

# FOSTERING HABITS OF MIND IN TODAY'S STUDENTS

A New Approach to Developmental Education

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EDITED BY

*Jennifer Fletcher, Adela Najarro,  
and Hetty Yelland*

Foreword by  
Emily Lardner



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## ENGAGING LEARNERS

*Jennifer Fletcher and Hetty Yelland*

*“What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings . . . what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”*

—Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ (*Finding God in All Things* 100)

To be engaged means to be connected, committed, and involved. Seasoned college instructors know there is a special window of opportunity for securing students’ commitment to learning early in each academic term. We call it “the honeymoon period,” and we work hard during this opportune moment to capture our students’ interest and trust. This is the time when our most vulnerable students are still making up their minds about the level of commitment they’re going to make to the class and to each other. After the honeymoon is over, uncommitted students all too often disappear from our rosters. One community college survey, for instance, found that many of the reasons students give for dropping classes early in the term relate to the management of commitments, including schedule conflicts, new jobs, home obligations, and the course-work itself (Mery 1). Such data tell us that many students respond to the difficulties of academic life by disengaging.

We can fortify students for the challenges to come by providing a critical combination of emotional and intellectual engagement during the early stages of the instructional cycle. Now is the time for strengthening learning communities, for gaining the goodwill and resolve of our students, and for creating safe-to-risk learning

environments. It's also the time for inquiry-based learning that sparks students' curiosity and creativity. By strategically addressing students' emotional and intellectual needs, we cultivate the habits of mind that lead to sustained academic effort and long-term growth.

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### What Do We Mean by Engagement?

In contrast to narrow views of engagement as “on-task” behavior, engagement as a habit of mind has far more to do with how learners approach their own intellectual growth than with what instructors do to keep students busy. For the authors of CWPA, NCTE, and NWP's *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, engagement is “a sense of investment and involvement in learning” (1). The idea of investment as a component of intellectual engagement is important. Students need to have some skin in the game in order to justify their involvement. Seen in this light, engaging classroom activities are not simply those that students see as fun but rather are those they see as meaningful. Elizabeth F. Barkley, author of *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*, is quick to point out this distinction: “Engaging students doesn't mean they're being entertained. It means they are thinking” (xii). Laurie A. Schreiner makes a related observation about the difference between involved learning and perfunctory behaviors in her discussion of academic thriving: “Showing up for class and reading the assignment does not equate to psychological engagement in learning” (4). In a blog she wrote for her first-year writing course, a freshman at California State University at Monterey Bay (CSUMB) similarly notes the links among engagement, effort, and deeper learning: “I think the most successful way to be an engaged learner is to always take extra steps to making sure you understand the content. It may take longer but it's essential.”

While students bear ultimate responsibility for developing an engaged disposition toward learning, we believe instructors can foster this development through learning experiences that exemplify and nurture learners' personal investment and involvement in their intellectual growth. Indeed, in *Student Success in College:*

*Creating Conditions That Matter*, George D. Kuh and his coauthors see student engagement as a shared obligation. They identify two key components of engagement that contribute to student success: the amount of time and effort students put into their academic lives and the learning opportunities and services institutions provide to enhance participation in academic life (Kuh et al. 9). Instructors may have limited influence over student effort, but we can control the kinds of learning experiences we offer in our classrooms.

Among the recommended practices the National Research Council (NRC) links to deep and transferable learning, two speak directly to the responsibilities teachers have for designing engaging learning experiences:

- “Engaging learners in challenging tasks, while also supporting them with guidance, feedback, and encouragement to reflect on their own learning process and the status of their understanding” (*Education for Life and Work* 181).
- “Priming student motivation by connecting topics to students’ personal lives and interests, engaging students in collaborative problem solving, and drawing attention to the knowledge and skills students are developing, rather than grades or scores” (181).

Both are critical practices for retaining at-risk learners early in the instructional cycle. In the next section, let’s look at how these recommendations can be applied in a college classroom.

### **Classroom Example**

In Olga Blomgren’s classes at Hartnell College and CSUMB, student engagement techniques are a key means of promoting academic rigor and student ownership of learning. You’ll find two of Olga’s lesson exemplars in chapters 5 and 6, but a quick look into her classroom here provides a compelling example of student engagement as “the product of motivation and active learning” (Barkley 6).

It’s a Thursday evening in late winter, and Olga’s students are hard at work finalizing preparations for their group presentations. The class is filled with energy and humor. Olga takes time to check in with individual students, asking how their day is going and following up on situations or concerns they’ve previously shared with

her. Students freely joke with one another without taking time or attention from the evening's business. Their task this night is to identify and explain the key claims and evidence in an article on gender roles their group has been assigned while engaging their audience of peers in a collective interpretation of the text. As the "teachers" of this class, the student facilitators are responsible for planning, organizing, directing, and monitoring the learning experiences—a level of engagement that fosters both advanced literacy practices and academic habits of mind.

The presentations start. Students smile, nod, and continue to be animated and expressive both in small groups and when interacting as a whole class, easily transitioning between a more formal "presentation" style of communication and relaxed, informal speech. They are respectful when posing and responding to questions. At each stage of the process, Olga offers guidance and encouragement. For instance, she follows up the presenters' or audience members' comments by asking probing questions that help students clarify and elaborate on their ideas. She also challenges students to justify their "instructional" choices. "Why did you choose that quotation?" she asks one group. She also encourages one of the other students to extend her thinking beyond her initial conclusions: "You're right that the writer uses this strategy; so what's the effect?"

When one group stops a little short in its analysis, Olga models a paraphrase of a source for the class after eliciting progressively more sophisticated responses from the presenters: "What does the writer mean there? Can you explain that a little? What is she trying to show with this evidence?" She continues to serve as a coach throughout the activity, providing additional prompts and reminders as necessary while still allowing the presenters to fully inhabit the leadership role they were assigned. The class closes with a reflective summary.

### **Take-Away Learning**

Olga's engagement techniques had clearly laid the groundwork for a highly successful student-led class session. Her students did indeed become their peers' teachers, achieving a level of autonomy and leadership more common in upper-division classes than in first-year courses.

This lesson affirms the principles of modeling and coaching as powerful means of promoting student engagement:

1. Modeling: Many students need to see habits of mind in practice to understand how these dispositional capacities help in problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, social development, and goal attainment.
2. Coaching: Many students need ongoing and explicit support as they work to internalize and apply habits of mind.

Modeling and coaching require dedicated classroom time not typically allocated in traditional approaches to college instruction. However, when we view habits of mind as learned attributes rather than as fixed abilities, we're more willing to make this preparatory investment because we believe we can impact student effort and resilience. Current scholarship justifies this approach. The NRC reports that "recent research indicates that intrapersonal skills and dispositions, such as motivation and self-regulation, support deeper learning and that these valuable skills can be taught and learned" (*Education for Work and Life* 99). Ultimately, the payoff of increasing our students' dispositional capacities is greater academic knowledge and skill attainment.

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## Engaging Students Through Intellectual Play

While our overarching goal is the kind of engagement Barkley and Schreiner describe—exemplified by the preceding classroom model—our assets-based approach encourages us to welcome a variety of opening gambits toward deep learning. We can't engage students who don't come to class. Thus, some activities that might at first seem to be all about having fun can turn out to be important gateway engagement techniques.

When we engage students' curiosity through intellectual play, we open the door to enduring interests and practices. A really good question, for example, can sucker students into taking personal and academic risks despite their best defenses. So can a purposeful classroom game. Sharing the pleasures of inquiry and discovery with students is one of the best ways to connect them to not only the learning community but also their own inner intellectual.

Inquiry-based academic fun has several payoffs. It makes visible why we, as academics, do the work we do: because we enjoy it! Modeling our own pleasure in intellectual labor (and play) makes clear to students that thriving in an academic life has a great deal to do with the extent to which we appreciate its intrinsic rewards. Creating opportunities for students to experience this same pleasure is an important part of mentoring developing scholars. Students who are fully engrossed in a game, such as Hetty Yelland's innovative adaptation of Scrabble to teach academic vocabulary (see page 91), show all the signs of engaged learning identified by Bresó, Schaufeli, and Salanova in their quasi-experimental study on self-efficacy: high energy level, enthusiasm, dedication, pride, and absorption (341). Furthermore, such total absorption in play has the added benefit of breaking down students' emotional defenses, and, as Bresó et al. note, "the lower the levels of anxiety, stress, and fatigue are, the higher the levels of self-efficacy will be" (340). Play thus becomes a low-stakes processing strategy to promote greater risk-taking, autonomy, and engagement—ultimately leading to deeper and more meaningful learning.

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There are so many good classroom examples to share. Daphne Young, who teaches writing at Hartnell College, Cabrillo College, and CSUMB, uses a bingo-type game (Word-O) to help students study for vocabulary tests. The competition is low stakes. Someone may officially win, but no one loses. Everyone has had a chance to review important material.

Kinesthetic learners' needs are often ignored within higher education settings, so "fun" activities that require students to get up out of their seats can help engage students with a more active learning style. Heidi Ramirez, a former Hartnell College writing instructor, would have students read about different types of dishonesty and then have them make up skits in small groups about each type of lie discussed within the text. Maria Boza, whose exemplar is included in this chapter, has her students participate in a lively, structured debate.

Math instructor Ken Rand uses lots of games during his Math Academy. This is a math review and prep seminar that Hartnell College offers prior to the start of each semester. Students are in the

classroom for two weeks, six hours a day, studying math—a strain on attention spans. Rand prides himself on providing T-shirts that read: Eat, Sleep, Math! The trick is that learning and review continue during the games. Whether they are running a relay or doing a *Jeopardy!*-type competition, math is involved. So the students can simultaneously take a break and continue learning.

## Engagement as a Habit of Mind

More and more over time, students need to take responsibility for approaching assignments in ways that are personally interesting and intellectually challenging. John Bean's perennially useful book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* makes the important point that "critical thinking—and indeed all significant learning—originates in the learner's engagement with problems" (xi). Therefore, for the students' own good as well as the instructor's sanity, every moment of every day cannot and should not be an entertaining show or fun activity.

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As in a writing class, some of the topics are more interesting to a particular student than others. One writing topic or reading may naturally lend itself to a large portion of the class whereas students may have to make more of an effort to find other topics and texts compelling. Student complaints are teaching moments. For example, students who say they can't write a good essay because they don't care about the topic need to be informed that finding a way to connect to and care about all topics is part of the assignment. To finish the assignment, engagement is required. But again, the instructor does not refrain from helping students make this connection. The goal is for the "fun" to continue, but on a new level. As Bain states,

To take a deep approach means to take control of your own education, to decide that you want to understand, to create something new, to search for the meaning that lies behind the text, to realize that words on a page are mere symbols, and that behind those symbols lies a meaning that has a connection with a thousand other aspects of life and with your own development. (38)

Students become more and more engaged in intellectual curiosity over time and, thus, ready to gain confidence, self-efficacy, and self-awareness about the transfer of knowledge. These aspects of engagement are our students' obligation.

First-year CSUMB student Karen, who says she is "itching to do something and to get involved," demonstrates her developing self-efficacy and self-awareness in her own description of engaged learning:

I think the most successful way to be an engaged learner is to always take extra steps to making sure you understand the content. It may take longer but it's essential. When given an assigned reading it's important to understand what's really being said. You can outline the reading or even annotate and also asking yourself questions. Being involved in the campus community is also really important.

## **Engagement and Threshold Learning**

When we think of the habits of mind that help students feel connected to their learning community and dedicated to their learning, it's important to consider what entry-level learning looks like on the developmental trajectory. In "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising," Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land explain how certain disciplinary concepts and skills can seem particularly obscure, disorienting, alien, counterintuitive, and even subversive to new learners. These are the concepts and skills that tend to resist "common sense," such as complex numbers in mathematics or deconstruction in literary criticism (2–3). Although not all academic learning fits this description, much of it does, especially for underprepared students. For instance, in prebaccalaureate writing classes, concepts such as audience, occasion, and ethos can present challenging learning thresholds to many students. When we ask first-year students to identify the audience for a specific text, they often say the text (regardless of whether it was published in the *New York Times*, *Seventeen* magazine, or *The Journal of the American Medical Association*) was written for just "a general reader" or "anyone who's interested in the topic." Discerning distinctions in audience depends on a nuanced, experiential understanding of how real-world texts are written, published, and read.

Prior to crossing a learning threshold, students often experience a great deal of uncomfortable confusion and complexity that may

increase their inclination to disengage. They may also substitute superficiality for depth. In describing this pretransformational stage, Meyer and Land note that “difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of liminality (Latin *limen*—‘threshold’), a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity” (10). We see this in student writing that has the form but not the substance of academic argumentation: the five-paragraph essay, for instance, or a paper full of abstract jargon. Asking students to rely on their own powers of invention instead of a familiar formula can leave them feeling anxious and disoriented.

At this point in their learning, students can have a fairly low tolerance for ambiguity. For instance, they may find our course outcomes and assignments overwhelming and prefer us just to explain exactly what they need to do to earn an A. They may be frustrated when we answer their questions by saying, “It depends.” Some may even feel like withdrawing or shutting down. On the other hand, honeymooners who underestimate the effort required to progress beyond this state of liminality may be naively optimistic about the road ahead. Educational scholar Donna Miller describes this developmental stage nicely: “As novices, [beginning students] don’t yet know that the path to understanding is cluttered, meandering, and protracted; that understanding requires experience, dialectical practice, and intellectual habituation” (51).

We can foster intellectual habituation by alerting students to the ways an active practice of intentional engagement supports their growth at this stage. We do this by praising students’ early progress, focusing on the process before the product, posing intriguing questions, privileging the long view, and encouraging students to embrace change while accepting mistakes and setbacks as a natural part of the learning curve. Our goal is to help students be engaged and intellectually vulnerable risk takers who welcome cognitive dissonance in the pursuit of deep learning.

Among the best defenses against disengagement are the abilities to *postpone judgment* and *tolerate ambiguity* (ICAS 12). Both are aspects of openness and curiosity, which *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* defines respectively as “the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world” and

Among the best defenses against disengagement are the abilities to *postpone judgment* and *tolerate ambiguity* (ICAS 12).

as “the desire to know more about the world” (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP 1). Instructors may even want to list these abilities as learning community norms on their syllabi, so that students see this kind of disposition toward “beginner’s mind” as a course expectation.

Later in the term—at the point when students feel they’ve been working hard in our classes for weeks, are dying for spring break or a holiday weekend, have strained all their personal resources and relationships, and are feeling spread too thin in every area of their life—we’re going to ask these students to dig deeper and try harder. We’re going to make the work more, not less, difficult because we believe that’s how we build transferable knowledge and internalized practices.

The only way that increased cognitive demand is going to fly down the road is if our students trust us and themselves. By modeling and coaching the cultivation of habits of mind as learned abilities, we stand in solidarity with our students and affirm our faith in their intellectual growth. We make this commitment knowing that we’ll ask our students to give us more just when they feel they’ve given all they can. Students who aren’t emotionally and intellectually engaged early in the academic term—and who don’t see habits of mind as something they can change—too often reduce, rather than increase, their efforts once the going gets tough (Dweck 16–17).

Michelle, a first-year student at CSUMB, describes the challenges she faces after the semester kicks into high gear:

I understand the material that is being taught yet I don’t really know how to connect back to my main understanding. Some other thing that I am encountering is the whole situation of not having enough time on my hands and not having enough time to get assignments done and actually do things. It’s understandable because it seems like it’s crunch time and it’s time to get things done.

We want our students to have a substantial cushion of support in place by the time they reach this moment. By foregrounding engagement as a habit of mind, we encourage students to adopt a growth mindset—something that helps honeymooners bounce back from challenges. Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University, explains, “Students with

By foregrounding engagement as a habit of mind, we encourage students to adopt a growth mindset—something that helps honeymooners bounce back from challenges.

a growth mindset are more likely to respond to initial obstacles by remaining involved, trying new strategies, and using all the resources at their disposal for learning” (17). In contrast to a fixed mindset, a growth mindset sees abilities as malleable and subject to improvement through effort and persistence, a perception that encourages a sustained commitment to learning.

## Conclusion

Building on the learning communities and communities of learners established early in the term (see chapter 2), instructors have an opportunity to use the embers of trust and collaboration to stoke a burning desire for deeper learning within the students’ hearts. Feelings started through community-building activities can stimulate other connections that are both more personal and progressively more academic. Once trust is established within a classroom, the connection is deepened through fun or interesting activities that are related to the curriculum. But engagement does not stop there. As a first-year CSUMB student wrote in a reflection, “Learning is not just sitting in class and listening to lecture, it is more than that. Learning consists of making connections to other concepts.” Engagement requires that students utilize critical thinking skills to connect their ideas to a broader intellectual discourse, and, ultimately, engagement helps students to develop intellectual curiosity and fosters risk taking—skills that will be needed to build confidence, which is discussed in the next chapter.

As teachers who work closely with students who are sometimes a little commitment shy, we can attest to the power of engagement. Engaged students accept a level of responsibility that has profound consequences for their future lives and learning. In the lesson exemplars that follow, you’ll see numerous ways to help students be connected, committed, and involved. We hope you’ll find these activities both meaningful and enjoyable.

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## **Lazy Teacher or Genius? A Case for Vocabulary Enhancement through Playing Scrabble in the Classroom by Hetty Yelland**

Activity: building vocabulary while playing Scrabble

Learning Outcomes: increased vocabulary, improved spelling, and enhanced dictionary skills

Habits of Mind: engagement and persistence

If you walked into my English 253 course at 10:10 on a Friday morning, you might be taken aback by the lack of teaching taking place. Students are clustered in small, lively groups. Often there is pizza, chocolate chip cookies, or taquitos with guacamole being shared among the groups. You would hear a couple of phones blaring out fuzzy versions of music on their tiny speakers: hip-hop from one side of the room, Spanish lyrics to a polka beat from the other.

Upon closer scrutiny, you would notice the diversity within these groups. An African American woman affectionately calls a stereotypical computer nerd “B-Rad”—his name actually being Bradly. A working-class young man, a Korean immigrant and mother of three college-age children, and a quiet Hispanic man all huddle around the same focus. What are they doing? They are playing Scrabble and they are learning. As the authors of *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* emphasize, encouraging students to think about and discuss words—instead of rote memorization—can inspire them to approach meaning in an inquisitive, academic way throughout their lives (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 1).

In my developmental writing classes that meet one hour a day, five days a week, Friday is always—or almost always—Scrabble day. Although it is designed to be a fun day and a break from the regular project we are working on as a class, it is still a learning day worth participation points that add up to 5% of the final grade for the semester. Students are expected to be on task and engaged.

Doing this activity starting the first week of the semester helps promote the habits of mind persistence as well as engagement. Students bond first with those around them and later are encouraged to branch out to play with other people. They are not just engaged, but engaged with each other. They don’t just play Scrabble; they talk about their lives, other classes, this class, and the current assignment. Initially they are interested in the novelty of playing a game, but over time, they learn to persevere together when the classwork

engagement gets more challenging and the game itself becomes old hat. They are being entertained and engaged initially, but they are also learning the habit of mind called *engagement*. Maintaining interest and finding new ways to challenge themselves is ultimately up to them. If they

adaptability can apply this to a game, they can apply it to their education.

### Method Behind the Madness

By playing Scrabble, students are improving not only their habits of mind but also many so-called basic skills. Students increase and build upon existing vocabulary. They learn to use the dictionary, and by doing so they improve their English language skills by checking spelling, word origins, and parts of speech. I would even argue that students increase their reading success through playing Scrabble. They are having to read a Scrabble game board with words placed horizontally, vertically, and backward. This is good practice for researching and reading college-level articles that progress from one column to the next and that contain sidebars, charts, graphs, pictures, and biographical material. Reading is not just following the words from left to right, line after line. College reading and Scrabble share the need to look at the text with a discerning eye.

Some of these transferable skills happen effortlessly through play, and others require supplementary work in order to achieve the desired outcomes. In "How a Hobby Can Shape Cognition: Visual Word Recognition in Competitive Scrabble Players," the authors state, "The results of a series of cognitive assessments showed that Scrabble . . . expertise was associated with . . . semantic deemphasis" (Hargreaves et al. 1). This means that Scrabble players gain the ability to recognize what is and what is not a real word, but do not usually learn the definitions of words from playing the game. Therefore, playing Scrabble in class gets students thinking about new words, and then I provide opportunities on other class days for vocabulary instruction in context. For example, students collaboratively choose new vocabulary words from assigned readings. The ever growing list of vocabulary is then recorded by each student by annotating the text. I have them circle words and write the definitions in the margins of the reading. The result is that books and articles come out on Scrabble days for reference and the skills transfer from one assignment to another. However, you could have them just take notes or require a vocabulary binder of some kind as well. Extra credit and/or prizes can be given for use of vocabulary on the game board.

spirit of  
transfer

## The Seven Stages of Scrabble

Although a class would not necessarily have to play the game every week in order for this lesson to work, Scrabble should be played no less than every other week. A few games will stimulate a student's thinking about words, but only consistent game play over weeks will lead players through the following seven stages of learning.

The first stage is when the students are learning to play the game. During this process, it is important to keep circling around the classroom answering questions and redirecting those not following the rules properly. At this point students usually can't believe their luck. They can't believe they are getting to have so much fun in English class. They develop friendships with each other, and I even allow them to bring food and play their iPods. I am pleased when I overhear a student saying something like, "Oh no! I missed listening to my favorite song because I was *thinking*."

motivation

However, the students soon reach the second stage in which they realize, to their dismay, how little their vocabulary actually is. A great number of the words they know are brand names (which can't be used in Scrabble) and slang (much of which is not found in the dictionary). They find—to their horror—that they are using a great many simple, one-syllable words over and over again, such as *at* and *is*. A few students offer a larger vocabulary, but most are in the same boat.

In the third stage, students either hate the game (they would rather be writing the dreaded in-class essay) or have a difficult time staying on task. At this juncture, it is very important for you, as the instructor, to remain both patient and firm about completing the task. Students will attempt to text on their phones instead of engage. Bathroom breaks will become longer. Students will even begin skipping class. Students may try to stop keeping score or just sit there and talk to each other. Kindly but firmly assure them that this is a natural stage that will pass and redirect them to the game.

persistence  
and self-  
management

Once students realize that the instructor wants them to succeed and that no one is going to let them just give up or cut corners, vocabulary enhancement begins in earnest. In this fourth stage, students begin to tap into a larger vocabulary they already know. They begin taking the one-syllable words on the board and adding an *s* to make plurals or converting them into longer, more complex words. They start looking at the dictionary and playing Scrabble at home—without being required to do so. They start utilizing the vocabulary words for the class. I start to see significant changes in the words used and the Scrabble scores. Week one may have been dominated with

self-efficacy

words such as *hat* and *blue* with final scores around 35. Now students are scoring near 100 and using words such as *merit* and *intern*.

The fifth stage is a renaissance. Spontaneous discussions about words start coming up during every class meeting—not just Scrabble day. This stage corresponds with what Susan Ebbers and Carolyn Denton say about learning in “A Root Awakening: Vocabulary Instruction for Older Students with Reading Difficulties”:

Word consciousness—and thus vocabulary development—might be best fostered in a verbal learning environment. . . . Children who are provided with the most verbally supportive atmosphere at home . . . learn far more words than those whose families engage in fewer verbal behaviors. . . . Teachers can emulate such an atmosphere. (91)

curiosity Likewise, students experiencing this stage of Scrabble move from focusing on the social interaction of the game day into the inquisitive context of more traditional, academic studies. Students ask me what words from the readings mean on days we are not choosing vocabulary words. They ask each other. They ask to use the dictionary. They discuss words in small groups and we discuss as a class. Smartphones come out of pockets, not to text, but to look up definitions, which are then spontaneously shouted out to the class and compared with other findings from other technological devices. Spelling and meaning are the main topics. Other topics are the use of academic language and the power of words (in both a positive way and the power to offend). “Why are words so powerful?” they begin to ask. They are just letters combined in arbitrary ways, yet saying something one way as opposed to another produces different results. They start to mimic the more academic form of writing from our class readings.

openness and reflection The sixth stage is when the students, realizing the arbitrary nature of language, begin to question all of language. At first they begin asking, “Is this a word? If *cat*, *hat*, and *rat* are words, is ‘gat’ a word? It looks like a word.” Even words they once thought they knew become strange and hard to recognize. “Is ‘net’ a word? I’m not sure. It sounds familiar,” one student will say. “Of course, it’s a word,” another student will say. “Net—like using a net to catch a fish!” Now the dictionary starts to come into play. Words are challenged by other players. When the challenged word is a real word and in the dictionary, the meaning is read out loud proudly. “I didn’t know that,” the students—and the instructor—begin to say.

Just when you feel successful and happy as an instructor, you will hit the final Scrabble stage. It's messy, it's chaotic, and it's creative. You will most likely hate it because it creates more work for you—just when you thought the students were beginning to take on responsibility for teaching themselves vocabulary. Don't panic. This is a natural part of the process and good for the students. At this stage, the students begin to test the boundaries of vocabulary and to experiment with words. They are willing to silently play the word *gat* even though they don't know whether it is a word, and if it is, what it means. Everyone begins making up words. So much so that the instructor must start challenging words, looking them up, and taking the nonwords off the board. However, this comfortableness with being wrong and experimenting with vocabulary is good.

creativity

Have fun!

## Challenges

As a final note on Scrabble in the classroom, I would like to discuss the biggest challenge with implementing this lesson plan: getting buy-in from administrators and colleagues. If you are seen rolling your pushcart of Scrabble boards down the hallway and looking too happy, there may be some concern. My advice is to keep dated score sheets and possibly even sometimes take photos of the game boards so that you can show the progress that your students are making if called upon to do so. I have also found it helpful to keep to a schedule. If there is no school on a Friday or we need to finish something else on a Friday, then we simply don't have Scrabble that week in my class; I don't reschedule Scrabble for another day of the week.

## Quick Start Guide

1. Plan specific and reoccurring times and dates to play Scrabble in your class. Whether game play is every Friday or every other week, or the last half hour of a three-hour class, students need to be able to look forward to the activity as part of their regular routine.
2. Scrabble allows up to four players per game set, so plan how many boards you will need to buy for your class. It's best to buy new games to make sure all the pieces are there.

3. Give each student a copy of the rules, go over the rules in class (plus any additional rules you require), and have a quiz on the rules of Scrabble. Students can't know everything before they start, but if they haven't bothered to read through the rules once, game play is less engaged.
4. Play! It is best to let the students pick their own partners at first. You can require playing with new partners after the first month.
5. Be sure to have one player per group be the scorekeeper to avoid cheating.
6. Let students talk and interact, but circle around and make sure they are playing correctly, taking score, and staying on task. As the instructor, challenge words anytime you want to, and then have the students alter the score sheet as necessary. Doing so will keep everyone honest and encourage students to start challenging words as well.
7. Give students a full 10 minutes for cleanup. They probably will not need this much time, but I have found that students do a sloppy job putting away games if they feel rushed.

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## Recess by Jennifer McGuire

Activity: various games that are adaptable to all disciplines

Learning Outcome: depends on the game

Habit of Mind: engagement

When I tell my students we're going to play a game, they laugh it off. Some give blank stares. This is *college*. I mean, really, a game? Yes. We're going to have recess. Games are familiar. Playing a game provides a feeling of safety and fun, while still allowing students to learn and challenging their intellectual process. It's all about supporting each other and engaging everyone in the classroom. In a game they'll take risks they wouldn't normally take in their writing, and if they mess it up, it's something they'll laugh about and debate with each other. They are not only learning new things from each other, but also utilizing their past knowledge. And it's just fun. It sets the tone for the class. Students realize that the learning process doesn't have to be difficult or exclusively focus on coursework. The learning process can be about engaging in their real lives in a different way. Composition doesn't need to be a drag, or something that they just need to get through to finish their general education requirements. They get comfortable quickly when they know right away that learning and practicing the skills of writing can be a fun and easy process, and they engage quickly and readily with games.

I don't tell them any of this, but they begin to understand with their first questions. Playing a game? Huh? This is not something you can be transparent about. You can tell individuals who are going to have recess that they will be learning social skills and communication, but that's irrelevant and secondary to just letting loose and feeling good about playing with their friends on the playground. They're just doing it and enjoying it. Nothing to explain about that!

## The Bell Rings

Early on in the semester, the first game we play can be as easy as Alpha-Omega (discussed later), which is great for introducing new vocabulary and concepts. Depending on what issues I see from the essays, or what strategy for essay writing we're going to practice, I'll choose different games. For example, if I notice that the majority of people are having difficulty with homophones, I'll play a game of Mix and Match. If it's nouns and verbs, I'll play Verbing the Noun (also

great to put on Bassnectar's song by the same title). Some games I've made up, and some are altered (not much) from those I learned and used when I taught K-12. They help bring groups together, make students interact, and all with a positive and light learning atmosphere. It's not "edutainment"; it's giving students a safe and familiar format that allows comfort with new things. It turns off those negative associations with difficulties, and makes it fun to learn and teach the others in class.

motivation

With a game in mind, I tell students to get into groups. Sometimes I split the class into halves, sometimes into threes or fours. Group size depends on the game. Once they are in their groups, I tell them to talk with each other to choose a prize (they can ask for the moon, but that doesn't mean they'll get it, so they need to have a reasonable alternative). I give them a minute to come up with one. I write the group on the board and the correlating prize in my notes. Sometimes students ask for a night free of homework, extra-credit points, or a treat, like cookies for everyone. (All prizes must have my approval!)

I explain the game, give them a trial run of the game, and we're off. Once they realize we really are going to play a game, they get a little goofy. Some may be hesitant, some shaking their heads like it's useless, some looking around to see how others are reacting. After we've played a game once in the semester, any following game is met with anticipation of the ensuing group dynamic.

openness

Now, let's take a look at some of the games.

## Mix and Match

This simple game helps students to use homophones and correct sentence structure. Students work in groups of three or four, and one person writes the answer. Up on the board, I'll write two homophones. The object of the game is to put the words in a complete sentence using the homophones correctly. Students work in their groups and try to finish first. They raise their hands when the assigned task is completed. It's all about speed and checking in with each other. I'll go to the group that finishes first, read their answer, and if it's not correct say, "So close!" If the answer is correct, I'll read it out loud and write it on the board announcing the winner. The first group that correctly uses the homophones in a complete sentence gets a point.

The game can be played with more than two homophones at a time, or you can incorporate two sets of homophones as you go on. You can do as many rounds as you want and set any point structure you like. It's *fast!* And students sometimes write really funny sentences. It's just as fun when they get one incorrect, and some of the funny ones they come up with just have to be read aloud.

## Pieces

For this game, which helps students with sentence structure, conjugation, tenses, and subject/verb agreement, students work in small groups of three or four, and one person in the group writes the answer. Put one noun and one infinitive on the board. You can start out with an already conjugated verb; it just depends on where the class is. If you have it conjugated, students have to use it in that tense. They have to come up with a sentence using both the noun and the verb correctly—no using them as adjectives or adverbs! Oh, tricky! Again, you can add more of either if you want to play with expanding sentences, modifiers, and prepositional phrases. You can always have them write them on the board.

adaptability

## Alpha-Omega

This game helps students build lexical sets/word banks, details, connections, and examples. It works best in big groups. Split the class into two or three large groups, and tell the students they can get in lines or assign a scribe to their group. Choose a word and write it on the board. Tell the students that they are to write directly under your word a list of words from A to Z that have to do with the word you have written. For example, I'll start off writing the word *hospital* on the board. Then I'll ask the class to come up with words starting with the first letter of the alphabet, then the second letter, and so on that would be associated with the word *hospital*. They might come up with *ambulance*, then *bed*, then *cast*. . . . As the words get written on the board, I encourage and cheer on the students.

The rules include losing a point for skipping a letter. If they do skip a letter and lose a point, then they can't go back if they figure it out later in the game. They can't use proper nouns or adjectives (like *brown cow* for *B* under *animals*). Word of advice: Don't monitor!

engagement When groups have completed their lists, go through them one at a time. Any words that are mentioned by more than one group get crossed out. Any words that don't belong in the set can be debated as a class. You can be the monitor for those. After a few rounds, this game can get very rowdy and energetic. It's practically a guarantee that the answers your students come up with and their creative defense of oddball words will make you laugh.

## Collage

creativity and curiosity This game helps students to provide a description, express a point of view, and think critically. It is a two-part activity with no prizes except bragging rights. The first part is to make a story collage, and the second is to guess the identity of the artist. If you have a stash of magazines, great; if not, your students can bring some in for homework. You can provide glue sticks. Group students so they can share the magazines, and have them rip out images and words that represent them and paste them onto a piece of construction paper. Each collage represents the image that student has of himself or herself, that student's story. Then have the students write short explanations of how the collages represent them. No names.

Once done, collect the collages and pass them out randomly. Each student writes a short paragraph on what kind of person he or she thinks the image represents. Then the student is to try to find that person in the classroom. Everybody walks around, talking to each other, finding out who is who. Some get it right away. This game is very interactive. The collage and the other person's description go back to the artist. They ask questions of each other, their thoughts, their explanations. This makes for a huge class discussion while creating the sense that the course is a community of individuals.

## Start and Stop

This game helps students write essay introductions or theses, conclusions, and titles. It started out as a regular old lesson plan for introductions, but somehow it morphed into a game. It's really simple. I like to show students the contest results from the San Jose State University Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, in which contestants compete to produce the first sentence of the worst novel, or examples from

other short story collections so they can see what a creative beginning to a story can look like.

Students get into groups of five or so. I put a subject on the board, and they have to come up with an introduction or a thesis (depending on what you want to work on) for that subject. The trick is that it has to be the worst one possible. When they come up with their sentence, they write it on the board. Once everyone has written their sentence on the board, the class votes on the ones they like the best—the best of the worst. And, boy, do they come up with some bad ones. Then they have to rewrite the sentence to produce the best thesis sentence for that same subject. It goes up on the board, and then they vote again.

We do the same thing with the conclusion for the same thesis or subject (both worst and best), and again for the title. When the votes are counted from each of the pieces, you have your winner.

## Success and Challenges

The wonderful thing about a game is that you immediately have your answers and feedback; there is no waiting to see what will be marked on a paper. The students know, and you know, when they catch on. The game automatically starts picking up; they talk more; they write more and faster; they start shouting out things, debating, asking questions. Students randomly have asked if we can play a game. I'll even challenge them to come up with games. If they want extra credit, they can come up with a game to play with the class that addresses any grammar or mechanics issue or learning outcome that they want. They learn so much more when they get to be the teachers. I don't teach them anything in the games. They have to teach and engage each other.

engagement  
and  
responsibility

The main problem that can arise with games has to do with the fact that games are competitive. At times, some students will be disappointed that they didn't win. However, over time it usually evens out in terms of winners. If the class is getting a bit lopsided on which group wins all the time, then bring in a prize for everyone.

When it comes to prizes, I make sure the prize won is something that benefits everyone. In other words, whoever wins the prize wins the prize for everyone in class. No one loses. This is the main thing about what they get to choose for a prize. I will do things that cost me money (usually food), but I'll save those for later, and I will bring

it in for the last day. Prizes are things like watching a movie, two extra-credit points, or a homework pass. Usually they are things that I would already incorporate into the class, but the students can come up with whatever they want, and I get to say yea or nay. I do have to admit, I did have to dress up as a ladybug one day for class . . . and it wasn't Halloween. This is when I learned not to write down the prizes on the board; they will slant the game so that the most desired prize wins. No kidding! They work as a whole team that way, which is a whole other dimension to game playing.

Regarding the issue of time, these games can last from 10 minutes to hours. You can split games up, continue the games into the next class, stop them, start them, change them, at any time.

openness Last, but not least, is your willingness to let this be actual play time. The topics can be addressed in regular lessons, but my experience has been that making them into games engages students right off the bat. When students have a chance to laugh at themselves and the doozies that they can come up with, it makes for a wonderful contrast to how they usually think about the seriousness of institutionalized education. They aren't being graded or judged or evaluated in any average sense, but they are definitely learning. It's a lot like recess as a kid: You play with the other kids and you learn social interaction, real-life application of communication. Give them a ball and they'll learn the rules and structure of the game played for that tool; writing skills are like that ball. They'll be learning, sure, but it'll also feel like recess.

### Quick Start Guide

1. Try to incorporate one game a week.
2. Start class with a game in order to build community.
3. All these games can be tailored to your specific teaching needs—find the ones that fit you best and then have fun!

## The Great Debaters? Well, Close Enough by María Boza

Activity: class debate

Learning Outcome: effectively prepare an argument

Habits of Mind: transfer of learning and engagement

### Background

Most students in WRT 95: Integrated Reading and Writing, the developmental writing course at California State University Monterey Bay, write an argumentative essay near the end of the semester. I was a philosophy major as an undergraduate, so to me this sort of writing is second nature. Yet, partly because of lack of prior exposure to the genre, this essay proves to be a difficult assignment for many of our students. Frequently the drafts they submit to me—after peer review—are papers that list information without questioning it and without structuring it as an argument in which a clear claim is made and argued for, taking into account the sides of the controversy.

I tell students to imagine that the audience for their argumentative essay is a panel of objective jurors in an academic setting who are open to persuasion. Furthermore, a skilled opponent, whose points they will have to anticipate and rebut, is attempting to sway these same curious but critical jurors. To enable students to see the back-and-forth of opposing ideas in concrete form while experiencing the rewards of engagement, my classes have a debate the week before their first drafts of the argumentative essay are due.

openness

We employ traditional policy debate format, which I have modified slightly to suit our needs. There are various online sources for the format—and they do not all agree. I have listed two under “Resources for Debate Format” at the end of this activity.

### Other Preparation for the Argumentative Essay

The debate is not the only preparation my students get for writing the argumentative essay—far from it. I show them PowerPoint presentations on claims, arguments, critical thinking, and logical fallacies. I follow these with an ungraded quiz to reinforce the material. We look at relevant pages of our textbook, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing with Readings and Handbook*, which has good coverage of argumentation (Bullock, Goggin, and Weinberg 119–49, 726–63).

metacognition

We read examples of effective argumentative essays and go over them paragraph by paragraph, noticing their structure and evaluating their persuasive tactics. (I draw these examples of good student-written argumentative essays from the Bedford/St. Martin's website for the sixth edition—now superseded—of *Rules for Writers* by Diana Hacker.) I give the students a very long, very specific essay prompt detailing what should be included in the essay. In the prompt I discuss structure, techniques, evidence, and effective strategies, as well as approaches that in the past have proven to be unproductive for students. And, yes, the debates are still necessary. Here's the prompt:

### *Assignment Directions*

Write a three- to four-page essay arguing in support of a definite position about a controversial issue taken from the choices provided. Be sure to do the following:

- In your introduction, state a thesis that clearly, forcefully, and accurately summarizes the principal claim you will argue throughout the essay.
- Persuasively build your argument by following reasonable lines of argument.
- Provide suitable supporting evidence for your position:
  - You must use at least one scholarly source to support your argument. (You may not count unpublished material as scholarly sources.)
  - Other supporting evidence may include facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, and/or opinions from experts.
- Discuss at least one opposing argument and provide a quotation that represents that position.
- Rebut the opposing argument.
- In a strong concluding paragraph, bring the reader back to the thesis you have just proven.
- Give the essay a title that assists the reader in identifying your focus.
- Properly cite all outside sources in MLA format, providing both in-text parenthetical citations and fuller "Works Cited" end-of-essay citations.

## Debate Preparation

To prepare students for the debate, if time permits, I show them the 2007 film *The Great Debaters*, directed by Denzel Washington. Through the film they get an idea of the structure of debate and also become acquainted with serious challenges faced by African American students in the Jim Crow South. My students generally like the movie, but for the class planner it has the disadvantage of running 124 minutes. Last semester I showed only scenes that were directly related to debate.

At least a week before the debate, I give a PowerPoint presentation on preparing for a debate. The first order of business after that is for the class to choose a topic. I like to have the students suggest possibilities, but if they seem stuck, I help out. The topic is never one of the choices I give them for the argumentative essay, for which they will have to engage in independent research and thinking. The debaters will be more engaged if students choose a topic about which the class is divided, so I canvass them about their willingness to argue the particular sides. For example, recently the proposition “The highway speed limit should be raised to 75 mph” drew no opposition, not even from the instructor, so that one was eliminated.

responsibility

I then ask for three students to volunteer to be judges. Frequently those students who opt to be judges are shy people who recoil from arguments. However, when postdebate analysis time comes, they can be excellent at pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each side’s performance. Thus, students who may be quiet the rest of the semester have the opportunity to show that behind that silence are minds that are taking it all in.

Next, those students who will not be judges choose sides: affirmative or negative. I aim for similar numbers on each side and ask students who are sitting on the fence to go to the side most in need of participants. I explain to them that it is not necessary for them actually to agree with the position they are arguing. The goal is not to find the “right” answer, which may not even be determinable, but to learn to argue well. In fact, frequently in order to maintain evenness of the sides, students whose first choice would have been one position take on the task of arguing the opposite. In academic discourse they will seldom find answers to be reducible to yes or no, so this is in itself good preparation.

tolerance for ambiguity

I remind students of the role of the affirmative side and of the negative, which they should have picked up on from the “Preparation

for a Debate” presentation and the film. Then I ask each side to choose two speakers. I emphasize that although two students will be presenting the arguments for each side, all members of each side must participate with information and ideas. In fact, I build in opportunities for them to huddle.

As the sides are choosing their speakers, I meet with the judges to explain to them what their job is during the debate. Their duties are to listen carefully; take notes on the arguments; and, at the end, deliver an individual verdict, expressing reasons for the decision. These reasons must be supported by evidence in the notes. This way, although they will be neither speaking with the sides nor lending support to a side, they will be engaged in the entire debate and will see themselves as the active participants that they are.

The sides and the judges gather into their respective groups to examine the color-coded table I have made of the debate format they will follow (see Table 3.1). For example, affirmative speaker #1 is coded blue and #2 green; negative speaker #1 is red, while speaker #2 is orange. I find that color coding helps me, so I assume it also helps my visually inclined students both before and during the debate.

Minutes before the debate I show the students, as a reminder, two PowerPoint presentations they have seen before, one on logical fallacies and another on unfair emotional tactics (i.e., *ad hominem* appeals, biased language, and ridicule). I emphasize the need for courtesy.

The students follow the official debate format without actually making an effort to figure out if what a student is saying is “constructivist” or “rebuttal.” I am glad when they present good points or follow effective strategies of any kind. There is a lot of group consultation during the breaks. This allows students who are not speakers to remain engaged and to see their contributions as valuable to the entire effort—therefore not viewing the debate as something that is being done by others while they remain mere spectators.

I sit out of the way, only jumping in to clarify questions of procedure. I used to be in charge of a timer that required me to hit multiple buttons frequently, a task that might be easier for a chimpanzee than for me. Then I wised up and asked that a judge be timekeeper. Students use their smartphones instead of my old kitchen timer, and the process goes more smoothly.

TABLE 3.1.  
Example of Color-Coded Table for the Debate

<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Time</i>
1 Affirmative constructive	6 min.
Cross-examination	4 min.
1 Negative constructive	6 min.
Cross-examination	4 min.
Break	4 min.
2 Affirmative constructive	6 min.
Cross-examination	4 min.
2 Negative constructive	6 min.
Cross-examination	4 min.
Break	5 min.
1 Negative rebuttal	5 min.
1 Affirmative rebuttal	5 min.
2 Negative rebuttal	5 min.
2 Affirmative rebuttal	5 min.
Break for judges' private deliberation	5 min.
Judge 1's report and verdict	3 min.
Judge 2's report and verdict	3 min.
Judge 3's report and verdict	3 min.

1 Affirmative: Blue; 2 Affirmative: Green      1 Negative: Red; 2 Negative: Orange

## Debate Aftermath

When the two sides are finished with their part of the debate, I ask the judges to describe in turn what, in their view, worked and what did not in each side's presentation and to vote on the winner. This activity of analyzing and verbalizing effective and ineffective elements of the arguments is one of the most productive steps of the whole enterprise. The verdict itself is usually unanimous and is less valuable. reflection

After the judges have had their say, I sit in the midst of the students and draw them to make explicit some of the lessons they might transfer from debating orally as a group to writing an argumentative essay in the loneliness of their rooms. These lessons include the following:

- Evidence strengthens the points of an argument.
- Each building block of a good argument is important.
- It's nice to work with a team.
- Authorities in the field can be brought in as members of one's team through quotation.
- Peer reviewers are also members of one's team.
- Our own arguments become stronger when we rebut opponents' strong arguments.
- Logic is necessary.
- A confident, calm tone boosts the credibility of the speaker or the writer.
- Finding common ground is another way the rhetor can boost his or her credibility; reasonable people are easier to believe.
- It's imperative to keep one's audience in mind.

### **Student Feedback**

In anonymous questionnaires filled out after the debate, students most frequently mention the need to support points with well-researched data as the biggest lesson they have learned from the activity. Some students also mention having learned that in order to debate effectively one has to be well acquainted with both sides of the question.

A common complaint is lack of preparation and information sharing by team members. Several students have expressed discomfort with the activity, one saying that he did not like the confrontational nature of it. However, in a recent semester, out of 46 respondents, only three said they would not recommend repeating the activity in future semesters.

### **Reflection**

Although many students find the debate useful—or at least interesting—this does not mean that the debates are all of high quality. One semester, when there were some particularly strong arguers in the

same section, the debate and the judges' analysis were stellar. The previous semester, on the other hand, the class had chosen legalization of marijuana as the debate topic, and some of the members of the affirmative team came to the debate stoned. One of them even threatened an opponent. However, it is rare for debaters to become so passionate about their stance that they behave uncivilly.

I have not conducted an experiment to compare the quality of essays in a “with debate” semester with that of a “without debate” one. I would not want to go a semester without a debate because students are fully engaged during the debate, and that is a habit of mind worth cultivating.

Through the exercise, students develop an awareness of the need to consider multiple points of view and, no matter what the academic task, to provide solid evidence for well-articulated positions. These are skills that will serve them well throughout their academic career and later on as they mature as members of civil society.

## Quick Start Guide

### Preparation

1. Decide on a debate format. Useful resources on formats are the National Association for Urban Debate League's publication *Learning to Debate: An Introduction for First-Year Debaters* and Wikipedia's “Structure of Policy Debate” entry.
2. Have students elect a debatable topic.
3. Invite volunteers to serve as judges.
4. Have remaining students choose sides.
5. Ask students on each side to choose two speakers.
6. Hand out copies of the format to the speakers and the judges.
7. Emphasize the need for preparation and collaboration.

### Debate Day

1. Ask the debaters and the judges to take appropriate positions in the classroom.
2. Ask one of the judges to be the timekeeper.
3. Remind students of the format to be followed.
4. Begin the debate.
5. Ask judges for their feedback at the end of the debate.

6. Ask students how they might transfer skills exercised in the debate into their writing of an argumentative essay.

### Resources for Debate Format

- Bullock, Richard, Maureen Daly Goggin, and Francine Weinberg. *The Norton Field Guide to Writing with Readings and Handbook*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013. Print.
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## Gender and Miscommunication by Sunita Lanka

Activity: the analysis and evaluation of information while reading college-level texts

Learning Outcomes: accurate comprehension and evaluation of college-level texts while drawing accurate inferences and devising reasonable conclusions

Habits of Mind: engagement, transfer of learning, metacognition, creativity, flexibility, and curiosity

It's a Monday morning. For most of my students you could say it's a "black Monday." The attendance is taken and I sense that my talkative students are winding down their exchanges about weekend activities with friends. The quiet ones stop fidgeting, and there is that moment of expectation: "Now what?" Looking around I smile, then force some enthusiasm into my voice as I begin, "Did you have a good weekend?" There are smiles, sighs, comments, hardly audible. I decide to get straight to the point. "Do you ever disagree or fight with your partners/boyfriends/girlfriends/spouses?" Suddenly there's less shifting in the chairs; some bend forward to listen more intently. A couple of them answer in unison, "Oh, God, all the time!" Those who are silent nod agreement, too, and the whole class, without exception, is listening. I tell them that this will be our next assignment: "Miscommunication between couples." I remind them that they were to read the text over the weekend as homework. I soon realize that many have forgotten to read it and they are now quickly turning the pages of the text to browse through it, in case there is a quiz. The assignment is to examine two articles in the course textbook, *Texts and Contexts: A Contemporary Approach to College Writing* (Robinson and Tucker, with Hicks)—"His Talk, Her Talk" by Joyce Maynard and "Man to Man, Woman to Woman" by Sherman and Adelaide Haas (32)—and to recommend one of the articles to a couple who seeks counseling to solve communication problems.

curiosity

I begin a warm-up exercise by asking simple questions such as, "What did you think of the reading?" "Can you relate to the anecdotes described?" and "Do you have similar stories to share?" It's interesting to observe how the silent ones are now giggling and beginning to talk with their classmates. When I call upon them to share their thoughts with the class, they begin hesitantly but soon burst into animated narration. There are peals of laughter when each one is given a chance to speak up about his or her experience.

engagement

This assignment covers the habits of mind of engagement, transfer of learning, metacognition, creativity, flexibility, and curiosity. For instance, the topic triggers inquisitiveness. Even those students who do not report having had communication problems are inquisitive about reading further to find out what happens to the couple. They are interested in participating in the group discussions where their friends share their real-life experiences. I have also seen very shy students share their own stories. This is transfer of learning because they practice transferring real-life experiences into writing. To do this successfully, they process this information and organize it to articulate it in the form of a coherent essay. Habits of mind are evidenced as students move through the activity.

1. Engagement: The assignment is successful in arresting attention to get students to invest effort into the exercise. Engagement is vital to any student activity.
2. Transfer of Learning: Students must transfer their real-life experience into a written product.
3. Metacognition: "Miscommunication between couples" is a topic any student can relate to, and be interested in—a topic that invites a reflection in a variety of contexts.
4. Creativity: The topic encourages the ability to use novel/diverse methods to approach, understand, and investigate an issue, and also to draw upon experiences related to the topic. The process of finding a solution to the problem enables students to not only examine the two articles closely/actively, but also look for the kind of information that will convince a couple of the solution offered by one.
5. Curiosity and Flexibility: The topic is an issue of universal concern, so students develop the awareness/need to adapt to situations, the need to find solutions to problems, manage expectations, and meet obligations of relationships. It also teaches them the abilities to articulate these in a convincing manner.

Analysis and evaluation of information is very important in the writing process. How does one teach students to learn this skill? The process inevitably has to follow a thorough comprehension of the text. It must trigger interest and a strong desire to participate and voice an opinion. Active reading is both essential and vital to doing the assignment.

I begin with a PowerPoint presentation and a handout to guide students on the process. The PowerPoint walks them through the

process of preparing to read, or prereading. The handout also provides them with a checklist of activities that I go over with them in class. The students take a couple of minutes to review the checklist handout. The students then take turns reading the text aloud in class. After the reading is done, I divide them into groups of four and ask them to find answers to questions that I present through the document camera:

1. Comment on the titles. Which one of the two articles gives an impression of togetherness, a likely compromise? Some of them dramatically enact the titles, saying “His Talk, Her Talk” is like “you go your way, and I go my way.” The other one, “Man to Man, Woman to Woman,” they say, is like a man can share conversations easily with a man, and women do so with people of their sex. This second one suggests that the couple communicates readily with people of their own sex.
2. What about the authors? What is the significance of one article being written by a single author, a woman, while the other is written by a man and a woman? The single author, Joyce Maynard, portrays a woman’s point of view; it is one-sided and highly opinionated. The second essay, on the other hand, is a collaborative effort. A couple is addressing a common issue; two perspectives, a man’s and a woman’s, are combined in dealing with the issue. Hence, there is a strong possibility that it might address more comprehensively/justly problems of communication faced by both men and women.
3. Which introductory paragraph has a topic sentence that clearly states what will be addressed in the article? How do the introductions read? Will the couple be able to easily identify the topic—the problem/issue—at hand? Which one of the articles could help the couple to see that it is addressing their problem? Can they identify the thesis statement? The students tell me that the first article has an attention-grabbing introduction but that it is rambling. It is the second one that addresses the problem at hand, communication. It is well organized with transitional words that contribute to effective comprehension.
4. Quality of information/content: Which article creates confidence and credibility in the troubled couple? What is the quality of information? Which is the article that has information to convince the couple that a compromise is possible? Is the information credible, plausible, connected to the topic, relevant; does it prove a point; are there any contradictions? What are the details

that are credible and convince the couple? Have they been able to see that facts are supported by reasonable, convincing data/statistics/research or interviews with couples? How strongly do they feel about such details offering support to prove a point, leading to accurate inferences? Details that explain, substantiate, and illustrate the point help in assessing the quality of information. The credibility of information is established not with opinionated statements, but ample authentic proof (i.e., research, surveys, interviews, and questionnaires).

5. Which one of the articles provides a solution to the problem in a direct and precise manner? Which one of the articles offers a solution to solve communication problems/clear misunderstandings between the couple? The students take turns reading the concluding paragraph of both articles. The two conclusions offer solutions, but the first one is not direct and clear. One has to infer the solution from the situation described by the author. The other article states very clearly that men and women enjoy different topics of conversation, and that by giving each other some space (i.e., freedom) and understanding it is possible to create a lasting relationship without conflict.

The class is able to draw their conclusions with some guidance, questions, discussions, and sharing of information. Monitor students' discussions by asking clarifying questions, moving around from one group to another, and guiding them on how to draw conclusions by examining the text. It's interesting to see the answers that each group comes up with. With gentle coaxing, also have them read sentences from the text that support their answers. Finally, ask students which of the two articles they've chosen to recommend to the couple and the reasons for their choice. They will initially present their preference as an in-class response listing their reasons as brief points.

It is interesting to note that with a little help students on their own are able to discover significant points from the two articles and use them to draw reasonable inferences. They record answers to the questions posed, as part of their preparation for a rough draft. When it's time for them to make the rough draft, I explain the format of the essay as follows:

*Learning outcome:* By the end of the exercise students understand the process of examining details, making connections, identifying contradictions, and analyzing and evaluating information—the necessary criteria to make inferences and draw conclusions in order

to make wise decisions. Most important, they learn to justify the reasons for their choices with evidence and confidence.

*Introduction:* States the issue and purpose of the assignment.

(Problem of miscommunication between a couple and recommending an article that would help them understand and overcome their problem.)

*Body paragraphs:*

1. Title: Comparing the titles and inferences from them.
2. Authors: One article is opinionated and solely from a wife's point of view. The other article is authored by a couple and it's reasonable to infer that it holds a comprehensive view of the issue because it has a man's and a woman's point of view.
3. Quality of information in the two articles: Comparing opinions, facts, and evidence that is authentic (i.e., supported by data, research, surveys, statistics, illustrations, and examples).
4. Solution offered: One article offers a realistic solution while the other does not suggest any remedial measures. By now, the students will be able to identify this on their own.

*Conclusion:* Based on the analysis and evaluation of the two articles a recommendation is made summing up and justifying the reasons for the choice.

## **Miscommunication Between Couples: Assignment Guidelines Handout**

Focus on the following:

- Title
- Authors
- Introduction
- Thesis statement
- Quality of information
- Solution

## **Checklist for the Recommendation**

- Is there an appropriate title?
- Are details of student assignment in MLA format?

- Are there distinct sections?
  - Introduction
  - Points of focus
  - Recommendation
- Does the introduction clearly state the problem at hand?
- Is there clarity and coverage of all the important points of the two essays?
- Is there evidence—points of support that explain why one essay is more suitable than the other to offer as a recommendation to the couple?
- Is there coherence?
- Is there a solution recommended?
- Does the response seem convincing?
- Do you think your response is clear and would help the couple?
- Did you review your writing for proofreading errors?

### Quick Start Guide

1. Get students interested in the readings and the topic by discussing miscommunication between couples as a class and in small groups.
2. After the students have read two articles on this subject as homework, use the next class meeting to continue discussion about this interesting topic and also to add a level of learning. Have students begin to analyze the structure of the texts. For instance, point out passages and then ask students to say what they infer, or have the students compare the strength of evidence presented in both articles.
3. Assign an essay in which students evaluate the structure of the assigned articles.

### Work Cited

Robinson, William S., Stephanie Tucker, with the assistance of Cynthia G. Hicks. *Texts and Contexts: A Contemporary Approach to College Writing*. 7th ed. New York: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008. Print.

## Letter to the Editor by Kathleen Leonard

Activity: writing a letter to the editor

Learning Outcomes: develop a thesis in support of an argument; gain awareness of the audience, tone, and purpose; complete the writing process while discovering the real-world value of their writing (other than for a grade) through engagement with current topics that interest students and have an impact on their local, state, national, or international community

Habits of Mind: engagement, motivation, openness, mindfulness, and confidence

### Making Your Voice Heard

All of us get irritated by things in our community, state, country, or the world. We want something changed, and we know just what to do. Who will listen to us? No one, we think, so we just keep quiet. However, there is a forum for speaking out and being heard—the letters to the editor of your local newspaper!

For more than 30 years, I have been writing letters to the editor that have been printed in the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Monterey Herald*. I write about many topics, such as politics, education, libraries, roads, and mental health policies. Once, in 1982, a newspaper even published my ecstatic letter about the Oscar unexpectedly being awarded to the long-shot, brilliant British film *Chariots of Fire*.

Almost any topic can be covered in a letter to the editor. What is necessary is that you be passionate about the topic because that is what comes through in your writing. Topics that have an argument and a solution are usually best because they give the student the opportunity to define why something is a problem or challenge and how best to correct it.

During the class meeting before this activity starts, I ask students to read the letters to the editor in a newspaper. If they can't afford a newspaper, students can read the letters online. The students are to find letters they think are particularly effective or horrible and bring them to class. They should be prepared to discuss why the letters are effective or not. I then ask students to start thinking about topics they might want to write about.

At the next class meeting, I distribute a handout called "Tips on How to Write Your Letter to the Editor" (see p. 119) and go over it with students. I put the students into groups, hand out letters to the

motivation

editor that I have clipped from the newspaper, hand out the Letter to the Editor Critique sheet (see p. 120), and have students review their letters using the sheet. The critique sheet provides the criteria they and I will use to provide feedback on the letters. It facilitates assessing how clear, credible, and compelling the letters are. Then, I have the students pick one student from each group to present the letter and its critique to the class. I encourage the class to comment on the critique and to give reasons why they agree or disagree with the critique. This activity helps the students with their critical thinking skills and gets them thinking about better ways to craft a strong argument.

engagement The assignment for the next class meeting(s) is for each student to bring to class a first draft of a letter to the editor for peer review. Each letter will be reviewed by at least two classmates using the Letter to the Editor Critique sheet. Then, after a class vote, either I will read aloud each letter anonymously, or the students will read aloud their own letters, and we as a class will discuss how each letter might be strengthened to improve the writing and increase the chances of publication.

A revised, edited, and proofread hard copy of the completed letter is due at the next class meeting, but it will not be graded until the student has submitted the letter to the local newspaper and then turned in a printed copy of the letter from the student's sent file so that I can see that the letter was actually submitted. I use the Letter to the Editor Critique sheet to determine the grade for each student's letter.

## Successes and Challenges

confidence and self-efficacy My experience has been that approximately 50% of the students' letters are published. It is especially thrilling for students when another letter writer from the community outside the class comments on a student's published letter because even when the comments disagree with what the students wrote, the students see that their words have made an impression on another reader. They see that their words matter and make a difference.

I suggest that you teach "Letters to the Editor" only if you believe in the assignment. If you don't write letters to the editor yourself, or at least want to, your students will pick up on your lack of enthusiasm and write poorly argued, uninspiring letters. However, if you believe in the purpose and power of persuasive/argumentative writing and genuinely want your students to see that their writing can make a difference in the world outside the classroom, then this is the assignment for you.

## Habits of Mind

Students are always surprised to discover that they care about lots of situations and topics. I've had students write about the Grammys, motorcycle helmets, street names, park closures, gang activity, politics, lack of good childcare options, football, graffiti, immigration, and ways to increase tourism, to name just a few of the topics in student letters that were chosen to be printed in a newspaper.

When students realize they are writing for the real world as opposed to the artificial world of the classroom, they become more engaged and motivated to write a good letter because they are writing about topics important to them, and they are writing for a public forum. Students realize that their letters can be read by anyone who reads the newspaper, so they are especially motivated to write well.

I explain to my students that the criteria for a letter being selected by the editor for print are that it be timely and well written. If the topic of the letter is not timely, then, no matter how well written, it will not be printed. So, the challenge is to make certain that students write timely letters. This promotes openness and mindfulness in the students because they often have to entertain new ideas and consider opposing approaches to solutions if they wish to have a stronger chance of being printed.

openness and  
responsiveness

When a student's letter is printed, the whole class cheers. This promotes confidence in the students whose work is printed, but it also promotes confidence in the students whose work was not printed because they bask in the reflected glory. Knowing that their peers had letters printed makes every student in the class aware that anyone can have their work printed. You just need the right topic and good timing.

Often, students will write more letters to the editor after the class has ended because they get "bitten by the bug" of civic responsibility. As a teacher, my heart fills with delight when I see these voluntarily written letters in a newspaper because I know that I've given my students a way to have their voices heard, as well as strengthened the habits of mind that will help them lead fulfilling lives.

responsibility

## Tips on How to Write Your Letter to the Editor

1. OBSERVE: Read the newspaper every day, paying particular attention to editorials and letters.
2. RESPOND: Letters to the editor typically arise from an emotional response. Look for opinions or events that anger you,

- frighten you, amuse you, or strike you as ridiculous. When something riles you, you are onto a possible letter.
3. **ANALYZE YOUR RESPONSE:** Dig into your reaction by asking that magic question “why?” When you find out why you are angry, frightened, or whatever, you have also found out what you want to say to the readers of the newspaper.
  4. **SPECULATE AND MAKE CONNECTIONS:** Before you establish a thesis, find out how your issue and your opinion fit into the context of contemporary events. Search newspapers (and the TV news) for related material. Know what others think about the issue. Know causes and effects. Timely issues are more likely to be printed.
  5. **SELECT A MAIN IDEA:** By now you are ready to choose a thesis. Make it strong, positive, and specific, and don't apologize by tacking on “in my opinion.”
  6. **SUPPORT YOUR THESIS:** Remember that you are trying to convince the readers of the newspaper of your point of view. Select information that best exemplifies or proves your point.

### **Some General Qualities of a Good Letter to the Editor**

1. Letters to the editor are shorter than essays, usually fewer than 200 words.
2. Letters to the editor deal with an issue or event that is timely, important, and of interest to the readers of the newspaper.
3. Letters to the editor express a strong opinion about an issue or give a fresh insight into it. Frequently, they recommend a course of action.
4. Letters to the editor have a strong, direct, brief thesis statement.
5. Letters to the editor often appeal to the human side of the reader.
6. Letters to the editor have catchy openings, dramatic conclusions; make good sense; have a clear, direct style; and are grammatically perfect.

### **Letter to the Editor Critique**

1. Is the letter's thesis or purpose clear? If not, how might it be made clearer?

2. Is the thesis well supported?
3. What is your reaction to the letter? Agreement? Disagreement? Indifference? Why?
4. Is the writer's credibility established?
5. What do you like best about the letter?
6. What do you like least about the letter?
7. Are there any words or phrases you believe should be changed? If so, why and how?
8. Do the opening and closing have punch?
9. Is the letter timely? That is, is it relevant to issues being discussed now?
10. What is the tone of the letter—serious, humorous, sarcastic, other?
11. If a problem is stated, is a course of action also stated?

### Example Letter

You may change the example letter each semester to reflect timely issues. This letter is a very good example written in 2007.

Dear Editor,

California moved its presidential primary with the goal of empowering its voters. However, if you, like me, were born between February 5 and June 3 in 1990, you've been effectively disenfranchised.

Dumb luck? Poor planning? Regardless of the cause, it seems to contradict the lip service given to "Rock the vote" and the value of young voters.

If California and the nation are serious about getting the youth involved, then it's time to respect us, not disregard those of us turning 18 next year.

A onetime exemption for the newly disenfranchised would remedy the injustice as well as show the up-and-coming electorate that their opinion and vote do matter.

Sincerely,

Name

Complete address

Phone number

Letters to the editor must have your full name, complete address, and phone number at the *bottom* of the letter. Address the letter to: Dear Editor.

E-mail to your local newspaper, and please put Letter to the Editor in the subject heading.

DATE DUE: \_\_\_\_\_. Please print your letter from your sent folder and hand in to me so that I can grade your letter and see the date you e-mailed it to the paper.

### **Quick Start Guide**

1. Help students to find a timely issue that speaks strongly to them.
2. Review the purpose and form of letters to the editor with your students.
3. Encourage students to submit their letters for publication.