

Card Games: Flexible Tools for Active Learning

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One of the principles of active learning is that, in class, students should have more extensive involvement in their own learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Student involvement can be defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1985, pp. 133-34). Bonwell & Eison state that strategies that promote active learning involve students in tasks other than mere listening, engage them in activities and develop their critical thinking skills. I have found that group-based activities, such as games, simulations, and role plays, are especially effective ways to enhance active learning in the humanities and social science courses. These types of activities require active group participation in completing problem-solving tasks during class time.

Various researchers have suggested that games, for example, promote input and output, lower student anxiety, and enhance student participation in learning content and a second language where English is the vehicle of presentation. Scarcella and Crookall (1990) maintain that "One effective way of encouraging students to attend to the input is to provide opportunities for them to be actively involved with it" (p. 225). Cantoni-Harvey feels that games engage students in problem solving and decision-making. From my experience, card games ensure that students are paying attention to what is being taught or introduced. Also, a significant amount of production is engendered in a dynamic manner through the use of card games.

In this article, I focus on one card game that I developed to illustrate how card games can be used as flexible tools for promoting active student learning among diverse student groups. First, I will provide a brief summary of my educational setting. Next, I will give a description of the game and what it is intended to do. Finally, I will discuss adaptations for managing different proficiency level students within the same class.

The Educational Setting

Card games are particularly appropriate for the active learning environment in which I am presently teaching. At the Miyazaki International College, content, English language and higher level thinking skills are taught concurrently through active and cooperative learning tasks and activities. Language and content must be integrated throughout each lesson. This integration takes place for all discipline-specific courses (other than Japanese and English language courses) during the first year and a half after students are admitted to the college. In the classroom, students are normally divided into working groups of three to four students which is not only an ideal arrangement for facilitating discussion, but also for other interactive sessions, such as card games. In my college classes I use card games as supplemental activities in team teaching since they promote active learning, our preferred teaching methodology.

Content Squares: Development and Purpose

I designed the game, Content Squares, for a team-taught Introduction to History course to review content from the course text in preparation for an end of unit exam. Through the game, I wanted students to interact with the material in a

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lively manner, to provide a context for oral communication (including attentive listening) and independent peer teaching, to synthesize and apply previously learned content material, and to integrate their language skills and content for production. I encouraged two vital aspects: competition and cooperation.

The goal for student groups in the game Content Squares is to produce oral sentences (and later short paragraphs) that are both content valid and grammatically correct. What is important for my purposes are the results that were achieved through this activity, its appropriateness at the college where I teach, and the card game's relevance to meeting an important pedagogical principle: active student involvement in classroom learning.

In developing the game, I examined the relevant units in the text and selected key words and short phrases, such as "irrigation" or "surplus grain," that were the most important concepts, terms, examples or facts. I then created a set of eighty cards for each group of four to six students. I typed on each card selected words and phrases from the text. A numerical value from one to four was also placed on each card: four was used for the most difficult words and phrases, one for the simplest. The points served another function: competition for each group to score the highest number of points.

Although the game, being group-based, was basically a cooperative activity, it also created a high degree of competition and excitement as teams vied with each other to produce the higher point numerical totals as determined by the cards played each turn. My team partner and I found that students were able to create sentences and paragraphs at different levels of sophistication in a highly interactive manner. Students became so absorbed in paying attention to the other group's statements and in forming their own sentences that they did not demonstrate any hesitancy or nervousness in verbally expressing their creations to other students. The card game gave us feedback on students' intellectual capabilities and their verbal fluency.

According to the rules for play, students had to react to material that was placed on the table by one group and quickly add details, compare or contrast information, provide an example, or make a generalization based on the other group's input. A high degree of intellectual and linguistic elaboration was achieved. This demonstration of learning during the game was later confirmed in the results on the unit essay exam.

How Content Squares Is Played

To conduct the game of Content Squares, I observe the following procedures and rules:

1. Form two teams of 2-3 players each. The teams sit opposite each other at a table.
2. Allocate one set of cards for each table.
3. Place cards face down on the table.
4. Teams randomly take half the cards and place them face down on the table in front of them.
5. Teams determine who has the first turn (flip a coin, etc.). The game is played in a similar manner to commercial Scrabble™. The object of the game is to form grammatically correct and content valid statements. The statements can be ones of description, categorization, contrast, similarity, generalization, example, and others at the discretion of the instructor.

6. For the first turn only, two cards are placed on the table. Points are given for statements that are grammatically correct and content valid. One point is deducted for incorrect grammar (depends on instructor's judgment).

Mesopotamia	Uruk
1	3
Mesopotamia	Uruk

"Uruk was a city in Mesopotamia."
4 POINTS

7. The second team takes their turn by placing only one card either vertically or horizontally on one of the cards on the table. A player can add to a previous statement or make two related statements. As in Scrabble™ when a player places a card next to two other cards, the player must make two related statements incorporating all the cards in those two directions.

Mesopotamia	Uruk
1	3
Mesopotamia	Uruk

granaries
4
granaries

"Mesopotamian cities had granaries in Uruk and other cities."

8 POINTS

The statements are made orally and loud enough for the other team to hear. Optionally, the sentences can be written down and shown to the other team. Unlike Scrabble™, players may form as many as three different sets of cards at different places on the table when they can't think of a way to place a card on an existing set. When this occurs, players can add one card to any existing set on the table.

8. Continue as above until all cards are placed or a pre-determined time limit has been met. The team with the most points is the winner.

Game Adaptations for a Multilevel Class

The card game is flexible enough so that I use it with multilevel students having different degrees of content comprehension.

To meet the needs of students with particular skill weaknesses or deficiencies in content understanding, I make a few changes in the content that I select, and the mechanics of play. For students with lower intermediate listening skills, I allow them

to first say and then write down their sentences on a piece of paper which is then passed to the other group. All members share the written statements. This ensures individual comprehension and allows more time for the group to react and develop their own sentences. I encourage beginning students to write all sentences. This alleviates their initial fears of speaking out in front of others and overcomes their preoccupation with making error-free speech. I also allot more time between turns and select content material which is less abstract and simpler in nature. For very low groups, I write entire sentences on cards to facilitate paragraph construction on particular concepts, such as extended definitions.

For higher level students, I impose strict time limits on their turns, demand error-free grammatical structures, or choose content which is more abstract, complex, controversial and speculative. To promote critical thinking skills, more proficient students analyze their statements and make arguments, offer opinions and express their feelings on the issues that rise from card placement.

When I wish to raise the complexity of the game, I have students closely examine a reading unit, self-select important concepts and terms, create sets of words and phrases, and conduct their own card game. In this case, I expect students to analyze the text carefully, and to justify their selections of key concepts.

In classes with mixed proficiency students, I am flexible in structuring groups. For example, I form separate groups in the classroom that are completely composed of higher, middle or lower level students. My team partner and I sit in on the middle and low groups to assist with any difficulties in language and content. If I want to emphasize peer teaching, I mix students in each group so that all proficiency levels are represented. In the heat of game competition, the stronger players ensure that everyone understands the sentences being produced on the table and put pressure on everyone to contribute.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I feel that card games like Content Squares create opportunities for students to be physically and psychologically engrossed in their own learning in which they have a great deal of control and latitude. Card games go beyond solely listening to academic input; students must respond to the oral input in an active manner by first discussing their response in conversation among other group members, and then by producing a verbal response to the other group. Card games can be designed that are imaginative and enjoyable devices which provide opportunities for students to understand critical ideas, to reinforce learned concepts, and to provide opportunities for students to engage in the application of new knowledge in new situations. They are certainly worth the effort by teachers who wish to promote active learning in the classroom.

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