

Design Question 5

What will I do to engage students?

Using Games and Inconsequential Competition to Promote Student Engagement

This design question encourages teachers to think about, and plan for, ways to engage students with the content of instruction. This should not be viewed as a need to entertain students, but to capture their attention in ways that keep them involved in the learning. When students are active participants in the learning, engagement and retention increase. This requires a multi-faceted approach that focuses on the five factors associated with high levels of student engagement:

- High energy
- Missing information
- The self-system (the system that controls what we attend to)
- Mild pressure
- Mild controversy and competition

Two effective strategies to engage students discussed in this self-guided activity are using games and inconsequential competition.

Using Games That Focus on Academic Content

Games that are developed around the academic content provide a fun way for students to deepen their understanding of declarative knowledge or increase fluency of procedural knowledge. Most students are motivated by academic games and, when done in a spirit of play, games can bring positive energy into the classroom. They stimulate students' attention because they require students to remember and provide missing information while engaging in mild competition. These are two of the key building blocks of engagement. Games can be used to focus on key academic terms, concepts or processes and are an effective way to reinforce learning or review for summative assessments. They can take a variety of forms and students even enjoy designing the game format. Three commonly used games are described below.

What is the Question?

If you've ever seen the television game show Jeopardy, then you know how to play this game! Create a matrix for your students with categories relevant to your content and decide on point categories. You can develop your matrix using a bulletin board or overhead, but take the time to search the internet for PowerPoint files already created that simulate the television game screen.

Matrix for “What is the Question?”

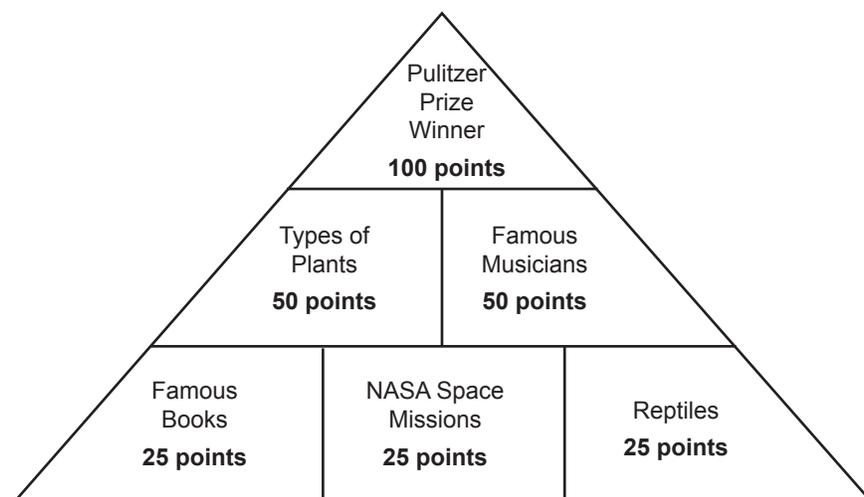
	Language Arts	Health/Fitness	Science	Music/Arts	General
100					
200					
300					
400					
500					

To play the game, students request a cell by calling out the heading and amount that corresponds to the cell, such as “Math for 300.” Clues with words, pictures or both are revealed in the corresponding cell. For example, the clue might be a math formula (i.e., $A = \pi r^2$), a definition (i.e., a word meaning alike), or a concept (i.e., the study of the large plates that form the surface of the earth.) Students give their response in the form of a question, such as “What is the formula for an area of a circle?”, “What is similar?”, or “What is plate tectonics?” The teacher decides if the question provided shows sufficient understanding and calls the answer as correct or incorrect. Correct answers allow the student or team to request an item from another category and level. Play passes to the next student or team when an incorrect answer is given.

Name That Category

This game is modeled on the television game show *The \$100,000 Pyramid*. Student teams are organized into a “clue giver” and one or more “guessers.” The clue giver must list words that fit the category until the category name is correctly identified by the guessers. Before the game begins, all of the category names on the game board are hidden. The teacher reveals them one at a time in a manner that allows only the clue giver to see them. Subsequent categories are revealed only when a team has correctly identified the current category and is ready to move on to the next.

Game Board for “Name That Category”



Talk a Mile a Minute

This game, again, has one person who sees the word lists and provides the clues while another student or group of students tries to guess the words. The words in the list provided are all related in some way to the topic. The talker may say anything about the terms while “talking a mile a minute” but is not allowed to use any of the words in the category title or any rhyming words. For example, he could not say “these are all shapes” or “this word rhymes with bear.” The talker keeps talking until team members identify all terms in the category and the first few teams to do so can be awarded points. The category title can be given at the beginning of the round or, to make the game more challenging, guessing the category can be required after all the terms have been identified.

Sample Words Lists for Talk a Mile a Minute

Types of Animals	Types of Literature	Shapes
Mammal	Fiction	Square
Reptile	Nonfiction	Circle
Amphibian	Mystery	Rectangle
Bird	Romance	Triangle
Insect	Biography	Oval
Fish	Autobiography	Diamond
Spider	Science Fiction	Rhombus

Something to ponder...

Games are often used to reinforce student retention of key information. How can using games as part of your instruction also help you to monitor student understanding of key concepts?

Using Inconsequential Competition

Friendly and playful competition increases engagement through a combination of mild pressure, high energy, and activation of the self-system. While many students will rise to the challenge of a competition, teachers must also be sensitive to those students who find competition itself to be the challenge. The key is to ensure that the competition is inconsequential through the following best practices:

- Establish clearly defined roles for players
- Rotate the membership of groups so that all students have the opportunity to be on the “winning” team
- Make the purpose of rewards to stimulate fun rather than a “high stakes” incident
- Pair students who have a high degree of content mastery with those who do not

Following these structures will allow all students to enjoy the many fun activities that incorporate games and inconsequential competition into the learning environment. These engaging activities can be utilized across all subject areas and types of content.

- Review of vocabulary and key content
- Debate competing points of view regarding content
- Exploration of competing theories and hypotheses
- Alternative approaches to solving problems
- Greatest number of characteristics or elements listed related to key content

Something to ponder...

Describe one possible positive consequence of using inconsequential competition in your classroom.

Action Planning for Using Academic Games and Inconsequential Competition

Action Step 1: Assessing Current Practice

Review a lesson unit that you have recently completed. How many opportunities throughout the lesson did students have to participate in games or inconsequential competition?

Unit Title _____

Length of Unit _____ weeks

Number of opportunities _____

How could you have used additional games to reinforce student retention of key information or skills?

How could you have used activities that incorporated inconsequential competition to help students extend their learning?

Action Step 2: Building Games and Inconsequential Competition into Lessons

1. For an upcoming unit, review your plans and identify several places where inconsequential competition or games could be incorporated.
2. Review the ideas for games and competition outlined in this self-guided activity or other similar activities you have experienced and choose at least two to implement within your unit.
3. As students are participating in the activities, pay attention to the level of engagement of all students and monitor the learning that takes place.

Action Step 3: Reflection

What positive results did you find from incorporating games and inconsequential competition?

What challenges did you experience? How could they be mitigated in the future?

How often do you feel is appropriate to use these strategies to enhance student engagement?

How can you continue to utilize games and inconsequential competition in your classroom? What other ideas do you have for activities that would engage students in this manner?
