

Minds and Motion

Active Learning for the Creative Classroom

Cally Stockton

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Introduction

When I tell someone that I am a middle years teacher, I usually get one of two reactions: “You must be a saint” or “You must be crazy”. It does take a lot of patience to teach this age group, and it helps to have a sense of humour and some creativity. Most of all, you need to enjoy your work so that the students will enjoy learning. Boredom is contagious, but so is enthusiasm.

If you are a middle years teacher, youth group leader or someone else with the privilege of working with young adolescents, you know that young people between the ages of 10 and 15 need activity and variety to channel their energy in a positive direction. A diverse and dynamic group, they all are going through many important physical, social, emotional and cognitive changes. Although they need structure and clear directions (usually repeated several times), they also want opportunities to practise independence and show leadership.

Students, from primary age to adult learners, learn best when the activity – whether lecture, group work or hands-on practice – is divided into shorter blocks of time. In my experience, the average attention span for middle years students (how long they can focus without some kind of change in position or activity) is between 10–20 minutes, so I designed all of the activities in this book to be done in that length of time. Shorter variations of the activities can serve as quick warm-ups or fill those 5-minute gaps at the ends of classes. Combining different variations creates a series of activities useful for longer time spans.

How to use the activities. Although they may seem simple, these activities can be the starting point or vehicle for powerful learning. For example, Vote with Your Feet, an activity in the Getting Better Acquainted section, can show the range of diversity in the types of music students like and can show that global warming may be the “hot” topic for science this year. In this activity, students physically plant themselves on a spectrum that shows their positions on a variety of topics. What might students learn about themselves and others if, after studying a unit, they actually moved to a different spot on the continuum? What kinds of multiple intelligences/learning styles would be tapped if, while standing in place along the continuum, the class made a one-dimensional column graph on paper

representing the 3-D column graph their bodies were making? A humanities and social sciences activity could involve role playing a real issue confronting the UN, parliament or a class issue for which there are differing viewpoints. This simple activity can help students begin to understand the complexity of reaching compromise to achieve goals (a balanced budget for parliament, a menu for the class party).

Use these simple activities to warm up, to understand prior knowledge, to introduce lessons, to model processes at work in the students' worlds – the kids will love them, and you will infuse your classes with energy. Motivated, enthusiastic students create fewer class management problems and engage in powerful, long-lasting learning.

Origin of activities. Just like good recipes, many of these activities have been around for a long time. I have collected them over the years in my various roles as a psychology student, youth worker, management trainer, school volunteer, parent and teacher. The games in the book are part of the public domain, and I have provided clear instructions and suggestions for variations that will encourage your own creativity.

Tested and approved by hundreds of middle years students, the activities have low physical risk and are cognitively, socially and emotionally appropriate for young adolescents. (Disclaimer: Anyone who works with middle years students knows that without proper supervision, they can turn paper folding into a full-contact sport.)

Book organisation. The activities are divided into four sections – Name Games; Getting Better Acquainted; Warm-Ups and Attention-Getters; and Team Building, Teamwork and Collaborative Learning. The activities include the following information:

- Number of people (gives the range of group sizes appropriate for each activity).
- Time (gives an approximate time length for each activity and often provides a suggestion about when to use it).
- Materials (easily obtainable and inexpensive); this section also details whether the activity is suitable for outdoors or indoors and whether desks or tables are needed.
- Directions (step-by-step and based on what has worked best in the classroom).
- Teaching Points (suggested discussion questions, topic connections and reflection strategies).
- Variations (suggested ways to connect to various content areas, adjustments to make based on available time and ways to extend the activity for increased complexity).
- Modifications (suggested ways to meet challenged students' needs).
- Notes (provides troubleshooting support based on observations of the activity in the classroom).

Having clear instructions and materials ready avoids losing valuable teaching time in lengthy transitions from one activity to another. In fact, once students have learned how to do a particular activity, they will transition quickly and can even lead the games. Depending on how and when they are used, the activities can serve many purposes, from learning names to developing higher-order thinking skills. I hope that you and your students will enjoy these activities and that some will become regular traditions in your classroom.

Name Snake

Objective: To learn each other's names

Number of People: Best for 10–30

Materials: Best done in a classroom, with desks in rows

Time: About 30 seconds times the number of people (5–15 minutes)

Directions: This game is called “Name Snake” because you “snake” up and down the rows of desks, rather than starting at the front of each row. The first person says their name; the second person says the first person's name, then their own name; the third person says the first person's name, the second person's name and then their own, until the last person says everyone's name and then their own.

Teacher Tip: To learn your students' names more quickly, look at each student as that person says their own name. As students say the names of their classmates, say each name to yourself. If a student gets stumped, be ready to help with a hint (“Starts with the letter J”, or “It's the name of a famous ____”). Be careful not to use hints that might embarrass students. When the game is done, try to say all the names yourself.

Teaching Points:

Learning Strategy: Point out that repetition is a key factor in learning and memorising. Students hear the name of the first student most often. With each additional student, they hear the name less often, and they hear the name of the person right before them only once. Students often stumble on that name, even though they have just heard it. To apply this to their studying, students should go through flashcards several times and shuffle them to see and say them in different orders.

Social/Cultural: Names are very important. Addressing someone by the name they wish to be called is a sign of respect. Discuss using titles with names (Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms, Dr, Rev., Captain, etc.) and waiting for permission to use first names with adults. Names can also be part of a family tradition. Ask how many students were named after a relative. (Humanities and social sciences critical thinking question: Why do you think that in some cultures it has been more common for sons to be named after their fathers than for daughters to be named after their mothers?)

Variation:

A student hands an object (foam ball, “talking stick” or other item) to the next person after saying that next person's name. This version is particularly useful if you want to establish a classroom norm of “the person with the item is the one who gets to speak” during certain kinds of activities.

Modification: If you have a student with a memory or speech problem, seat them so that they can go first or second. You can also describe the activity, tell the students which side of the room is the starting point, and let a few students trade seats to experience more or less of a memory challenge. (Often, students will ask if they can try saying all of the names, even if they aren't the last person.)

Note: Remind students to practise good listening skills while other students take their turns saying the names.

Human Shuffle

Objective: To interact with classmates to discover commonalities and differences; good intro for peer pressure discussions

Number of People: Best for 8–20

Time: 10–20 minutes (depending on number of rounds and amount of discussion)

Materials: Some space to spread out, a seat for each student or a carpet square to stand on

Directions: This activity is a bit like musical chairs. Put the chairs in a circle, one chair for each student. The leader stands in the centre and does not have a chair. The leader makes a statement (“Shuffle if you like chocolate”). If the statement is true for a student, they get up and move to a vacated seat. The leader tries to take a vacated seat as well, so one student will be left without a seat and becomes the new leader. (If the leader doesn’t get to a seat quickly enough, they will need to make another statement.) The new leader makes another “Shuffle if you…” statement.

Statements can be preferences (likes, dislikes), birth month, what students are wearing, experiences. See “People Bingo” and “Vote with Your Feet” for more ideas.

You can stop and debrief when there are surprises and notable responses (no one moves, everyone moves).

Variations:

- Limit the questions to a particular topic.
- Instead of chairs, have students stand on carpet squares or other place holders.
- Questions can elicit opinions that quickly can lead to a debate. For example: “Shuffle if you think school uniforms are a good idea.” After they move, ask, “For those of you who moved, why do you think so?” “For those who didn’t move, why not?”

Modification: Students with disabilities who are not able to quickly move to new spots can point to a new spot with a laser pointer, torch or metre ruler, and that spot is theirs.

Note: In musical chairs-type activities, some students can get rowdy and fight for a spot. Establish ground rules ahead of time.



Anagrams

Objective: Get students' attention and practise thinking creatively

Number of People: Any number

Time: 10–20 minutes

Materials: Paper and pencil, whiteboard, blackboard or a flip chart pad

Directions: Model the activity first by writing a word on the board or flip chart pad, writing a few words that can be made from its letters and then asking the students for a few more. Tell the students that you are going to give them a word, and they are to write that word at the top of the page; when you say “go”, they need to come up with as many words as they can think of in X minutes, using the letters from that word.

Give the students a word that is at least six letters long (like “pirates”), and say “go”. At the end of the time limit (3–5 minutes), say “Stop” and have everyone put their pencils down. Have the students count the number of words they created (pirates: trip, tea, tire, tries, pit ...). You can have the winner say their words aloud, or you can collect the papers to check for spelling and the highest number of words.

Rules: Decide if plural words (rate and rates) count as two separate words. Decide if proper names count. (You may want to leave them out, since there can be many different spellings of names.)

Variations:

- You can do more than one round with a different starter word and have the score (word count) start over or be cumulative.
- Students can work together in pairs or small groups to brainstorm the list of words. There also can be a competition between groups.
- **More Challenging Anagrams:** Give a title or first and last name and have students come up with a phrase using the letters. Letters can only be used as often as they appear in the title/name. Example: “Edmund Barton” has two “Ds” and two “Ns” and one “A” and one “U,” so “D” and “N” can only be used twice in a phrase (e.g. “Random bed nut”). Winners can be selected based on the best phrase or the most number of letters used in the phrase.
- **Most Challenging Anagrams:** Students must come up with a phrase that uses all of the letters. There are free anagram generators on the internet that you can use to show students some of the many possibilities from each word or phrase, but encourage students to see how many they can create on their own.

Class Flag or Coat of Arms

Objective: Create a visual representation of what the class values

Number of People: Any number

Time: Three sessions, at least 15 minutes each

Materials: Pencil, paper or flip chart pad, textas for draft, materials to make coat of arms or flag (poster paper or fabric), sample coat of arms or flags (either pictures or the real thing)

Directions:

Session 1: Ask students if they know what a coat of arms is. Briefly discuss the purpose of a coat of arms and where they are found (e.g. homes, universities, flags of countries). Ask if any students have a family coat of arms. Show a couple of examples and describe how different items on the coat of arms are symbols for particular qualities, like honour and bravery. If students are making flags, have them discuss flags from different countries and what their symbols represent.

This session is a brainstorming session, so have the students generate a list of qualities that are important to them as a group (friendship, fun, learning). Write the list on the board or flip chart pad. (If they have previously created a set of class rules, you may want to refer to it and see what values they represent.) Then ask them for ideas on what image or symbol might represent each quality. Get a few ideas for each quality. Tell the students that next time they will work on a design.

Session 2: Review the list of qualities and possible visual representations. Depending on the size of the group, either work together to vote on what to include and create a design; or, break into smaller groups and have each group work on some ideas. Create a draft of the design(s).

Session 3: Review the draft, and see if anyone has any ideas for changes. Reach consensus on the design. (Can everyone support it?) Work together to create the coat of arms or flag, or nominate a few students to make it.

Variation:

Students can work on a design individually or in pairs, in class or at home. Then the class can vote on the best design or combine ideas from different designs, or they can make modifications to the best one.

