

# **Classroom Learning Activities: Using Frame Games in the College Classroom**

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The use of educational games in the classroom is not a new idea, however some educators are reluctant to give credibility to this teaching strategy in the college environment. Games that are misused or used for entertainment purposes have given this type of teaching strategy a negative reputation (Gredler, 1992; Greenblat, 1981; Petranek, 2000). However, when used as part of the experiential and active learning models of theorists such as Dewey and Kolb, instructional games can provide common experiences that can be analyzed, reflected on, adapted and customized to meet the needs and objectives of any type of course and level of education (Gredler, 1992; Greenblat, 1988; Petranek, 2000). Games can be used to reinforce or simulate course concepts and complex social structure systems, and they have been proven to increase student motivation, engagement and retention of material (Greenblat, 1988; Specht, 1991; Yaman, 2003). Games in the classroom can also be used to help students practice or refine knowledge and skills and to help review key concepts. Games can also help instructors identify gaps or weakness in students' knowledge and reinforce new relationships between important or complex concepts (Gredler, 1992; Greenblat, 1988).

One type of game strategy that can be effective for the classroom is the use of "frame games". Frame games are those that are popularly familiar (such as Jeopardy© and Monopoly©), but they are adapted to specifically cover particular course content (Greenblat, 1988; Stolovitch, 1980; Thiagarajan and Stolovitch, 1980). Thiagarajan and Stolovitch (1980) explain, "[Frame games] are those games that are deliberately developed to provide a content-free instructional structure on which can be loaded locally relevant content" (98). Frame games have numerous educational benefits including generating awareness about current issues, discovering new insights, helping students learn basic facts (lower-level thinking skills), application of higher order thinking skills such as integration, synthesis, and problem-solving (104). Moreover, frame games are less time consuming to design because the basic structure of the game already exists. The key is to appropriately change the subject and rules of play to coincide with the intended course goals and objectives.

In an Introduction to Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management course, it has been found that many students are trying to understand just what the profession is and how to distinguish between the many types of leisure service organizations. After trying unsuccessfully in the past to get them to read and discuss the material from the text, an instructional frame game was designed. It was named Leisureopoly, loosely based on the popular Monopoly© board game. Throughout the playing of the game, there are numerous

“teachable moments.” The idea of a game in the classroom has piqued students’ curiosity encouraging them to learn more about the type of agency they represent so they can “win” the game. Several researchers have commented that educational games based on Monopoly© have negative outcomes in the classroom because of the competitiveness involved (Gredler, 1992; Greenblat, 1981; Stolovitch, 1980). However, by adapting the rules of play to adhere to more educational outcomes, this experience provides a positive and unique opportunity for students to become increasingly involved in the classroom and their learning.

### *Outcomes for Leisureopoly*

There are numerous outcomes for this game, depending on the specific topics covered in the course. Examples of outcomes include:

1. Students create a mission statement for their agency.
2. Students use the mission statement to guide the decision-making process of developing their leisure service agency.
3. Students recognize the differences in leisure service organizations.
4. Students experience the internal and external pressures of managing a leisure service organization.
5. Students compete for resources, just as leisure service organizations compete for resources.
6. Students use budgeting and accounting skills to manage financial resources.

### *The Game*

To maintain a quick pace, the game works best when played with a group of 20-25 students. Students are divided into groups of four to five members, and an accountant and spokesperson are selected for the group. Each group represents a leisure service agency, which may or may not actually exist in the “real world.” The following agencies were selected for the class: Wild Dunes Resort, National Park Service, YMCA, All-Star Sports Complex, and the Metropolis City Parks and Recreation Department. The goal is to create agencies that represent a broad spectrum of leisure service organizations, yet not so different that they are not able to compete for the same resources and encounter some of the same challenges. The “winner” of the game is the group, or groups, who complete their mission statement. For example, if the group represents a “for profit” agency, then they must finish the game having made a profit. However, a non-profit agency will have different measures of what is considered success.

Given the amount of time involved and the numerous opportunities for class discussions, it is preferable that the game be played over the course of three to four class sessions. On day one, the rules are explained and groups are selected. The first task for

each group is to create a mission statement based upon the type of agency they represent, and each group must also explain how they are funded (taxes, donations, etc.). Successful completion of these tasks requires that students understand the basic functions of their agency (information that is covered in previous reading assignments or class discussion). Once these two tasks are completed, each group receives two million dollars that must be managed and accounted for during the entire game.

On the second day, the game begins. Groups alternate rolling the die. The number rolled corresponds to the type of card they receive. This adds some element of chance to the game, however, by designing cards in ways that require students to use skills or information from the course, the instructor can help reduce the idea that students simply react to whatever the card says (Gredler, 1992). For example, by rolling a one or a six, the group selects an amenity card. Amenity cards include a 25,000 square foot building, a tennis court, a gymnasium, a pool, a playground, a fleet of vans and buses, 10,000 acres of land, and other types of amenities that would be found in the leisure service industry. If they choose to purchase the amenity, they must justify their purchase based upon their mission statement goals. If they decide not to purchase the amenity, it goes up for auction and other groups may bid until the highest bidder wins. Throughout play, agencies may sell or trade their amenities to other groups. This usually results in some interesting debate between agencies.

By rolling a two, the group selects a management card; rolling a three refers to a maintenance card; rolling a four gets a programming card; and rolling a five results in a quiz card. Quiz cards provide the instructor with an opportunity to include miscellaneous questions that might not be covered in other categories or to provide examples of exam questions. Each card also includes different levels of financial rewards. For example, on a programming card, if a group can list the four general categories of programming, then that group receives \$50,000. If the group can list *and* explain the four categories, they receive \$75,000. Much of the literature recommends students not be penalized for incorrect answers (Gredler, 1992). If incorrect answers are given, the group would lose their turn, but the game should stop for a moment while the class discusses the correct answer. Play continues until the instructor decides the game has covered the topics of interest. “Winners” are determined by assessing whether or not agencies completed their mission statements.

### *Debriefing*

Because the game has the opportunity for increased class discussion, play should continue for at least one more session. This final session should be devoted to debriefing, or reflection. Reflection is the most important aspect of experiential education, and it should be planned more carefully than the actual game (Gredler, 1992; Jones, 1980; Petranek, 2000; Specht, 1991; Thatcher, 1986). During the debriefing phase, instructors should reinforce connections between the experience and the course content. Many researchers suggest reflecting in small groups, as a large class, and then individually. The importance of individual reflection is often overlooked by most instructors using the

game format as a teaching tool, therefore efforts should be made to allow students time to reflect individually on their personal experience with the game (Petranek, 2000). This can be done with a short, informal writing assignment, or a more formal paper integrating elements of the game into the content of the course.

### *Recommendations*

It is important to understand that this type of teaching format will not work effectively for all groups, and some students actually suggested an incorporation of additional elements of competition into the game. Many students would prefer to have one winner rather than allowing the potential for all groups to win based on whether or not they complete their mission statement. The concept of winning and educational games has received much debate throughout the gaming literature, and ultimately, it is a decision to be made by the instructor based upon the learning styles and personalities of his or her students.

For larger groups, changes will need to be made to this basic layout to keep up the momentum of the game and to reduce the chances of students becoming bored or disinterested. Varying the type of agencies as well as the playing cards will enhance the game and stretch the possibilities for more creative versions of the basic game format. For example, other playing card topics might include ethics, budgeting, legislation, leadership or theories. It is also recommended that future games include more natural resource elements, perhaps policy development or legislative acts. And finally, it is important to develop ways to include input from the clients or customers of an agency (such as the general public or club members), especially since the purpose of what we do in leisure service organizations is to serve our clients and enhance their quality of life. Interestingly, during a debriefing session, the instructors asked the students if they thought the game was missing anything, and some immediately noticed the game did not allow them to consider their customers' input when making decision about programs and services.

Using a frame game allows instructors to create and customize their own rules, goals, and objectives to incorporate course content into an enjoyable learning activity. Although a basic outline of a game has been discussed here, it can certainly be adapted to include any type of subject or content area. With some preparation and creative design, using a game such as Leisureopoly can provide a memorable learning experience that is both fun and educational.

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