

Developing a time to work and a time to play

How to choose and incorporate games as a classroom teaching method

Using games in the clinical setting has become popular in many facilities as a fun—and effective—training technique. Whether they are teaching facts about a particular patient affliction or coaching on critical thinking skills, games have become a proven strategy to relay information in a clinical classroom. An article in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* noted that “games can be developed as an appropriate teaching strategy by nursing faculty,” while another article in the *Journal of Nursing Education* stated that “adults learn best when they apply theory immediately, such as by playing a game.”

“It’s fun, and it’s nonthreatening,” says **Carla Bertsch, RN, MSN**, director of education at Bonner General Hospital in Sandpoint, ID, who, along with her classmate **Mikel Allen, BSN, MSNc**, developed a presentation about games as a teaching strategy for her masters program at Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA. “Employees love that [technique],” she says.

Allen agrees that, in the clinical environment, games can be used effectively to supplement learning. As a clinical instructor for a medical-surgical course at Washington State University, based in Pullman, she has used games very effectively with her students, such as cardiovascular Family Feud. “It creates a relaxed environment where students are not afraid to answer a question wrong,” she says.

Although game-based learning is a very hot technique in nurse education, many educators are not sure what steps to take in implementing game-based learning with their staff. Learn here how to get started.

So why are games useful?

Games can give educators the opportunity to broaden the avenue through which they provide information to their staff members, opening the door for new learners to grasp needed knowledge.

“When you have a group in an audience, they learn differently,” says **Kathy S. Dropeski, RN, BSN, CDE**, diabetes educator at Hills & Dales General Hospital in Cass City, MI. Dropeski developed a Jeopardy game for a diabetes class and submitted an abstract to the American Association of Diabetes Educators. “Maybe they’re not good written test takers or they learn verbally. Games are an opportunity to reinforce learning.”

According to *Urologic Nursing*, adult learning can occur through auditory, visual, and psychomotor approaches. Although educators tend to select an instructional method that focuses on one particular learning style, “learning and retention of information may be increased by up to 90% when all three learning styles are incorporated into a teaching strategy . . . strategies that cover and reinforce content and stimulate interest in a fun manner, such as gaming, add a change of pace to the usual form of lecture presentations.”

The possible pitfalls of gaming

One key thing to keep in mind, says Bertsch, is that not everyone likes games.

"You'll always have someone in the crowd who hates games," she says. "But remember: the rest are loving it."

Another possible drawback, she adds, is that it can be time-consuming to develop a game.

And if you choose to buy a premade game, it can be expensive.

Also, unlike a lecture, you are not presenting the information in a structured format, so content may be missed in the course of the game, says Bertsch.

However, staff members will probably remember only about 10% of what they were taught in a PowerPoint presentation, she says, whereas a game is likely to increase that retention rate to 80%–90%.

To help learners best retain content, evidence indicates instructors should use games in conjunction with other methods. "We do not suggest that educational games be used as the only teaching strategy, but rather that a game could be an appropriate feature of a combination of teaching strategies," write Metcalf and Yankou in the *Journal of Nursing Education*.

Bertsch agrees. "That's why games are so effective. They are never meant to be a catchall, but they work adjunct to other strategies. You're going to miss content, but what they do get, they're going to remember. So you'll walk away ahead."

Types of games: which one should you choose?

Any game, says Bertsch, falls into one of two categories: content-focused or process-focused.

A content-focused game will test a basic level of knowledge on a certain subject. Games like Jeopardy, for example, will test if a staff member has retained specific information.

"Basically, with this type of game, you're asking the nurse, 'Do you have the facts?' " says Bertsch.

Process-focused games, including simulations, will assess whether a staff member is proficient in a certain skill, such as critical thinking.

So the first step, says Bertsch, is to define the purpose of the game as content- or process-focused. Then, before developing the game, take the class size and time restraints into account.

"You need to make sure the game you choose is able to be played in the class size and time space you are dealing with," she says. "Otherwise, you could have too many participants for the game or just run out of time."

Developing and playing the game: quick ideas

When you have chosen the game for your classroom and are ready to begin its development, take the following tips into account:

1. Games should have an aspect of competition and a winner. "That's the key ingredient," says Bertsch. "Otherwise, you just have a discussion. It's a hallmark difference that you have that competitive aspect."

2. Games should be easy to understand. Make sure that the rules and concept of the game are made clear from the get-go to avoid confusion that defeats the learning purpose, says Dropeski.

"If they're not sure how the game's played, or if it's overly complicated and confusing, that can turn them off to the process," she says.

3. Games should be fun. Even when dealing with serious or dense material, keep in mind that a game, by nature, should be enjoyable and nonthreatening, says Bertsch.

Make sure to integrate the game into the sequence of the day so that it has the greatest cognitive benefit.

"In other words, ask yourself, 'Do I put this at the beginning of the day, or should I do it later to reinforce what we've talked about?'" advises Bertsch.

If you are teaching critical thinking skills, for example, have the game take place at the end of a lecture, so that the staff members can apply what they have learned.

After playing the game, make sure that you debrief your staff members to measure success.

"See what they learned from it, what they saw [as] weaknesses and strengths, and ask them how they can apply it to real life," says Bertsch. "Take a few minutes to shut down and recap. And you're likely to see a big increase in their retention of knowledge." n

References:

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