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Thinking Outside the Paper Pencil Box

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What does, “thinking outside the paper pencil box” mean? It depends on your background and prior experiences, I suppose. To me, it means making time with young learners more meaningful than answering questions and filling in blank spaces on a sheet of paper. Not that these types of activities don’t have value because they absolutely do, but it’s important that they are not the only means by which we teach our kids.

Let me begin with some background that explains my desire to work outside the box. Students arrive at my home for tutoring with tasks to complete for homework that sometimes involve only paper and pencil materials. Once the assignment is completed well and understood, the challenge we face together is to come up with a game idea that will require some critical thinking and will reinforce the skills being reviewed. Helping students have fun while learning is an important consideration when planning any learning activity as well as making sure they will be actively engaged in the process.

Here is a concrete example of just such a game. A student brought a sheet with geometric shapes and vocabulary for those shapes to be completed during our session. The goal was to learn the vocabulary word, to count the number of sides associated with each shape and then identify the vocabulary word that goes with the correct shape. Both the student and I thought outside the paper pencil box and made a game to practice these skills. Once the worksheet was completed, we used a file folder and markers to create a game board for the purpose of reviewing and reinforcing the skills covered on the worksheet.

Once the trail spaces were drawn on the file folder, we took turns filling in those spaces with a drawing of one of the studied geometric shapes. As the student drew each shape she was forced to focus on the number of sides each shape required. In some of the board spaces, we took turns writing the shape vocabulary. This reinforced the spelling of the shape vocabulary. Once the game was decorated to our satisfaction, we played the game making the rules up as we played. The object of the game was to be the first person to reach the “finish” space with an exact roll and use the correct vocabulary identification. Each player took

a turn rolling a die, counting the number of spaces to be advanced on the board and identifying the shape or vocabulary word in the space. We also drew in spaces like “go back to start or go ahead two” and so on.

The student had fun while playing the game and inadvertently reinforced the skills from the worksheet. She was studying for her upcoming geometry test while playing the game. Which activity do you think will encourage the student to study these concepts further, “playing the game she helped design or memorizing the information on worksheet?”

Making a game to reinforce a skill is an old concept and teachers have been doing it in their classrooms for many years. The reason home-made games are successful teaching tools is because children enjoy being involved in the design process as much as they enjoy playing the game. They like sharing ideas and making rules. The process of making rules is a great way to develop critical thinking skills and encourage that student whom may not be an eager writer to write. What a better way to develop strong writing skills, good vocabularies and a love of learning than designing a game.

“They are invested in the process and the game has value because it’s theirs.”

Older children can make a game for their younger siblings. Games from the past like CandyLand and Chutes and Ladders provide great models for game board trails. Children get excited when it’s their turn to slide down a chute or be sent back up the chute. They are invested in the process and the game has value because it’s theirs. When it comes time to make up the rules, you will need to keep them on track and remind them the purpose for the game.

Provide plenty of markers, stickers, and supportive feedback throughout the game-making process. Visit your local teacher’s

store for game-making supplies such as poster board, colorful game card accents, rubber stamps, stickers, spinners, large foam die for younger students or colorful smaller die for older students, to make the games look colorful and authentic. Get creative and use rubber pencil toppers, or rubber novelty shaped items like vehicles for game tokens. Look at store bought games for ideas. You could even create a plastic tub of game-making supplies to have on hand whenever the creative bug bites! The most important thought is to help students love learning by making it personal and by giving them ownership in the studying part. Using hands-on materials and fun store-bought games enhances study sessions and makes homework not so dry.

The Game 24 is a great way to help students learn about addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The game provides cards for three levels of difficulty. It can be purchased at your local teacher’s store or online. Multiplication War is a fun way to reinforce multiplication facts. The war occurs in the game when both players draw a card that contains a math fact with the same product. For example, 4×4 and 8×2 , in the event of a “war,” players then place three cards face down on their war card and turn the fourth card up. The player with the fourth card product that is the highest is the winner of the war and gets all of the cards. This is a total of the two original matching products that started the war and the six facedown cards and the two end cards. The winner of the “war” comes away with 10 cards to add to his/her stack.

When you are shopping for educational games be sure to think about your end goal. “What is it you want to teach or reinforce when your child plays the game?” Obviously you want to have fun and spend time together that’s a given, but games can be a great way to teach challenging concepts like Virginia history, information about our process of government, geography and any other skill our children need to learn. For more ideas on how to make games to reinforce school curriculum for children of all ages consult your kids first and then, feel free to email me through my website address at lenora@iieonline.com. I am happy to brainstorm game ideas with you! (Check out “Math War” on Amazon.com) 