Playing Games in the Classroom

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Most of the subjects taken by final year students studying law at the University of the South Pacific are electives. In the first semester of their final year, however, they have to take a course entitled Current Developments in Pacific Law. The purpose of the course is twofold: to hone the skills perceived as useful to them as they prepare to leave tertiary education to enter the workplace and to broaden their appreciation of the context of the law they have learned to date. The course therefore covers a number of different subject areas delivered by a variety of lecturers, linked loosely to an overarching theme. The rationale behind the course is to encourage students to think across a broad spectrum of topics which will be generally relevant to them when they enter the work place.

The nature and content of the course permit considerable flexibility in its delivery and different lecturers adopt different styles. As co-coordinator of the course my task was to hold it together and to ensure that students remained focused and interested in the overarching theme. To do this I adopted a number of strategies including playing games. Although these games were used in the law programme, they could be adapted for other subjects.

Getting started

The course started with a 'balloon debate', except that being the Pacific it was a 'sinking canoe debate.' The class was divided into groups. Each group was requested to work on a class action arguing why they should not be thrown out of the sinking canoe to lighten the load. The groups they were asked to represent were: members of parliament, judges, chiefs, legal draftspersons, police and lawyers. Having worked out an argument, they had to appoint a spokesperson to voice the argument of the group to the class. The whole class then voted on who should be thrown out. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the first to go to the sharks were the members of parliament. The point of the exercise was to get students to start to think about the interrelatedness of these different sectors in respect of good governance and the legitimacy of Pacific island legal systems. The exercise also prompted the start of discussion on the course web-based discussion page with many contributors wanting to re-think the order in which the classes represented had been thrown out. In particular there was debate as to whether lawyers or chiefs should be retained. Students should also be encouraged to consider – once the canoe or balloon is lightened – the consequences of their decisions.

This type of exercise can be adapted for any subject in which students are asked to evaluate and construct arguments and then judge those arguments against each other.

Not all topics involved games, although all involved student participation in some

form or another, either in the classroom or subsequently through the electronic discussion page or debate topics or themes chosen for individual presentations. The electronic discussion page was generally appreciated by students as it allowed those who were quiet in class or felt intimidated by the more outspoken class members, to express their views from the safety of the computer. Given that Pacific island students vary enormously in their willingness to 'speak out' both because of individual personalities and cultural influences, this afforded a good opportunity for everyone to 'have a say'.

Board games need not be boring

One of the topics covered towards the end of the course was 'Globalisation and the Pacific'. As with each topic, students were given an outline of the topic by way of the Internet-based course notes, with three questions to think about and references to a limited number of readings, half of which were web-based. One hour to cover what potentially is a huge topic is not long, even if consideration of the topic is carried on through discussion on the web-based discussion page and incorporated into a debate topic. The purpose of the one hour slot is not, however, to provide a lot of information but to provoke and encourage thought and discussion. This was done by way of a board game.

For Pacific Island states, globalisation is a mix of good and bad, of advantages and disadvantages. Whether at school or university, prior to the class, each student is asked to think of two advantages of globalisation and two disadvantages, as well as two neutral events that do not directly affect globalisation but might upset progress. These might include: *coup d'etat*; vote of no confidence; devaluation of local currency; cyclone; national strike; power cuts; closure of national airport and earthquake. The purpose of the game is to get students to appreciate that, in order for Pacific islands to develop, both advantages and disadvantages need to be considered and both may have consequences. At the same time it has to be appreciated that matters beyond the control of national governments or individual policy-makers might upset progress.

The design of the board game is loosely based on the game of 'Snakes and Ladders', a game played with counters and a die in which players move along numbered squares according to the number thrown on the die. If the player lands on a square where there is a ladder, the player can ascend the ladder and continue the journey to 'home' from the square at the top of a ladder. If however a player lands on a snake's head then the play slides ignominiously down to a lower number and must continue the journey after the setback. It is a game, therefore, of ups and downs, of good things and bad.

Students are divided into groups and are asked to make their own pack of cards. This is done by writing each advantage, each disadvantage and each neutral event supplied by the group members on a separate card, together with an instruction: on the advantage cards this could be "Move two squares forward", on the disadvantage cards it could be "Move three squares back" and on the neutral cards "Miss a turn". Each student is then given a piece of paper marked into numbered squares, perhaps 30 or 40, and a token, such as a shell, a pebble or a coin.

Taking turns, each students throws the die, moves his/her token that number of squares starting at 1, picks up a card, reads out what is written there and follows the instruction. The winner is, of course, the one who reaches the last number on the chart first.

25	26	27	28	29	30
24	23	22	21	20	19
13	14	15	16	17	18
12	11	10	9	8	7
1	2	3	4	5	6

A little imagination and preparation is required but there is no reason why students themselves should not be encouraged to design games. A game has rules, and observance of the rules leads to a certain goal or conclusion, while non-observance leads to set-backs or failure to achieve the goal.

Putting some fun into skills

It is difficult to lecture skills so sometimes it helps to make them fun. Initial library skills can be developed using 'Paper Chases' or 'Treasure Hunts'. The first is useful for linking use of reference works such as textbooks or general sources of information such as encyclopedias, to more specific sources: in the case of law, reported decisions of the courts and legislation, as well as articles, on the subject area or specific commentary in published papers. The second can be used for familiarising students with a range of library resources, and either involve linked clues, or simply a list of things to find. These can be designed for face-to-face students or for students studying at a distance via internet courses.

One of the assessed tasks for Current Developments in the Pacific was an oral presentation to be done in pairs. This is not an uncommon form of assessment but even in their final year some students still find it daunting. As preparation for this, students were invited to play 'Just a Minute'. This is based on the radio game of the same name, in which the 'players' have to speak on an allocated topic without hesitation, deviation or repetition. If they do hesitate, deviate or repeat themselves, then the other players can challenge and the successful challenger takes up the topic. The person who is speaking at the end of the minute – interruptions are not included in the running of time – wins a point. Each group of students requires a time-keeper and a referee who decides if a challenge is a valid one or not and who hands out the topics. Topics can be closely linked to subjects covered in a course or be more frivolous topics in order to encourage players, or ambiguous topics which could be taken in different ways. For example, topics for this class included Members of Parliament, nepotism, racism, pigs (which are used for custom ceremonies including criminal compensation), fish (which are a threatened resource and part of the local diet), chiefs, the ombudsman, newspapers and elections. Because it is a game and the groups have to make themselves heard against each other it encourages a lot of volume. Shy students find it easier to become involved than when

asked to speak in front of the whole class or to a silent audience. It also makes the non-speaking players listen very carefully to what is being said in order to spot any hesitation, deviation or repetition. At the end of the session students realize how difficult it is to speak for a minute on an unprepared topic, compared to one which is prepared. The game also encourages them to appreciate that it is important for a person to think faster than they speak!

Conclusion

Thinking up games is an interesting challenge for teachers. If you have children, learn their games and see if you can adapt them to brighten up a class or get a message home. Use students to think up the rules for new games or to design games for each other. If their first attempts do not work so well, get them to analyse why and suggest what corrections could be made – after all, bad game rules are not much different from poorly drafted laws. While learning – especially perhaps learning law – is not always fun, there seems to be no harm in playing the occasional game. Many decisions in life are made after weighing up the pros and cons, and games can be used to pitch protagonists against each other in a friendly contest, in preparation for life after study.