

# **Playing the Hand You Are Dealt**

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## **Introduction**

“You got to know when to hold ‘em, Know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away and know when to run.” (Schlitz, 1978). As the lyrics to the song the Gambler suggest, life is like playing a card game. A hand is dealt to each person who then sizes up those around them, and “plays” a hand by making decisions based on experience or lack of experience with the game. The feedback received symbolizes learning, and can result in wins or losses. Learning opportunities stimulate synthesis of theory into practice... the heart of teaching. Simulations and games “allows students to ‘live out’ the hypothesis and implications of theories, giving them intense emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experience that they will otherwise never have (Neilson, 1998, p. 106). The Hand You Are Dealt learning activity provides students an opportunity to “play a hand” in a decision making process.

## **The Learning Activity Description**

Divide the class into groups of four. Each group picks a card game they can all play (i.e., poker, go fish, crazy eights & etc.). Students deal out the appropriate number of cards for the game, but prior to playing the game, they should write down the cards that they were dealt (of course without showing the other players their hand). Students then play the game. After the game is done, have the students write a quick response to the following questions: 1) What was your initial reaction to the cards you were dealt before playing the game? 2) What was your reaction to the other players as the game was played? 3) What was your reaction to the dealer? 4) Review your choices or decisions made during the game, what would you change? 5) Did you win or lose? How did it feel? and 6) How is playing a hand of cards similar to the role you would play in managing an agency or program? (These questions can be changed to relate to topic area of discussion). Discuss the student’s answers and personal reactions with the card game.

For the next portion of the activity, have each group pick a dealer to shuffle the deck and deal out seven cards to each player. Again, each player is to jot down the

cards in his/her hand. Create a key (see examples below) for what the cards mean in the scenario, and show it on a powerpoint as you explain the key. Distribute a hand-out so that each student can write down the “environment” created by these cards. Ask the students to respond to set questions based on the “hand they have been dealt”. For example, with outdoor leadership, the students discussed stressors and challenges faced by the leader of that scenario. Once the partners have discussed, then have a larger discussion with entire class about the different hands that were dealt.

End the discussion by asking students why use cards to demonstrate the concept? Hopefully, the students should be able to see that the metaphor offers some interesting insights and revelations, thus increasing discussion. However, what may not be so obvious is that besides being a metaphor for decision-making, at the core of the activity is recreation. We can play at what we learn. Often, we are called upon to enhance our participant’s experience. Card games can do that and should be on our toolbox as an activity for participants, staff training and other potential uses.

Two scenario examples of keys for the learning activity:

### *Outdoor Scenario*

Question to set the stage: Life-threatening or everyday matters: What are the stressors faced in outdoor leadership?

Scenario: Often outdoor leaders do not know their participants level of experience, interest, physical ability or personality. Additionally, an outdoor leader faces both unexpected challenges and stressors (i.e., weather conditions, accidents or other unforeseen events). You are an outdoor leader for Outdoor Adventures, Inc. You can decide the type of trip you will be leading (i.e., climbing, mountaineering, backpacking, sea kayak expedition). Using the key provided, write out a scenario describing your group members and the general trip situation.

Key: If you have a card with the following numbers or face:

2-5: skill level of participant (1 the beginner and 5 advanced)

6-7: minor injury occurs

8-9: attitude problem from that participant

10: fear level great (may be trying to overcome, impress or are there against his/her will)

Jack: equipment failure

Queen: extreme weather situation

King: attempts to turn participants against leader

Ace: supports leader in all decisions “overall a dream participant”

Joker: life-threatening injury or person lost

Once your scenario is written, find another person to trade with and read about the hand they were dealt as an outdoor leader. Identify and list three different stressors to the leader that are not imminently life-threatening to the participants. What is one situation in the scenario that could lead to a life-threatening situation? Next, discuss with your answers with your partner. Be prepared to discuss your insights and challenges with the entire class.

### *Management Scenario*

Question to set the stage: How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure service delivery?

Scenario: You have just been hired as recreation program manager for ACC Leisure Services (entry level management job), you can decide if it is sports, senior citizens, special events, etc. You have been asked to make recommendations to your supervisor about what your agency should be doing to serve the community. So, you conduct a demographic analysis as the first step of your needs assessment and also look around to learn more about your co-workers and the agency climate. Write down the profile of your community and agency based on the “key/legend”

Key: The suits are different cultures that have historically had challenges that need to be resolved. Clubs: Asian; Hearts: African-American; Diamonds: Hispanic; Spades: Caucasian

2-4 The percentage of newcomers to our community who are non-English as a First language speakers (2=25%, 3=50%, 4=75%)

5=wild card You can make-up what type of person would your wildest dream to help you succeed with community goals

6-8 The percentage of current residents that are born and bred in our community (6=25%, 7=50%, 8=75%)

9: A staff member with alcohol issues that most everyone knows about, but does nothing about

10: Vocal “green-friendly” environmental staff member who has ties to a newspaper reporter

Jack: volunteer board president who gets the big picture and has leadership skills to pull it off

Queen: matriarch of the community that has lots of money and if on your side will be a great donor

King: long-time, vocal community resident who is on the county commission and feels that Recreation is a waste of tax payer dollars, so fights to put every penny toward roads and jobs

Ace- staff member who has bought into the mission and goals of your agency

We live and work in Georgia, so our county reflects the startling state-wide statistic that we are the national leader in “becoming the fattest, the fastest.” Look at the “hand you have been dealt” as a recreation program manager (entry level management job):

List 3 things you would be concerned about

List 3 opportunities this situation provides you

List 3 action steps would you recommend in a goal setting meeting with your new supervisor.

### **Learning Outcomes**

This learning activity is a combination of simulation/games, discussion and writing designed to allow the students to “live out” decision making of practitioners. Classroom discussion scaffolds the transfer of knowledge to new contexts, changing students’ attitudes and retention of knowledge (Nilson, 1998). Through incorporation of a hands-on experience such as playing a game of cards fosters a vibrant discussion of theory into practice (McKeachie, 1986; McKeachie, Chism, Menges, Svinicki, & Weinstein, 1994). Finally, the writing portion of this activity further assists the student in acquiring and retaining knowledge (Young & Fulwiler, 1986; Hinkle & Hinkle, 1990) as well as giving a student the chance self-explore (Ambron, 1987).

### **Recommendations**

The design of this learning activity can be manipulated to fit into any content. The card games played can be a simple game (i.e., Old Maid, Go Fish, Spoons), a game with partners (i.e., Pinochle, Spades), a game with stakes using M&Ms (i.e., Texas Hold ‘Em, Black Jack, Poker) or a game with one’s self (i.e., Solitaire, Concentration). The learning activity legends can reflect the content of the discussion and writing activity. Underlying the learning activity is an element of enjoyment reflecting the relevancy of our field.

### References

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