Mid-State Technical College

Kelly.steidinger@mstc.edu

Number of Students

30 online students

Technology Requirements

Students will need access to the Internet, a learning management system's discussion forum, or Padlet board. BuzzFeed personality quizzes can be accessed online at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/quizzes/personality>

Technique Summary Description

This learning activity aims to create student interaction during the first week of an asynchronous course and allow students to reflect upon their personality traits by completing a BuzzFeed personality quiz. An example of a BuzzFeed personality quiz title include "Which Halloween creature are you?" or "Everyone has a dinosaur personality twin, so it's time to find out yours." Although this exercise was utilized in an Introduction to Psychology course, it could be implemented in any asynchronous course as an amusing icebreaker to encourage students to go beyond providing biographical details on an introduction discussion forum.

Technique Description and Instructions

For this icebreaker discussion forum, students will first choose a BuzzFeed personality quiz to complete. Students can pick any quiz on the platform but should ensure the quiz results are appropriate to share with others in an educational setting. After completing the quiz, students will share the quiz title and a screenshot of their quiz results in their posting. Finally, students will introduce themselves to the class (hometown, major, etc.) and answer the following question: Do you believe the results of the personality quiz are accurate? Why or why not?

Additional Comments

I implemented this introduction discussion forum in my online Introduction to Psychology courses during the past semester and thoroughly enjoyed reading students' responses. I believe this is an entertaining way for students to reveal information about their personalities based on the personality quiz they chose to complete and their quiz results.

Although this exercise is primarily designed to be a fun icebreaker where students introduce themselves, instructors can also refer to this learning activity in an Introduction to Psychology course when discussing personality trait theory and confirmation bias later in the course. I was surprised to find that students primarily accepted their results as accurate, which quickly illustrated the concept of confirmation bias. Since BuzzFeed personality quizzes can be created by anyone online for free, the students' results lack validity and reliability, and this allowed for additional conversation about the accuracy of non-peer-reviewed materials and the general accuracy issues with personality trait tests.

Editorial Comment: *Here we have a great example of a playful connection-former. However, the professor is thinking one step ahead and using this content again later in class to tie it to the course outcomes. This is a great example of looking at play pedagogy through the lens of “yes and...” and finding ways to keep the play flowing through the course.*

Wellness Wednesday

A Playful Wellness Check

Carly Croman

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

carolinecroman@arizona.edu

Jessica Hill

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

crombie@arizona.edu

Number of Students

27+

Technology Requirements

NA

Technique Summary Description

Playfully check in on well-being while providing supportive resources and information.

Technique Description and Instructions

Leverage the announcement tool in your learning management system to foster human connection by regularly checking in on students' well-being in low-stakes ways. This technique stemmed from a "Wellness Wednesday" series in the Fall of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has since evolved into a valuable feedback loop, allowing for regular check-ins and sharing just-in-time information.

Wheel of Wellness

- Create a "wheel of wellness" by entering the eight dimensions of wellness into wheelofnames.com. The dimensions are: Emotional, physical, occupational, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and financial. <https://wheelofnames.com/6vj-sd7>
- In your announcement, encourage students to spin the wheel and set a goal for that area of their well-being – just for fun.
- Provide example tasks for a few dimensions, such as: Physical – try a new recipe.



(The above image shows the dimensions of wellness as placed on a digital tool, wheelof-names.com)

Morale Check

- A morale check asks students to rate their morale on a scale of 1-10. This can happen in a few different locations in an asynchronous course site.
- If you share a weekly video and the platform you use has a comment feature (like Loom.com), try asking students to comment on their morale rating on the video.
- Alternatively, ask students to share something boosting morale at the end of a discussion post. This allows students to crowdsource morale boosters.

Editorial Comment: *Why add a Wheel of Fortune element to a wellness activity? It turns out this simple game of chance makes the introspective work of thinking about your wellness seem a little less charged, and a little more fun. We can see something similar working with the morale check. Borrowing the Mini Photo Scavenger Hunt idea described earlier in the book, maybe have the students share their morals using a picture from their phone or a piece of clip art from the web? — Eds.*

Shoe Story

An Icebreaker With a Sole

Elizabeth C. Parks

Assistant Professor of Acting/Stage Movement

Theatre and Dance

Appalachian State University

parksec1@appstate.edu

Technology Requirements

Zoom breakout rooms will be necessary. Each round requires a different number of students in each breakout room. Students will need a web camera and a microphone.

Technique Summary Description

In describing their shoes in a first-person narrative, students get to know themselves and each other.

Technique Description and Instructions

This approach is presented in three rounds and a debrief.

Round #1

This round requires that you create breakout rooms with two students in each breakout room. The more randomly they are paired the better.

1. Ask students to take off one of their shoes and hold it. If, for some reason, they aren't wearing shoes, ask them to get a shoe that they wear pretty regularly.
2. Offer the following instructions and then send students into breakout rooms:
 - a. Describe your shoe to your partner in the first person using "I am..."
 - b. Example: "I am blue, with tiny scratches. My sole is rather worn, but I am very comfortable. I am tied very tightly, and I make squeaking sounds when I walk."
 - c. Encourage the students to be as detailed as possible in their descriptions.
 - d. Invite them to see what discoveries they make about themselves and their partner.
3. Give them about four minutes in their pairs, then gather everyone back.
4. Before students start sharing about Round #1, move them to Round #2.

Round #2

This round requires you to create breakout rooms with four students in each breakout room.

1. Offer the following instructions and then send students into breakout rooms:
 - a. Each person must share something they learned about themselves while talking about their shoes.
 - b. Invite them to think about how their shoe represents them. It may be worth sharing with students that they need not judge themselves or each other based on the state or style of their shoes.
2. Give them about eight minutes in a breakout room with their group of four, then gather everyone back.
3. Before students start sharing about Round #2, move them to Round #3.

Round #3

This round requires you to create breakout rooms with eight to ten students in each breakout room.

1. Offer the following instructions and then send students into breakout rooms:
 - a. Now, each person must share something that someone *else* said in Round #2 that they related to, resonated with, or that applied to themselves.
 - b. Examples might be: “I really related when someone said they never realized how worn out they were.” Or “I could really relate to being tied in knots.” Or “I also feel like I’m barely velcroed together.”
2. Give them around 10 minutes in a breakout room with their group of eight to ten, then gather everyone back.

Class Debrief

1. If time allows, take a few minutes to debrief regarding what folks learned about themselves and each other.

Additional Comments

Depending on your class, you could vary the object they are describing. However, the object needs to be familiar/personal and universally used or worn by the students. A wallet, a hat, or a jacket could also work. I would not recommend using something electronic such as a phone or laptop.

I credit Jodi Jinks of ArtsAloud-IA for inspiring this technique.

Friday Friend Zone

Cultivating social presence and personal connection in online courses

Ellen N. Beattie, PhD

Assistant Professor of Doctoral Education, Research Methodologist

College of Arts and Sciences

University of Arizona Global Campus

Ellen.beattie@uagc.edu

Technology Requirements

Learning Management System with announcement functionality

Technique Summary Description

In online learning environments, establishing a sense of social presence is vital for fostering student engagement and building a supportive, inclusive classroom culture. One strategy I've implemented with success is the "Friday Friend Zone" (name adaptable to course tone), which involves weekly, lighthearted engagement prompts that encourage students to share more about themselves beyond academic identities.

Technique Description and Instructions

Each Friday, I post a question to the course announcements, designed to spark curiosity and invite students to share personal insights. These questions range from simple preferences, like "What's your favorite season of the year?" to aspirational queries such as "What goals do you have post-graduation?" Each question is paired with a relevant picture or meme, creating a welcoming and visually engaging invitation to participate.

To lead by example, I always answer the question first, modeling openness and encouraging students to share their responses. This small weekly ritual is more than a break from academic rigor; it's an intentional act to humanize the online space. Students are invited to express their personalities and engage in non-academic interactions, fostering a genuine sense of community.

By incorporating Friday Friend Zone activities into online course announcements, instructors can enrich the virtual classroom environment, creating a platform for students to connect in meaningful ways. This strategy promotes a welcoming, vibrant learning space where students feel seen, supported, and inspired to engage fully.

Some sample questions include:

- If you had a day with no responsibilities, what playful activity would you spend it on?
- If you could invent a gadget to make academic work easier, what would it do?

- What's the most unexpected place or situation where you've had a great academic/research idea?
- If you had to design a playground for grown-ups, what would it include?
- If you were to host a "play day" for adults, what three activities would you include?
- What's the last thing that made you laugh out loud?
- What's a random fact about yourself that always surprises people?
- Describe your ideal weekend in five words.
- If you could turn one aspect of your work or studies into a game, what would it be, and how would you play it?
- What was your favorite childhood game? When was the last time you played it?
- What's one playful tradition or activity you've brought into your adult life that keeps your inner child alive?

Additional Comments

Purpose and Benefits

1. **Building Social Presence:** The Friday Friend Zone creates opportunities for students to engage with each other and with me on a personal level, breaking down the isolation of online learning. As students share, they reveal facets of their identities that deepen mutual understanding and empathy.
2. **Increasing Student Investment:** When students feel known and valued, they are more likely to invest in the learning experience. By engaging in these Friday reflections, students are encouraged to see the online classroom as a space for genuine, multidimensional engagement.
3. **Encouraging Retention and Community-Building:** Social presence is linked to higher levels of engagement and course retention. The consistency of the Friday Friend Zone fosters a classroom culture where students feel connected and motivated to return and participate each week.

Implementation Tips

- **Set a Positive Tone:** Use a lighthearted approach and tailor questions to suit the class's dynamic. A well-chosen meme or image can help establish the tone and make the activity feel welcoming rather than obligatory.
- **Vary the Question Types:** Rotate between fun, simple questions and reflective prompts encouraging students to consider their goals, aspirations, and values.
- **Model Participation:** Always respond to the question first to demonstrate openness. A personal response from the instructor helps set a supportive, inclusive atmosphere.
- **Acknowledge Participation:** Whenever possible, respond to or like students' answers to signal that their contributions are noticed and valued.

Playful Pedagogy

“For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the p259 truth. Imagine, then, that a man should need to get fire from a neighbour, and, upon finding a big bright fire there, should stay there continually warming himself; just so it is if a man comes to another to share the benefit of a discourse, and does not think it necessary to kindle from it some illumination for himself and some thinking of his own, but, delighting in the discourse, sits enchanted; he gets, as it were, a bright and ruddy glow in the form of opinion imparted to him by what is said, but the mouldiness and darkness of his inner mind he has not dissipated nor banished by the warm glow of philosophy.”

— Plutarch, *De auditu* (c.100 ad)

In a popular phrasing of this quote, Plutarch says: “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a mind to be ignited.” Ironically, the English translation of the essay from which this quote is lifted is “On Listening to Lectures.” It seems we have known for a good 2000 years that listening to someone talking about something is pretty far down there on the learning scale.

With that in mind, we arrive at the section of the *Online PlayBook* discussing techniques relevant to playful pedagogy. By their nature, each of the techniques in this section challenges the status quo of instruction, creativity, reinventing ways for students to understand and connect with material and re-engaging the professor in the sacred work of teaching. Each technique tackles different subject matter and approaches its play with a different sense, a unique play style. But together, they offer a glimpse into a kind of teaching that, to borrow from Plutarch, can help banish “the moodiness and darkness” of your students’ inner minds. Play is the kindling that can help ignite that fire!

Kahoot! Cool!

Playing with Attendance Quiz in an Online History Classroom

Shu Wan

PhD Student

Department of History

University at Buffalo

shuwan@buffalo.edu

Number of Students

20-30

Technology Requirements

Students will need access to the Kahoot platform

Technique Description and Instructions

Kahoot! was designed by a group of Norwegian information scientists as an innovative teaching device. According to its website, “Kahoot! was founded in 2012 by Morten Versvik, Johan Brand, and Jamie Brooker who, in a joint project with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), teamed up with Professor Alf Inge Wang, and were later joined by entrepreneur Åsmund Furuse.”¹ This game-based platform helps teachers from grade to graduate schools worldwide transform the traditional landscape of classroom education, which has drawn intense attention from scholars. Wang and his colleagues published a literature review essay in 2020, which reports over eighty case studies about the use of *Kahoot!* in the classroom. Wang et al.’s essay concludes that “*Kahoot!* can have a positive effect on learning compared to traditional learning and other learning tools and approaches and for various contexts and domains.”² When meeting students through Zoom, instructors could use Kahoot! for both online attendance and pop quiz administration in an entertaining manner.

Without any coding requirements, *Kahoot!* is friendly and easy to use. After signing up on <https://kahoot.com/> for free, instructors can easily follow the website’s guidelines on creating their quizzes by editing background pictures, adding both questions and choices and ticking the correct answers. For example, a world history instructor could require students to read a specific chapter from Tannahill’s *Food in History*. The *Kahoot!*-based quiz question for attendance regards the chapter’s key information.

1 “About Kahoot! Company History & Key Facts,” *Kahoot!* November 22, 2022, <https://kahoot.com/company/>.

2 Alf Inge Wang and Rabail Tahir, “The Effect of Using Kahoot! for Learning – A Literature Review,” *Computers & Education* 149 (2020): p. 103818.



Attendance Quiz Feb 25

Questions (2)

1 - Quiz

In Tannahill's opinion, What was *not* the "surprising result" of Europe's hunger for species?

- ☐ "Discovery" of America
- ☐ Pope Alexander VI drew the line and all
- ☐ "Discovery" of China

In Tannahill's opinion, What was *not* the "surprising result" of Europe's hunger for species?

- ☐ "Discovery" of America
- ☐ Pope Alexander VI drew the line and allocated the New World
- ☒ "Discovery" of China
- ☐ Conquest of southern Asia

When using *Kahoot!* for attendance/quizzing in online courses, the instructor should start the quiz on their own laptop/PC and send the QR code to students, who can visit the question page after entering their names on their own devices.

Finally, the instructor can check the results and assess students' class performance.

Attendance Quiz Feb 25	
Played on	25 Feb 2022
Played with	23 players
Played	2 of 2
Overall Performance	
Total correct answers (%)	73.91%
Total incorrect answers (%)	26.09%

Reflection on the Technique

Since the first time using *Kahoot!* as an alternative attendance sheet during the in-person class in 2021, students have always shown their excitement for my integration of such an innovative and interactive technique into the history classroom. Their feedback encouraged me to take a similar approach when teaching the online course. Most students welcomed my efforts to make the online classroom more engaging and inclusive.

Instructors can consider using *Kahoot!* to facilitate participation in class discussions. When teaching the winter course, I presented slides and *Kahoot!*-based word clouds at the same time. During the class discussion section, I suggested students tell me their thoughts or post them on the word cloud. The idea originated in my suffering from social anxiety with talking before many people (even through Zoom). Students also struggle with the same issue. I offered them an alternative and inclusive approach to class discussion.

Editorial Comment: *Kahoot! is a great place to start for professors interested in, but maybe a little reluctant to take the playful pedagogy plunge. This tool was built with play and engagement in mind, and it's as easy to use as it is, and it is reliable in its popularity. - Eds.*

Escape Room

Groups Test Their Knowledge, Together

Sun Ooi, MSW, RSW

Faculty developer, Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation

University of Toronto

Faculty (part-time), Faculty of Applied Health and Community Studies

Sheridan College

Instructor (sessional), Professional and Part-Time Learning

Durham College

Faculty (part-time), Faculty of Social and Community Services, Humber Polytechnic

Sun.ooi@utoronto.ca

Number of Students

Works with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Web conferencing platform that has breakout rooms (e.g., Zoom). An application that collects responses and that can require specific responses to access subsequent questions (e.g., Google Forms).

Technique Summary Description

Students work together in breakout groups to solve puzzles and unlock subsequent content.

Technique Description and Instructions

In a course where students are expected to critically reflect on and analyze social determinants of health as applied to clients and their own positionality, beginning with basic recall and comprehension gives students a chance to check their understanding before moving to more complicated analysis of the concepts later in the course. To engage them in first building their basic understanding, knowledge check questions are presented as part of challenges or puzzles that students solve by correctly answering content-related questions.

In breakout groups, students are tasked with correctly identifying social determinants of health and their implications through questions that test knowledge and understanding of the key concepts. Each group is given the questions/puzzles and inputs their responses with a Google Forms link. By answering the questions correctly, groups obtain additional “clues” which are used to solve the puzzles and access the next set of questions. Students talk through the questions together to progress through the puzzles and complete the activity as a group. When the final puzzle is unlocked, students enter a final review activity with the rest of the groups who have also successfully “escaped” the challenge.

There are many examples, templates, and tools online for building and customizing your own virtual escape game (links are below to get you started). Some have themed puzzles that you can adapt; others use a visual scene that you can design to function as a virtual room where participants explore and find clues. Branching scenarios could also be used to direct participants to different options based on their responses. The design of the escape room environment can be intricate or simple. The idea is simply to encourage engagement and teamwork for group members working together to find solutions.

Additional Comments

Breakout groups in online classes generally have mixed reviews. Students have reported they enjoy the collaborative aspect but that they often feel discomfort with the forced discussion time. By giving them a specific task in this escape game-based challenge, group members communicate more confidently as they work together to solve puzzles. Using this activity early on in the class not only fosters more ease with participating in group activities but also scaffolds the learning for concepts that employ higher-order thinking as the course progresses.

Examples:

- [Digital Escape Rooms with Microsoft](https://infinitelyteaching.com/2020/05/12/digital-escape-rooms-with-microsoft/)
(<https://infinitelyteaching.com/2020/05/12/digital-escape-rooms-with-microsoft/>)
- [OneNote Escape Rooms](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suKBV82sJOk)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suKBV82sJOk>)
- [How to Make an Escape Room on Google Forms](https://teachwithhollyrachel.com/how-to-make-an-escape-room-on-google-forms/)
(<https://teachwithhollyrachel.com/how-to-make-an-escape-room-on-google-forms/>)
- [Creating a Virtual, Interactive Escape Room with Google Slides, Docs, and Forms](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjKkmRdQ8ac)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjKkmRdQ8ac>)
- [Digital Escape Room Clue-Creating Resources](https://wakelet.com/wake/8cbb6cc5-6f48-4262-9156-51318250ecf8)
(<https://wakelet.com/wake/8cbb6cc5-6f48-4262-9156-51318250ecf8>)

Editorial Comment: *The escape rooms approach to play has been a popular way to engage students in a variety of activities. Read on for a second approach to thinking about escape rooms in an online class. - Eds.*

Escape the Module

Connect Puzzles for a Virtual Escape Room Experience

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students may need to access websites external to their LMS or print activities and perform them offline.

Technique Summary Description

A typical learning module can be turned into a virtual escape room experience where students solve puzzles featuring course content and use resulting clues to open other module activities. When they successfully complete the last module item, they have “escaped.”

Technique Description and Instructions

Let students play with some course content by turning a learning module into a virtual escape room. Convert each module activity into a puzzle or clue that leads to the next module activity. Students escape the module after completing the last activity.

Steps:

Review each planned module activity and consider how to turn it into a puzzle, clue, or both. Then link the activities together by having the first activity “unlock” the second activity, which “unlocks” the third activity, etc.

For example, an online learning module could include a lecture video, a reading in an uploaded file, a reading quiz, and an assignment to complete. They could come together to form a virtual escape room experience through the following steps:

- Lecture Video Unlocks Reading
 - The instructor determines a secret word, then either states the secret word somewhere in the lecture video or has it flash on the screen.

- Students watch the video and find the secret word.
- Password protect the reading file (an internet search can provide instructions on how to password protect a file in any software).
- When students attempt to open the reading, they are prompted for a password. The secret word is entered and the reading opens.
- Reading Leads to the Quiz Answer
 - Create a Text Cipher using words or letters in the reading (see “Puzzled Content” in this book for cipher ideas).
 - The cipher is the answer to a one-question quiz.
- Quiz Reveals Hidden Assignment
 - Create a one-question multiple-choice quiz with the cipher solution as an option.
 - Students select the correct option and submit, which opens the Hidden Assignment
 - Learning management systems such as Blackboard and Canvas have an adaptive release function that allows instructors to hide module activities until students meet specified criteria, such as getting 100% on a quiz or completing a certain number of posts in a discussion forum. Use this function with the Hidden Assignment to show when students successfully complete the quiz.
- Hidden Assignment
 - The newly revealed assignment is a crossword puzzle containing clues to course concepts that will be addressed on an upcoming exam.
 - Students complete the crossword puzzle as their review activity and then submit it as proof they “escaped.”

Playful Add-Ons:

- Increase the playfulness of the virtual escape room by creating a story for the experience. Free artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as Microsoft’s CoPilot or Google’s Gemini are helpful for story creation. For the prompt, describe each step of the escape room and the content being addressed then request a short story to link each step together. While AI may not create the perfect story, it will offer ideas that can lead to one.
- Create an actual virtual escape room by using Google Slides. Links, images, puzzles, and more can be hidden on a Google Slide. Then, in “presentation” mode, students can click around the online slide with their mouse until they find the hidden objects. [Learn how to create an interactive virtual escape room through this instructional video - <https://youtu.be/NXvL-gLLzXCE>]

When to use it:

When used once or twice within a course, a virtual escape room experience can increase student engagement by providing a fun and unexpected activity. Good module choices for a virtual escape room include the first week of the course (start with a little entertainment), the last week of the course (end on a playful note), or somewhere in the middle (give students a break from the routine).

Race/Course

A Metaphor for Course Learning and Collaboration

Sun Ooi, MSW, RSW

Faculty developer, Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, University of Toronto

Faculty (part-time), Faculty of Applied Health and Community Studies, Sheridan College

Instructor (sessional), Professional and Part-Time Learning, Durham College

Faculty (part-time), Faculty of Social and Community Services, Humber Polytechnic

Sun.ooi@utoronto.ca

Number of Students

Works with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Virtual whiteboard such as miro.com

Technique Summary Description

Course activities are framed within a metaphor of a video game racecourse. Students participate in community building and are invited to make meaning and share reflections.

Technique Description and Instructions

A video game racecourse is introduced at the start of the term as a metaphor for students' contributions in a seminar course and for framing their progress in experiential and work-integrated learning. The seminar focuses on professional practice topics, and students are meant to weave their learning from diverse practicum settings into discussions.

In class, I show a short video clip of a Mario Kart race and poll the class to find out how many are already familiar with the game. Then, students share observations orally or in the chat about features in the game from their knowledge or from what they observed in the video, and I relate it to expectations for the class and their practicum learning. Notably, I mention that each player/student is on a path toward the finish line/graduation. In contrast with the videogame, they are not competing with other players/students. The objective is to surpass their present skill level and learning edge as we advance through the race/course together. Similarly, the items collected in the videogame (e.g., banana peel, red shell, etc.) are typically used to target opponents in the game. In the context of the class, we support and celebrate each other's forward movement in the race/course. We then take turns naming items from the game and ideating how they can be reframed as collaboration and reflection prompts for class discussion. The prompts get noted on a Miro board for use in future class discussions.

Other observed elements in the video are checkpoints/assessments that add to their progress in meeting the race/course objectives, as well as hazards that can hinder their progress. I use this opportunity to discuss supportive resources and practices designed to set them up for success. On the Miro board, I have an image of a racetrack and icons of several characters from the video game. Students each choose a character, which I ask them to click and drag to different points on the race-track in response to statements I read about learning preferences, academic challenges, study habits, coping, and the like. They get to notice the commonalities they share in a safe, anonymous way, and there are often spontaneous comments of humor and solidarity during this part. To wrap up the activity, I ask students to offer different metaphors or other frameworks relevant to their own cultural or personal experiences, and we continue exploring the applications to our professional learning context.

Additional Comments

Reflection is a cornerstone of experiential learning, so the model offers a way to encourage reflective discussions and meaning-making where classroom community and course objectives are salient. The idea of parallel races taking place in the context of cooperation, support, and compassion promotes learners' strengths as well as the safety of using help-seeking behaviors during the learning journey. A metaphor inspired by play sparks the curiosity and humor inherent to play, helping to frame the academic environment as a safe ground for learning and self-development. The non-threatening nature of play encourages creative exploration for students to make sense of and integrate their practicum experiences with their sense of themselves as developing professionals. Often, the themes from play also resonate across learner variability and cultural differences. As a result, social connection and community are promoted, which is especially valuable in online learning.

Editorial Comment: *Themes, as noted here, are a powerful and playful way to reframe and recontextualize. Merely thinking of a course not just as a race but as a colorful and silly Mario Kart race allows students to discuss more freely and explore the questions at hand more broadly. In this case, the selection of a videogame theme over a more serious race or competitive theme makes the play work. .*

Blogs over Boxes

Humanizing the power of reflection

Dennis DeBay, PhD

Associate Teaching Professor

STEM Education

CU Denver

Dennis.debay@ucdenver.edu

Caroline Danks

English Teacher

English

Bear Creek High School

Caroline.Danks@jeffco.k12.co.us

Number of Students

Any number

Technology Requirements

Blogging Platform: (in this case [Ghost](https://ghost.org/) <https://ghost.org/>)

Technique Summary Description

This technique (re) humanizes reflection prompts by blogging in a teaching licensure program. We believe that blogging allows students to build playful, authentic conversations for teacher education students ([Yang, 2009](#)).

In teacher education, there are specific expectations from governing bodies to confer a license for student candidates. These are specific criteria that demonstrate how a future teacher is ready to support their students according to the state. For reporting purposes, students must fill out a 10-page rubric in boxed format to discuss student engagement, professional dispositions, supporting students, etc.

1. TC utilizes in-depth knowledge about their students, families & communities gathered from multiple sources to plan instruction.	1 Awareness	2 Emerging Practice	3 Basic Practice	4 Proficient Practice	5 Advanced Practice
Look-for's/Actions for ALL TCs					
<input type="checkbox"/> 1a TC develops a comprehensive understanding of students' backgrounds (e.g., cultural, linguistic, ability, interests, etc.) and students' academic, behavioral, and social needs through multiple means, recognizes this diversity as an asset to learning , and utilizes this knowledge to plan instruction .					
<input type="checkbox"/> 1b <u>With the support of the CT</u> , TC uses a variety of strategies to build positive relationships with families and learn about the broader community context in order to understand and incorporate families' Funds of Knowledge about their children as learners and community resources/perspectives when planning instruction.					
<input type="checkbox"/> 1c <u>With the support of the CT and other specialized service providers</u> , TC is familiar with any specific needs identified on specialized instructional support plans (e.g., 504 plans, IEPs, ALPs, or READ Plans, etc) for their students and ensures that these needs are accounted for in planning instruction .					

Student Teacher Assessment Document.

The students are then expected to reflect on these criteria weekly in a series of boxes.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optional: If you want to, you can also include a link to a lesson plan, video, or <u>other artifact</u> 	
Feedback and Collaboration Prompts to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What feedback am I getting from my clinical teacher, site team, and/or other colleagues this week that is shifting my thinking/actions and helping me develop as a teacher? What successes and challenges have my clinical teacher and I faced this week in our partnership? What strategies are my CT and I using to explicitly plan for and meet the needs of students as a team? What feedback are we getting from students and/or families? 	??

Reflection document

Breaking Out of the Box: Blogging as a Playful Approach to Teacher Reflection

Introduction

Picture this: You're a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed student teacher, ready to change the world one lesson at a time. But wait! Before you can unleash your inner superhero, you're handed a 10-page rubric that looks like it was designed by the no-fun police. Fear not, future educators! We're here to turn that snooze-fest into a blogging bonanza that'll make reflection so enjoyable you'll forget you're actually learning.

The Problem: Boxed-In Thinking

Behold, the dreaded assessment document! It's like trying to fit the entire ocean into a kiddie pool. Sure, it covers all the important bits, but it does not allow for a lot of creativity.

And here's where the magic (doesn't) happen. Students are expected to pour their hearts out into these tiny boxes, week after week. It's like trying to have a deep conversation through a keyhole. We can do better, folks!

The Solution: Blogging Bonanza!

Enter the world of blogging, where reflection meets creativity, and boxes are for cats, not thoughts! We're proposing a wild and wacky idea: Let's ditch the dull and embrace the delightful. By using blogging platforms, we're giving students the keys to their reflection kingdom.

Why Blogging? Because....

1. It's like a playground for your mind: Students can swing from idea to idea, slide down slopes of creativity, and build sandcastles of knowledge.
2. It's a fashion show for thoughts: Customize your blog like it's the Met Gala of education. Memes? Yes, please! GIFs? Bring 'em on!
3. It's a conversation starter: Comment sections turn monologues into dialogues. It's like a never-ending teacher's lounge, minus the stale coffee.

The Playful Process

Step 1: The Great Educator Brainstorm

We kick things off by asking our students, "What does it mean to be a teacher who teaches [insert subject here]?" But here's the twist – we want them to get weird with it. Interpretive dance? Sure! Haiku? Why not! The goal is to break the ice and melt away those first-day jitters.

Step 2: Tech Time!

We introduce our students to the magical world of Ghost (or any other blogging platform that tickles their fancy). It's like teaching a cat to use Instagram – hilarious, slightly chaotic, but ultimately rewarding.

Step 3: The Great Box Rebellion

We show students the traditional assessment document and ask them to play "I Spy" with what they notice and wonder. Cue the collective groan and eye-rolls. This is where we reveal our master plan: Blogs over boxes!

Step 4: Weekly Wisdom Nuggets

Students create weekly blogs that are part reflection and part stand-up comedy routine. They're encouraged to use memes, jokes, videos, and anything else that makes learning fun.

The Results: Happy Students, Happy Teachers

Our students have been loving this approach more than free pizza at a staff meeting.

Here's what they're saying:

- "I'm learning and laughing? Is this even legal?"
- "Blogging > Boxes. It's just math."
- "I never thought I'd say this, but I actually look forward to reflecting now!"

Playful Examples from the Trenches

Blog Example 1: The Hummus Connection

One student shared their journey of building relationships with students, complete with Toy Story and Futurama memes. They wrote about a touching moment when a student shared homemade hummus with them. The blog post included a hilarious GIF of Woody saying, “You’ve got a friend in me... and some hummus!”

Blog Example 2: Vinyl Therapy

Another student reflected on self-care and work-life balance, using their love for vinyl records as a metaphor. They included a meme of a frazzled SpongeBob with the caption, “Me, trying to balance grading papers and having a life.” The post ended with a thoughtful reflection on finding harmony between teaching and personal time.

Why It Works:

Our approach ticks all the boxes (pun intended) of how we think about playful task design. Our blogging approach is like a Swiss Army knife for learning - it’s got all the tools for success tucked into one nifty package. Picture this: students sipping on a learning smoothie, where the vegetables of knowledge are blended seamlessly with the fruity fun of creativity.

Conclusion: The Future is Fun

By embracing blogs over boxes, we’re not just changing how students reflect; we’re revolutionizing the way they think about teaching. We’re creating a generation of educators who see reflection as an adventure, not a chore. So, let’s break out of those boxes and into the blogosphere! Because when it comes to teacher education, if we’re not having fun, we’re doing it wrong. Remember, in the words of the great philosopher Mary Poppins, “In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun.” Let’s find the fun in reflection, one blog post at a time!

Editorial Comment: *We were tempted to place this technique into the Whole Course Play section, because of the way it plays with convention and upends an entire approach to the class. But we left it here because it demonstrates how a free and creative approach to the same old thing not only can change how students think about the content, it can re-engage them in a way that will improve outcomes. Whether you take the playful rebelliousness of this class as an inspiration for a single assignment or as a new approach to curriculum, we are all about busting out of the boxes.*

Create Custom Course Images With AI

Automated Clip Art for the Win

Wendy Wolfe MAED – EDTC • Google Certified Innovator

Program Chair, MAED with Emphasis in Educational Technology

Concordia University St. Paul

wwolfe@csp.edu

Number of Students

Unlimited

Technology Requirements

An AI Image Generator (e.g. [Microsoft Copilot](https://copilot.microsoft.com/onboarding) [https://copilot.microsoft.com/onboarding], [Padlet](https://padlet.com/)'s "I Can't Draw" [https://padlet.com/], [Magic School](https://www.magicschool.ai/) [https://www.magicschool.ai/], [Crayon](https://www.crayon.com/) [https://www.crayon.com/])

Technique Summary Description

Create custom icons/images for a course or unit.

Technique Description and Instructions

Feed keywords, themes etc, of a unit or course into your favorite AI Image Generator. Create your unique image and use it to create your unique course brand. Incorporate the image into slide decks, reading list headers, forms, badges, wherever it fits!



This example was created with Microsoft Copilot for a graduate course in educational technology.

New to creating AI Images? These are great resources to help get started:

- [Copilot Image Prompting 101](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/bing/do-more-with-ai/ai-art-prompting-guide/image-prompting-101/?form=MA13KP) (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/bing/do-more-with-ai/ai-art-prompting-guide/image-prompting-101/?form=MA13KP>)
- [Using Padlet's "I Can't Draw" feature](https://padlet.blog/i-cant-draw/) (<https://padlet.blog/i-cant-draw/>)
- [Magic School's Image Generator](https://www.magicschool.ai/tools/image-generator) (<https://www.magicschool.ai/tools/image-generator>)

Additional Comments

Possible twist: Have students create and submit images as formative assessments throughout a unit and use them as discussion starters to illustrate the course.

Editorial Comments: *Why have a boring online course shell? For years professors have been scrounging around the web for available clip art to spice up their courses. This technique encourages teachers to play with and use a robot pal to help generate something new and unique. This is play at a fundamental level—playing with the images in the course..*

Gameshow-Style Review

Is That Your Final Answer?

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

For *Jeopardy!*, three or more students (or three teams of students) are preferred.

For *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?*, any number of students will work.

Technology Requirements

The instructor will need screen-sharing capabilities and a template for adding the questions and/or answers. Free templates – as well as those for purchase – can be found on [teacherspayteachers.com](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com). Other options for creating such slides are available online, including [TriviaMaker.com](https://www.trivi Maker.com), which has free and fee-based options.

Students will need access to the instructor's session for the day. Ideally, all participants will have web cameras and microphones.

For the Final Jeopardy Round, instructors will want to play the “thinking music.” This can be found online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe4tUzx CmWY>. The same technique is used for *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?*. Music for this can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS-dqC2k0fuA>.

Technique Summary Description

The instructor uses well-known game shows to review students for exams. The game proceeds at the instructor's pace. The instructor may wish to choose and assign teams.

Technique Description and Instructions

Game Show-style reviews add a little fun and competition to standard review activities. Once the instructor has added the relevant questions and answers to the chosen game show template, he/she shares the game's rules and conducts the review in the same manner as the game show hosts. *Jeopardy!* typically works better with teams, especially when getting to the final round. *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?* can work with team or individual student responses.

The students form teams, or if preferred, the instructor may assign students to teams in advance. Teams can help keep score.

Additional Comments

While this activity does require advanced preparation, it can be built once and used many times. It keeps the students engaged, especially if prizes or bonus points are awarded to winning teams or individual students. Everybody wins!

Other game shows can be adapted for exam review as well, including *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *Family Feud*. The former works best with multiple choice-style questions, while the latter works better for questions with multiple correct responses (steps in a process, themes of work, causes for an event or phenomenon, etc.).

Editorial Comment: *There is a kind of magic in borrowing pop culture activities like game show formats. Even if students are not familiar with the specific rules of the game show, these are time-tested formats that are entertaining. And the structure of the game show can work for any discipline at any level of the academy.*

Playful Introduction to Scientific Co-creativity

An Applied Improv Game to Introduce the Investigative Science Learning Environment (ISLE)

Carolyn Sealfon, PhD

Visiting Professor

Natural Sciences and Computational Sciences

Minerva University

csealfon@minerva.edu

Number of Students

More than 6, up to ~1000

Technology Requirements

Breakout rooms

Technique Summary Description

Playfully engage students in a quick improvisational activity that mirrors a few creative elements of the scientific method: Making an observation, proposing possible explanations, and coming up with ways to test the possible explanations.

Technique Description and Instructions

The inspiration for this activity comes from “yes, and” storytelling, commonly used among the applied improvisation network and the Investigative Science Learning Environment (ISLE), a playful and creative approach to teaching physics developed by Eugenia Etkina et al. (<https://www.islephysics.net/>).

Ask for a couple of volunteers to model the game for the whole class first, and as the instructor, play along with them. Then, place students in breakout rooms of 2-4 students per room and invite them to play the game while rotating who goes first. Ask students to choose in which order they will go before playing.

Person 1: State something surprising you (could have) observed. (“You won’t believe what I saw the other day! I saw [observation]”) [Encourage students to be creative with this. For this game, the observation need not be realistic.]

Person 2: Propose a possible explanation for that observation. (“Wow, you saw [observation]? Maybe that was because [explanation]”) [Encourage this student to repeat the observation before proposing an explanation to demonstrate active listening. Also, encourage creativity in generating explanations. Generating multiple possible explanations to explain observed patterns is initially one of the hardest parts of ISLE for students at first.]

Person 3: Propose a way to test that idea. (“Yes, and to test if [explanation] is true, we could try [experiment]”).

Person 4: Make a prediction based on the idea and the proposed test. (“Yes, and if [explanation] is true and we try [experiment], then we would find...”).

(If the group size is 2-3 and there is no Person 3 or Person 4, simply rotate back to Person 1 and/or 2.)

As feasible, rotate through the breakout groups. Optionally, invite especially creative examples to share with the whole class. This activity pairs well with activities in Ch. 1 of the Online Active Learning Guide by Etkina et al.

Editorial Comment: *This active learning approach provides serious context and demands critical thinking skills. As the author notes, it encourages more surprising or creative observations. Why use an observation like, “I saw a car wreck,” when you could claim, “I think I saw Bigfoot run behind the student center.” -Eds.*

Find the Errors in the Syllabus

That Doesn't Look Right

Andrew Davies

Adjunct Professor

Communication Arts Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

ardavies@vcu.edu

Number of Students

Under 20 students

Technology Requirements

Students need to be able to access the PDF of the class syllabus and at least be able to use the chat feature in the web conferencing software.

Technique Summary Description

Students are challenged to find as many errors in the syllabus as possible within a set time limit. The trick is they only earn points for an error they've found that none of their classmates have found.

Technique Description and Instructions

Before the start of the semester, add some typos to your usually pristine syllabus. Then, when you want to play the game, challenge students to find all the errors. Like Syllabus Scavenger Hunt, this is a thinly veiled way of playing with students and encouraging them to carefully read the syllabus. So, it's best used on the first day of class as a way of familiarizing the class with the syllabus and finding relevant information.

Once the time limit is reached, go to each page of the syllabus, starting at the front, and ask students to point out the errors, if any, they've found. As each error is mentioned, ask if anyone else found that typo. If not, mark it as a point; if so, cross it off and move on to the next one.

As you get further into the syllabus, the number of unique errors should eventually go down to zero.

Additional Comments

A variation on this game could involve hiding pertinent information in the syllabus text instead of errors. Then, you would challenge students with a series of questions or prompts to guide them to the correct spot in the document.

Words that Woo

Applying the Power of Language through Cult Design

Abby Ferrell, MA

Instructor, Communication

General Education

Mid-State Technical College

abby.ferrell@mstc.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Ideally, students will have a free Canva account. However, this activity can be completed in Word or Adobe Photoshop.

Technique Summary Description

This activity involves creating a fictional cult and designing a recruitment flyer that uses persuasive and manipulative language tactics. Students will share or upload their flyers to a discussion board where their peers will comment and vote on which cult they would join. This exercise demonstrates the power of language on group membership and how it can be used to influence people's beliefs and decision-making abilities.

Technique Description and Instructions

Before creating their flyers, students should first learn the basics of verbal communication, specifically in terms of group membership. This may include videos or readings pertaining to slang and jargon to create group norms and a sense of belonging.

Following an introduction to the language, students should learn the basics of cults, including what a cult is. At this point, the instructor should also introduce forms of "cult speak" (us vs. them language, loaded language, euphemisms, etc.). To expand on this section, the instructor may have students provide a written analysis of a prominent cult leader's speech.

Finally, it's worth explaining to students that not all group-binding (or "cult speak") language is harmful. For example, many fitness programs use this type of language in a positive and motivational way. This is important so that students know their flyers do not need to be manipulative in a threatening way.

Now, it's time to create a cult recruitment flyer!

1. In both synchronous and asynchronous courses, students should create a recruitment flyer for a fictional (harmless) cult.
2. Flyers can be created using Canva or a different design tool.
3. Flyers should contain persuasive and cult-like language tactics to convince people to join. Students may be advised to include at least three different types of “cult-like” language (for example, loaded language, jargon, us vs. them, etc.).
4. In a synchronous section, the flyers can be shown during class, followed by a vote on which fictional cult students would be most likely to join. Afterwards, a discussion may be held addressing the following questions:
 - a. Why did you create the cult you did? What forms of persuasive or manipulative language were included?
 - b. How did designing a fake cult make you think differently about the persuasive power of language?
 - c. How can we distinguish between a genuine message and manipulative tactics?
 - d. Do you think it’s ever ethical to use manipulative tactics, even for good intentions (e.g. public health campaigns)? Why or why not?
5. In an asynchronous section, students should share their cult flyers in a discussion board or shared folder. Then, peers may vote by commenting on the cult post they would most likely join. They should include a brief paragraph about why they would select that cult and what language strategies were used. Alternatively, students could answer the discussion questions provided above.

Additional Comments

The cult recruitment flyer activity aligns well with the playful pedagogy model. The creative and slightly subversive nature of the activity hooks students’ attention and serves as a lighthearted introduction to the power of language and persuasion. Further, it allows students to have fun engaging with one another, which can be difficult in an online setting. In my own courses, this activity is always a hit. Just plan for it to take longer than anticipated; students go all out creating their cult!

Editorial Comment: *This technique provides a great example from a larger category of techniques that use playful contexts to practice or demonstrate serious content. In the original PlayBook, we talked about Roberto Corrada’s administrative law class, which deals with serious legal analysis of the fictional work Jurassic Park. In both cases, thinning of playful cases to use while asking students to practice or demonstrate course understanding is a great way to unleash the power of playful pedagogy.*

Draft Day

Where Professional Sports Meet the English Classroom

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Instructors will need presentation software, such as PowerPoint or Google Slides, and a shared document that permits students to add content during the activity. Google Docs works well for the shared document.

Technique Summary Description

Students compose, revise, and finalize essay drafts for submission through themed, instructor-paced tasks.

Technique Description and Instructions

This technique began as an in-class activity to add a little fun and competition to an otherwise boring activity – drafting essays. Using the concept of Draft Day in Professional Sports, this technique allowed me to have students work on specific, scaffolded tasks to draft an entire paper – or at least the bones of an essay – in a single class period. Students who performed each of the tasks well the first time were featured on the scoreboard (see the linked Google Slides presentation below) as “First Round Draft Picks.” Students who adequately revised their tasks were featured as “Second Round Draft Picks.”

Students were asked to wear team colors or jerseys for their favorite sports teams and bring themed snacks. The room was decorated to reflect all the sports we offer on campus.

Essentially, we turned it into a Draft Day Party. Prizes were awarded for Most Team Spirit (best-dressed student), Most Valuable Player (hardest worker, student who earned the most points during draft picks), Best Cheerleader (student who cheered others on or kept others on-task), and Best Snack. We had a snack sign-up sheet, and I even sent out a themed Evite through our LMS.

During the class period, I share [my Google Slides presentation](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MInvjQysAPIBK3nvGhPKxLNTel0wBevPP2B94ieh798/edit?usp=sharing) (<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MInvjQysAPIBK3nvGhPKxLNTel0wBevPP2B94ieh798/edit?usp=sharing>) to pace the day’s activities and display the students’ achievements, we worked through the basic elements of writing an

essay: writing thesis statements and topic sentences, choosing quality sources, selecting and embedding relevant source material, and creating Works Cited entries.

For an online course, students add their content -one item at a time - to a shared Google Doc, and the instructor selects the best examples to display on the scoreboards (scoreboards are in Google Slides and are displayed using the screen sharing function). Shared documents can be accessed in the LMS or the chat box option of the chosen meeting software.

This approach helps students who may be struggling with certain tasks, as they can see good examples of each. The teacher can also send feedback to individual students or talk them through it for revision. These revisions can earn them spots on the second-round draft picks scoreboard. Each task is to be completed successfully before moving on to the next. Students who progress quickly can begin working on in-text citations, organizing the Works Cited page, finalizing their body paragraphs, or writing their introductions and conclusions. Anything not completed by the end of class can be completed independently, but all students should end class with the basic components of an essay.

For themed, inspirational music, the instructor can play the following songs on low volume in the background: Bill Conti's "Gonna Fly Now," Queen's "We Are The Champions," Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," and ACDC's "Thunderstruck." For first- and second-round picks, instructors may wish to use the NFL Draft "chime" accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn1dOk6-Q-8>.

Memes for Learning

Playful Alternative Assessments

Mysti Gates, M.Ed, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Works for any number of students

Technology Requirements

Instructors will want to make recommendations regarding free meme-generating websites for students to use. Otherwise, no special technology is required. I have used ImgFlip and Canva.

Technique Summary Description

This technique is a quick, fun way to assess student learning as it applies to history, current events, or literary elements. It's also quick to grade! Students who fail to complete other assignments are eager to complete this task, often submitting more than the minimum number of memes.

Technique Description and Instructions

Memes are a language all their own, and students are certainly fluent. For this task, instructors should determine the submission criteria for student memes and provide acceptable examples. Originality is a MUST. Other criteria might include the number of images, specific events, people, or characters to assess, acceptable file formats, specific memes to adapt, character or word count, etc.

For literature, this task can easily be applied to plot, theme, setting, character analysis, and point of view (POV). If desired, students can submit multiple memes formatted as a reel. This adaptation requires multiple images, but it can also allow for "themed" collections.

Additional Comments

In a face-to-face course, I ask students to bring hard-copy color photos. We hang them up in the classroom for all to enjoy. Classes like to outdo one another, and students in other courses enjoy seeing what other classes are working on.

For an online course, these could be uploaded to a shared folder, added to a Padlet, or submitted in another collaborative, easily accessible platform. While this is not required, it does add a level of enjoyment and comic relief to the class. Adding voting and prizes would increase both the amount of fun and the level of competition.

While I have not used it yet, I do plan to adapt this assignment and have students make POV videos like the ones they see and post on TikTok.

Editorial Comment: *The idea of having students use memes in a class setting is really about meeting students where they are. To the degree that your students see memes as a playful form of internet culture, bringing these bits of media into your classroom shows that you are thinking about what they care about and inviting them to use their specific sense of the world in how they think about and learn in your class. This is a perfect example of playing with the idea of what an assignment assessment looks like and making something intimidating or otherwise onerous into something fun!*

SelectorTools™

Tools for Selecting Students, Teams, and More

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Instructors will need to purchase the online or CD version of Kagan's SelectorTools.™ These are available at <https://www.kaganonline.com/catalog/EST/>. Screen Sharing abilities ensure all class participants can see the chosen student(s), team(s), and/or groups.

Technique Summary Description

Instructors can use these tools to randomly select students, teams, or groups. Tools can be adjusted for any class size. SelectorTools™ allows instructors to create and edit a roster as needed to reflect the correct course and attendance for the current session.

Randomization is an important part of play, as it keeps tasks unpredictable, fun, and fair. These tools keep students guessing as to who will be asked to go next – whether it's for a class discussion, group activity, or performance-based task. By adding an element of randomization, students must constantly be on-task and on alert.

Technique Description and Instructions

After purchase, instructors need only to create their rosters to use these tools. These tools increase engagement and force students to stay alert and prepared for the tasks selected by their instructor. Tools available in the newest version – which includes 15 options – include No Repeat Selector, Color Selector, Color Spinner, Name Selector, Next Team, Number Selector, Partner Picker Spinner, Role Assigner, Role Timer, Roll the Die, Student Selector Spinner, Student & Team Selector Spinners, Team Selector Spinner, Team Sequencer, and Who's Up?.

Additional Comments

Single- and multi-use licenses are available. Single-use version is just \$29! See website for details.

I have used this technique with Socratic circle-style discussions. Students are usually reluctant to speak up, and initially, students lack the skills and confidence to do well. In teaching them the skills they need, and in adding the Student Selector Spinner, students knew they needed to be prepared. This was a weekly activity at the time. After the first couple of rounds, students began looking forward to each discussion day and would come in and rearrange the tables and chairs in anticipation. The enthusiasm they had for one another as their names popped up on the screen was both pleasing and surprising. It added an aspect of fun and encouragement to an otherwise serious task.

I have also used the color and number tools with gameshow-style reviews. These tools selected which team would go first, next, etc. Combining these techniques - and sometimes buzzers - made for an engaging, entertaining, and effective review session that students highly enjoyed. Students are more likely to learn when their activities are useful and engaging. These tools – used on their own or in conjunction with other playful techniques – can add an element of play (and fun!) to any subject/ discipline.

Of course, these examples reflect face-to-face classes, but they are easily adapted for the online course equivalents. Rearranging furniture is not required!

Editorial Comment: Luck is one of the fundamental forms of play. While often connected to gambling, many games include an element of luck, whether it is a roll of the dice, the drawing of a card of cards or spinning a spinner. This technique points to the power and possibility of inviting Lady Luck into your classroom!

“So Many Possibilities” Scavenger Hunt

A Digital Game of Course Discovery

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Outside of making sure the students have access to the scavenger hunt instructions and items to locate, no specific technology requirements exist.

Technique Summary Description

Use this technique to help students become familiar with the features of the Learning Management System (LMS), course resources, and content of course syllabi or use it for student review for upcoming exams and assignments.

Technique Description and Instructions

I like using this technique to familiarize students with the folders and resources provided in their LMS. Their scavenger hunt includes a list of questions that force students to review the folders, documents, and links posted in the LMS. These questions begin with the following phrases:

- If I needed help with _____, in WHAT FOLDER would I find what I need?
- In what DOCUMENT would I find...?
- What LINK would I access if I needed help with...?
- If I wanted to see _____, in WHAT folder would I find what I need?

I also use this technique at the beginning of the semester – with or without prizes – with the course syllabus. This ensures students adequately review the contents of the syllabus and serves as a nice alternative to a syllabus quiz. When students submit their completed scavenger hunt form, they have an opportunity to ask any necessary questions.

While not used as frequently, I have used this technique with research-based tasks, including an MLA Scavenger Hunt that has students explore the “MLA Formatting and Style Guide” of the Purdue OWL website. This could easily be adapted for courses that utilize APA documentation or for other topics and tasks related to exam review.

Additional Comments

Originally developed as a BINGO game for face-to-face courses, this technique was modified for online courses in the form of a scavenger hunt. Prizes for the online format are awarded to the first three students in each class who complete and submit the scavenger hunt as instructed. These prizes are in the form of digital coupons students can select and redeem later in the course. Coupons may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) Give me five!** - 5 bonus points on assignment of 25 points or fewer
- 2) 10 to ONE** - 10 bonus points on an assignment worth at least 50 points
- 3) Hole in ONE Prize** - Replace any ONE zero on an assignment prior to today's date
- 4) Oops! Token** - No late point deductions on an assignment of my choice
(*Must still be turned in within the Late Work Policy as outlined in the Syllabus)

Loom Quick Connects

Extending Play Possibilities with New Tools

Jessica Hill

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

crombie@arizona.edu

Carly Croman

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

carolinecroman@arizona.edu

Number of Students

27+

Technology Requirements

Loom is an easy-to-use video recording program that allows instructors to record weekly videos, quick tutorials, and more. Additionally, Loom's transcription feature is intuitive, enabling easy edits for accessibility.

Educators can receive free access to all of Loom's advanced features by signing up here: <https://www.loom.com/education>

Technique Summary Description

Level up your weekly video announcements by using Loom's interactive features. Use emoji reactions and invite comments using playful strategies to boost engagement.

Technique Description and Instructions

Recording and sharing weekly announcements is par for the course in asynchronous online classes. Announcements are an effective way to share just-in-time information and communicate relevant course details. However, sometimes sharing these videos can feel like screaming into the void. It can be hard to know how many students are watching the videos or if they have any questions about the video content. To counter this, we have recently tested using Loom for weekly videos. Loom is a user-friendly recording platform that offers exciting features for embedding interactions, including:

- **Emoji Reactions:** A fun feature of Loom is that it allows viewers to react using common emojis. The possibilities for this feature are endless. We have played around with this feature by using it for quick "check-ins." For example, ask students at the start of a video to pick an emoji representing their current mood or just share their most commonly used (appropriate) emoji in their text messages.

- **Playful questions:** Loom also lets viewers ask questions and respond in the video comments. We've used this feature to pose playful questions, like students' favorite place to study on campus, their favorite seasonal movie, or their favorite corny joke. It has also been helpful to solicit content-related questions about upcoming assignments. If you need help coming up with playful questions, consider using this repository: <https://teambuilding.com/blog/icebreaker-questions> or consult the *Professors at Play PlayBook* for some fun ideas.

Also, Loom provides real-time data on student engagement. In addition to seeing how many students watched your videos, you can gauge engagement by tracking participation in these playful interventions.

Editorial Comment: *In the online classroom, there is no reason to feel limited by the tools you have been handed. In this case, the professors have extended the functionality of their LMS by popping in a new tool that gives them additional features—new affordances. And while the tool itself may not be inherently playful, they use the features of Loom to think of new and playful ways to engage with their students.*

Playful ePortfolios

Not Your Run-of-the-Mill Portfolio

Jessica Hill

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

crombie@arizona.edu

Carly Croman

Assistant Professor of Practice

University of Arizona

carolinecroman@arizona.edu

Number of Students

27+

Technique Status

Used regularly

Technology Requirements

ePortfolio platform such as Digication or Google Sites

Technique Summary Description

Using ePortfolios is a high-impact practice in higher education that promotes student reflection and meaning-making (AAC&U). While they are often seen as tools for professional self-expression, ePortfolios don't have to be stuffy. You can take a playful approach to ePortfolio pedagogy by creating sample ePortfolios that highlight your own personality or by making one for a favorite fictional character or even the campus mascot!

Technique Description and Instructions

When a new technology or platform is required (no matter how well-researched), it can be challenging to get student buy-in. Try these strategies to infuse play into your ePortfolio pedagogy:

- **Design as Self-Expression**

Incorporate unique design elements - such as specific colors, photos, and personalized language - on the landing page of your ePortfolio. Don't have your own ePortfolio yet? Create one to introduce yourself and the assignment to your students. Love rock climbing? Opt for

a photo of you in action instead of that 10-year-old headshot. Spend most of your time in the garden? Consider a green background and a photo of your latest harvest.

- **Fictional ePortfolios**

Add humor and playfulness to your ePortfolio by creating a sample ePortfolio for a fictional character. For example, imagine what Leslie Knope from Parks and Recreation would say in her bio. Or, share your school spirit by designing an ePortfolio for your campus mascot! By having fun with your example, you will give students permission to have fun with their own portfolios.

- **Encouraging Playfulness**

Help students take a playful approach to ePortfolio creation by providing guiding questions and prompts. For example, what is the story you want your ePortfolio to tell? How might you use color and images to tell that story? What brings you joy? For example, if sunflowers make you smile, maybe add a field of sunflowers to the header. Do you love anime? Add your favorite characters in the background of each page. Consider starting with joy and working backward. Try including a playful prompt in a weekly discussion board and consider how they could use elements from that activity to craft their ePortfolio.

Additional Comments

Wilma Wildcat's ePortfolio: <https://arizona.digication.com/wilmawildcat/home>

Example instructor ePortfolio: <https://arizona.digication.com/carly-croman-univ-101/home>

References

American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). (n.d.) High Impact Practices. <https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact>

Come Play in My Playground

Using Visuals to Invite Engagement

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

NA

Technique Summary Description

Learning Management Systems (LMS) can be bland and boring. Students log in and see a white background, black text, and plain system icons representing folders, documents, and assignments. Injecting visuals into the space can create a different experience and invite students to engage.

Technique Description and Instructions

In contemporary society, information is often presented with visuals. When students want to see the news for the day, they look at articles on a phone app or an internet page that features images. When they want to engage with friends through social media, sharing an image or video is often their starting point. Even simple internet searches return pages of text with images sprinkled throughout. Visual elements increase interest in the accompanying information and provide motivation to find out more.

When students log in to an online course, they see a plain text screen in black and white. It is visually boring and does nothing to direct their attention and motivation towards course content. And while adding a few images can help, they won't change the ho-hum feel of the LMS. It has to feel like a course playground, with colors and images appearing with every click of the mouse. Use every available opportunity to insert images, videos, and other visual elements that contrast with the standard course appearance.

One strategy for creating an immersive course playground is adopting a visual theme. Select a theme that works with the course content or just sets a desired tone. You could also help students get to know the physical college town where the campus is located. Use the visuals to feature town history, popular restaurants, walking trails, and other places of interest. You could even share your interests or hobbies through a visual theme. If you love animals, feature a different species with each visual or introduce students to zoos around the world.

I taught a course where students felt intimidated by the content. I adopted a beach theme with light browns and blues interwoven with images of sand and water. Many people feel a sense of calm near water so I used the visuals to convey a calming tone throughout the course. The course content had no connection to the beach, and I offered no explanation about the theme. It was simply a ribbon of visuals running through the course, sending a silent message that everything would be fine. The students just thought I liked the beach and never asked about the theme.

To create your own immersive course playground, add visuals to as many of these online course spaces as possible:

Course Image and Header

If your LMS uses an image or header to represent a course, you may be able to swap it out for a custom image. Look in the course settings or ask the online support team for guidance on how to insert a custom image. The image could represent a course concept, complement a course theme or story, or even depict instructor interests. Personalizing the course image and header can serve as the first invitation for student engagement.

Create a custom image in tools such as Canva, Google Slides, or PowerPoint. Or, use AI tools to generate images for you. Canva's Magic Media, Microsoft's Designer, Bing Image Creator, Adobe Express, DALL-E, DeepAI, and Hugging Face are completely free or have free options for image generation. A simple internet search can provide guidance on how to prompt AI tools for the images you want.

Course Syllabus

Researchers have demonstrated that after five minutes of reviewing a visually appealing syllabus, students believed the instructor to be kind and supportive, and they expressed excitement for course content and activities (Nusbaum et al, 2021). These positive first impressions can translate into increased motivation to engage with the instructor and course content past the initial week of class.

A visually appealing syllabus can be easily created by selecting one of the many templates provided in Microsoft Word or Canva, then replacing the template text with course information and swapping the stock images for ones connected to the course topics.

One possible challenge with creating a visual syllabus is that institutions may require the use of a plain text syllabus template. Some institutions may allow images if required language (i.e., academic policies, institutional statements) does not change. If changing the syllabus is not permitted, consider creating a second version of the syllabus for students and then post both versions in the course.

Assignment Instructions

Assignment instructions are a great way to include visual enhancements within a course whether they are posted directly in the LMS or included as an attached file. Brief instructions can feel more inviting with one small image. Or, take a more detailed set of instructions and add design elements such as shapes, images, and colors. If time is limited, use software with built-in AI tools for documents (i.e., Canva, Adobe Express), enter the assignment text, and then prompt the AI tool to transform the document with images, fonts, and formatting that complement the topic or task.

If the course uses quizzes or tests, include an image with the instructions and some of the questions to add visual appeal.

Slide Decks

Online courses usually include video presentations created in software such as PowerPoint or Google Slides. The templates contained within the software are used regularly since they are easy to access, but it also means they are familiar and boring. Increase student interest in the video presentations by finding new templates. Slides Mania (<https://slidesmania.com>), Slides Go (<https://slidesgo.com>), and Microsoft Create (<https://create.microsoft.com>) all have downloadable slide decks in a variety of designs. If you are feeling adventurous, use Microsoft Designer (<https://designer.microsoft.com>) and prompt the built-in AI tool to design a slide deck specifically for your topic.

Discussion Forums

If discussions are part of the course, add images to the instructions, starting prompt, and any comments you post to students. Encourage students to add visual elements to their comments such as images or videos.

Course Profiles

If the LMS has individual profiles for instructors and students, add a photo to your profile and complete any descriptive information requested. Then create an introductory assignment that tasks students with doing the same. Add a playful twist by allowing students to use Bitmojis instead of photos. Don't forget to include instructions on how to create a Bitmoji and post it as a profile image.

Module Images

If the LMS allows an image to be used alongside a module title, take advantage of the opportunity. It only takes a few minutes to find Creative Commons images and then upload them to the different module folders. The result is a visually interesting module list for students.

How Students Respond

Much like the Nusbaum et al. (2021) findings, students always offer positive comments about the visual appeal of my online courses. Some students even return the favor by creating visually appealing assignment submissions when only a text document is requested. They feel invited to express themselves through the visual course environment because they see it everywhere they click.

Tips

- Take time to add alt-text descriptions for images students need for class (i.e., tables, figures) or mark images as decorative if they are purely for visual appeal. These options guide e-reading software for visually impaired students. The software will read alt-text to students and skip over decorative images.
- Be careful with the use of red and green text, as students with color blindness may not be able to read it.
- Always check the student view of the course to see how the visuals and text look from their perspective.

Reference

Nusbaum, A. T., Swindell, S., & Plemons, A. (2021). Kindness at first sight: The role of syllabi in impression formation. *Teaching of Psychology*, 48(2), 130-143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959953>

Editorial Comment: *Play demands a little color in life, don't you think?*

Decisions, Decisions

Variety is the Spice of Life

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any number of individual students or small groups

Technology Requirements

N/A

Technique Summary Description

Give students a variety of assignment tasks and/or end products to customize the learning experience based on personal interests and needs.

Technique Description and Instructions

Online students perform many of the same assignments in each course, such as the standard papers and presentations. While they can often pick their own topic, that's where their choices usually end. Letting students also make decisions about how they will apply and demonstrate learning allows them to tailor the experience to their needs, interests, and skills. The personalized approach increases student motivation and engagement while also increasing classroom equity as students can use their strengths with each choice.

Assignment choices can benefit instructors too. While creating expectations for each choice requires an initial investment of time, it can be fun to try new activities. The evaluation process becomes more enjoyable with the variety of submissions. And the quality of submissions increases when students feel personally invested, so grading becomes easier. Once choice options are created and tested, they are easily adapted for other courses.

If you have never included assignment choices in a course, start slow with two or three options for one project. Increase the sense of fun by only offering unexpected options that move away from traditional papers and presentations. The project becomes playful when students have to try something new.

Here are some assignment options to consider:

- Conduct an interview and create a:
 - Top 5 Things I Learned handout
 - TikTok-style video summary
- Create a physical object and document the process through a photo essay
- Document course concepts in action through a photo project (include short narratives for each photo)
- Curate resources and create a website to explain and share them
- Write a fictional story about a course concept
 - Diary for a real or imaginary figure
 - Predict what will happen 50 years into the future
- Design an interactive book through BookCreator or FlipHTML5
- Create an interactive presentation through Google Slides
- Create a series of micro-lectures
- Design a social media campaign
- Create infographics
- Create an annotated bibliography
- Combine several of the options and create a training curriculum

Take the assignment one step further and have students share their creations with the class. End products could be posted in a discussion forum then students could choose five to view and comment on. Remember to share criteria for what their comments should address. If synchronous sessions are possible, have students present their projects in real-time.

Level Up

Take on the challenge of designing a choice board. A choice board is a 3x3 table with a different activity in each square, totaling 9 possible activities. Detailed instructions should be available for all activities. Students select 3 connected squares such as a row, a column, or a diagonal and perform the activities in those squares. Be strategic about the location of activities to encourage students to perform diverse tasks such as combining creative tasks with writing tasks or familiar tasks with novel ones. Students should submit their pattern choice and what order they will perform the activities. Then, depending on the effort required for each activity, students could submit one activity per week for three weeks or one activity every two weeks for six weeks.

How Students Respond

I have offered choice options in multiple courses and students always express appreciation for having some control over their learning. The best response I received from students was for a choice board with short experiential learning activities. A few options even had playful twists to increase the fun. Students were enthusiastic about the variety of available options and their ability to truly tailor the activities to what they wanted to learn.

Editorial Comment: Admit it, you get as tired of grading the same old thing as students do of turning in the same old thing. This technique points out how much students like the choice of assignment but also points out how much more fun they are to grade! This is a message we'd like to hear repeated more often. Professors can end up with as much fun from implementing playful pedagogy as students do.

From Boring to Buzzy

Playing with the Discussion Board

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students need access to their Learning Management System (LMS) discussion board (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas, etc.) and know how to insert or attach items in the comment toolbar. They may also need to know how to create video presentations.

Technique Summary Description

Discussions are common assignments in online courses, but the traditional format of read-something-post-something-respond-to-peers leads to tedious exchanges that no one enjoys. Turn perfunctory posts into buzzy banter with five different discussion board activities.

Technique Description and Instructions

Student engagement increases when discussion assignments inject some creative approaches. These five discussion assignments share ways to have students play with their conversations.

ASSIGNMENT #1: NEWS SO HOT, IT'S BREAKING

This two-part assignment asks students to create content then discuss it in small groups over multiple weeks of the course.

Part 1

Students assume the role of a TV news reporter and create a short video (2-4 minutes) discussing a current event (i.e., world news, popular culture, campus activity, etc.) applied to a specific course topic. For example, in a history class, one video could share information about contemporary campus protests and compare them to Civil Rights era campus protests. In an English course, a video could offer an invented news story about a literary character who goes viral in real-world social media for something addressed in the book. Instructors can provide a list of possible topics and have students sign up or allow students to propose their own topics.

Part 2

Once videos are submitted, divide them into 4 to 6 equal groups. Each group of videos will be used for a different week of discussions. During the designated week, each video should be posted in its own discussion thread as a starter post. For example, a class of 30 students would result in 30 videos that could be divided across 5 weeks. Each weekly discussion would feature 6 videos, each in its own discussion thread.

For a weekly discussion, the students who created the posted videos serve as “featured reporters” while the rest of the class are “viewers.” At the beginning of the week, viewers watch each video, select one to discuss for the week, and offer their first comment. A few days later, viewers offer a second comment for the same video. Reporters moderate the discussion about their videos by responding to questions and engaging with their viewers. The process is repeated each week until all videos have been shared and discussed.

Playful Add-Ons:

To add some fun, instructors can assume the role of a TV news producer and create a backstory about why the news videos are needed, add a fictitious TV station name and logo, and share an example news video. Offer extra credit or other rewards for students who use a TV news background in their videos, deliver their presentation in true reporter style, adopt a fun reporter name, and/or stay in their reporter character throughout the assignment.

Tips:

- Offer guidance for discussion comments to encourage critical thinking such as “Identify another relevant current event that connects to this topic and explain the connection,” or “Share one thing you learned about [the video topic] that you didn’t know before.”
- Create evaluation criteria for videos, discussion posts, and discussion moderation so students know how to meet expectations.
- While the length of the videos can be adjusted to allow more content coverage, requiring a shorter time frame will encourage students to watch.
- The reporter role can be swapped with any other character suitable for the course.

Why Use It:

This assignment asks students to use several higher-order thinking skills. As reporters, students must research a course topic, connect it to events outside the course, explain the connection to their peers, and lead a discussion about their work. As viewers, students learn from peer videos and then choose which ones to discuss, which increases motivation to engage with course content and each other.

When to Use It:

Use this video-plus-discussion format for any class presentation assignment. In the online environment, students often create presentations that are only viewed by the instructor. Knowing that peers will view their work can encourage students to invest more attention and effort into the video. It also offers choices for discussion topics, which motivates participation based on personal interests.

ASSIGNMENT #2: THE 4-1-1

What Is It:

This multi-week assignment asks students to start a class discussion by offering a special report on the weekly readings. Other students collaboratively curate new information to extend the report.

Steps:

At the beginning of the course, assign individual students or small groups of students to a specific week of readings. Students should write a **4-1-1** report about the readings and post it in the discussion board on the first day of their designated week.

The **4-1-1** report should include:

- **4** important takeaways from the readings (limited to 1 sentence for each takeaway, stated in their own words);
- **1** scholarly resource that complements the readings along with a brief explanation about the connection to the readings;
- **1** example of the readings in action (i.e., news story, campus example, personal example, pop culture, etc.) along with a brief explanation about the connection to the readings.

All other students should offer one comment on the report during the week and address one of the following pieces of information:

- a) an additional one-sentence take-away from the readings,
- b) an additional resource that complements the readings (website, book, journal article, etc.), or
- c) an additional example demonstrating the readings in action.

Each comment must contribute new information. No duplication or restatements are allowed. At the conclusion of the discussion week, the report writer(s) should create and share a handout featuring an updated 4-1-1 report that incorporates all contributions from the class. The handout would provide a list of short statements about important content, examples of the content in action, and a list of resources to advance understanding.

Playful Add-Ons:

Turn the handout into a colorful digital poster. Create a virtual art gallery to share students' work (free PowerPoint and Google Slides art gallery templates can be found online) and have students vote on the best posters in different categories.

Tips:

- The instructor should provide the 4-1-1 report for the first discussion to role-model the activity. Assign students starting in the second discussion week and allow the first student(s) a little time to create their reports.

Why Use It:

Students use several higher-order thinking skills in this assignment such as evaluating the most important ideas, condensing important ideas into a one-sentence summary, demonstrating course content with examples, finding relevant resources, and generating unique contributions to each discussion.

When to Use It:

Use this discussion approach to encourage students to regularly read and interact with assigned course content. It can replace reading quizzes and the handouts can serve as a review as students prepare for a final exam.

ASSIGNMENT #3: SOLUTION SHOWDOWN

What Is It:

This is a multi-week discussion assignment using a case study as the topic of conversation and a catalyst for a class competition.

Steps:

1. Start with a complex case study requiring the application of multiple course topics.
2. Divide students into small teams and create a private discussion forum for each team.
3. Week 1 – Individually, students read the case, write a tentative solution, and then post it in their team discussion forum.
4. Week 2 – Individual students read all solutions in their team forum and then post a comment containing a self-evaluation that compares their solution to their teammates (i.e., similarities, differences, what they did well, where they missed some information, what they didn't think about that someone else did, etc.).
5. Week 3 – Individual students review all self-evaluations in the team forum then collectively discuss the best solution possible from their team's ideas.
6. Week 4 – The Solution Showdown begins. In a discussion forum the entire class can access, post two different team solutions in one discussion thread. Each student reads the two solutions and then provides a comment indicating which solution should win that showdown and why. [Add discussion threads as needed to accommodate the number of match-ups required.]
7. Week 5 – It's the Semi-Finals where last week's winners are paired in new showdowns (2 per discussion thread) and the process continues.
8. Week 6 – It's the Solution Showdown Finale. The remaining teams go head to head in a final battle.

NOTE: Multiple matchups can occur simultaneously and there could be multiple winners. For smaller classes, drop the Semi-Finals week and head straight to the Finale.

Playful Add-Ons:

Choose a playful theme, then use an artificial intelligence tool to rewrite the case study using the theme (Google Gemini is my personal favorite AI tool for creative ideas). Ask each team to create a name and mascot that matches the theme. Create digital badges that align with the theme and use them as “prizes.”

Tips:

- Only provide instructions for the steps students need to work on for the week. This approach keeps students focused on the immediate task, reduces competition in the early steps, and creates a sense of mystery about what’s coming.
- Provide guidance for the initial solution and self-evaluation such as questions to consider, topics to address, etc.
- Add length requirements for the initial solution such as four to five paragraphs. It increases consistency between students and offers better comparisons during the match-up steps.
- In the Solution Showdown steps, use the discussion settings to block students from seeing any comments until they post their own. That will ensure students are using their own critical thinking skills rather than being influenced by peers who posted earlier.

Why Use It:

This assignment uses the full range of critical thinking skills while also emphasizing social engagement. Knowing that the assignment will result in a competition can motivate some students to increase their performance.

When to Use It:

This assignment is appropriate for any course that uses case studies as a learning tool.

ASSIGNMENT #4: THE KNOWLEDGE VAULT

What Is It:

This is a three-part assignment asking students to illustrate course concepts and select the most important ones to preserve in a fictional knowledge vault.

Steps:

1. Take a Topic - Tell students they need to preserve important course knowledge in a digital vault to be opened in the year 2525. Provide a list of important topics and concepts from the course and have each student select one. [Topics could also be assigned.]
2. Digital Design - Students create a digital poster to illustrate their selected concept. The design should educate future students about the concept without repeating anything the textbook or other course materials already provide. Designs should be submitted as a separate assignment prior to the discussion.
3. Lock It Up - Divide the posters into groups of 3 to 4 and place each group of posters in a separate discussion forum. Each discussion forum should require students to post a comment before they can view other comments. Students visit each forum during the discussion week, review the posters in that forum, and offer one comment per forum. The comment should nominate one of the posters for inclusion in the knowledge vault and explain why the selected concept is the most important to preserve out of that group.
4. Select and Announce the Winners - The instructor could select the winners in each forum or announce a run-off and have students vote on 2 options from each forum. Announce the winners and reward them with digital badges or extra credit.

Playful Add-Ons:

To explain why the knowledge vault is necessary, create (or borrow) a dystopian story about an evil presence who destroys information. Use AI creation tools to create what you think the knowledge vault should look like, with both open and closed versions. Use the closed version as an illustration for the instructions. When winners have been determined, create a results poster featuring the opened vault and place images of each winner inside the vault. Share the results poster with the class.

Tips:

- Identify a standard size for the poster such as letter or legal size.
- Set a maximum word count for the posters to emphasize illustration over description.
- Suggest resources for digital poster creation (e.g., Canva, Microsoft Word, Google Draw) and offer links to instructional videos for using those resources.
- For larger courses, assign a concept to small groups (2 to 3 students) and ask them to create a poster together.
- Assign/Select topics at the beginning of the course and offer multiple weeks for students to develop concepts and work on their final product.

Why Use It:

This assignment uses higher-order critical thinking skills by asking students to research course concepts, creatively communicate them, and evaluate their importance.

When to Use It:

While the topic and design steps could be implemented earlier, the discussion step is best used towards the end of the course when students have a more complete understanding of the course content. The discussion could be used before a final exam to help students recall concepts.

ASSIGNMENT #5: INSTA-FACE-X_

What Is It:

Use a fake social media profile to engage students in class discussions.

Steps:

1. Fake Social Media Profile - Design a fake social media profile related to the course. The profile could represent an important individual, real or fictitious organization, literary character, or even an imaginary person created for the course. For example, in an American history course, the profile could be a time traveler who has visited different historical eras.
2. Fake Post - For each discussion, create a fake post for the profile that serves as the conversation prompt.
3. Social Media Response - Instruct students to respond using a specific social media style. For instance, if the profile is created in the style of Instagram, students could respond by offering a comment using a similar style. Or, students could respond in the style of X (formerly Twitter), which restricts comments to 280 characters or less and uses hashtags and emojis.

Playful Add-Ons:

- Start a debate by creating two or more profiles, offering crossover comments on the fictitious profiles, then asking students to share what comments they think will be offered next. For instance, a history course could have a George Washington profile and an Abraham Lincoln profile. Both could comment on each other's profiles about the contemporary role of the federal government, each offering different opinions. Students could pick up the debate by predicting what comments each character would say next.
- Mix up the social media platforms for each step. Create a Facebook profile then have students respond with an Instagram post followed by an X (formerly Twitter) post.
- Get students more involved by having them create a social media profile for someone who may have lived in a specific era, was a side character in a literature book, etc. Once their profiles are finished, have students post them in a small group discussion board and participate in a conversation based on what their character might say.

Tips:

- The profile design should mimic an existing social media platform. Templates for different platforms can be found on the websites of Ditch That Textbook, Kapwing, Canva, and Classtools.
- Provide resources about how the selected social media platforms work. Sharing instructions

and examples of what the platform looks like can guide students who may not be familiar with it.

- Guidelines may be needed to define what appropriate posts look like (i.e., avoiding foul language, keeping it family-friendly, etc.).
- Instructors should role model what to do by providing an example post in each social media format.

Why Use It:

Social media is widely used for communication, and it can increase student engagement in discussions. It can also increase critical thinking as students represent ideas visually or in short explanations. The use of character profiles encourages role play, which requires critical thinking skills and may help students express their thoughts without fear of being judged.

When to Use It:

This discussion approach can work with any topic that could have a real or invented character and could be represented visually or with short text responses.

Editorial Comment: Here's what happens when the boring old discussion board meets some playful creativity—magic! We know, these techniques look like a lot of extra up-front work. At the same time, you can look forward to much more enjoyable grading by reviewing the creative and engaged work of students. Mostly, we want to point to the energy and joy play can bring to every corner of the LMS. This collection of techniques should inspire you to look in other nooks and crannies for ways to make your course more fun!

Give Them the World

Using Google Earth for a Learning Activity

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students need to use Google Chrome for this activity and may need a Google account.

Technique Summary Description

Deliver a lesson in a unique way by using Google Earth.

Technique Description and Instructions

Taking students to actual physical locations on a virtual map offers a real-world perspective of course content. It also gives students a fun break from the online course environment. If you can represent course topics through any location on a map, you can create a lesson in Google Earth.

Locations can be real places such as historic buildings, tourist attractions, and campus places or representative places such as any office front in the world to stand in for business activity. The location description can accommodate a variety of information including text, hyperlinks, images, video, and audio to be associated with each location pin. As an example, a location description could share a video about the course content and pose several questions for students to discuss in a linked forum. Another location description could provide a link to an interactive quiz where students answer questions about the location.

One lesson that could fit any course is putting all the introductory information and activities in a Google Earth Tour of different campus sites. Students can access needed starting information and perform first week activities while also connecting with the physical campus.

Steps:

- Identify the locations you want to use and the information to accompany each location
- Open the Google Earth link (<https://earth.google.com>)

- Select “Add” in the toolbar, then “Placemark”
- Right-click on the map and select “What’s Here” to search for the first location
- Click on the desired location to add a Placemark
- Double-click on the Placemark to open the description window
- Add the description for the location
- Repeat these steps until all locations are marked on the map

When all locations and descriptions are ready, perform the final tasks:

- Select “Tour” in the toolbar then “Create New Tour”
- Add the placemarks to the tour in the desired order and choose preferred settings
- Select “Share” in the toolbar and select the preferred option (link, embed code)

Playful Add-Ons:

Instead of a tour, keep the Placemarks as separate locations and create a virtual escape room experience by linking each Placemark to the next one. For instance, end the first Placemark description with a link to a password protected document and share that the password can be found in “Streetview” for the current location. Then provide a hint such as “The password is the street where the bakery is located.” Students open Streetview, look around for the bakery, then identify the street name. The unlocked reading could contain a link to the next Placemark and the process can continue with the next set of activities.

Any information can be taken from the Streetview of each Placemark such as numbers that are visible on houses or streets, prominent colors, business names or types, etc. That information can be turned into code words, passwords, or even an answer to part of a puzzle. Or, leave a clue in the Placemark description that leads students to their next item such as “Go to the most famous tourist attraction in Paris, France.”

Student Response

Online students appreciate easy-to-use, novel approaches to asynchronous learning that takes them out of their routine. The interactive options combined with visual presentation also increase student engagement with the material.

I Spy

With My Camera Eye

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students need a tool for taking photos such as a digital camera or a smartphone with a camera.

Technique Summary Description

Students take photos depicting course concepts as they appear in common environments and offer narratives about the photos.

Technique Description and Instructions

I Spy asks students to look around their local environments and take photos of course concepts in action. For example, students in a marketing course could take photos of how different local businesses use specific techniques. Or, students in a recreation course could take photos of local locations available for people to engage in different recreational activities. Each photo should be accompanied by a brief narrative explaining what the photo depicts and what course concept it demonstrates.

Instructions should outline what to do for both photos and narratives, provide an example photo and narrative, and share any limitations for the photos and narratives. For instance, in the marketing course example, students could be directed to take photos of 3 different marketing techniques demonstrated by independent, locally-owned businesses. They could also be limited to just one photo of print materials such as flyers since they are a familiar technique. Adding a limitation would encourage students to find less available options and diversify their photos.

Details should include:

- Number of Photos Required - a good range to consider is 3 to 5 photos, as this range allows demonstration of some course concepts without becoming burdensome.
- Narrative Word Count – a range of 100 to 300 words can keep narratives brief and focused
- Submitting photos and narratives - One option is for students to create a presentation file starting with a title slide, then their first photo on slide 2, followed by the narrative on Slide 3. The rest of the presentation would follow the photo-then-narrative slide pattern.

If students do not have access to a camera or cannot go into the environment and take photos (i.e., active military), they could be directed to Creative Commons sources to select images.

Consider adding a second assignment for this activity such as offering a discussion about specific course concepts and asking students to post the photo and narrative they took. An awards activity could also invite students to view classmates' projects and vote for who should receive recognition in different categories. Having a second part to this project would allow students to view each other's work and understand the variety of ways the course concepts are represented.

Student Response

Students enjoy I Spy as it allows them to be creative while applying course concepts in their immediate environment. They have also shared that they look at things around them a bit differently after completing this activity.

Editorial Comment: *Does this count as play in your mind? We think so. By bringing the affordance of the phone camera into the virtual classroom, you challenge students to think about their course differently. Having them extend the classroom wherever they happen to be creates an open sense of exploration that is definitely playful.*

Online Scavenger Hunt

In Search Of

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students would need to access the internet or other online sources to find information.

Technique Summary Description

Using provided web links, students visit different websites and answer questions about the information offered on the site.

Technique Description and Instructions

Instructors often offer additional resources to help students learn more about the course topic but busy students likely won't look at the resources because it is not a required course activity. Turn the resources into a graded scavenger hunt so students can become acquainted with them. Remind students to bookmark each site for later exploration so they can easily return to the resources at a later date.

Steps:

- Make a list of the resources students may find helpful such as websites, books, and journal articles.
- Obtain a web link for each resource such as a specific website or a link to the campus library's holdings for a journal.
- For each resource, create one or more questions that can be answered by reviewing the information available once students click the link. Each question should direct students' attention to an important piece of information (i.e., "What tool on this website allows students to upload a paper to check for grammar mistakes?" or "What % of women said they are single parents while pursuing a college degree?") If the website contains a lot of information, offer a hint on where students can find the information (i.e., "look at Table 3" or "look to the left of the book image").
- Provide the list of questions along with the corresponding link for students to use.
- Have students answer the questions in a quiz to receive credit for completing the scavenger hunt.

When to Use It

Time the scavenger hunt to help students when they need it most. For instance, use the scavenger hunt as an assignment for the first week of class if the resources would be helpful for other courses activities such as a planned project. If the resources share field-related information such as professional associations or possible career paths, use the scavenger hunt towards the end of the course as students may be more receptive to this information after learning course content.

How Students Respond

I use the scavenger hunt activity as an introductory quiz, and the resources all have immediate applicability to the students' full-time jobs. Each time I teach the course, several students express appreciation for being required to learn about the resources.

Playing with Projects

Let's Get Together

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Small groups of students.

Technology Requirements

Most project activities could likely be performed with tools students already have access to within the LMS and standard computer software. Any additional tools may require instructional support so students can use them effectively.

Technique Summary Description

The independent nature of online assignments leads to students often feeling isolated (Kaidarova, 2024). Provide the meaningful relationships students are looking for and increase the sense of fun and exploration by linking multiple assignments together into Project-Based Learning (PBL).

Technique Description and Instructions

Online learning often involves a lot of independent work to fit the busy lives of students. When students interact with online peers, the interactions often focus on transactional activities like discussions. As soon as comments are posted, the interaction ends. Even group projects are often transactional because tasks can be separated, performed independently, then joined together in a final product (Donelan & Kear, 2024).

Whitton and Langan (2019) identify stimulating pedagogy, shared experiences, and collaborative activities as ways to increase connection between students as well as offer a sense of fun. Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one way to combine these recommendations as small teams of students collaboratively perform connected assignments across an extended time period (Guo et al., 2020). As a bonus, PBL offers a perfect opportunity to play as it is a blank canvas where instructors can tell stories, develop characters, inject artistic and creative tasks, and immerse students in a different world.

Getting Started

Courses often include a culminating assignment, such as a research paper, as a way for individual students to demonstrate learning mastery. An existing course can be adjusted for PBL by turning the culminating assignment into a course-long team project. The project should require teams to research

a specified topic, apply multiple course concepts, and incorporate creativity. It should also contain multiple parts using content that is threaded across each of these parts.

For example, instead of an individual student writing a 10-page research paper, ask a 4-student team to design a learning module to teach the rest of the class about the research topic. Specify minimum requirements for the final product such as:

- a) a 5-to-7-minute video lecture to teach content;
- b) a class or small group discussion (including learning goals, prompts, and instructions);
- c) a content application activity or assignment (including learning goals and instructions);
- d) an activity encouraging student interaction around content without using the discussion board (including learning goals and instructions); and
- e) an overview of the entire learning module, including the sequence and purpose of each activity.

Teams could create a final website, interactive document, or a class presentation to share their work.

Other ideas include asking teams to use their research to solve a specified societal problem, create a new business product, or develop a marketing campaign. Each project could have a different final product, such as a comprehensive proposal to a federal agency about the societal problem, a Shark Tank-style audition video for the business product, or a digital portfolio for the marketing campaign.

Once the details are outlined, brainstorm playful story ideas about why students must perform the project. Ideas could be outrageous, silly or even shamelessly borrow plot lines from television shows or movies. Developing a list of story ideas can provide inspiration for injecting playful add-ons for PBL tasks.

Details, Details

After deciding on a project idea and final products, address all team and project details. The following recommendations are offered to guide development:

Team Size and Formation

Online students often do not know each other so the instructor should create the teams. A size of 3 or 4 students works best to keep communication, meetings, and work distribution manageable. Assigning students to a team could follow any strategy, from grouping students as listed in the roster to entering students into an online spinner and randomly selecting team members.

Team Contract

The online environment poses challenges for team building, so it is important to include a team contract as the first PBL assignment. Require teams to address criteria needed for good communication and collaboration. It is also recommended that tangible consequences be offered to address problematic team members. Options could include setting aside 5% of the total project points and letting students grade each other's team efforts or letting teams "fire" a teammate after meeting certain

conditions (i.e., issuing a warning letter, meeting with the instructor).

The following sections and questions are recommended as part of the Team Contract instructions:

- Communication
 - What communication method(s) will be used?
 - How often should team members check the communication method(s)?
 - How quickly should team members respond to messages?
- Meetings
 - When will team meetings occur?
 - How will team meetings occur?
- Project Assignments
 - When should each team member have their contributions ready for review before each deadline?
 - Where should each team member's contributions be placed for review before each deadline?
- Roles (add others as needed)
 - Who will be the team communicator (i.e., create communication channels, arrange and facilitate meetings, send meeting reminders, and communicate with the instructor for questions and concerns)?
 - Who will be the assignment facilitator (i.e., identify / delegate/track tasks, verify assignments meet requirements and are free of technical errors)?
- Consequences
 - What problematic behaviors will result in a lower team-assigned grade?
 - Under what conditions would the team consider firing a team member?
 - What process and timeline will be followed if a team member needs to be fired?

The contract should include an electronic signature for each team member to indicate agreement to the terms.

Project Tasks and Checkpoints

Help teams maintain a steady pace towards project completion by breaking it into different submissions throughout the course. For example, teams need to discuss project ideas, so replace an existing discussion assignment with a small group brainstorming session. The next week, have each team submit a final project plan with goals, tasks, and who will address each task. Keep in mind that students need extra time for collaborative tasks in the online environment. Consider allowing a minimum of two weeks between due dates for significant project tasks as well as reducing or removing assignments not associated with the project.

One helpful approach is requiring draft submissions for different project parts, and then redistributing the drafts for peer review. This approach accomplishes several goals, such as offering regular checkpoints, providing teams with feedback from multiple classmates, allowing time for teams to make guided improvements, and increasing students' assessment and evaluation skills. Peer review instructions should include a checklist, rubric, or list of questions to guide feedback.

Grading Plan

Low-stakes grades based on following instructions or participation can be effective for most project tasks. The final project should be a high-stakes grade to emphasize its importance as the culminating activity.

Playful Options

Encourage fun and creativity by inserting short, playful options for extra credit. Offer extra credit to the team if they include a fun team name, a team logo, and themed nicknames for each team member. Award extra credit when teams submit a photo of their recent virtual team meeting. Issue extra credit challenges throughout the project, such as posting a meme about their project or team dynamics.

How Students Respond

I have used PBL in multiple courses and experienced both positive and negative student responses. The responses became overwhelmingly positive after the team contract was introduced. The contract proved to be a critical step in how students experienced the project and their team. Taking time to share preferences and establish expectations gave students ownership over team success, and they felt more connected to each other as they started the project tasks. I regularly have students comment that the projects offered one of the best team experiences they have ever had. They communicated well, felt supported, and developed real connections to classmates.

One note about students' responses to playful add-ons such as extra credit tasks. Most teams participate in playful options early in the project such as the ones offered with the team contract. As the project continues, participation decreases due to busy schedules. Offering easy and quick playful add-ons for the different project steps can encourage more teams to continue playing.

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Puzzled Content

The Fun is in the Solution

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Students may need to access websites external to the LMS or print copies to perform some activities.

Technique Summary Description

Encourage students to play with class material by turning information into puzzles. The puzzles can be stand-alone activities or connected together to create a virtual escape room experience.

Technique Description and Instructions

The following sections describe different ways to turn class information into a puzzle for students to solve. Puzzles can be solved for a low-stakes grade, extra credit, or just for fun.

Jigsaw Puzzles

Turn any brief course information into an image file (.jpg, .png), upload it to Jigsaw Planet (<http://jigsawplanet.com/>), and watch it transform into a virtual jigsaw puzzle students can assemble online. For example, instead of using text for a weekly announcement, create an image of the announcement and turn it into a jigsaw puzzle. Post instructions telling students they need to solve a puzzle to see the weekly announcement, and then share the link to the jigsaw version.

Crossword Puzzles

Have students review keywords and important course concepts by turning them into a crossword puzzle. Create a list of the terms and concepts along with their clue statements. Then, visit Puzzlemaker (<http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/>) and enter the information. The resulting crossword puzzle can be downloaded as an image and shared with students.

Hidden Messages

Hide secret words or phrases in course content and have students find them. For example, when

recording a lecture video, go off script for a moment, state the secret word or phrase, and then resume the lecture. To make it a bit trickier, remove the secret word or phrase from any automatic video captioning so students can only find the needed information by watching the video. Or have the secret word or phrase briefly flash on the screen. For readings, insert QR codes or links that lead to messages.

Ciphers

Turn course content into cipher puzzles for students to complete. Here are some common cipher techniques:

- **TEXT CIPHER** - Use words in a document or book chapter to form a secret message.
 - Option 1: Assign each word a 3-digit location number. The first number is the page number where the word can be found. The second number is the line of text where the word is located. The third number is where the word is located on the specified line. As an example, the number 8.2.5. direct students to page 8, 2nd line, 5th word (counting from the left). Share the location numbers, let students know what each digit means, and then have students decipher the message.
 - Option 2: Bold, underline, or highlight specific words/letters in the reading. Students then look for all the identified words/letters to create the secret message.
- **SYMBOL CIPHER** – Replace each letter of the alphabet with an emoji/icon /symbol and create a key for students. Design a secret message about the course content (i.e., what to review for an upcoming test) and replace each letter with its corresponding emoji/icon/symbol.
- **CAESAR CIPHER** – A Caesar Cipher shifts the alphabet by a specific number of letters. For instance, if the letter A is represented by the letter J, then the letter B would be represented by the letter K, and the letter C would be represented by the letter L. After creating a secret message, give students a key or send them to a free online cipher wheel to solve (<https://caesarcipher.net/caesar-cipher-wheel/>). [If using the online cipher wheel, provide clues such as “Yellow J = Black A” so students can figure out how to operate the wheel.]
- **MORSE CODE** – One free online tool (<https://www.boxentriq.com/code-breaking/morse-code>) quickly converts messages into Morse Code. The site also has a Morse Code key to share with students.
- **LANGUAGE CIPHER** – Create a quick puzzle by converting any message into a different foreign language through Google Translate (<http://translate.google.com/>). Paste the message into the English side, then select one of the many language options on the other side. Copy the resulting text for students and invite them to solve the cryptic message. Hide a clue by directing them to Google Translate, such as a link in a weekly reading with text that says, “Follow Me to Solve the Message.” When they reach the site and enter the cryptic message, Google Translate will automatically detect the language and provide the translation.

Editorial Comment: We are big fans of puzzles. And taking a page from the Professors at Play AI PlayBook, use your friendly ChatGPT to quickly create these kinds of puzzles and more! .

Quiz Quest

Slaying an Academic Norm

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Small groups of 3 to 4 students.

Technology Requirements

This activity requires a separate and private discussion board for each small group. While it can be performed in the LMS, the online social annotation tool Perusall (<https://perusall.com>) is a particularly useful platform for this activity.

Technique Summary Description

In small groups, students divide quiz questions, offer tentative answers, receive feedback from group members, and then take the quiz individually.

Technique Description and Instructions

There is a dragon hiding in the academy, breathing fire from dark corners. The dragon lurks in the proctored exam, waiting for a student to look sideways from the online camera for a second longer than necessary before sending its flames. It also slinks in through special online tools, looking for evidence that a student's writing is not their own before inflicting burns. What is this dragon that regularly threatens students? It's the academy's norm of anti-cheating policies and practices, creating a punitive environment where learning takes a back seat.

What if we slayed this academic norm and REQUIRED students to cheat?

Quiz Quest takes students on a learning adventure where "cheating" is part of the journey.

Prepare for the Quiz Quest by creating a set of application-based questions, such as mini-case studies. The questions should challenge students' critical thinking skills but only require brief responses such as true/false or short answers. Avoid multiple-choice questions so students must generate an answer rather than select one.

Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 4 students and create a private discussion board for each group. Post the quiz questions at the beginning of the week, and groups distribute the questions among their members. All questions should be addressed, and every member should answer at least

one question. Individual students have 3 days to post an answer to their assigned question(s). Each answer should be accompanied by an explanation with evidence about why their answer is correct. Over the remaining 3 or 4 days in the week, each group member reviews the posted answers and replies to each one with “I Agree” or “I Disagree.” If they disagree, they must share an explanation and evidence.

An official quiz with the same questions is posted at the beginning of the same week. Students must complete the quiz as individuals by the end of the week. They can take it early if they are confident in their own answers or wait until later in the week and use their group’s answers.

This activity works well when multiple quizzes are planned, but structure is important. Separating the quizzes with at least one week in between allows students to take a break from each other and focus on other tasks. Adding a team contract before Quiz Quest begins can help each group determine:

- how they will divide the questions for each quiz,
- what they will do if someone does not post an answer by the deadline, and
- when and how they will communicate.

The contract encourages communication and accountability while also introducing group members to each other.

While flipping the script on academy norms is an act of playful rebellion, there are also other ways to inject play into Quiz Quest. For example, quiz questions could feature pop culture references or fun character names. Unexpected questions could be added for extra credit so students can test individual knowledge without risking their grade. And digital badges could be awarded when students earn a specific score on a quiz. Some LMS platforms allow instructors to award badges and achievements automatically. If that is not an option, create a digital image for each quiz and post it with the grade for students who meet the criteria. Each badge could bestow a fun title such as Quiz Whiz or Smarty Pants.

How Students Respond

In a final reflection, students stated they were dreading Quiz Quest when the course began but it quickly became their favorite assignment for two reasons. First, students were not always confident with their answers and appreciated being able to discuss each question with a few classmates. Exchanging answers and explanations allowed students to build critical thinking skills and self-confidence. Second, Quiz Quest helped students meaningfully connect with their group members. Instead of a paper or presentation, they produced an online learning community where they gave and received support.

Some Friendly Competition

In It to Win It

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

N/A

Technique Summary Description

Some students love a little competition. Tap into that competitiveness by adding opportunities for students to compete for prizes or titles.

Technique Description and Instructions

Boost any course activity by adding a little friendly, optional competition. Students who want to compete will enjoy the periodic challenge of earning rewards and recognition.

Two examples, 1) Assignment Superlatives and 2) Race for the Easter Eggs, are shared here:

Assignment Superlatives

Remember high school awards such as Most Likely To Succeed? Create some fun equivalents for a class project and have students vote on which submission deserves each designation. For example, if students need to create a 5-minute video presentation, share that the presentations will be considered for categories such as Most Colorful, Best Narration, and Best Slide Deck. If they are interested in the competition, students can create their presentations based on the category they want to enter. For small classes, students could nominate their video for specific categories. For larger classes, the instructor may need to choose the finalists for each category. A few points of extra credit could be offered for viewing the nominees, voting in the competition, and explaining why their preferred video should receive the recognition. Winners could receive additional extra credit or a virtual badge created by the instructor.

Race for the Easter Eggs

Let students know that they can find hidden items (“Easter Eggs”) in the course throughout the term, and the first student to find each item receives some kind of prize such as a virtual badge, extra credit, or entry into a drawing for a prize like some department swag (sent to the winner via postal mail at the end of the course). What to hide – an image, web links, QR codes. The image could be a fun character or location. The links and QR codes could lead to a playful poll or a popular music video. Where to hide them – in a discussion comment, assignment instructions, weekly reading, assignment submission space, or as a stand-alone item that is set to open at a random point during the week inside a course module. How to report easter eggs – Provide a method of reporting what was found, such as posting a comment on a designated discussion board, sending a message to the instructor, or answering an optional quiz question. It could be a competition where the first student to report the hidden item wins the designated reward or share the reward with any student who reports it.

When to Use It

To keep it interesting for students, it is important to use competition sparingly so it remains a fun activity rather than another task to perform. Class Superlatives should only be used with one assignment during a course. And Easter Eggs should be hidden in no more than half of the course modules and the location should be varied each time. Participation should be optional for any competition activity.

How Students Respond

I have used both techniques and the competitive students appreciate the different way to engage with the course and classmates. There are also students who don’t want the extra steps and appreciate not being forced to participate.

Editorial Comment: *As the author points out, not everyone finds competition fun. So, making this optional is an important point. Of course, this also raises the question about other techniques. Maybe there are people who don’t like puzzles, or stories or other fun touches. There is no simple answer to meeting all the diverse needs of the students in a class. But providing options and, certainly, making your more playful elements optional is a smart strategy to avoid turning your fun into classroom frustration.*

Round and Round We Go: The Perfect Circle Pursuit

Teaching Students Research Design and Statistics Through the Use of a Class Playful Pedagogy Game

Margaret R. Lamar, PhD, LPC, LPCC, NCC

Associate Professor

Department of Counseling

Palo Alto University

mlamar@paloaltou.edu

Number of Students

Works well for any number of students.

Technology Requirements

Students need access to an online spreadsheet and the “Draw a Perfect Circle” website. <https://neal.fun/perfect-circle/>

Professor should have knowledge of basic formula functions in a spreadsheet. Depending on the spreadsheet you use, you should be able to easily run an internet search for how to use a particular function.

Technique Summary Description

Students record a series of scores from “Draw a Perfect Circle” with their dominant and nondominant hands. This web game challenges you to try and draw, as close as you can, a perfect circle. The class scores can be used to calculate some basic statistics, using spreadsheet formula functions. I use this activity when I teach single case research design, but it could also be used to teach experimental research design. It can also be used to learn about descriptive statistics. If you’re not teaching single case design, you could take out the qualitative part. That is specific to single case research design. If you are using this activity in a live class, the discussion part is fun to keep in.

I have done this activity in my synchronous online class and in an asynchronous discussion board as well. For the synchronous class, I would reduce the attempts in each round to 2 or 3, to save time.

Technique Description and Instructions

Format a spreadsheet with the following headings:

Name	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
------	---	---	---	---	---	------	---	---	---	---	---	------	---	---	---	---	---	------

Set up the “mean” column to calculate the student’s mean for each round. I also set up the spreadsheet to calculate the entire class means for each round, putting that formula at the bottom of the spreadsheet.

Give students the following instructions:

- Write your name in the spreadsheet.
- Open the Draw a Perfect Circle Game (you can do this on your computer or your phone or tablet) <https://neal.fun/perfect-circle/>.
- Using your non-dominant hand, draw a circle (you'll need to click "go" first)
- Record your score (it is a percentage) in the column entitled "1."
- Repeat 4 more times for Round 1, recording your score in each subsequent column.
- Pause and answer the following questions (you'll add these notes into the discussion board once you are finished):
 - How are things going?
 - What is challenging?
 - What is easy?
- Now, switch to your dominant hand and play the game, recording your scores 5 times.
- Pause and answer the following questions (again, you'll add these notes into the discussion board once you are finished):
 - How are things going?
 - What is challenging?
 - What is easy?
- Now switch back to your nondominant hand and play 5 more times for the final round, recording your scores.
- Share your mean scores for each round, along with your qualitative notes in the discussion board.

Other discussion questions to use in the discussion board or in the synchronous class.

- What do you notice about the descriptive statistics in your scores and in the overall class scores?
- How was this similar to a single case design method?
- What was the intervention?
- What did we learn from the qualitative data?
- How can we use the qual data to contextualize the quant data?
- How can we use this method to research our interventions with clients?

Additional Comments

Other options for the “intervention” include, instead of switching hands, use a different device (computer vs. phone) or draw a circle with your eyes closed vs. eyes open. Having students help decide what the intervention will be is a great class discussion!

Feeling Experimental?

Discussion Board to Help Students Learn About Research Design and Playfulness

Margaret R. Lamar, PhD, LPC, LPCC, NCC

Associate Professor

Department of Counseling

Palo Alto University

mlamar@paloaltou.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Online discussion board or forum where students complete asynchronous activities in groups.

Technique Summary Description

Students learn about experimental research design by engaging in regular play throughout the week and recording their observations. In research education, students are often exposed to endless “case examples” of research. Think of elementary school math stories (If a train is going east at 100 mph...) and just extend that to graduate school (Classroom A has a GPA of 3.89, and Classroom B has a GPA of 3.75....). I find that students do not have a personal connection to research and giving them case examples keeps the subject removed from them. This activity helps them apply research to their own daily life, learn about the power of playfulness (always trying to build the playful adult army) and learn about the topic of research design.

Technique Description and Instructions

On your discussion board, post the following instructions along with a picture of a feelings chart (easily obtainable through an internet search):

This week, we’re going to run our own experiments to get a better understanding of how basic research designs work. Here’s our working research question: Does play impact our mood?

Null Hypothesis: No, it doesn’t. How dare you even consider such an idea?

Alternative Hypothesis: Of course it does, silly Rabbit!

Here’s how we’re going to set up our experiment.

1. Identify something you can do that is playful. Whatever you choose, it doesn't need to take a long time. Choose something you can plan to do at least three out of seven days this week. Examples include:
 - 1-minute dance party
 - singing as loud as you can to a fun song
 - skipping down the street
 - playing a card game
 - making fart noises
 - doodling
 - playing with play dough
 - build a fort
 - blow bubbles
 - do a puzzle
 - drawing on the sidewalk with sidewalk chalk
 - have a paper airplane throwing contest
2. Set a timer for three to four out of seven days this week when you know you can take a break and do that activity.
3. When the timer goes off, note your mood on the feelings chart below.
4. Do the fun thing!!!!
5. Once you have completed your activity, again, note your mood on the chart below.
6. Once you have done this experiment on three different days, post your findings here.

I'm curious to see how our moods and feelings will change when we engage with play in our daily lives.

Additional Comments

This asynchronous activity allows students to build connections, have fun, and learn about research designs. I use this in a research class, but this could apply to other classes as a connection-former or as an introduction to graduate-level work, or any class that incorporates research. Hearing about the students' choice of activities is a particular treat!

Hypothesis: Giraffes Can Dance

A Variation on Using ‘Giraffes Can’t Dance’ to Teach Research Content

Margaret R. Lamar, PhD, LPC, LPCC, NCC

Associate Professor

Department of Counseling

Palo Alto University

mlamar@paloaltou.edu

Number of Students

Works well for any number of students

Technology Requirements

Students need access to an online document that allows collaboration (e.g. Google Slides, Google Docs, etc). Instructors have the option to use YouTube to play a reading of the story.

Technique Summary Description

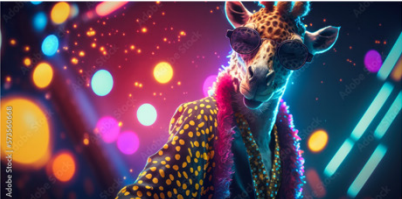

Ever since I read about Lisa Forbes’ use of *Giraffes Can’t Dance*, the classic children’s book by Giles Andreae, in the *Professors at Play PlayBook* (Forbes & Thomas, 2022), I have wanted to include it in my classes. This technique uses a children’s book as the material for a counseling case study. The goal is to get students to focus on the mechanics of the analysis rather than worry about getting it wrong. Creating a treatment plan for a giraffe is quite disarming.

I have used it in clinical applications, as Forbes suggests, but I primarily teach the graduate research course for our counseling students, so I needed to find a different way to integrate it. At the beginning of the course, students are nervous about research and wondering why they need to take it to become counselors. I am always looking for ways to break down those fears and invite them to see research as fun. Using this book shakes things up because they don’t expect such a fun, silly book to be part of learning about scientific research. Nevertheless, I ask them to build a study based on the book’s hypothesis and we all have a fun time. Framing the story as a research hypothesis to be tested allows students to naturally explore concepts such as operational definitions, variables, and study design in a less intimidating context. The exercise helps them see research as a process of discovery and creativity, which is essential for counselors developing critical thinking and evidence-based practice skills.

Technique Description and Instructions

I use this activity in a synchronous class, so I begin by playing a video of someone reading the book on YouTube. This allows students to see the book pictures easier. The video I use also includes closed captions, so it is more accessible for students. I prepare a Google slideshow with multiple slides labeled with each group number.

After the book has been read, I task groups of students (4-6 in each group) with designing an experimental study, using a treatment and control group, to determine if they can support the alternative hypothesis: Giraffes can dance. They are put into groups to work on this activity. I give them about 25 minutes. They create visual representations of their experimental design using Google slideshow. When their group time is up, I have them describe their studies to the large group.

<p>Group 5</p> <p><u>Control</u></p> <p>Zoo giraffes because they may be exposed to music at the zoo already</p> <p>One month of behavioral observation</p> <p>Exposure to "jungle" music, classical music, 90s hip hop, 2000s pop</p> <p>Measuring head swaying, bobbing, knee waggling, and rhythmic tail swinging (movements on-beat)</p> 	 <p><u>Treatment</u></p> <p>Wildlife reserve giraffes</p> <p>One month of behavioral observations</p> <p>Exposure to "jungle" music, classical music, 90s hip hop, and 2000s pop</p> <p>Measuring head swaying, bobbing, knee waggling, and rhythmic tail swinging (movements on-beat)</p> <p>Potential constraint: may be more difficult to observe in open land</p>
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Control Group:
Giraffes not exposed to any music

Treatment Group:

one group of giraffes exposed to EDM music

one group of giraffes exposed to elevator music

How to measure


Observation of how many limbs are moving to the music

Ethical considerations

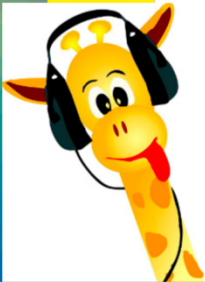
Have giraffes sign consent forms


Seek approval from PETA to prioritize giraffe well-being

Feed giraffes snacks



Room 3





These two slides are typical of the creativity I see from this activity, though there are often videos added, which I wish I could show you. These groups each decided how to operationalize dancing. The first group, as you can see, chose to define and measure dancing as “head swaying, bobbing, knee waggling, and rhythmic tail swinging (movements on-beat)”. The second group defined and measured dancing as how many limbs are moving to the music.

The groups chose how to distinguish their treatment (wildlife reserve giraffes exposed to different kinds of music and giraffes exposed to EDM and elevator music) and control groups (zoo giraffes and giraffes not exposed to any music). For these groups, I also asked them to think about some of the logistics for the study (having the giraffes sign consent forms, seeking PETA approval, and snacks) and potential limitations (observing on open land). I have had groups go into detail about how they will

give some giraffe dance lessons, while some giraffe participants can speak and have a lot of human agency! I learn new things about giraffes every time.

Additional Comments

We have so much fun with this activity. Students get really creative and think up such creative ideas because they're not tied to a serious scientific framework. I would be remiss if I did not mention that one of my student groups found a YouTube video of giraffes dancing. It is a video of two wild giraffes dancing together and it is amazing, so I encourage you to share it with your students if you use this activity.

Editorial Comment: *Remix and reuse! This is a great example of taking another playful technique and remixing it into something that works better for a different class. We approve!*

Operation Observation

Do You See What I See?

Margaret R. Lamar, PhD, LPC, LPCC, NCC

Associate Professor

Department of Counseling

Palo Alto University

mlamar@paloaltou.edu

Number of Students

Works well for any number of students

Technology Requirements

NA

Technique Summary Description

This is a fun, quick introductory activity to open class. The purpose of this activity is to teach observational skills. It also teaches students about the importance of operational definitions and interrater reliability. I use this activity in a counseling course, but it could be applied in education, research, business, marketing, nursing, communication, and criminal justice.

Technique Description and Instructions

I start this at the top of the class before I make announcements or start teaching content. I put students in groups of **three to four** and tell them to choose a behavior that occurs frequently during a typical class period. They will record this behavior throughout the class. I give them three to five minutes, tell them they need to choose quickly and let them know not to share their chosen behavior with other groups. When they come back from the groups, I start class, as usual. When I am ready to finish the activity (see additional comments), I put them back into their original groups and instruct them to share and discuss their results within these groups. They stay in their small groups for about ten minutes. Once back in the large class group, I invite each group to share their behavior, their findings, and the challenges they encountered. Other class discussion questions I pose are:

- How might the observers in your group ensure you were counting the same behavior?
- How did defining the behavior you chose affect how you measured it?
- How did groups reconcile different interpretations of behaviors?

Additional Comments

I typically don't provide examples of behaviors to students because I want them to think creatively. They typically choose things like how many times people touch their face, take a drink, eat something, turn their cameras off, etc.

There are some important things to know when doing this activity. I teach on Zoom, so when I share my screen, students are only able to see me and a few other students. This can be an issue, depending on the behavior they choose. A solution to this is to ask them to observe only me. This usually ends up being quite fun for them (we all get to laugh at how many times I say "ummm" or touch my glasses). Alternatively, I choose not to share a screen during the time they are doing observations. In general, it is best to do this activity during a class where you don't need to share materials on-screen at length or need to do breakout groups.

I used to have them do observations over the period of a two-hour class. I ended the activity with about 30 minutes left, so we could discuss their findings. However, I found that students were so distracted during observations that they had trouble participating in conversation. Now, I let them do observations for about 30-40 minutes while I facilitate class, we stop the activity, discuss findings, and then I can finish my class without the distraction of the activity.

Editorial Comment: *This is a great example of something that is not explicitly playful but is being presented in a playful manner. By not defining the behaviors the students are supposed to observe, they are invited into the activity. There is specifically no right or wrong answer, and the approach is up to the student's interpretation. Imagine the same activity with a provided scorecard and an objective measure of success. It is worth noting that the professor's playful presence is critical in making this activity fun.*

‘nnherit-U’ – A Fun, Family Business Activity

MBA Family Business Module Induction

Ed Gonsalves

ESADE Business School, Barcelona

edwardcharles.gonsalves@esade.edu

Number of Students

Works well with 10-30 students, but you could easily scale it up.

Technology Requirements

- Access to MS Teams or Zoom (or whatever video platform you’re using).
- Ability to share files (so students get the card deck).
- Breakout rooms – these are key for group discussions.
- Your students will need a smartphone or some messaging app (WhatsApp, SMS, etc.) to send and receive feedback.
- Online Whiteboard or Jamboard (optional)

Technique Summary Description

So, here’s the deal: I wanted to create something that would not only help my MBA students reflect on their roles in their own family-owned businesses but also get them to open up about how they see themselves versus how others see them. This is where the “nnherit-U” cards and activity come in. It’s playful, it’s interactive, and it gives everyone a chance to really dig in – and get some feedback from their social surroundings.

Players use a set of *Enneagram-inspired character cards* (which I provide online) to reflect on their family business roles. They also send the cards to their family and friends to see what others perceive. The fun comes in comparing the cards participants pick for themselves with the ones their family and friends pick for them. It’s eye-opening – and opens a whole can of dialogues!

Technique Description and Instructions

How does it work? It’s simple, fun, and takes about 40 minutes (give or take).

Step 1: Self-Reflection and Picking Cards

To start, I share online a deck of 10 character-cards with the class either as a PDF or via the share screen function. These cards are based on typical family business archetypes, like “The Visionary” or “The Harmonizer.” Each card has a quick description, and the students read through them and reflect

on which ones best describe their characters in their family business and socially. If you want to get a clearer idea of the front and back of the cards and their design, or don't want to make your own cards, then you can find some here: <https://nnherit.com/playkits/>

Each participating student picks two cards from the deck:

1. Primary Card: The one that they feel best describes themselves.
2. Secondary Card: The next best fit. Once chosen, they message their picks to me via chat. I encourage them to jot down, in the chat, a few thoughts on why they chose those cards – just a line or two to get them reflecting right off the bat.



Sample Back & Front of character cards (try students can access more about the characters with the QR code on each card)

Step 2: Share with Family and Friends

Next, I have the students take a screenshot of the card deck and ask them each to share it with five of their family members and five of their close friends via their messaging apps. In each message, they invite respondents to pick two cards that best describe the respective student.

The responses need to be back within 15-20 minutes. This keeps the activity moving and ensures everyone gets fresh insights while the session is still going.

Step 3: Reflect on What You Expect

In the 15-10 minutes of waiting, I ask students to reflect on what they expect the responses to be. Do they think their family and friends will pick the same cards? Different ones? This is where things get interesting. You can use a quick poll to ask students how confident they are that the cards will match up.

Step 4: Compare the Results

Once the responses come in, students compare the cards they picked for themselves with the ones their family and social networks chose for them. Hey presto! This leads to great conversations about self-perception versus social perception.

Some questions that I like to use include:

- “Were you surprised by any of the cards chosen for you?”
- “What does the difference between your choices and others’ say about your role in the family business?”

Step 5: Breakout Room Discussions

I then break the students into small groups (using breakout rooms) and give them about 10-15 minutes to reflect on their findings. To keep the dialogue flowing, they are asked to share:

- How did their own choices compare to what others picked for them?
- How might these differences reflect their role in their family or business?
- Any personal learnings that they gained from the process.

Step 6: Debrief

We then come back together into the plenary and share our main takeaways from the breakout sessions- the introverts are asked to share on a Google Jamboard. Students often speak about how they enjoy seeing themselves – and their family dynamics – in a new light.

Additional Comments

This activity is fun and offers an easy, experiential tool for learning. Here’s what participants usually walk away with:

1. **Increased self-awareness:** Students get a sense of how they see themselves in their family business – and how others see them.
2. **Insight into social perception:** They get direct feedback from the people who know them, which often highlights gaps (or misalignments) in self-perception.
3. **Dialogue and reflection:** The activity ignites relevant conversations about leadership, family dynamics, and personal identity- and the tensions these elicit.
4. **Practical takeaways:** Students then apply these insights to how they approach leadership and decision-making in modules throughout the semester.

The beauty of this activity is its flexibility and speed. While I use it synchronously in online settings (on MS Teams or Zoom), it can easily be adapted for asynchronous and face-to-face classes. Instead of live feedback, students could gather responses over a longer period and then reflect through an on-

line discussion board or journal. This playful online exercise helps build self-awareness, encourages collaborative dialogue, and deepens students' understanding of their roles in their family businesses in ways that are both meaningful and memorable.

Editorial Comment: *Here is another great example of opening up the virtual classroom. Inviting students to reach out to friends and family brings in a novel element that can stimulate discussion. While this may not look like play in some sense, we would point to how this assignment plays with the norms of what is considered in and out of the class. And the reflection activity has a fun element of testing your thoughts about yourself against other people who know you. We think this is definitely playful.*

Choose Your Own Adventure

Be the Hero in Your Own Learning

Bryce Woolley, BA, JD, Esq.

Associate Professor of Law

Academic Success and Bar Preparation Department

Southwestern Law School

bwoolley@swlaw.edu

Number of Students

Can be done in a large classroom, small classroom, HyFlex, synchronous online, or assigned/provided for individual asynchronous access.

Technology Requirements

Students need access to Canvas and/or other remote learning platforms compatible with H5P.

What is H5P?

HTML5 Package, abbreviated as H5P, is a free online e-learning platform that enables educators to create interactive content, including quizzes, videos, and games. Content creators do not need to have any knowledge or experience with HTML coding to use this platform. H5P content can be easily integrated into other major online platforms like Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle. For example, on Canvas you can include an H5P link to an embedded quiz: students click the link, take the quiz, submit, and their submission is automatically graded according to your rubric. There are also more fun ways to use H5P.

Branching Scenarios

H5P branching scenarios have been used to train professionals ranging from sales representatives to nurses. A branching scenario is a series of questions, and your answers will direct you down different paths to a variety of conclusions.

Iteratives

H5P branching scenarios lend themselves to iterations of varying sophistication. At the most basic, the exercise looks like a series of questions that pop up on the screen, like a survey. At the most sophisticated, they can be in the form of an interactive video with professional actors and sound design.

Technique Summary Description

Students play a branching decision game to achieve the optimal result specified by the task.

Technique Description and Instructions

“Choose Your Adventure” was a popular style of books in the ‘80s and ‘90s, typically set in a fantasy context (think *Lord of the Rings*). You would read a few pages, be faced with a choice, then go to one page or another. For example:

You and your party have been hiking for hours. You come across a cave. Your traveling companion asks, “What do we do?”

Go into the cave – turn to page 8.

Keep following the trail – turn to page 15.

The outcomes vary wildly from optimal, to okay, everyone died of dysentery and mission failed.

I use this game after a substantive unit has been fully covered. This requires students to tackle factually specific applications of the legal rules they just learned. They may not feel ready, but the game aspect lowers the stakes of failing.

In the law school classroom, constitutional criminal procedure’s 4th Amendment search and seizure doctrine is particularly well-suited to this type of game. Students are in the role of a police officer, and their goal is to obtain as much admissible evidence as possible. This can include three or more branching decisions. Paths can lead to: (1) no admissible evidence, (2) One of three items of admissible evidence, (3) two of three items of admissible evidence, or (3) three items of admissible evidence.

The rules and gameplay are basic:

- (1) Access the H5P exercise.
- (2) Read the prompt.
- (3) Make your choice.
- (4) Read the next prompt.
- (5) Make your next choice.
- (6) Repeat however many times your game requires or allows.
- (7) Optional: Prizes are given to the student/groups that get the most admissible evidence (or best achieve the goal given).

The game can be played live in person in front of a classroom but is particularly well-suited to online play. We can all play at once by using a poll function to determine the next step. Or platforms like Zoom allow the professor to assign or allow students to form teams via breakout rooms. Students are allowed the space to debate choices without the specter of the professor looming over them. Once reconvened, students may be called on or use the “raise hand” function to participate and argue their choices. If another group makes a different choice (which they likely will, at least some of the time), debate ensues. This can be done for each choice or at the end of the game. Asynchronously, students can play the game on their own and get their results.

Learning is its own reward, but prizes are easy to incorporate to motivate our extrinsic-reward-oriented learners. Prizes may be given for the most optimal performance (i.e., getting all three pieces of admissible evidence). There can be multiple winners.

This game is great for counterfactual exercises. What other decisions could be made? What other pieces of evidence could we throw in there? Add more branches!

Additional Comments

This game is versatile in both content and required time. It is also a great launch point to encourage students to design their own hypotheticals to facilitate learning. Sophisticated online learning platforms can optimize live delivery, but it can also be done asynchronously with basic, easily accessible platforms.

Additional Resources

For more information and tutorials, visit h5p.org.

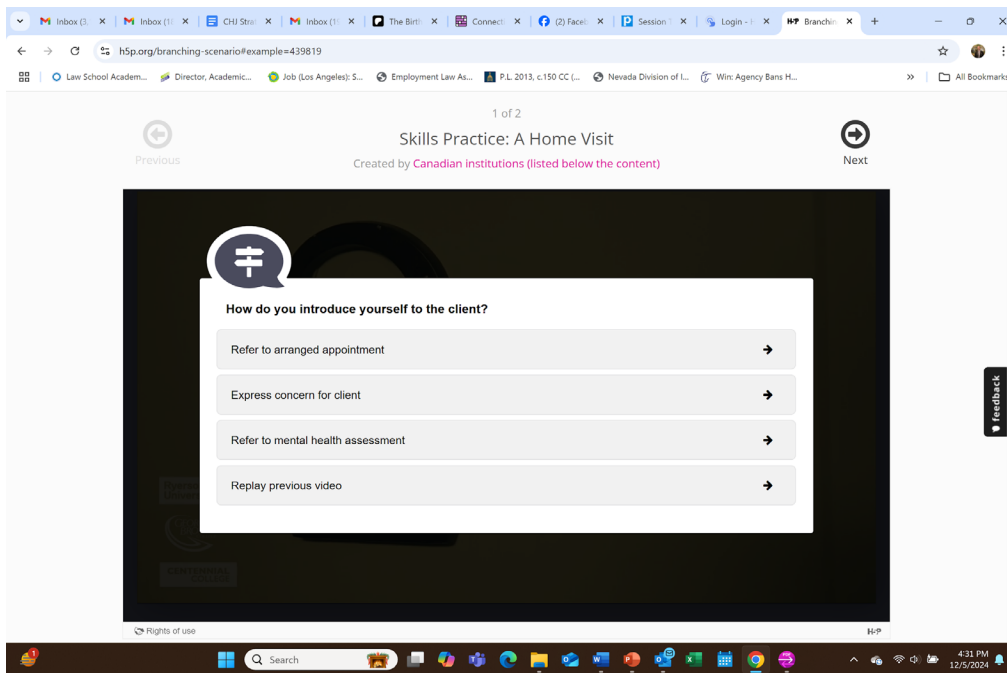
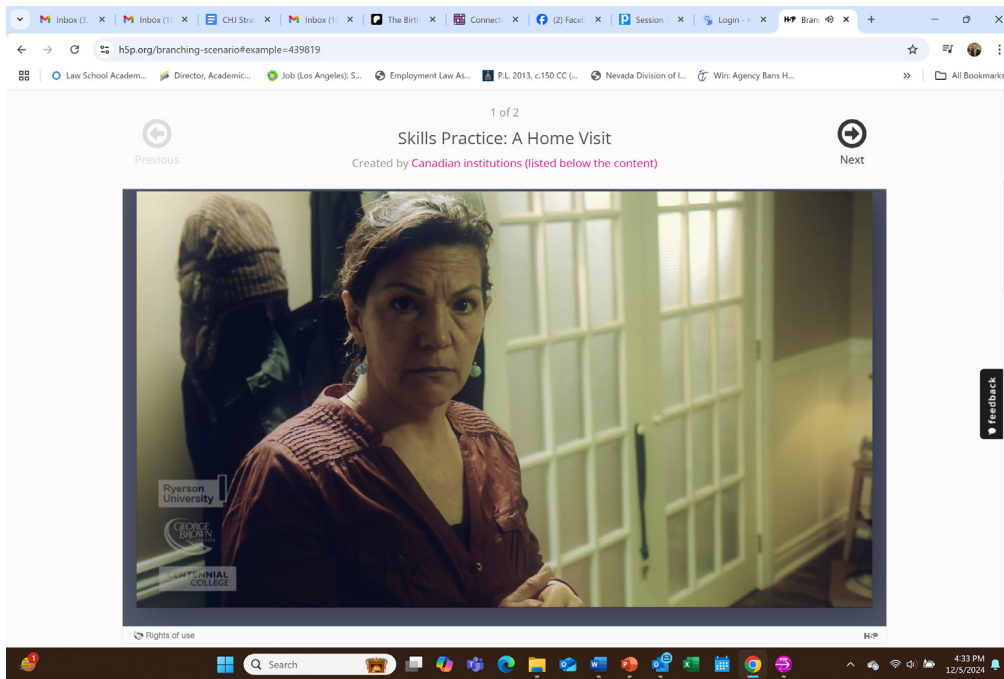
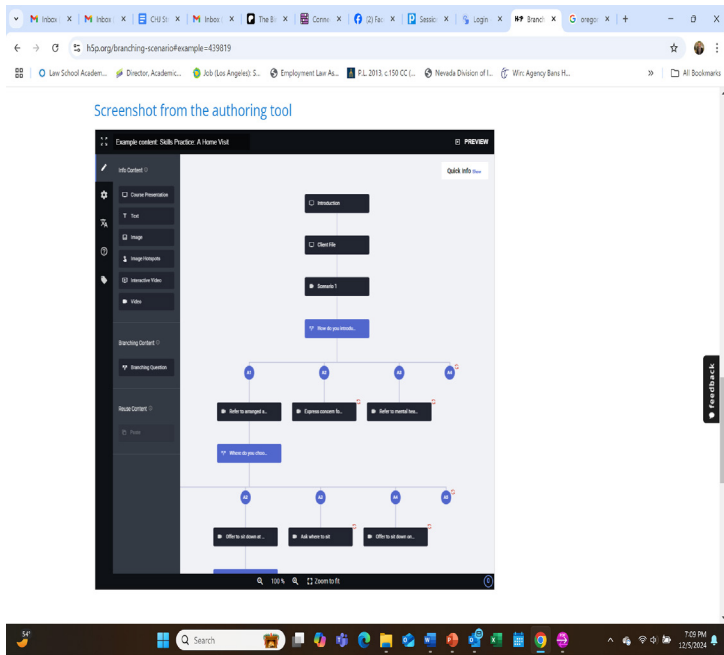


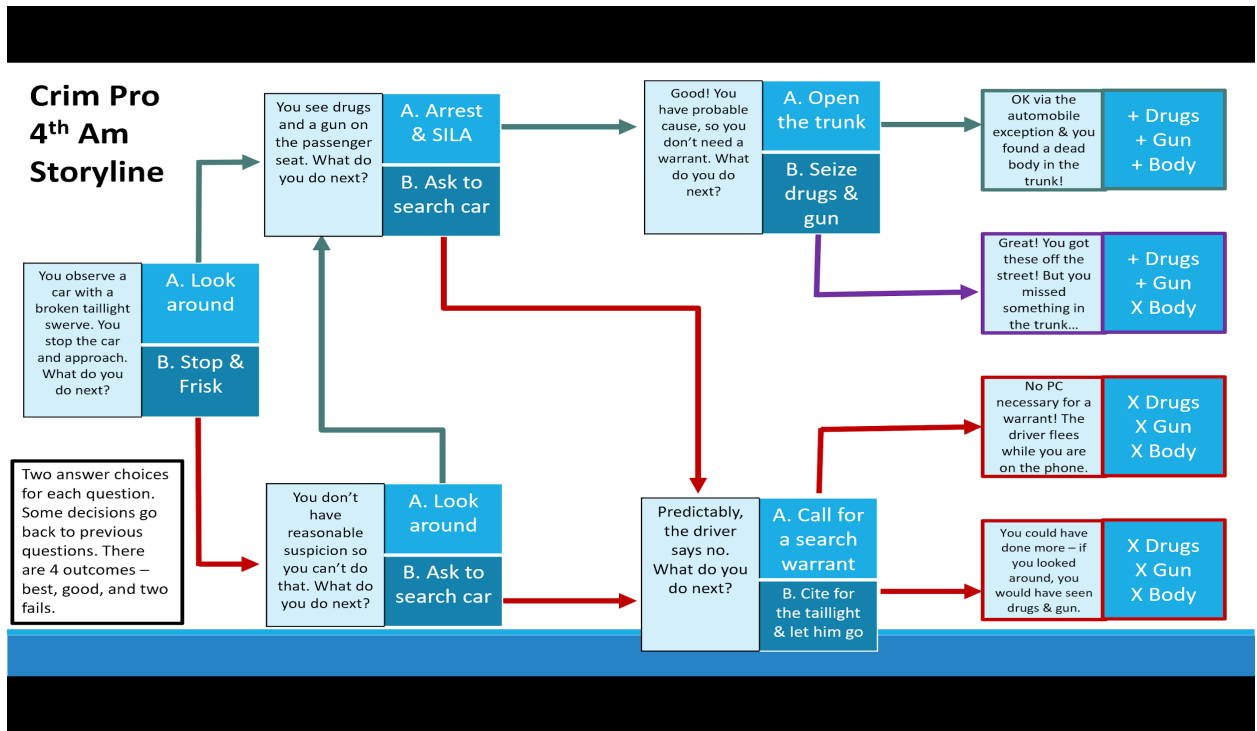
Image: Screenshot of question from H5P “A Home Visit” demonstration.



Screenshot of actor in video from H5P “A Home Visit” demonstration.



Screenshot of authoring tool used in H5P to create branching scenarios. The swirling red arrows return you to a previous question, whereas the other moves you on.



Flowchart of 4th Amendment Search and Seizure branching scenario.

Reinforce, Punish, Repeat

Teaching Conditioning Through Video Games

Bryan D. Poole, PhD

Professor of Psychology

Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences

Lee University

bpoole@leeuniversity.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students.

Technology Requirements

Students must have access to a smartphone, computer, or console that can play videogames.

Technique Summary Description

Students play any videogame and discuss how operant conditioning principles encourage continual gameplay and discourage specific actions within a game.

Technique Description and Instructions

In an online psychology course, students first learn the principles of operant conditioning by watching a brief video in which I explain how reinforcement and punishment can shape an organism's behavior. I then ask students to apply the content to their lives in a relevant, playful way via the following instructions:

1. Find a videogame to play or download a free one. Any game will do!
2. While playing the game, consider the various ways operant conditioning principles (e.g., via visual effects, sounds, or other events) are deployed.
3. After playing the game, discuss what game you played and how it specifically uses the following types of reinforcement and punishment to shape the player's engagement with the game, encouraging certain behaviors and discouraging others:
 - a. Positive reinforcement (e.g., rewards for success)
 - b. Negative reinforcement (e.g., removal of obstacles for continued effort)
 - c. Positive punishment (e.g., penalties for mistakes)
 - d. Negative punishment (e.g., loss of rewards for failure)

Students then share their findings with the class, either through live discussion or in a discussion forum to promote thoughtful interaction. Where possible, students are also invited to record themselves playing the game and discussing their observations in real-time, which they can upload to our learning management system.

Additional Comments

Videogames offer an engaging platform to explore various topics in psychology. For example, videogames can be implemented to teach classical conditioning, flow, social learning theory, self-determination theory, aggression, and group dynamics—to name only a few. Giving students a chance to play games while learning about psychology can increase engagement, motivation, and learning.

Editorial Comment: Sometimes, making a lesson more fun is as easy as picking a more playful example. Videogames are designed to be fun. Using them as a class example borrows some of the natural play embodied in the games and creates a spillover into the content. Yes, we think that just having playful examples can push a standard assignment into the realm of playful pedagogy.

From Boring to Bedazzled

Mastering Marketplace Makeovers Utilizing Aristotle’s Rhetorical Proofs

Kelly Soczka Steidinger, MA

Behavioral Science & Communication Instructor

General Education

Mid-State Technical College

Kelly.steidinger@mstc.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

For a web conference or Zoom class, you will need digital copies or screenshots of Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, or eBay advertisements. If you choose items from your geographic area, I suggest removing the address or any personal identification in the ad. In an asynchronous course, students will provide a hyperlink to the listing they choose to revise.

Technique Summary Description

The purpose of collaborative learning activity is to allow students to practice integrating Aristotle’s Rhetorical Proofs into Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, or eBay listings when rewriting the item description to enhance students’ persuasive writing or speaking skills. In a synchronous course, students work in teams to write the winning listing that creatively meets the four rhetorical proofs and convinces the instructor to purchase the item. In an asynchronous modality, students vote for the best listing by awarding stars on a Padlet or a discussion board to choose the best-revised advertisement. Students have enjoyed the opportunity to be creative, zany, and competitive!

Technique Description and Instructions

In 2014, I heard the National Public Radio story, *Boring Craig’s List Ads Could be a Thing of the Past*, which discussed a group of three undergraduate students who attempted to start a free advertising agency designed to help people revamp their Craigslist postings to be more persuasive. Unfortunately, the free advertising agency did not last, but their story inspired the following activity that has stood the test of time in my public speaking and English composition courses.

Aristotle proposed multiple methods of persuasion that writers and speakers can use to effectively persuade their audiences: Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos. Rapp (2020) states, “Persuasion comes about either through the character (ethos) of the speaker, the emotional state (pathos) of the hearer, or the argument (logos) itself” (para. 5). In addition, Kairos refers to the timeliness of the argument and can uniquely create a sense of urgency (Singleton, 2021). The purpose of collaborative learning activity is to allow students to practice integrating Aristotle’s Rhetorical Proofs into Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, or eBay listings when rewriting the item description to enhance students’ persua-

sive writing or speaking skills. When applying appeals to this activity, students should creatively enhance the credibility of the product being sold, influence potential buyers through emotional appeals, appeal to buyers' logical sense of fiscal responsibility, and create a sense of urgency to purchase the item.

In a synchronous course, this activity takes an estimated 20 minutes for students to complete when working in teams to write the winning listing that creatively meets the four rhetorical proofs and convinces the instructor to purchase the item. In an asynchronous modality, students vote for the best listing by awarding stars on a Padlet or a discussion board to choose the best-revised advertisement.

Synchronous Instructions

1. In face-to-face or virtual web conference classrooms (Zoom), split students into groups of three to five students.
2. Each group is given a different Craigslist object that is "for sale" and told to either revise the current advertisement to incorporate Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos or to start from scratch and construct a new listing using the rhetorical proofs.
3. Groups are also told that the exercise is a competition with the instructor as the subjective judge. The judge is looking for the correct use of the proofs, use of creative language, and exceptional oration skills when reading their new paragraph to the class.
4. Groups are then moved into separate Zoom breakout rooms to work on revising their item descriptions.
5. After roughly 20 minutes, students will reconvene in the main Zoom room. Each group chooses a member to read the advertisement out loud to the class for analysis. After the description is read, the class is asked to identify how the group has utilized the rhetorical proofs. After each group has read its description, the instructor, as the subjective judge, awards a score, and a winning group is chosen.

Asynchronous Instructions

1. Students should find a Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, or eBay item to sell to their classmates by providing a screenshot of the listing without the seller's information since a hyperlink may disappear if the item is sold.
2. Students will provide a copy of the screenshot using a learning management discussion board or a Padlet and will either revise the current language of the listing to incorporate Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos or start from scratch and construct a new listing using the rhetorical proofs. For the asynchronous course, I use this activity as a low-stakes formative assessment.
3. Once students have completed their postings, they should review their classmates' postings during the following week of the course and pick three postings that they think executed this assignment exceptionally well by awarding them each with five stars.

Additional Comments

Students love both the competitive nature of the exercise and the unique items they need to sell. In

the past, students have had to sell a wire basket, poker chips, Christmas wreaths, vintage clothing, and a homemade Green Bay Packer clock. Additionally, this activity solidifies the conceptualization of Aristotle's proofs in the minds and has improved the effectiveness of their utilization of the proofs in later assessments. Since listings are always changing on Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace, you can pick new items regularly so that the activity never becomes stale!

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‘Blue Bowl’ Teaching

The Power of Online Scavenger Hunts

Dane Stickney, PhD

Assistant Teaching Professor

School of Education and Human Development

University of Colorado Denver

Dane.Stickney@ucdenver.edu

Jane Smith

Workforce Development Manager

TreeForce Pre-apprenticeship Program

The Park People & Denver Digs Trees

Jane@theparkpeople.org

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students

Technology Requirements

Online video conferencing access, ideally with web cameras and microphones engaged. They will also need to be willing to run around whatever setting they are in.

Technique Summary Description

Students and teachers share on-the-fly prompts, everyone runs around their space to find an example, they share, and do it again. Beyond the protocol, though, being able to give up control as a facilitator and allow the session to veer into the unknown is scary, thrilling, and may alter your pedagogy forever.

Technique Description and Instructions

Scavenger hunts are an old-school way to get people moving, having fun, and sharing stuff and the stories behind them. Online spaces provide a new twist on this old favorite.

This online technique first emerged organically during the school closures resulting from the COVID-19 virus when one of the authors, then a high-school teacher, was leading a class and the other author was observing as part of a research-practice partnership. The moment was so rich and special that both the K12 and university educators included riffs on the assignment as part of their core pedagogy. As such, we have two versions of online scavenger hunts to share.

First, a process that focuses on “things”

1. While in the synchronous classroom (we use Zoom or Google Meet), explain the aim and rules of the game:
 - a. Define “scavenge” (to search for and collect things), scavenger (one who collects things), and scavenger hunt (a game in which people interact with their surroundings to find random things).
 - b. Explain the rules:
 - i. At first, the facilitator will describe an item (i.e.: something blue), and everyone has 60 seconds to run around their context and find an item.
 - ii. Be sure to establish ground rules about what may be in and out of bounds for the activity (ie: no drugs, weapons, or underwear).
 - iii. Each person shares what they found and what it means to them (if anything).
2. Play the game.
 - a. The process repeats, but eventually, once the flow is well understood, the facilitator can assign student volunteers to call out the item for the next rounds.
3. Set either a time limit or score goal to end the game.
 - a. A 12-minute break works well, allowing for two or three hunts.
 - b. In terms of scoring, you could give a point each time a person finds an item that meets the charge, have students vote on the best item each round, or something else.

Second, a process that focuses on feelings and experiences

1. While in the synchronous classroom (we use Zoom or Google Meet), explain the aim and rules of the game:
 - a. Define scavenge (to search for and collect things), scavenger (one who collects things), and scavenger hunt (a game in which people interact with their surroundings to find random things).
 - i. In this case, though, your hunt will take place internally in your head, heart, thoughts and feelings.
 - b. Explain the rules:
 - i. At first the facilitator will ask a question.
 - ii. The learners will reflect on the question for a minute, even consulting calendars, journals, or other artifacts if needed to answer.
 - iii. Each person shares about what they found and its impact or significance

2. Play the game.

a. The questions:

- i. How are things in your work (for teachers, that's the classroom; for K12 students, it's usually an after-school job)?
- ii. How are things with your studies?
- iii. How are things in your heart?
- iv. How are things in your head?
- v. What is the funniest thing that has happened in the past week?

3. We recommend that the facilitator answer these questions first, acting as a model of vulnerability or reflection. We often approach this with a balance of humor, self-deprecation, and honest struggle, and we tend to answer all five questions at once.

- a. We then give learners in our space three to five minutes each to share. Sometimes, they cover all the topics. Sometimes, they go deep on one. Sometimes, they cry before they can answer. Sometimes, we're all crying because we're laughing so hard.
- b. Through this process, the facilitator and learners see each other as human as opposed to simply an evaluator or knowledge sharer. With that kind of connection, difficult conversations – about something as small as a missed deadline or as big as a battle with anxiety – are much easier to have and mediate.

Additional Comments

On a Thursday in early May 2020, the lead author logged on to Google Meet to attend a local high school class remotely. He had been working as a field researcher with this class during their in-person meetings, but the teacher and students had decided to invite me into their online space, as well, once classes were moved because of the COVID-19 virus.

Toward the middle of the online class on this particular day, something small but magical happened. A sophomore student interrupted the regular discussion of the students' usual civics focus.

"Oh my God, Daniel (pseudonym per IRB), we have that same bowl!" the girl exclaimed, as her classmate Daniel, startled, looked up from eating cereal out of a chipped blue ceramic bowl that was barely visible in his video.

The teacher, the co-author of this piece, immediately responded: "Wait, watch this." Still on-screen, she stood up, opened her cabinet, and pulled out the same blue bowl. "I don't know if it's the exact same, but it sure is similar."

The entire Google Meet' Brady Bunch-like video squares all lit up, some for the first time in months as many students have done their online learning with a dark avatar. The teacher of this class had asked them all several times since the virus outbreak to turn on their screens in the name of community, to make it feel just a little like it used to in person. Usually, they ignored her.

But not this time.

Most of the students on the class video disappeared briefly before returning with bowls of their own, mostly blue ones. The girl who screeched class to a halt showed Daniel what she was talking about. Her bowl sure did look a lot like his. Other students, in an effort not to be left out, showed off bowls of their own, even if they weren't blue. A bright orange plastic bowl and a molcajete made an appearance before the students put me on the spot. The lead author showed off a small bowl he bought at a student art sale in college.

This moment resonated deeply with both the university educator and the K12 teacher, not simply because it was a bright glimmer in a dark time for the students, teacher, and researcher alike but also because this moment happened in an online space. Through these online class observations, interviews with students and teachers, and our own experience working with teacher cohorts in online contexts, it's clear that the forced shift to online learning caused several problems. Spotty communication, poor attendance, an eroding classroom community, and a general lack of rigorous and relevant content all jump out as some of the more prevalent tensions.

But beautiful moments – these blue bowl moments where relationships, community, and humanity drown out all of the noise of online learning – are possible. The experience in that online high school class made things click for us as digital pedagogues in different ways. We hope this old-school and simple approach unlocks playful connections for other educators in the online world.

Editorial Comment: *Agreed. Magical. Don't we all need more magic in our classrooms?*

Virtual Realia

A Tactile Approach to Online Learning

Bryce Woolley, BA, JD, Esq.

Associate Professor of Law

Academic Success and Bar Preparation Department

Southwestern Law School

bwoolley@swlaw.edu

Number of Students

Can be done in a large classroom, small classroom, HyFlex, or synchronously online.

Technology Requirements

Students need access to Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or other online videoconferencing software.

Technique Summary Description

Students team up and assume the roles of grocery store employees to stock indoor and outdoor displays of produce. This activity is intended to teach the skill of analogical reasoning in a fun and playful way using realia.

What is Realia?

Realia is the use of objects and materials from everyday life as teaching materials. The realia in this activity are fruits and vegetables.

What is analogical reasoning?

Analogical reasoning is fundamental to legal argument and a skill critical to success in law school. It is comparing and contrasting (analogizing and distinguishing) the facts from previously decided court cases to your case to argue for a particular outcome. Our facts are like this case, so it should come out the same way. Our facts are different from this case, so it should come out the other way.

Technique Description and Instructions

Prior to the class, ask students to purchase fruits and vegetables from the grocery store or have their already-purchased fruits and vegetables on hand. You must also have fruits and vegetables on hand to demonstrate and to be a surrogate for students whom are unable or decline to incur that expense. The fruits and vegetables must all be different and about fifteen items are optimal, but the activity can be successful with a minimum of six.

Students tend to get more excited when this activity is gamified, so divide them into teams. 3-5 students per team is optimal. Then deliver the instructions, which are a bit complicated:

1. You are an employee of the Produce Shoppe tasked with setting up the indoor and outdoor displays of fruits and vegetables.
2. Each display must contain three (3) items.
3. The indoor and outdoor display displays will be set up by a shared characteristic of the produce (i.e., color, shape, etc).
4. The three (3) items in the outdoor display must share this common characteristic.
5. The three (3) items in the indoor display must also share that characteristic but in a different way (i.e., outdoor display is green color, indoor is red color; outdoor display is round shape, indoor is oblong shape).
6. Give teams some time (about 5-8 minutes) to brainstorm using their fruits and vegetables together (i.e., student one might have a red tomato to pair with student two's red pepper).
7. Call on each team to present their displays – using the fruits and vegetables they have in their hands. They must show it!
8. Debate ensues (unless it's easy – yes, they are red, yes, they are green). The class – or the professor – renders judgment on the debatable ones. If the characteristic is firmness, doesn't an avocado go from firm to smushy over time? If the characteristic is banana-shaped/curved, while the present sweet potato is curved, most aren't so should it count?
9. At the end of time (one-hour is an optimal minimum), announce the winning team! Really, everybody wins because now they have healthy produce to eat.

Additional Comments

Gen Z, those born between 1997-2012, will be college and post-graduate students for the next decade. Interestingly, the primacy of kinesthetic learning style among Gen Z has skyrocketed over previous generations. So has the experience of online learning and “Zoom-University.” This makes any form of tactile online learning much more important. Things as mundane and easily accessible as fruits and vegetables can bring a tactile experience to online education, particularly when used in games. So, let's go to the grocery store!



Various fruits and vegetables (the realia!) that you and your students can use to learn analogical reasoning.



Produce Shoppe Exercise: Examples

EXTERIOR DISPLAY: RED			INTERIOR DISPLAY: GREEN		
Red Bell Pepper	Roma Tomato	Red Delicious Apple	Avocado	Zucchini	Green Bell Pepper
EXTERIOR DISPLAY: FRUIT			INTERIOR DISPLAY: VEGETABLE		
Red Bell Pepper	Roma Tomato	Red Delicious Apple	Carrot	Broccoli	Onion
EXTERIOR DISPLAY: FRUIT			INTERIOR DISPLAY: VEGETABLE		
Pomegranate	Cherry	Strawberry	Cabbage	Celery	Green Onion
EXTERIOR DISPLAY: RED			INTERIOR DISPLAY: GREEN		
Pomegranate	Cherry	Strawberry	Cabbage	Celery	Green Onion

Examples presented to the class before the exercise. Each example represents properly awarded points.

Editorial Comment: Online doesn't have to mean exclusively digital, as this technique shows. Having students get their hands on something can help bring the topic to life. Also, we have it on good authority that this technique works even better if the professor wears a banana costume while running the activity!

Whole Course Play

“The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.”

— Arnold J. Toynbee, lecture, University of Denver, 1964

Whatever else he was getting at, this great historian civilization pointed at something that sits at the heart of playful pedagogy. Yes, play in the classroom can be energizing and stress-relieving. But it can also support, supplement, and improve learning. Why sprinkle play on a course like Mary Poppins and her spoonful of sugar when you can make the benefits into the core of the course?

We know it’s easier said than done. But as this section illustrates, it can be done.

To expand the idea of what whole course play can be, we have also included techniques that are overarching approaches to introducing play into your class. The best part about playful pedagogy—it starts with the ideas that one size does not fit all and opens the lid on the jar of possibility!

Forensic Entomology Alternate Reality Game (ARG)

Real Pretending

Erin Bauer, Entomology Lecturer

Department of Entomology

University of Nebraska—Lincoln

ebauer2@unl.edu

Number of Students

30-50 each semester, undergraduate and graduate level

Technology Requirements

LMS for asynchronous courses (i.e., Canvas); access to email, internet, Microsoft Word products, and social media (YouTube, Facebook, etc.) platforms. Links to other tools, such as Padlet, will be provided within the online course.

Technique Summary Description

This technique seeks to engage students in online forensic entomology course content through an alternate reality game (ARG). An ARG is a complex, immersive experience combining puzzles, clues, transmedia storytelling (using various platforms like websites, social media, discussion boards, and videos to spread a narrative), player collaboration, and real-life elements or tasks to create an unfolding fictional storyline. A murder mystery focusing on several fictional crime scene scenarios will be presented. Students will learn relevant content designated as “evidence” and interact with characters throughout the semester, following clues and applying what they learn both to assignments and collaborative discussions. A final project synthesizes student knowledge and allows creativity and autonomy in “solving” the three cases through game-based learning, based on content and methods provided within the course.

Technique Description and Instructions

Although this technique is being used for an online entomology course, with a change of content, it can be applied to other disciplines as well. Note that implementation of this method can be gradual or adapted to your needs. It can include a course with just a few gamified elements (puzzles, badges, etc.), or it can be fully gamified, such as the alternate reality game where the narrative spreads throughout the entire semester and is fully embedded in the course. The general outline for designing the gamified elements needed is as follows:

1. **Determine a storyline that fits your area.** A murder mystery fits well with forensic entomology, but there may be other genres that better meet your needs. For example, a history class may have a time travel theme, or an entrepreneur class could help its characters with their quirky new business. After creating learning objectives for your course, you may wish to outline how your story ideas can best merge with your course content.

2. **Determine what tools/resources you will need.** Depending upon what types of content you want to create, you may need help from instructional designers, website designers, actors or coworkers (to play your characters) or other specialized help. The gamified elements are up to you, so you can go as simple or complex as you can with the budget, tools, or resources you have at your disposal while still offering a playful course.
3. **Build (or revise) your course around the story.** For example, for forensic entomology, students are helping a homicide detective and forensic entomologist with cases where insect evidence plays a crucial role. Important aspects that students learn in the course directly relate to story elements (i.e., keep learning goals and outcomes in mind). Students are referred to as “Detectives,” and course modules are listed as “Evidence.”
4. **Create gamified elements and release them at integral places during the course.** These can be integrated into related topic modules or weekly content and might include discussion boards where students can brainstorm ideas, hidden clues that students only find if they engage with the assigned content (such as the syllabus!), interactive activities, puzzles, virtual scavenger hunts, social media and email interaction with characters, videos, photos, or other immersive content. AI can be a useful tool here. For example, I wrote a script about one of the fictional cases and had AI generate a newscast about it. The reporter was a realistic AI and I incorporated a real video into the content.
5. **Align assessments with gamified elements.** Examples might be giving points for completion of puzzles, discussion contributions, or reflections. Some of these may be offered as extra credit while others should be required. Integrating cooperative tasks or collaboration, which are important aspects of an ARG, can encourage division of labor and teamwork. Online badges can also be integrated to reward students for specific successes.
6. **Place clues strategically throughout the course content to ensure students see it through normal engagement with the material.** Clues should not be so deeply hidden that students grow frustrated. The instructor or fictional characters should keep in regular contact with students, giving them hints about where to go next to complete assessments. The final project instructions should be available at the beginning of the course so that students know what they are working towards.
7. **Launch the course.** It’s important that with this type of technique, you and/or your fictional characters regularly keep in touch with your students and guide them through the process. This will build rapport and ideally immerse students more in the story world you have created. This can be accomplished through regular LMS messages, announcements, video clips, email, social media, or other communication tools.
8. **Encourage students to work together on aspects of the course.** You can decide if you want to offer group or individual projects, but you may want to create a discussion board where students can post clues they’ve found to assist the whole class. With an ARG, cooperation is essential as it is meant to be a collective endeavor where individuals share evidence they find with the group and collaborate on many of the tasks to reach a common goal. For example, in the Forensic Entomology course, student groups complete final reports about each case based on what they have discovered during the semester about the victims, suspects, and insect evidence and produce “recommendations” for the fictional homicide detective and forensic entomologist.

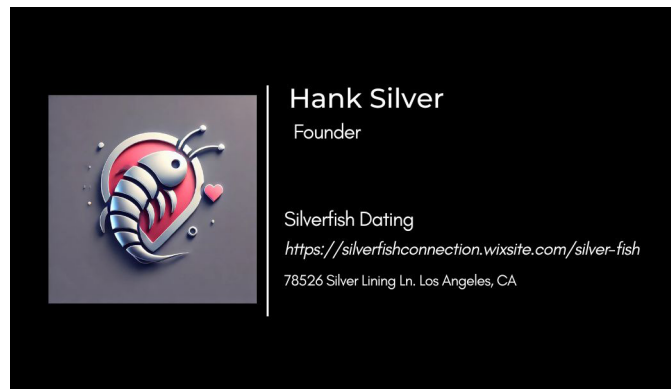
9. **Evaluate your course.** Once you have completed the course gamification for the first time, take inventory of what worked and what didn't (for both you and your students; student surveys can help gauge this) and then adjust these elements for the next class. You may want to start out with just a few gamified elements and work up to a more full-fledged game in future semesters of the course.

Additional Comments

Please note that developing this level of gamification will require a larger time investment at the outset. Once the videos and other elements are created, however, they can be reused in future iterations of the course, with the exception of any potential new content or slight revisions.

Overall, this game-based learning method will introduce students to numerous content-related resources as well as engross them in a fictional storyline. The intent is to encourage engagement with, motivation for, and retention of the information through immersion, cooperation, and an interesting plot that students will be invested in!

Editorial comment: Interested in ARG-type games? One great resource for those who are not quite ready to write their own scenarios is the Reacting to the Past Project (<https://reactingconsortium.org/>). These complete classroom games tend to focus on politics and history. But they provide a wealth of content and ideas for anyone considering large-scale classroom roleplaying!- Eds.



Oligopoly

A Monopoly-Style Course Progression

Mysti Gates, MEd, MA TESOL

English Instructor

English Department

University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain

mgates@uarichmountain.edu

Number of Students

Ideally, the technique will work well for any number of students.

Technology Requirements

For this technique, Genially is the online platform of choice. According to their website, “Genially is a cloud-based platform for building interactive learning and communication experiences.”

Technique Summary Description

Oligopoly— n. a state of limited competition in which a market is shared by a small number of producers or sellers. This online, interactive game allows students in online courses to earn bonus points and/or extra credit by completing specific tasks.

Technique Description and Instructions

This technique builds on the concepts of Monopoly where students have game pieces and roll dice to determine their next moves. Instead of rolling the die/dice — I’m leaning toward one — for their first couple of turns, students will initially advance by successfully completing a series of tasks (see screenshot below). Then, students will progress by rolling a virtual die, with the goal of making a full circle around the game board.

Rather than buying and collecting properties, the object of the game is to complete enough tasks on the virtual game board to make a full circle that ends on “Go.” Each of the tasks included on the game board encourages student participation and success, and the successful completion of color-blocked spaces translates to additional tasks or tokens.

The green icons are a work in progress, but the plan is to have them correspond to prizes, advancements, or penalties — similar to Chance or Community Chest cards in Monopoly. The prizes will correspond with those I already use for BINGO and Scavenger Hunts:

1. **Give me five!** - 5 bonus points on assignment of 25 points or fewer
2. **10 to ONE** - 10 bonus points on an assignment worth at least 50 points

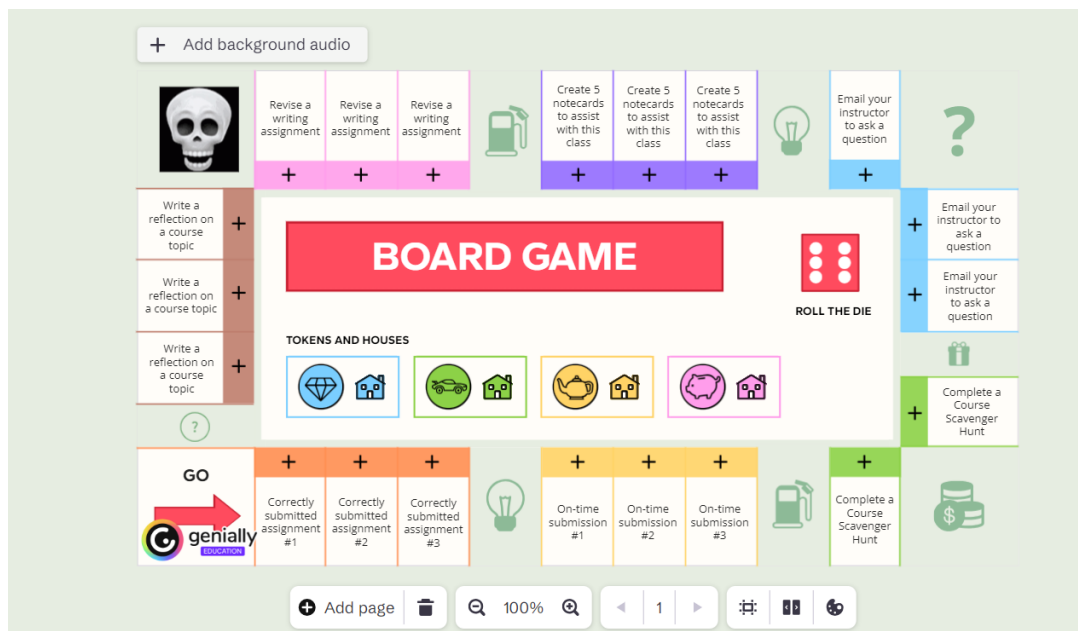
3. **Hole in ONE Prize** - Replace any ONE zero on an assignment prior to today's date

4. **Oops! Token** - No late point deductions on an assignment of my choice
(*Must still be turned in within the Late Work Policy as outlined in the Syllabus)

The ? icon will coincide with the “Tokens and Houses” icons in blue, green, yellow, and pink. These will be randomly assigned using the [Wheel of Names](https://wheelofnames.com/) method (<https://wheelofnames.com/>). The animated skull includes a sinister laugh and sends students back to square one — literally.

Additional Comments

It is definitely a “work in progress,” but once all of the platform-specific kinks are worked out, and the audio and animation are complete, I believe it will add an encouraging and engaging experience for students in asynchronous courses.



Building Playful Mindset

Play is Everywhere

A Nicole Pfannenstiel, PhD

Associate Professor of Digital Writing

English & World Languages

Millersville University

AmberNicole.Pfannenstiel@millersville.edu

Becca Betty, MA

Adjunct Professor

English & World Languages

Millersville University

rhbetty@millersville.edu

Number of Students

Works well with any number of students.

Technology Requirements

Students need to access a digital community space. This can include a social media site with shared tagging for the class to find/access or institutionally provided discussion space within a learning management system. Ideally, these 'extra' posts fit within existing posts to draw attention to a playful mindset.

Technique Summary Description

Students choose to participate in optional post shares, but the prompts focus on building playfulness within the world and are not connected to course content and skill growth. This approach to posting was developed for online asynchronous undergraduate and graduate courses.

Technique Description and Instructions

This approach fosters community, helping the whole learner feel seen within the digital online space through playful posting. In class, this is called the “Dr. P Game,” a name that helps participants engage with the ‘routine’ digital space used within an online class without subverting the rules drastically. The name can be easily adapted for a variety of classrooms and learning environments.

For this playful mindset activity, students are encouraged to create ‘extra’ discussion post in response to silly prompts. This design supports students seeing the discussion space differently, connecting to peers playfully, and choosing to share non-class related content.

A note: These posts are extra credit in class, pushing closer to play than playful and allowing students to opt in as they desire. However, the overall design mirrors various class openers, so it could easily be used as a routine part of online work.

We recommend offering one prompt per week for the duration of the semester to support a routine playful mindset. When possible, provide your answer as part of the prompt. Students enjoy seeing you share before they share! It also serves to lower the vulnerability of sharing playfully because they have an example answer from the authoritative source within the space.

Sample Prompts:

1. Please share a color that describes you today. Then, briefly explain why it describes you today.
2. Language ‘games’ are one of the most common games across cultures and languages. Kids learn to play with words and the power of language through language games. To celebrate this playfulness – share the silliest riddle you know (or find through Google).
3. Share your favorite snacks that support you as a graduate [undergraduate] learner. Salty, sweet, and everything in between.
4. It’s midterm time!!! Share with us your favorite study spots on campus or at your home.
5. It’s finals time – share with us your go-to snack for brain power.
6. Identifying as members of a community is powerful in supporting learning. Share an image of how you connect with [University name].
7. We have a lot of reading in class this week. Share a book you read recently for fun!
8. Technology can change how we write – what is your favorite way to write? Pen and paper? Word Processor? Clay tablet?
9. What do you Meme? Post a meme about how you are feeling this week.

10. Our University Library is great for learning (and fun too). Find something weird that you can access through the library and share a link..

We invite you, dear reader, to playfully remix these prompts. We have found the most success when prompts ask the student to situate their personal interests in a semi-professional space. These can and should be 'assigned' temporally, clearly acknowledging student experiences throughout the flow of a semester. These can and should be adjusted to the environment, situating the physical environment while also building a shared community (through the university, student experiences, etc.). Finally, these can and should be adjusted to create space for emotional regulation. Asking students to play with color is an easy way to share emotions without being too vulnerable.

Additional Comments

Students need space to share these images. This assignment was originally developed as an exercise on Twitter (now known as X), with a shared class hashtag helping students find the class tweets and the game tweets. Nicole moved classes from Twitter to Tumblr in recent years. With both uses, class discussions were held in the social media space, so these playful mindset posts were 'extra' but easy to find within routine discussion posting.

When using discussion tools in university-provided learning management systems, a similar approach should be used to situate these playful posts within the classroom's ongoing conversation.

In a synchronous class, this activity would need just a couple of minutes at the beginning. In an on-line asynchronous course, this activity adds significant value for very little extra time. Students enjoy responding and can build casual communities together, unlocking the valuable interactions that grow out of informal spaces and discussions.

Theme Weaver

I Believe You Can Get Me Through the Course

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD

Professor

Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

pholzweiss@shsu.edu

Number of Students

Any

Technology Requirements

Instructors may want to use digital creation tools and AI to generate theme ideas, stories, and images.

Technique Summary Description

Identifying a course theme and weaving connections to the theme throughout the course can connect content and activities together while also creating a sense of playfulness that enhances the learning environment.

Technique Description and Instructions

A course theme can be anything from content-related ideas to popular culture to a personal passion, while the actual application of the theme can range from relaxed to intricate connections throughout the course.

Choosing a Theme

The first step to weaving a theme throughout a course is identifying an idea that is broad enough to fit all course topics and activities and allows creative applications. A good place to look for theme ideas is the course content. There may be easy connections to make, such as a “Mad Scientist” theme for a chemistry course or a “Classic Books” theme for a literature course.

If no immediate theme ideas emerge from the course content, consider popular culture for inspiration. Using broad categories from television, movies, and music can provide flexibility in theme application. For instance, designating a “Movie Villains” theme for a psychology course provides a large body of material, from silent films to cartoons to recent superhero blockbusters. A popular culture theme can also just be playful without any clear connection to course content. A “Top 40 Music” theme could be applied to any course, with song titles and artists serving as the creative inspiration. For instance, have a Taylor Swift week where everything in a learning module is named after a song or album. Then, just for fun, share a link to your favorite Taylor Swift song and offer students an opportunity to share their favorite (or discuss why they don’t listen to Taylor Swift).

Another place to look for theme ideas is personal hobbies and interests. If you like traveling, take students on a trip around the world with the course theme. Find ways of connecting the course to different cultures, countries, or geography. Increase the personal connections with students by sharing some of your travel photos and stories throughout the course and inviting them to do the same.

Consider the physical campus as another possible theme. Featuring campus lore, popular activities, buildings, offices, and leaders throughout the course can help online students feel connected to the institution.

A final resource for theme generation is Artificial Intelligence. Tell your favorite generative AI tool (i.e., Copilot, Gemini) about the course purpose and topics, and then ask for 10 playful theme suggestions that fit the course. If you don't like the initial suggestions, ask for 10 more. If no ideas resonate, tell AI what ideas you liked but why they do not quite work. Then ask it to try again with 10 more suggestions.

Applying the Theme

The second step is to apply the theme. Simple ways to incorporate a theme include adding related images to the syllabus and course modules, creating fun assignment names, and offering themed examples in video lectures. Artificial Intelligence can offer ideas for renaming assignments and generating examples. In the prompt, share a description of the course and theme, then ask for the ideas you need.

Also, consider immersing the students in the theme by incorporating it into an assignment. For instance, in a psychology course with a "Movie Villains" theme, students could develop a short video describing their favorite movie villain and three course concepts that explain the villain's behavior. In the "Top 40 Music" theme example, a weekly discussion could ask students to identify a hit song from any decade and explain how it represents a social movement from that time period. Asking students to connect course content to the theme encourages critical thinking while emphasizing personal choice and creativity.

Create a Story Theme

When no theme is a good fit, create a story to serve as the course theme. The following example shares why and how I created a story theme to meet what I needed for a course.

My theme ideas typically come from a personal interest in popular culture (i.e., wizarding world, candy factory, the game of Clue). So, that is what I turned to for a new course on supervision in higher education. I thought of funny work environments in television (The Office, The Chair) and movies (Office Space, Admission) but I could not find a way to make those ideas work with the course plan. I spent several days searching television, movie, and book lists for theme ideas and even asked Artificial Intelligence to provide ideas. No theme ideas emerged.

I switched strategies and created my own theme by writing a story to fit planned course activities. I wanted the students to feel like they really were supervisors on a different real-world college campus for the entire course. I started by creating the main character role students would play - a new director of an advising office who was supervising employees for the first time. They would play the main character role in each activity.

To make the story believable, I wrote three short background stories – 1) the main character’s career experiences before accepting the director position, 2) the purpose and responsibilities of the advising office, and 3) the history of the college. I also wrote character profiles for the employees in the advising office so the students would understand who they were supervising. The six employees came from diverse backgrounds, represented three generations, had unique professional strengths, and exhibited personality quirks that could prompt interpersonal conflicts.

To complement the background stories and profiles, I used Artificial Intelligence tools (Adobe Express, Canva) to create images of the fictitious college, the college logo, and images of each character. Flyer and newsletter templates were used to present the background stories and character profiles, and then all of them were combined into one “storybook” to introduce the theme during the first week of class.

Each week, students received a new part of the story which connected to a weekly task. These weekly stories involved adding a few sentences to already developed assignment instructions to explain why the main character had to perform the task. A few additional materials were created to increase the connection to the story theme such as fictional college letterhead to use with an assignment.

One fun assignment asked students to contribute to the story theme. After students completed several assignments that took them through different steps of posting and filling an open job position, they were asked to create a flyer about their “new hire” to circulate around the campus. Students were directed to create an image of their new hire using Artificial Intelligence tools (with provided guidance) and then write a fictional background narrative to share more about the individual. The character they created was included in a later assignment.

How Students Responded

Students enjoyed the story theme and felt like it was as close to being an immersive experience as they could have in an asynchronous course. While each student worked on a different college campus, the story theme helped them have a shared context where they could compare different supervision approaches using the same campus practices, office functions, and employees.

Additional Comments

Themes should be easy for students to understand. Sharing a few external resources may be necessary to provide basic theme information (i.e., a website with a list of movie villains so students have examples). Themes should also complement the course content instead of replacing it. Be thoughtful with theme applications and use a balanced approach when asking students to participate in the theme. Sharing a themed image or using themed language in assignment instructions connects to the theme without asking students to do anything. Having students perform theme-related assignments requires them to connect directly to the theme. One or two of these assignments can inspire creativity and critical thinking, but adding more may lead to frustration.

Editorial Comment: *A Taylor Swift-themed course? Count us in!*

Essays

Sometimes there's just more to say. Just a few more minutes of fun before dinner. One more round. Another try. Overtime.

Here are a few essays from playful professors who needed a little extra space to share their ideas about what it means to move play online.

Working with LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® Online

Alison James

Professor Emerita

University of Winchester

engagingimaginationdotcom@gmail.com

Over the years, I have run a great many LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® workshops face to-face in universities, embedded its use in curricula, explored matters of staff and educational development with it, and worked with it in research contexts. In addition, since 2020, I have been designing and delivering playful and LEGO-based workshops online, including the co-creation of an online course to train facilitators in LEGO SERIOUS PLAY with the Danish consultancy Inthrface (the only course of its kind that is endorsed by Professor Johan Roos, one of the two founders of the method). We run these courses four times a year in intensive two-day blocks, during which time participants build, play, share and reflect using LEGO. They acquire a knowledge of the method and its drivers; rooted in a multi-sensory, constructionist pedagogy, which allows for the emotional and empirical ways of knowing. It is all about expressing these ways of knowing in 3D form; to explore complex issues for which there is no straightforward answer.

LEGO SCHMEGO – what's in a name?

After that rather dry opener, a very quick word, if I may, to differentiate between LEGO and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY. Educators can take a handful of LEGO bricks and devise playful, enjoyable and meaningful activities with them. However, doing something great with LEGO and doing something great with LEGO SERIOUS PLAY, however, are different achievements. The main distinction is the specified set of principles and order of activities that LEGO SERIOUS PLAY uses to allow for creative and playful exploration of topics that matter to people.

What is LEGO SERIOUS PLAY?

Ok, still a bit dry, but I need to introduce LEGO SERIOUS PLAY for anyone unfamiliar with its nature. As noted above, the method is a systematic and hands-on approach to exploring complex issues. Participants build, share and discuss models they have constructed out of LEGO on the subject in question and in line with the principles and etiquette of the method. All voices in a LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshop are equally heard, and diverse opinions accommodated. So, it's a highly personal technique, as well as one suited for objective problem-solving. Now almost 25 years old and known worldwide, LSP is often a well-accepted mode of playful engagement in universities where there may be some nervousness about anything less tried and tested.

That was the short version. If you would like to know more about how to use LEGO and LEGO SERIOUS PLAY online you are welcome to download this open-access booklet: [LEGO for university learning: online, offline and elsewhere](https://zenodo.org/records/7421754). (<https://zenodo.org/records/7421754>). It is the follow up to our 2019 publication focusing on LEGO in academic development contexts. Both are edited by Professor Chrissi Nerantzi and me and have contributions from numerous academics using LEGO across the disciplines. They are yours free, gratis and for nothing.

Getting My Hands on Stuff

First off, if you want to use LEGO online you need to sort out the supply of bricks. In 2020, when many people could not leave their houses, they found ingenious solutions. Some involved neighbors leaving their children's LEGO outside the house (washed), which was collected (and washed again) by the person needing to borrow it. Where possible, people raided the family toy cupboard or their hobby stash. In other cases, it was possible to post LEGO to participants well in advance of an online meet up.

We have moved on – thankfully – from those emergency days involving LEGO laundry. However, we still need to think about what people need in terms of bricks and how they can get them. When I work with Inthrface we have the luxury of being able to send out starter kits, base plates and minifigures to participants. Some universities I work with also have an arrangement whereby staff can collect LEGO bags from a central location before a workshop online, or also have things sent out. Otherwise, it is back to alternative methods of sourcing your own supply. For the advance planners among you with a juicy budget, you can buy specialist LEGO SERIOUS PLAY kits online. For those of you working to a tight budget (like me when I started) look out for pre-loved LEGO. I also love a mooch around a charity shop (goodwill store?) for bricks and have been sent wonderful things like a black sting ray from friends who act as my ad hoc supply chain.

How many bricks? This is an FAQ. I love loads of them, but [Professor David Gauntlett](https://davidgauntlett.com/portfolio/lego-collaborations/) was one who early on advocated seeing what you could meaningfully do with as few bricks as possible (<https://davidgauntlett.com/portfolio/lego-collaborations/>). The LEGO Foundation also publishes the [Six Bricks](#) booklet (for children) which adapts itself easily to online contexts and adult use. Excellent if you want to do something quick with a few bricks to exercise experimentation and creativity. (https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/jrfpg4tx/sixbricks_ok_print.pdf).

While it is equitable for everyone to have the same set of bricks, life is not always this neat. It is random and part of the fun is that we all bring different things within us to any educational encounter (including sourcing our own bricks). Most importantly too, in LEGO SERIOUS PLAY is what you have to say and what you are using the bricks to mean. So, a fancy pants selection of bricks may be aesthetically pleasing, but the value lies in their message. Meaning can be housed in simple constructions just as well as in complicated ones. Giving participants different starter selections of bricks doesn't tend to be an issue in face-to-face workshops. In fact, comparisons of who has what give instant rise to bartering, swapping, pantomime, and underhand shenanigans that warm up a room in no time. We have not yet fathomed out how to bring the same level of chaos into an online setting, but maybe this is just as well.

Sourcing and planning the use of bricks sounds highly operational and not playful at all. But it could be (see bartering and shenanigans above). Inviting participants to create a themed collection of bricks or find ones that have a special meaning for them, or in their favorite color, or unusual shapes, or ones which have a funny story attached to their being found. Or anything infinitely more inspiring and inclusive than I've just mentioned (over to you).

In our facilitator training, another thing we do to engender playfulness from the get-go is to set participants a pre-course task. They make a simple model of themselves – in whatever way they choose – which is ready for their personal introductions. They then upload photographs of two versions of it – the original one, and one with bricks missing – which we use as a steppingstone into the method itself, as well as working together. It gets people going very early on. The important thing to think about when doing this is...

Low, High, Wide Play Design

If brick supply is an issue, online activities will need to take this into account. They need to be something everyone can participate in, no matter what kind of bricks they have, or how many. There is a lovely phrase that I first heard when I trained as a LEGO SERIOUS PLAY facilitator in 2013, after several years experimenting with LEGO bricks. Originating from Seymour Papert (Resnick, 2020 <https://mres.medium.com/designing-for-wide-walls-323bdb4e7277>) it emphasizes the importance of design which is “low threshold, high ceiling, wide walls.” This means creating an activity which everyone can readily access from where they are (crossing a low threshold), interpret within their own knowledge and experience (wide walls) and extend and expand their capability (high ceiling). This kind of openness and flexibility is important when inviting people to play together online, particularly if they are strangers. There may be a level of reticence or awkwardness that is not as present as in face-to-face encounters (Or not? Now, there’s a PhD question in the making...).

Connecting to Other People and Their Stuff

One of the joys of a LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshop (or any play encounter for that matter) is the energy and presence of being physically in the same space. In face-to-face LEGO SERIOUS PLAY sessions, you work around a table and can see or reach over people’s models, change your angle of vision, and do countless other things that aren’t possible online. To compensate for this physical lack, my colleagues at Inthrace tried all kinds of platforms for our LSP facilitator training where participants could build jointly; ultimately opting for MIRO (<https://miro.com/>). They created templates and virtual spaces, with color coded Post Its and pre-devised work areas for participants and gave simple pre-training so that everyone could feel comfortable in photographing models and uploading them into the space.

MIRO does allow for playfulness in the sense of the visual items represented, the way that participants can see each other moving around on screen, how they can comment on things, annotate models and decorate constructions like connections between ideas with emoticons and so on. While that works for many activities, we have often found that participants are content with the low-tech approach of holding models up to the camera instead. Simple adjustments of their laptop/phone cameras allow the rest of us to peer at it from different angles, while encouraging the presenter to be interactive with their own model brings it alive. It also allows for a slightly more performative engagement than just pointing to a whiteboard on a screen. Playful reminders to the presenter to hold their model in front of their face when they have green screen backgrounds are essential; otherwise, part or all of their construction disappears into the Fog of the Filter.

Avoiding the Zoom of Doom

Virtual sessions have many pros, but they can be a real energy drain too. Most of us try and work round this by keeping time on screen contained, however what do you do if you have an intensive course or event to deliver? How do you keep up momentum?

It all boils down to the playful engagement and environment we can create in that space. Two-hour sessions online can require real efforts of attention, so you can imagine what that means if you are delivering two intensive days online, like we do in facilitator training. My first suggestion here is to trot out that clichéd but useful phrase: “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.” You need to pace your energy as facilitator/teacher, while also helping your participants modulate theirs. Play is brilliant for this, but in long sessions it helps to dial down the hilarity at times, not keep it permanently up. It can be just as wearing being in a high-octane session where the fun never stops, as in one where there is no fun in the first place.

Another suggestion, which I imagine all of us do to some extent, is to see your online facilitation as an act of improv. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY can be a great method to create a sense of bonding and connection between participants, but we start each course as complete strangers. My improv means listening out for and noticing any little habits/preferences/views or defining features of the group or individuals and weaving these into playful conversations that makes the experience feel personal and cohesive. This might be about remembering metaphors or images that have been generated. This helps infuse our shared metaphorical language, including in jokes and banter, that has emanated from the physical constructions built and the ideas they contain. Or lines and phrases that people use, or the repeated use of bricks (shovels, bridges, ladders, trees, whatever) within the group. You can't prepare your improv in advance (well, DUH), as you do not know what people will build or say, but you can take playful notice of what is being built and said in a way that makes people feel heard and their contributions recognized and appreciated. All respectfully done, of course.

In LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshops everyone gets the chance to present their models to the group and tell the story represented within them. Varying the ways you invite people to share their constructions keeps things lively, especially when you get them to pick (on) the next speaker. Of course, you have the time-honored chat box too. To avoid this last becoming hard to follow, or a parking lot for random thoughts, I have adopted the Chat Waterfall technique, which I learned from a participant in my study, *The Value of Play in HE*. Here everyone writes their responses at the same time and holds off hitting send until the facilitator gives the word. And then there is a tumult of answers which all send the chat box whizzing which can be more fun to monitor and engage with than the plodding trickle (!) of responses which can result at other times.

Catch Them Before They Fall

It is often hard to keep track of everyone's participation and energy levels when you have loads of people in a virtual space. For some reason (my own ineptitude, probably) I often struggle to see more than a few faces in the gallery which makes it hard to simultaneously check in with how they are doing, while also presenting and explaining things. This is where it is wonderful if you can have a co-facilitator or nominee to keep an eye on how people are feeling. Are they playing with their dog? Asleep? Missing completely? Being able to check in on that person discreetly or weave them into activities in a way that helps them revive a little is really helpful.

All of these points apply whether I am running workshops and sessions directly with participants, or in training contexts. There are many others. What they really boil down to is plan your logistics, walk through your activities, ask 'what ifs' about different questions, activities and possibilities in an online space and keep your energy, drinks and dietary snacks of choices replenished at all times.

For more on play, please help yourself to

James, A. (2022) *The Value of Play in HE: a study*. Free to download at <https://engagingimagination.com/the-value-of-play-in-he-a-study-free-book/>

Permeability of Play

Reconnecting to and reimagining play with PhD students

Alison James

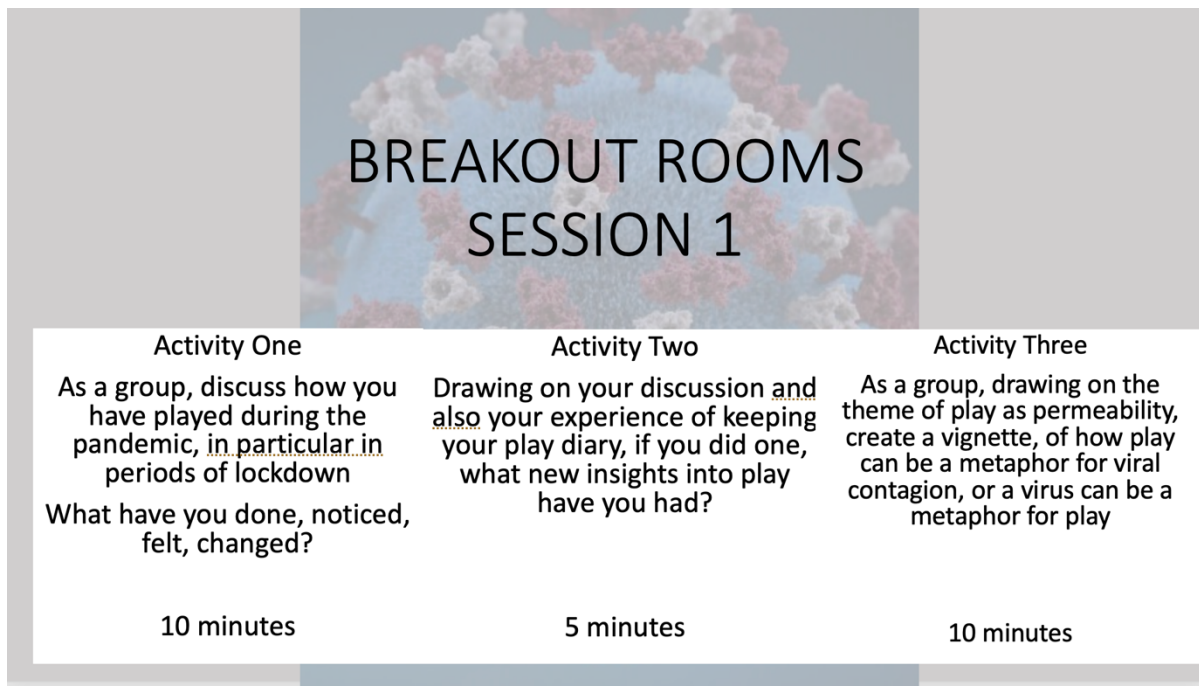
Professor Emerita

University of Winchester

engagingimaginationdotcom@gmail.com

In 2021, I was invited to run an online workshop about play and design for emergence with PhD design students at the DesignSkolden Kolding, in Denmark. I called it *The Permeability of Play*, as I wanted to stress play can traverse all boundaries – disciplinary, cultural, physical.

To help students recognize that play was infusing their every day, even in a time of the pandemic, I invited them to reflect on the signs of play all around them, using the three short activities below. I set up the discussion with various images of play that I'd seen firsthand or come across in the media. I also situated the discussion after an initial part of the workshop where we had explored 'what is play'.



Activity One	Activity Two	Activity Three
As a group, discuss how you have played during the pandemic, in particular in periods of lockdown What have you done, noticed, felt, changed?	Drawing on your discussion and also your experience of keeping your play diary, if you did one, what new insights into play have you had?	As a group, drawing on the theme of play as permeability, create a vignette, of how play can be a metaphor for viral contagion, or a virus can be a metaphor for play
10 minutes	5 minutes	10 minutes

After several years of enjoying/enduring break out rooms, I tend to use them sparingly. The ones I have attended at public events have sometimes been interesting ways to talk to new people. At other times they have been awkward or even empty. I've noticed a pattern emerging. The moment leaders of a webinar announce everyone is being sent into breakout rooms, 50% of the attendees suddenly remember an urgent call or school pick up and are gone. This tells me not everyone is a fan.

However, in courses they can be a useful way for your students/participants to focus on a specific topic, practice new knowledge and skills, or test out understanding in a pair or small group. My three activities offer benefits; they make space for people to tap into their power of noticing and their memories – perhaps reacquainting themselves with play experiences they may have skimmed over before.

Through writing a play diary – in whatever style they liked, so personal and playful definitely a possibility - they were able to reappraise their understanding and experiences in a new light. The final activity was one which really allowed them to unleash their imaginations in a metaphorical, playful and creative way; by totally reimagining play within the context of what we were living through at the time i.e. the COVID pandemic. This, incidentally, was not supposed to belittle the seriousness and darkness of the experiences of many. Rather, it provided a different lens through which to find parallels between something disquieting and something that is usually deemed neutral or innocent (Machiavelli and co notwithstanding).

Mirroring

Early in 2020, many universities had to move - with next to no preparation - to remote emergency teaching. Soon afterwards it became apparent that the loss of human connection was an essential missing element of online education. Copious handouts and resources on their own were not enough. I found myself being invited to deliver talks on the theme of play as survival – something I felt was a fundamental part of play - but had not expected other people to feel similarly about.

In 2021, around the time that I hosted the permeability workshop, I had also started conducting Zoom interviews for my study *The Value of Play in HE* (James, 2022). As part of my secondary reading I had inhaled Stephen Nachmanovitch's two wonderful books *Free Play* and *Art is Life*. Stephen is many things; among them, a musician, teacher of improvisation and a writer, and I thought he would make a fantastic contribution to the study. I was delighted when he accepted an invitation to interview, and, shortly after, there we were; two strangers talking to each other from our living rooms.

Early on in the interview, I asked Stephen whether humans could connect using remote platforms, not least with people they did not know. Without further ado, he invited me to follow him in a hand mirroring exercise over a couple of minutes. Wordlessly, he started to move his hands in different shapes and gestures, and I followed with mine. It was uncomplicated, unprompted and completely mesmerizing. (I later tried it with a room of several hundred people, and to my astonishment, it had a powerful effect there too). Just the simple act of focusing on someone else (or 300 someone elses), with both of you acting with trust and in good faith, open to the experience. I started *The Permeability of Play* workshop with that story and experience too.

Six Word Stories

In many of my workshops, whether I am using LEGO® or not, I often include the six-word story. This is based on the touching and funny book *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. (Fershleiser and Smith, 2008). The use of storytelling or writing is well established in creative and playful practices. However, what we often lose sight of is that the supremely short story can be as compelling as a long one. In workshops on critical reflection and personal and professional development I used to ask final-year students to sum up their degree experiences in six words. Similarly, in LEGO workshops (on or offline) I often invite participants to create a six-word story (and embody it in a physical model) as a means of getting to the heart of an experience. It can also be a useful way of getting people to spill into the chat box online about how they are doing on an intensive course. In-the-moment feedback if you will – sometimes amusing and always perceptive.

Puzzling About Puzzles

I love using puzzles and visual or paper games that all participants can do at a distance – either in their heads or using scraps of paper and pen to hand.

Joining the Dots

A particular favorite of mine is the nine dot puzzle, used to brilliant effect by James Adams in his book *Conceptual Blockbusting* (available in multiple editions). If you like logic puzzles you may have come across it; where you have three rows of nine dots and ask people to join all the dots with four lines and without taking their pen off the paper. I usually put up an image on the screen and invite people to try and solve the problem.

The point and the fun of doing this exercise with participants is partly the extreme ingenuity and playfulness of the solutions. Even more so, though, is Adams' identification of the thing that stop us achieving a successful outcome; in either this puzzle or other life situations. It is the imagined boundary. We tell ourselves that we can't or shouldn't do things in a certain way (or at all) and so we don't. We don't challenge whether that boundary exists. In the nine dot puzzle, the imagined boundary for many is thinking that you have to stay within the nine dots. Those who succeed go way outside them, which allows the movement of the pen to link all the dots.

It is a powerful analogy when you take it into other contexts. Adams shares some of the more radical solutions to the puzzle – cutting out the dots and threading them on a pencil, screwing up the paper and pushing the pencil through the dots, or ingeniously – the child who simply got a fat pen and wiped out the nine dots in four thick lines. I have probably annihilated his work in my recounting so read his book – the ideas are powerful, practical, intriguing and have huge scope for play.

The Mouse in the Maze

Images, cartoons and memes have long been easy and playful stimuli to introduce a subject or give students a break from something arduous and dry. In workshops (on and offline), I have created visual representations of an experiment described by Penman and Williams in their excellent guide to mindfulness, *Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (2011: 112-114). They cite work done by psychologists at the University of Maryland who asked students to solve a simple maze puzzle. In their experiments, two groups of students both had maze puzzles where they needed to draw a line through the maze (once again, without removing the pencil from the paper, as in the Adams example) in order to guide the mouse safely to its hole. However, one group had a delicious piece of cheese near the hole (a positive, or approach-oriented puzzle). The other group had no cheese, but rather had a predatory owl, waiting to capture the mouse (a negative or avoidance-oriented puzzle).

I am not a psychologist, nor have I access to the materials used to conduct the experiment. However, citing these stories and inviting participants to think about how they play out can be a playful way to engage with what might come next. Which is what I did online with participants, using cartoony visuals of owls, cheese, mice and mazes.

As in many uses of play and games, while the event may be fun to do, it is what arises from the game afterward that reveals real insights. In the Maryland experiment, having filled out their mazes, the students did a task measuring their creativity. Those who had the owl and tried to avoid it did 50% worse than those helping the mouse to find the cheese. Avoidance closed down options in the students' minds – making them fearful and with an enhanced sense of caution. According to Penman and Williams, the second group of students "...became more open to new experiences, were more playful and careful, less cautious and happy to experiment." The experience emphasized what we also know as playful educators: "The spirit in which you do something is often as important as the act itself." (2011:114)

Educational systems and practices which leave teachers, students and supporters of learning feeling stifled and trapped crush out that openness. Earlier in their book they remind us that pushing too hard at a problem often makes us less effective at solving it than adopting looser, freer, gentler approaches. An argument for playfulness if ever there was one. Dogged persistence and avoidance lead to feeling trapped and “demobilized” – and in their wonderful expression “Your playfulness becomes paved over with concrete” (2011: 114). To avoid concrete, let’s identify our imagined boundaries and see what surprises us.

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Elyse's Quest

Maarten Koeners

Co-founder InnoPlay

Senior Lecturer in Medicine and Biomedical Sciences

University of Exeter Medical School

m.p.koeners@exeter.ac.uk

Robin Mello

Professor of Theatre Storytelling & Applied Theatre

Department of Theatre, University of Wisconsin

rmello@uwm.edu

Adam Lusby

Co-founder InnoPlay

Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship

University of Exeter Business School

A.lusby@exeter.ac.uk

The Status Quo

The faint hum of a laptop fan filled the small bedroom-turned-office as Elyse stared at her screen, her cursor hovering over the “Leave” button. Another online lecture had ended, filling her with a deflated sense of disconnection. Participants had dropped in and out, cameras off, mics muted, and now, even after the session was over, a few student accounts lingered aimlessly. “Were they ever really there?” Elyse muttered to herself, sinking back into her chair. Doubts started to grow, making her wonder whether it would have been better to just send a recorded lecture. She sighed deeply, her discontent growing into something she was afraid to confront. It wasn’t just this lecture—it was the whole experience of online teaching that gnawed at her. She wondered aloud, “Does it always have to be like this?”

Elyse was an educator by calling, someone who loved the vibrancy and embodiment of a classroom filled with chatter and curiosity. Her dream was to inspire young minds, as she was inspired by her own teachers, and make a difference in how students see and experience the world, a world full of wonderful challenges and potential. But the sudden shift to online learning had frustrated her. What worked so well in a classroom fell flat in the online space. Teaching had become cold, mechanical, and devoid of the warmth that once fueled her. She knew she wasn’t alone; over coffee and cake, a real lifesaver, her colleagues expressed similar frustrations, sharing stories of reduced attendance and unengaged students. Yet, few seemed ready to challenge the status quo. For her a fear of failing, Elyse realized, had become an impediment to innovate her practice.

But something deep within Elyse refused to accept this as the new normal. She felt the need to change, even if this was very uncomfortable for her to do. What if online teaching could be different? What if it could feel *human*? Reflecting on all the affordances of the online space, she decided then and there: she would find a way to make at least some of her online teaching into a social, joyful experience.

One Experiment at the Time

Elyse's quest began with excitement but quickly lost momentum. She dove headfirst into books, articles, and attended a course on innovative pedagogy. Her notebook filled with lists of resources and ideas that felt promising but, to be fair, overwhelming. Every time she tried something new in class, either something went wrong, or it didn't feel like she was being herself – making it feel inauthentic. An attempt to use a collaborative game using an online whiteboard resulted in much confusion and student frustration, while it also drained all Elyse's energy for that day. An icebreaker involving a virtual scavenger hunt, which took her weeks to make, had to be canceled due to IT issues. She started to doubt herself. *Maybe it's impossible to make online teaching engaging*, she thought. The relative comfort of her previous teaching methods beckoned. But Elyse refused to give up.

One day, during a coffee date with Sarah, one of her colleagues and fellow coffee and cake enthusiast, Elyse found clarity on how to continue her quest. Sarah was fondly recalling a story in which Elyse, who at the time had just joined the university, had been sneaking into Sarah's classroom, boldly pretending to be her teaching assistant. Sarah wanted to learn quickly on the job and promptly used what she learned from Sarah in her own classroom as small experiments, often on the same day. Sarah listened with a big grin on her face while she absentmindedly doodled in her notebook. She realized that her current attempts to change her practice for online teaching were laced with fear, often because of her desire and expectation to deliver something near perfect on the first attempt of something complicated and ambitious. She needed a mindset to test her ideas without fear of failure. When she finished her cup of coffee and looked down she saw she had scribbled some sentences and had encircled *Small, Sneaky, Specific, Soon*, in her notebook. She read it out loud and together with Sarah she came up with her first small and sneaky experiment she could do that day. It was time to approach her quest not as a struggle for something perfect and dictated by experts, but as a playful exploration. Starting with one experiment at a time.

Elyse's Experiments

That same day, without telling anyone (apart from Sarah) or explaining why, Elyse played music as students started to log on for her online lecture and she noticed the energy in the online room was more relaxed, engaged, and allowed for informal conversations. Later that day on the phone she shared her experience with Sarah and in the following days with renewed enthusiasm Elyse started to experiment some more. Sometimes together with Sarah, sometimes alone, and eventually also together with other colleagues who started to notice that Elyse was up to something impactful.

In one of her experiments, Elyse wanted to encourage students to use their cameras and address key skills for "prosocial learning," a concept she learned from one of the books she recently purchased. She paired students in breakout rooms to draw each other simultaneously without looking at the paper or lifting their pen. The results were Picasso-like drawings. This activity modeled embracing discomfort, understanding that making a mess is part of a creative process, and that letting go of hyper-focusing on outcomes can enhance learning. To Elyse's relief, students began sharing their drawings on camera, laughter spilling into the virtual room. In her notebook she wrote "Contour portrait – good for creating connection."

One by one, colleagues started to notice the success Elyse was having in engaging with students, reflected in positive student feedback. They started to ask, “Elyse, do you have a list of activities I could do with my students?” or “Elyse, could you facilitate a session with my students on how to playfully communicate online?” In the beginning, Elyse saw these questions as a validation that she was doing something right and as opportunities to create more impact. However, she quickly realized this was an illusion. She got overwhelmed with the many requests and frustrated that the positive changes were only temporary if her colleagues did not themselves embrace the mindset of “one experiment at the time.” Realizing that although there are no shortcuts for their own quests, she could support and help her colleagues by writing down her experiences in the form of “lab-notes” and “experiments.”

Elyse’s next entry in her notebook was:

“Lab-note: before the weekend I decided last minute to include a simple 3-minute instruction sequence (with background music) on drawing Macca the Alpaca within my recorded lecture and asked students to email me their drawings before the next session. The results were wonderful. My inbox is filled with creative interpretations, including one titled “Macca the Chewbacca.” Today during the synchronous session with the same students, I shared the drawings with the class, which sparked joy and reinforced the sense that students were not learning in isolation. This small, playful addition contributed to a shared feeling of connection and belonging. At the end of today’s session, I played some music from the playlist the students had created themselves and I realized that in all recent experiments, playing music has also helped me with my own teaching performance as the music makes me feel more joyful and ready to engage.”

Elyse made it a habit to always bring her notebook to capture her experiments and made it a ritual to share her experiences with Sarah over the phone or on their regular “coffee dates,” which also involved cake, obviously. After years of experimenting, with plenty of failures, Elyse learned to see failure as part of the process toward improvement. Her notebook became full of lab notes and experiments. Elyse’s quest had not only transformed her own teaching but had inspired others to reimagine what online education could be. The journey had been messy, but it had also been magical. Elyse knew she had only scratched the surface of what was possible. And so, Elyse’s quest continued, not as a solitary journey but as a shared adventure to experiment and help push online pedagogy into new and impactful realms.

Elyse's Notebook

Lab-Notes

Lab-Note #1: Being Intentional with my Language

Stop reinforcing limiting stories about my own online teaching. Be intentional on what language I choose to use. For example, use the following table to regularly reflect on what language I intend to use, and thereby make a start with changing my own stories and that of others.

What Language Do I Wish to Use?

Language I Intend to Include	Language I Intend to Exclude
Creating connection online is where I start	Creating connection online is difficult
Online teaching is interesting	Online teaching is hard
We invite you to...	You have to...
I'm dancing with time	I'm too busy
I wish to learn how to use play in an online classroom	I do not know how to use play in an online classroom

Lab Note #2: Design for Online

Instead of replicating in-person teaching, use both the constraints and affordances of the online space to intentionally design for online. Start with small experiments aiming for little wins. One framework to help me do this is the 4 S's of experimentation (based on d.school's Teaching and Learning Studio): Small, Sneaky, Specific, Soon.

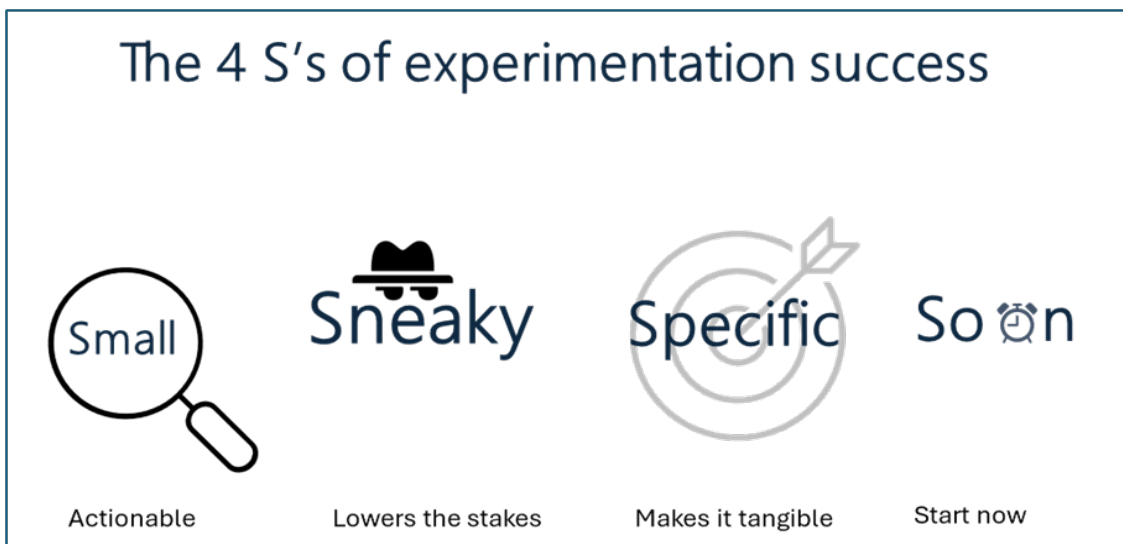
Small will allow me to make it actionable: by keeping my experiments small will make it easier to do, to critique and to improve. For example, start all my online lectures with music.

Sneaky will lower the stakes: by committing to something that is not widely broadcasted, funded or supported etc. I will feel less pressured and more open to innovate and take risks. For example, experiment with one playful activity in my upcoming teaching without telling anyone. Afterwards, reflect on what was good and what could be improved.

Specific makes my experiment tangible: by being specific on what, when, who and where etc. will create clarity on how to commit to the next steps of implementation. For example, experiment with a 10 minute "soft start" in my teaching on Monday and invite colleague Sarah to provide both technical support and kind, specific and helpful feedback.

Soon will help me transition from the emotional safety of talking about my experiment, to actually doing the experiment in real life. For example, ask: "Is there something I could do differently today?"

Side note: applying the 4 S's of experimentation successfully required practice and a large amount of learning-by-doing before it became second nature. However, when it did, it positively transformed my academic practice.



Lab Note #3: Start Softly

In preparation of my online teaching, there are several things I can do to enable me to create pro-social interaction.

Weeks/days before my online teaching, I ask myself: ‘What does engagement mean for me?’ and ‘What does play mean to me?’ By reflecting on these kinds of questions regularly I have noticed that I have become more adventurous with creating new and experimental pedagogy. As I still have weeks or days before my online teaching, I can consider whether I already create asynchronous engagement through play. For example, I included an instruction sequence on drawing Macca the Alpaca, within my recorded lecture and asked students to email me their drawings before our next teaching session.

On the day of my online teaching, I finalize my detailed schedule and test my setup and resources. For example, test my camera, test sharing music and, if I am using a phone as a second camera, test using this with my resources etc.

Minutes before my online teaching, I make sure I am well prepared both mentally and emotionally. Emotional and social aspects do not come as easily in the online space as they are in-person. To support this, I could for example make it a habit to do a breathing exercise or a meditation or anything that gets me into a focused state. See experiments for contemplation.

At the start of my online teaching, I allow a significant amount of time for a “soft start” for students to login and to “acclimatize” to the online space. Ideal ways are playing music and have one or two warm-up activities to create connection. These can be activities specifically designed for connection or I could include games like Ghost Blitz or Story Cubes, see experiments for a soft start for more details.

Lab Note #4: Design for Connection

Warm-up activities (aka ‘stokes’) designed for connection can be an effective way in increasing student interaction through their cameras. Our favorites being Go find it!, Contour drawing, and Rainbow (see soft start examples for more details). One result of running these kinds of activities is that after the exercise many students will leave their cameras on and might appear more confident voicing comments/questions over the microphone.

Lab Note #5: Build to Contemplate

Play in a broad sense is not necessarily an activity, it is a feeling and does not have to be fun and is not the opposite of serious. Stuart Brown, founder and president of the National Institute for Play and co-author of *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* reminds us “the opposite of play is not work, it’s depression”. To enhance focus and engage more deeply during online learning, consider building time and space for contemplation within my session. For example, starting with a mindfulness video, including quiet activities, such as drawing or reflective writing. Online activities designed for contemplation allows for a more mindful environment – our favorites being mindfulness break, meditation, stretch, and waterfall, see experiments for contemplation for more details.

Lab Note #6: Sprinkle Some Magic With Games

Consider how including games could create some magic within my online teaching. Games are well tested activities for amusement and fun and can provide engagement in a virtual space. Using a game can create authentic context to promote motivation to learn. In addition, games allow students to make decisions continuously – a valuable skill to develop – which is in contrast with the low levels of decision-making seen in traditional learning. Online games designed for amusement and fun can be an effective way in increasing student engagement – my favorites being Skribblio, Jibbergigle, Funemployed, Thanks, Soundball, BYB, and 1,2,3 - see experiments for a soft start for more details.

Lab Note #7: Use a Detailed Schedule

A tool to help me design for online is using a detailed schedule in which I note the teaching activities and their purpose, the resources needed, what energy I wish the students to feel, whether I use any music, and other relevant notes. Using such a schedule will help me to “DJ the online room,” reflect on the language I intend to use, and allow me to make detailed notes during and after my session on what worked and what could be improved.

Side note: combining this practice with the 4 S's of experimentation has upskilled my abilities to design for online.

EXPERIMENTS

Experiments for a Soft Start

I notice the group feels awkward using pen and paper. I wonder if they might feel more comfortable with doodling and writing with pen and paper after drawing Macca.

During a recorded lecture, I gave step-by-step instructions to start drawing, which in the end turned out to be Macca the Alpaca. I invited the students to email their drawings to me, after which I shared a sample of Macca's during a live lecture. This has been shown to create an increased sense of belonging.

I notice the group is awkwardly quiet. I wonder if everyone might feel more comfortable with some music.

When I play music before I start my lecture or seminar, the energy in the room is often more relaxed and engaged, allowing for informal conversations. The music often gets me in a positive state, which helps me with my performance. Depending on the time of day and the activity, I find the type of music which will get the group, for example, more active, settled, or reflective.

I notice my presentation is missing something. I wonder if it might feel more engaging with some music embedded within my slides.

I include timers with music in my slides to create clarity and simultaneously promote appropriate energy for when the group needs to complete an activity, such as reflection. Students gave me positive feedback when I included a begin- and end-tune in my recorded lectures.

I notice the group is enjoying the music. I wonder if they would enjoy this even more if we together created a Playlist

When facilitating a group for multiple sessions, I invite everyone to submit between 2 and 5 songs. I will put all these suggestions into a playlist and use them for the start and end of my seminar/workshops and during activities.

I notice the group is losing focus. I wonder if they might be able to reset their focus after a break playing the Ghost Blitz game.

I play the [Ghost Blitz Game \(https://www.zoch-verlag.com/zoch_en/categories/family-games/geistes-blitz-601129800-en.html?wse=1\)](https://www.zoch-verlag.com/zoch_en/categories/family-games/geistes-blitz-601129800-en.html?wse=1) when I wish the group to have fun and simultaneously activate and train their reflexes and pattern recognition. This game works online using my phone on a stand as a second camera. If there is one or more in the group who perform much better than the others (this is often the case), I handicap them by penalizing them when they grab the wrong item. For example, they must return one or all cards.

I notice the group is struggling with ambiguity and/or creativity. I wonder if they might be able to let go of the need for certainty by playing the Story Cube Game.

Once upon a time, there was a game where your imagination had no limits. Epic, fabulous, or paranormal adventures...roll the cubes, make a story! I use the [Story Cubes Game \(https://www.story-cubes.com/en/\)](https://www.story-cubes.com/en/) online, using my phone as a second camera as students have shared that seeing

Schedule

Event:

Date:

Group Size:

Day 1/1

[illegible]

actual dice being thrown was satisfactory and creates a more connected experience. Story Cubes is a game of dice covered in symbols. Their role? To act as a compass, a guide to invent the craziest and most wonderful stories. Adventures of all kinds: fantasy, epic, magic, extra-terrestrial.

Experiments for Creating Connection

I notice the group is restless and unfocused. I wonder if they might refocus if we play a game of Go Find It!

Go find It (<https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/resources/activities/gofindit>) is a scavenger hunt card game that can be played anywhere - including online - with any number of people. I usually start with two rounds with only one card, which I show through my camera and say for example “go find something furry”, “you have 30 seconds”, “it has to be in the room you are currently in.” After that, I increase the difficulty with two, three, or eventually even four cards for finding one item. You can play different variants of this game and although you do not even need cards the experience is more genuine if you draw randomly from a deck of cards.

I notice the group feels limited in their creativity and engagement. I wonder if they might feel more connected and creative after drawing a Contour Portrait.

I paired students in breakout rooms to draw each other simultaneously without looking at the paper or lifting their pen, creating Picasso-like drawings. As well as creating interaction, this method models key entrepreneurial skills including embracing discomfort, understanding that making a mess is part of the process, and allowing students to start without overthinking. In addition, this is a wonderful activity to experience and discuss the relationship between enhanced learning and letting go of hyper-focusing on outcome.

I notice the group does not typically use their cameras. I wonder if they might become more aware of this and become more comfortable with turning on their cameras if we create an online Rainbow.

This activity works particularly well in large online groups. I invite them to pick any color of the rainbow, write this down and turn off their camera. Yes, off. After I give them 2 minutes to transform their world into a world of their chosen color, I invite everyone that chose a specific color to turn back their camera. Going through each color of the rainbow, one color at a time, the online gallery becomes a festival of color, making it hard not to smile.

I notice the group is hesitant to share their thoughts and ideas. I wonder if I can bolster their creative confidence with a game of Crazy, let's!

I will strike a pose or do a movement and invite everyone to copy me. Then I encourage someone to change this pose or movement into anything they like. When that happens, everyone should copy the new pose or movement until someone else comes up with a new pose or movement and so the game continues. This game promotes online attention and decision-making. For example, who are you going to follow if two people change their pose or movement at the same time? It also allows for risk-taking (is anyone going to follow me?) making it a gentle activity to overcome “online shyness.”

Experiments for Contemplation

Mindfulness Break

1. Make yourself comfortable
2. Close your eyes
3. Become aware of your breath
4. Feel your breath
5. See if you can slow down your breath
6. Become aware of your feet
7. How they touch the floor
8. Appreciate your feet
9. Take a full and complete breath in
10. Breath out slowly
11. When you are ready open your eyes
12. Take a moment to just be
13. Notice how you feel
14. Notice your surroundings
15. Notice things you haven't seen before

This practice can be used to put ourselves back into a space of patience, presence, and resilience, and it can be done subtly wherever we are.

Meditation

I share my sound and use Peloton, Headspace, and YouTube for a guided meditation of between three and six minutes. I let the students know that if medication is not their thing to respect the room and use the time to daydream.

Stretch

1. Interlace your fingers and stretch them above your head
2. Gently stretch sideways, back and forth
3. Stretch out your arms

4. Stand if you can
5. Take a step back, away from your computer
6. Notice
7. Become aware of any tension in your body
8. Gently stretch and/or/ wiggle and/or massage wherever you feel tension
9. Make your stretches more pronounced and dramatic
10. Shake off any remaining tension

This practice can be used to put ourselves back into an awareness of our body to release any build-up of tension while we also allow for a short break.

Waterfall

A waterfall is when a teacher provides a prompt or question, gives learners X amount of time to think and type in the chat box without sending and then says, “Press enter!” when the time is up. When learners press enter, all their answers appear in the chat box at the same time, creating a waterfall or cascading effect. This creates a waterfall effect where everyone’s responses appear at the same time, ensuring that all voices are heard equally. This can lower the threshold of sharing and engaging with the prompt or question and offers the teachers to engage with what is shared in an unforced impromptu kind of manner.

Experiments for Playing (other) Games

[Skribbl.io](https://skribbl.io) – a free online drawing game which is a lot like Pictionary. Players take turns to choose a word and draw it, while the other players try to guess what they’re drawing, gaining points for correct and speedy answers. To start a game, type skribbl.io into your browser, create a private room, and send the link to others. Skribbl.io can be a great tool for memorization, just make a list of custom words you want students to be exposed to. You can also select different languages if you want to brush up on vocabulary. This game is already perfect for playing while on online calls, but make sure you do not share your screen as a facilitator, as it will show everyone what you’re drawing!

[Netgames.io](https://netgames.io) – offers free social games for your phone and hence suitable for online engagement. Our favorites include ‘One Night Ultimate Werewolf’ and ‘Codewords’.

[Kahoot](https://kahoot.com) – a friendly, engaging online game that allows players to compete in a quiz. Kahoot can be a great tool to check the specific understanding of concepts as the quizmaster can provide multiple similar options for a particular question. This game comes to its full potential if you let students make their own quizzes to playfully revise at the end of a class/session.

[JibberGiggle](https://jibberjiggles.com) – Jibbergiggle takes everyday scenarios and challenges you to act them out using only ridiculous nonsense words and your own expressive face. You can use your camera phone to show the grid of potential answers and show the card with the sound of your regular camera. Before you know it, you will be sillier and laugh harder than you thought possible on an online call.

FunEmployed – a card-based game in which everyone’s trying to become employed. Apply for real jobs, like astronaut, lawyer or priest, with unreal qualifications, such as a dragon, the ability to speak panda, or a DeLorean. In the game, each player uses his qualifications to convince the other players that she’s the best qualified for a job. You can type the qualifications in the private chat, or you can use online platforms that have created versions of the game within a specific theme or discipline.

Thunks – a beguiling question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start to look at the world in a whole new light, and, on top of that they can make your brain hurt. For example: “Is there more past than there is future?” We have been exploring the playful use of Thunks (created by Ian Gilbert) ever since we read Ian’s book *“Why do I need a teacher when I’ve got Google.”* One possible use is within your group, read the first Thunk and take a minute to think about them. Importantly, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, simply *your* answers. You do, however, need to think about your answers and be able to justify them. In other words, don’t say the first thing that comes into your head, and be prepared to fully explain your answers when you give them. Take turns to let every group member give their answer. Listen to the answers given by others and treat them seriously even if they sound odd. They may all be valid if they can be justified.

Use the card version with your camera to create a tactile experience with more genuine randomness and interaction.

Bring Your Own Book - a game of borrowed phrases, where players search through books for text that they can take way out of context. It’s easy. You give one minute for everyone to find a book. Optional: you can let students show their books on camera and share why they chose it. Thereafter, you draw a prompt from the deck, then all students race to find the best phrase in their own book that satisfies the prompt. Since you can use a different book each time, you can play it with any audience, and there’s a practically infinite supply of source material.

Some examples:

- What’s the tastiest “name for a candy bar” in that history textbook you’re reading?
- How quickly can you find “lyrics from a country western song” in your dog-training guide?
- What kind of “advice for graduating seniors” will appear in your anthology of limericks?

Bring Your Own Book print-to-play can be downloaded: <https://www.bringyourownbook.com>).

Sound Ball - this game involves “throwing” an imaginary ball to one another within the online space, saying the name of who you are throwing it to and making a random sound. The named person needs to catch the imaginary ball, making the same sound, before naming the person they are throwing the ball next to making a new random sound. This activity practices and enhances online attention and focus while having tons of fun and silly sounds. It is also an ideal activity to experience and unpack online communication.

1-2-3, Clap-2-3

Pair students in breakout rooms and they will count repeatedly to three, taking turns saying the next number. They are encouraged to go as fast as they can before they repeat this while replacing the

“one” with a clap. Thereafter, they are invited to replace the “two” with a slap on their desks (i.e., clap, slap, three, clap, slap, three, etc.). In addition to this new instruction, they also should celebrate any mistakes they make or hesitate saying/doing the next number/movement. Celebrations should be abundant and together with their pair (e.g., hands in the air shouting “tadaa!”). This activity creates positive energy in the participants while it also allows them to address and practice the need to celebrate failure.

Macca the Alpaca

For example, during a recorded lecture provide the following step-by-step images and instruct the learners to start drawing. With the last image invite learners to add some details to make the drawing more personal, thereafter invite learners to email their drawings, after which you can share a sample of Macca's during e.g. a live lecture.

