

Games in the Classroom

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IBSC London 2011

“Why use games in the classroom?”

The simple answer is that boys *like* them. Any time a teacher can introduce something into the curriculum that is both educational and fun, boys are going to be far more interested in what they are being taught. There has been plenty of research in recent years on the differences in boys’ and girls’ learning; much of this has pointed to what many of us have known for quite some time: boys like to move around, to compete with each other, and to have varied activities. Games allow for a change of pace and a chance for boys to just “be boys” in a controlled setting. Games can help to reinforce the basic elements of our subject area, elements like vocabulary, simple processes, key terms, etc. They can teach speed of recall, teamwork and the use of resources.

Many teachers don’t like to use games in class because they are perceived to be loud, unruly, and time consuming both in and out of the classroom. Many teachers cite that they don’t enjoy playing games themselves, so they don’t use them in class. Whether it’s your style or not, the fact of the matter is that boys like them, and any time a student is doing something that he or she enjoys, they are more likely to learn something. While a teacher’s comfort in the classroom is important, it’s equally important to remember that our ultimate goal is to reach *all* of our students, not just the ones who learn like us. To that end, games are also a great way to reach the three primary types of learners: kinesthetic, audio and visual. Introducing a game into the end of a traditionally taught lesson is a simple way to reach kids who might otherwise not be served by your standard lesson plan.

Making games work for you

Games can be worked into any curriculum. While they work great as an entire lesson plan, more often than not I use them as **SPONGES**, to soak up time at the end of a class period. Instead of letting kids start on their homework or leave class early, use those remaining 5 minutes to play a game and use all of your class time for meaningful exposure to the material. Furthermore, you will find that games can be used as **CARROTS** at the end of class in order to help get your class to focus during the lesson.

The trick is to use the **K.I.S.S.** principle (Keep it simple, stupid) when designing your games so that they are quick, painless to prepare and easy to pull out of a drawer whenever necessary.

- Questions should be simple, and the answers need to be relatively short and have black and white answers. If there can be debate about what the right answer is, there will be, and that will just slow the whole works down.
- Games are most easily played with concepts like vocabulary, dates, rules, formulas and facts. Never ask opinion questions or questions that can be answered with a short paper.
- Keep the rules and objectives as clear and simple as possible; you don't want to spend 3 of your 5 minutes explaining and debating the rules.

CANDY

Candy is hugely important. It is truly amazing what you can get a boy to do in order to win a small piece of candy. Buy candy that is small and individually wrapped. Choose candies that are not messy and are quickly consumed; if you give a boy a piece of gum or taffy, you have lost him for the remainder of the class. Be cognizant of allergies; keep a few types of candies on hand in case a boy can't eat nuts etc.

The Questions

Many teachers are leery of using games in class because they think that they are going to have to stay up all night preparing questions in advance. The truth of the matter is that I never prepare questions in advance. There's no need. Flipping to the end of the chapter of most text books provides a teacher with an ample supply of questions, vocabulary and problems to use in games. More often than not I pull the questions out of thin air. Since I usually play games after a lesson, it's relatively easy to make up questions about the material that we just covered. If you're stuck, you can always flip through the book.

Props

Props and manipulatives will make your games that much more exciting. Some basic props to keep in a drawer include:

- A soft ball (I like Nerf®)- This should be something small enough to keep in a drawer, and soft enough that when thrown in a classroom it isn't likely to destroy anything.
- Flyswatters- I keep at least 4 of these on hand. They are useful when you want the boys to slap their answers on a map, board, or overhead projection.
- Flashcards- Flashcards take a little bit of preparation, but once you've made them, they'll last you the rest of your career. If you need help making them, enlist the help of bored students in study halls.
- Dice/spinners- Random chance can add a lot to your games. Dice and spinners are a simple way to spice up your games. I use dry erase dice so that I can write categories, verbs to conjugate, numbers, parts of speech etc. on all sides. I buy mine from Carlex, but you can find them in other places too.
<http://www.carlexonline.com/LARGE-WIPE-OFF-DIE/productinfo/3245/>
<http://www.carlexonline.com/SET-OF-4-SMALL-WIPE-OFF-DICE/productinfo/3246/>
- Dry-erase boards- I use Kwik Chek® paddles. They are two sided and come with individual markers and erasers. I also buy mine from Carlex, but you can find them in lots of places.
<http://www.carlexonline.com/KWIK-CHEK-WHITE-BOARD-SET-2/productinfo/3214/>
- Buzzers- When you want to get really fancy, you can have the students ring in their answers like they do in game shows. I use these for games like Jeopardy as they add a little realism to the game. I use Eggspert® buzzers, but there are others commercially available. Eggspert now has them in wireless as well, so they can more easily be used by students in their seats. Once again, I get mine from Carlex:
<http://www.carlexonline.com/WIRELESS-EGGSPERT-GAME/productinfo/3628/>
- Bells- For years (until I found Eggspert) I used a common desk bell to have kids ring in for games. They can be purchased cheaply at most office supply stores.

Sample Games

Here are some very simple, easily adaptable games that I use in class on a regular basis. They're not very fancy, but the boys BEG for them. Again, these are just samples, so feel free to adjust them and hopefully use them as a springboard to create your own.

Charades/Pictionary

Props: None

Virtually everyone has played Charades or Pictionary at one point or another, so they are often overlooked as commonplace, but they are easy no-prep games that the boys will get into. If you have never played either of these games, the basic idea is that a name, concept, vocabulary word etc. is given to a boy who then has to act out (in the case of Charades) or draw on the board (in the case of Pictionary) in order to make the class guess what it is. For instance, I show a boy a vocabulary word such as the verb "to swim" and he would then mime swimming. The first kid who guesses the French vocabulary word wins a point. I give points to the boy who guesses the correct answer and not the actor in order to avoid spoilers.

Variation: This game can also be played in the traditional team method. Each team is responsible for guessing their own actors' clues and earn points for guessing the correct answer within a given time period.

Flyswatter

Props: 2-4 flyswatters

Flyswatter games can take a bit of preparation but are pretty simply run. The basic premise is that each team has a flyswatter and when asked a question they need to hit the answer with the flyswatter before the other team(s). This can be as simple as writing a series of dates all over the board and then the teacher giving events, writing vocabulary and the teacher giving the definition, writing names and the teacher giving a description etc. I often use this game in conjunction with a map to teach geography, or draw pictures of vocabulary on the board for the kids to slap.

Note: Make the kids do the prep for you. Give each kid 3 or 4 items to write on the board for you and it reduces prep. time greatly. I'll also set this one up while the boys are finishing up a quiz or worksheet.

Silent Lines

Props: none

This game is good if you have a nitpicky subject like math or grammar.

Have the boys divide into two lines facing the board. A question is asked and the boys at the front of each of the two lines go to the board and try to answer. The entire class is silent. When one of the boys thinks that he has the correct answer, he says "Check!" If he is correct, his team earns a point and he goes to the end of the line. If he is incorrect, he goes to the end of the line and the next boy needs to answer the same question by correcting the previous answer. Play continues until one team gets a correct answer.

Ways to make this work for you: Write a math problem on the board and let the boys solve it showing their work. Have the boys translate a sentence from English into Spanish etc. Have the boys label the parts of speech in a sentence. Take an incorrect answer from one of their homework assignments and have them correct it.

Around the world

Props: flashcards

Around the world is a classic elementary school game based on speed of recall. It works best with flashcards, but can be effective with oral prompts too.

A student is chosen to start and then stands next to the kid nearest him. The teacher shows a flashcard and the first of the two students to respond with the correct answer moves on to the next seat and challenges the next student with the goal of beating every student in the room. If a student loses, he sits wherever he is (NOT necessarily in his original seat) and waits for play to come back around to him. Play continues until one student has made it through all of the students in the class and back to their original seat.

Book search

Props: none

This game can be played individually or in teams and is a great game to fill a few minutes at the end of class. Have the kids start with their texts CLOSED on their desks. The teacher then asks a question and the students must find the answer in their book. The first one to find the answer gets a point.

Bingo

Props: none

There are literally thousands of variations on bingo. You can find all sorts of bingo cards on the internet, but this is a simple low-prep variation that everyone can use.

Have the students take out a piece of paper and draw a 5x5 grid. Have them put an x in the center box and then fill in all other boxes randomly with answers. I often use this with numbers obviously, having the students write the digits in the box and I list off the numbers in French. This can easily be adapted by asking the students to fill the grids with vocabulary and the teacher reads off the definitions, with famous people and the teacher reads off their actions, with numbers and the teacher reads off problems etc.

PowerPoint games

Props: PowerPoint projector

Basically every game show that has aired has been converted into a classroom review game. *Jeopardy!* is a favorite, but many teachers also play *Family Feud*, *Hollywood Squares* and others with great success. A simple internet search for “PowerPoint game templates” and the like will uncover tons of these games for you to easily modify to your subject. These will take a bit more prep time in order to fill in the blanks with questions from your subject area, but the time is worth it. A few good sites are:

PowerPoint Games

<http://jc-schools.net/tutorials/ppt-games/>

PowerPoint Games and Game Templates

http://people.uncw.edu/ertzbergerj/ppt_games.html

Classroom game templates and more

<http://www.murray.k12.ga.us/teacher/kara%20leonard/MiniT/Games/Games.htm>

Paddles

Props: Dry-erase paddles

This is a simple way to gauge how well your students know material. After presenting a lesson, split the class into groups of 2-3 and give each group a dry erase paddle. Ask a question and give a point to the first team to show the correct answer on their paddles.

Who am I?

Props: Flash cards, tape

This is actually an old party game that I adapted for French class. I keep a deck of note cards with the names of famous people written on them. I then stick one to the forehead of each student with scotch tape and they have to ask a series of yes or no questions in order to figure out who they “are”. This game can easily be adapted to be used with numbers, e.g. “Am I odd?” “Am I prime?” etc. or vocabulary terms, e.g. “Am I part of a cell?” “Do I exist in mammals?”

Last Man Standing

Props: 1 soft ball (or similar throwable item)

This is a simple game that I use to fill time at the end of class. I have the boys stand in a circle and toss a ball to one of them. I then ask a question which should be relatively simple, an answer of just a few words. If the boy with the ball gets it right he tosses the ball to a new boy and I ask a new question. If the answer is wrong, the boy tosses the ball to another boy who then is asked the **same** question. If the 2nd boy gets it right the 1st has to sit down and is out of the game. If the 2nd boy gets it wrong as well, they toss it to a 3rd boy and the 1st boy is then safe. Play continues until all of the boys but one are sitting. If I want to play this for longer than 10 minutes, I’ll allow boys who have gotten out to re-enter the game if no one in the class gets the answer correct and they know the answer. Boys re-enter from first out to last out. Be wary of playing this game for too long as the boys will disengage if left out of the game for too long.

Variation: If you have a class that is particularly sluggish or lazy, make it the last man *sitting* so that they have more incentive to try.

Ball elimination

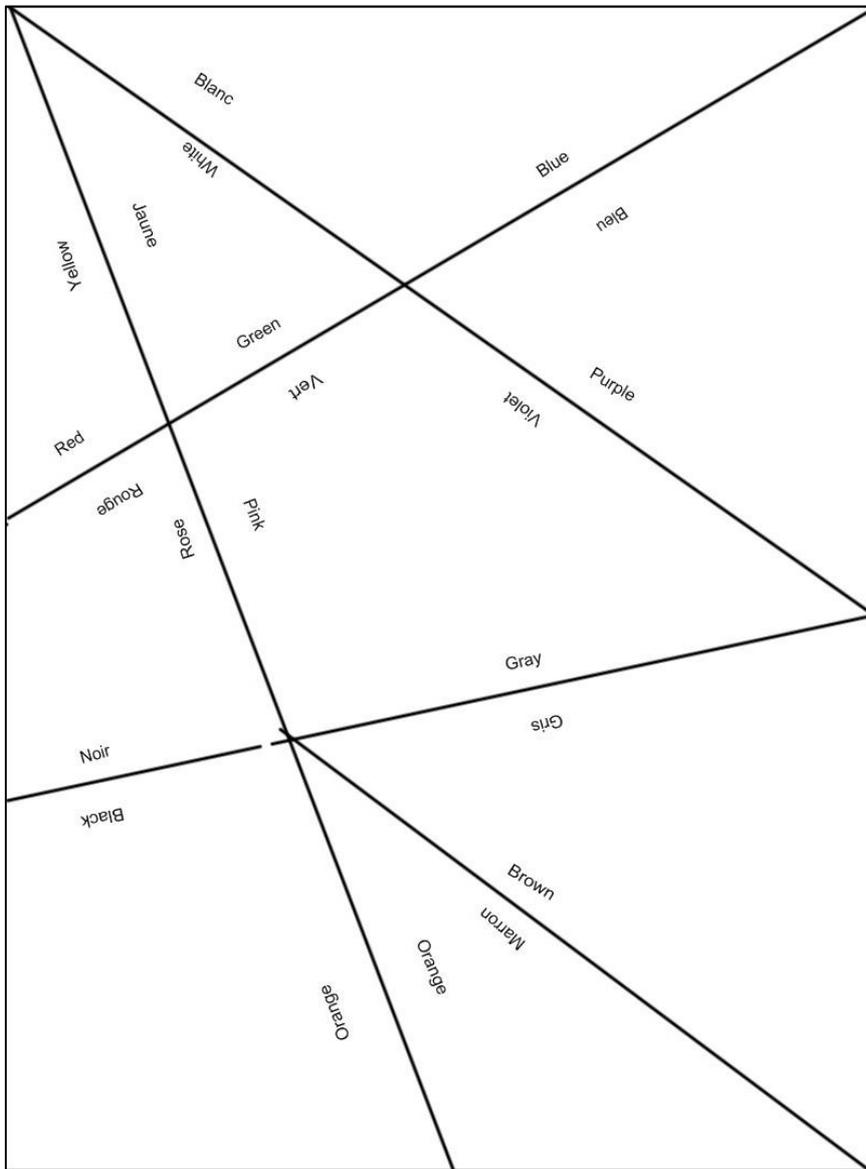
Props: 1 soft ball (or similar throwable item)

This is a team variation of Last Man Standing. Divide the boys into two teams and make them stand in two lines facing each other. Play is like Last Man Standing only when a boy throws the ball it is always to a member of the opposing line. Play continues until one team is entirely knocked out. If you want to play for longer, allow boys the opportunity to re-enter in the order that they were out.

Puzzles

Props: Puzzles

Puzzles are easier to make than you might think. They take a bit of prep work, but if you store them in zipper-top plastic bags they can be used again and again. Take a normal 8 ½ x 11” piece of paper and divide it into irregular sections using straight lines. On both sides of the lines write questions and answers. This can be as simple as a word and its translation/definition, a country and its capital, or a body part and the system to which it belongs. Photocopy the puzzles onto cardstock for more durability, then cut the pages up along the lines and have the kids put them back together. First to put it back together correctly wins. Here’s an example using colors in French:



God

Props: a die/6 cards, paddles

God is a review game that I play shortly before chapter tests and the like. It's basically a board game à la "Chutes and Ladders."

- First, I draw a game board on the whiteboard with scattered chutes/ladders (shladders) and random +1,-1 spaces etc. I then have the class divide themselves up into teams, usually so that there are 3-4 teams of no more than 3 students. A question is asked of the class, usually a translation style question using the material from the current chapter. The team that is taking its turn gets to answer first. If they are correct, they get to draw a card from a deck of 6 (you can use a die, but I find the boys prefer to draw the cards themselves) and move the appropriate spaces. If their answer is wrong, the next team gets to "steal" for half credit of a drawn card (I round down on 5 and 3, and up on 1). If they get it wrong as well, it moves to the next team etc. Game play moves around the room in order until one team makes it all the way to the end of the board.
- If a team lands on another team, I move the team that was landed upon one space back.
- I usually put in spaces that allow for bigger jumps (both forward and backward) and I make both ends of the "shladders" live, so that one may go up or down depending on the direction of travel.
- The game is called "God" because for the purposes of the game I am God and reserve the right to change the board at any time. For instance if a team makes it too close to the end too early in the class period, I will add spaces to the board, extra "shladders", etc. In the interest of speed, I usually don't explain the finer points of the rules until it comes into play (when a team lands on a special space etc.).

The boys are very competitive, and enjoy the game even when they are losing due to the inherent element of chance which allows a team to get ahead on the board even with less correct answers than other teams. Because every team has the potential to win at any time, boys generally remain engaged for the duration of the game, usually the entire class period.

A sample "God" board

