

Classroom Activities Appendix

Classroom Activities That Can Be Used To Shift a Mood

It is not uncommon for young adolescents to become uncomfortable or fidgety during lessons with strong themes, whether the themes be emotional, developmental, sexual, or about issues of boundary setting and safety. It is important to continuously have a sense for the “mood” of the room and to shift activity as needed to allow for expression of built-up tension. Sometimes a five- or ten-minute break with a structured movement or group activity is all it takes to help the bodies of the students settle and to allow their minds to reattend to the subject at hand. Several games or short activities can be used to shift out of anxiety or apparent tension. Sometimes it is a relief for the whole group to finish an intense lesson and have time at the end for a game or movement activity.

Of course, additional games already familiar to the teacher are also acceptable. Try to choose activities that increase communication, improve mood, or increase a teamwork feel in the room. Whichever activities you may choose, it is important as the leader of the activity to “sell it” from a space of authenticity inside of the instructor. When introducing any of these activities as a break from intense subjects, frame the break in a positive way. For example, “Hey, class, I notice that folks are starting to get a bit fidgety. It can be hard to talk about these subjects and try to make sense of it all. Let’s take a quick break together and do something to let our bodies and brains have a little fun and clear out some of the nervousness before we continue.” Or, “Wow seventh grade, you guys really went deep with this topic today. Let’s have a bit of fun before lunch so that you can let the lesson settle a bit before we break.” Many of these games have example videos available online.

Behind the Body Twist and Reach

This is a body mechanics movement-oriented exercise that demonstrates that when mind and body are working in concert, surprising things happen.

Have students stand with feet shoulder-width apart, facing the instructor, raising their right hand with arm extended fully, pointing directly in front of them. Ask students, without moving their feet, to twist/rotate/pivot their body to the right—rotating from the hips and waist and extending their arm to reach as far around as possible. Ask students to notice what they are pointing at, and then to return to the neutral starting position. Ask students to lower their arm, close their eyes, and imagine with their brain (without moving their body) that they can unhook at their bellybutton and rotate/turn their torso in a complete circle. Then ask students to open their eyes, point straight again, and repeat the pivoting motion—noting what they can point to this time. Most students will discover that their ability to twist/pivot and point was further the second time as compared to the first time.

This exercise is useful to demonstrate that what we think and what we can imagine impacts how our body responds.

Up and Down Eye Roll Touch Your Toes

This is also a body mechanics exercise.

Have students stand with feet shoulder-width apart, facing the instructor. They need room in front of them to bend forward. Ask students to (without bending their knees) bend forward and reach as far toward their toes as possible—noticing the limit to that stretch for them. Students should then stand up straight again, and then move their eyes (without moving their body) up to the ceiling and down to the floor. Do the eye movement up and down three or four times. Ask the students to repeat the forward bend exercise (straight legs, no bent knees) and notice whether they can bend further than before. Most students exclaim in surprise that they can.

This exercise is useful to demonstrate that what we think and what we can imagine impacts how our body responds. Reach further.

Zip Zap Zop

Stand in a circle. Have students practice saying “Zip,” “Zap,” “Zop,” in call and response to you. As you say each word, clap your hands at chest or waist level, letting the top hand shoot forward after clapping as if you are sending the word forward with your clap. Once the students have the motion and verbal sounds down, begin the game. One person starts by clapping and pointing to someone as they say “Zip.” The person pointed to then claps, and points to someone else saying “Zap.” (This can include going right back to the person who said “Zip.”) The second person pointed to then claps, and points to someone saying “Zop.”

Then it starts all over again with the next player clapping and pointing to someone saying “Zip.”

If there is a mistake—just pick up again.

The point of the game is cooperation, eye contact, and clear direct gestures. It is not a competition—there are no winners or losers, and no one is “out” for making a mistake. Use the game to point out clarity of intent and action and strong verbal sounds and body communication.

WA!

Stand in a circle. The first player who is starting the game says, “Wa!” and with hands pressed together over their head, gestures forward until their hands are directly in front of them, arms straight, sending the gesture to any other player. The receiving player raises both arms up above their head, palms pressed together, saying “Wa!,” and the players on both sides of the receiving player simultaneously and immediately gesture toward the second player’s body without touching them, swinging their arms with palms pressed together, both, saying “Wa!” The person with arms over their head (the second player who “received the gesture”) now sends the “Wa!” to another person in the circle, and the game continues.

There are plentiful videos of this game online. It can be played as a cooperative game like Zip Zap Zop; or once everyone understands the game and the class has a good rhythm going, you can play it as an elimination game. Focus is on accuracy, clear gestures, speed—and above all, working together.

Red Ball

Stand in a circle. The first player pretends to hold in their hands an imaginary “red ball” and selects a second player in the circle. Making eye contact, the first player asks “red ball?” The second player nods affirmatively. Using a direct gesture with both arms as if tossing a ball, the first player mimes tossing the ball, and the second player mimes catching the ball. The player receiving the “red ball” says, “Thank you, red ball.” The second player then “throws” to another player after asking “red ball?” and receiving the affirmative response. Play continues. If a player misses a cue, remind people to pay attention and be clear with their words and gestures, then restart when necessary.

The fun (and the need for concentration) increases by adding a second, and third, “ball” of different colors. Adding a new “ball” is best initiated by the original first player—the leader of the exercise. The red ball continues, a “green ball” and “yellow ball” are added, and players must keep track of all active “balls.” You may receive any of them—or even more than one at the same time!

The key to this game is the question inflection of “red ball?” as the person “asks for consent” to toss the ball with their body and tone and waits for the potential receiver of the imaginary ball to nod before the first player tosses, then to say, “Thank you, red ball” before turning to repeat the “ball” sequence with another player. If a player shakes their head indicating “no” when asked “red ball?,” the person who “has” the ball turns to a different player and continues.

With middle schoolers, I find a maximum of three balls at a time works best. When a group is really paying attention and the students “get into it,” a lot of humor ensues as everyone tries to track the current “balls” flying around the circle and mimes catching and throwing.

Zooma zoom

This is just a simple movement that shifts the mood of a room. Once students know how to do it, it can be used at any time and doesn't require setting up in a circle or playing a more involved game. Look on YouTube for "ZOOM Vid-Bernadette's arm trick." Learn how to do it, and then do it in front of the class. Break it down to teach the students.

Polarization Reversal Tapping Triangle

This is useful in focusing a group and setting an intention—individually or as a group.

There are three areas of tapping: the pinky knife edge "karate chop" of one hand, the chin, and the pinky knife edge "karate chop" of the other hand.

Ask the students to mirror you as you demonstrate the three tapping gestures. Use the inside surface of the fingers on your left hand to gently but firmly tap the pinky knife edge of your right hand. Tap while you say out loud the intention progression that you are placing in the exercise. When the intention has been stated completely, stop tapping, move to tapping your chin with your fingertips, and repeat the five phrases. Then use the fingers of the right hand to tap on the left-hand pinky knife edge while saying the five phrase intention out loud for the third time.

Students should repeat your words each step of the way, call-and-response style.

The teacher decides what the intention progression will be—depending on what mood change you are seeking.

I find this five-step intention useful:

I want to be focused and calm.

I can be focused and calm.

I will be focused and calm.

I am focused and calm.

I am OK.

The words specific to the intention "focused and calm" can be varied as the teacher sees fit—for example, "present and relaxed," or "aware and respectful."

This exercise can be used repeatedly without losing efficacy. You will likely see the students becoming more focused and calmer with the progression.

Exhale-Focused Breathing

This is an exercise to support students in settling down and being more present in their body.

Have students blow out their breath completely in a long, slow exhale. Ask students to hold their breath at the bottom of the exhale—to “hold on the empty.” Tell them to listen to when their body says, “Hey, breathe!” and then take in a long, deep inhalation breath.

This exercise is in direct contrast to telling a person to “just take a deep breath!” The focus on the exhale allows one to become deeply embodied and present before taking the next breath. Waiting for your body to “tell you” to breathe also invites you to tune into your own body’s needs.

This exercise can be used frequently without losing efficacy.

Yoga Poses Suitable to a Small Space

If the instructor is familiar with yoga poses, a handful are easy to teach and effective at increasing concentration and groundedness.

Poses I find work well include tree pose, warrior pose, and triangle pose.

There are many links to competent demonstrations of these poses. Use what works!

Clapping, Stomping, Rhythm Call-and-Response, or Singing

Your classroom experience might already include suitable clapping and stomping exercises or songs. In general, I find these also to be a great way to shift the mood, expel some anxious energy, and refocus attention.

Singing or chanting

Your classroom experience might already include suitable clapping and stomping exercises or use of rhythmic songs or chants. In general, I find these also to be a great way to shift the mood, expel some anxious energy, harmonize the group, and refocus attention.

Mirroring Game/Lead-Follow

Have students stand face-to-face with a partner. One student is leader; the other is follower. The leader starts to move arms, head, legs, or body in a slow, deliberate way. The follower mirrors gestures and movements. Partners try to sync up so that it becomes difficult to observe who is leading and who is following. After a minute or two, roles are switched. Students can be asked to re-partner with someone new depending on time. Several shifts in partner allow for “harmonizing” in silence with different people.

This game is useful to get students out of their heads and into their bodies; it shifts focus away from challenging materials for a few moments and provides relief after intense content.