# Incorporating business-focused "Cards Against Humanity"-style card games into the marketing classroom

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ABSTRACT

Games in the classroom is not a new concept. Simulations, board games, and online games are popular methods of incorporating game-based learning or gamification into the classroom. However, newer and more humor-based games popular with student populations, such as Cards Against Humanity, a popular card-based party game, have produced some business-level imitators that can create fun and engaging opportunities in the modern marketing classroom. This paper discusses the use of Silicon Valley Startups, Business Walrus, Wash A Pig, and Charty Party as teaching tools and provides examples of how to use them to help foster creativity, engagement, and active learning through humor and fun.

Keywords: creativity, engagement, games, active learning, humor
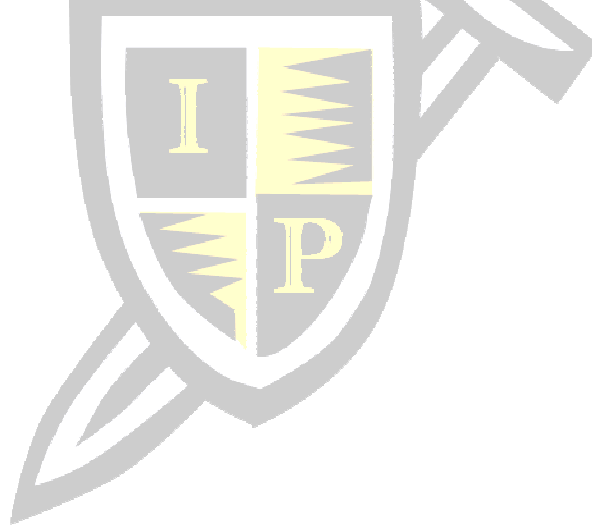
INTRODUCTION

As Gen Z overtakes Millennials as the predominant generation on college campuses, it is critical to identify ways to engage and support their evolving learning needs. The Millennial generation is defined as individuals born from the early to mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, while Gen Z (Generation Z) is those born from the mid-1990s to around 2012 (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Extant research indicates Millennials have a preference for customization, team-orientation, and hands-on activities and, while Gen Z has shown to have similar preferences, this younger generation is also interested in skill-focused learning, entrepreneurial experiences, creativity, and personalized micro experiences (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Vrba & Mitchell, 2019).

As such, the traditional "sage on the stage" model of lecturing is often diametrically opposed to the needs and learning interests of the tech-savvy generation (Vrba & Mitchell, 2019). With experiential learning, faculty take on a supportive role, "locating the learner at the center of the process" (Leigh & Spindler, 2004, p. 53), allowing the student to identify and engage with the activity through experiences, as opposed to faculty being the star. Hands-on learning resonates with Gen Z and finding new ways to incorporate that into the classroom can keep content fresh and allow creativity to flourish.

Creative in-class endeavors have shown increased topical knowledge, participation, and creative input from students, while helping develop relationships and enhance class enthusiasm (Lee & Hoffman, 2014). Focused immersion and temporal dissociation, as often happen in activities like games, are predictors of heightened enjoyment, and heightened curiosity and enjoyment are significant predictors of grounded learning effectiveness (Baker et al., 2017). Including enjoyable activities in the classroom allows students to learn without feeling like they are in the traditional school model, leading to increased engagement.

While classroom activities are often presented in an ordered manner, using real-world examples as framing devices, the idea of chaord (chaos + order) (Hock, 1997, as cited in (Leigh & Spindler, 2004)) presents the opportunity to use order in the framework of a class activity, while incorporating chaos into the content, similar to how a business experiences the unexpected daily (Leigh & Spindler, 2004). As in experiential learning, chaos theory (and chaord) directs instructors to guide and facilitate, allowing participants to learn from new perspectives and from the unexpected presentation of activities. One surprising form may involve humor.

Humor presents an opportunity for creative communication, as "what a person does in jest is usually not accorded the same weight" as when someone is serious, allowing individuals to test their creativity in a non-threatening environment (Lang & Lee, 2010, p. 47). Utilizing humor in what might otherwise be a more serious scenario (the classroom), those involved in the activity make a "private agreement to temporarily suspend a generally accepted guideline" (p. 47), allowing for the opportunity to create new understanding and perspectives on an otherwise familiar topic. Research indicates liberating and stress-relieving humor, like what is found in many games, positively effects organizational creativity (Lang & Lee, 2010). Further, humor has been shown as a vehicle to enhance camaraderie, remove intimidation, encourage communication, and again, stimulate creativity (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). Removing the barrier of embarrassment may make creativity more accessible for all, but especially for those anxious in the classroom.

Games in the Classroom

Using games in the classroom is not revolutionary and games have been used in a variety of methodologies across disciplines. Game-based learning is an active learning strategy that allows for "increase[d] engagement with the subject material through playing a game" (Coil et al., 2017). Games foster unique learning experiences for students, providing them an opportunity to experience the knowledge they have gained by directly applying that topical knowledge (Major et al., 2021). Students move from "simple to more complex environments during gameplay," where they are forced to apply critical thinking skills to be successful (Major et al., 2021, p. 150). There are numerous game types in academia, ranging from puzzles to guessing games, trivia, role playing, and simulations. In business, games often take the form of business simulations (Baker et al., 2017; Garber, Jr. et al., 2012). Board games are a popular form of educational gaming using both existing tabletop games to teach content or through the creation of specialized games for medicine or hard sciences (Cockrell et al., 2021; Coil et al., 2017). Student feedback for tournament-style games reflects task and competition enjoyment, with students welcoming the opportunity to put theory into practice (Rundle-Thiele & Kuhn, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of humorous, business-focused card games as a tool for active learning. While games have been used previously, this application involves games specifically intended to be humorous and idiosyncratic = and allows flexibility for the instructor to apply across a wide array of marketing content, specifically focusing to meet the needs of both the class and instructor.

Card Games in the Classroom

Cards Against Humanity is a popular card-based party game (Dillon et al., 2009). In the game, one person draws a prompt card, while the other players offer a response card they feel best fits the prompt in the eyes of the first player. The game's key feature is the outlandish, unorthodox, or, yes, potentially offensive humor of the cards, making the game more appropriate for a college-aged or older audiences, but not exactly classroom appropriate. Research around Cards Against Humanity has focused on ethical issues with the game (Director, 2018; Strmic-Pawl & Wilson, 2016), though other research has discussed Cards Against Humanity-style games for specific disciplines (Burkey & Young, 2017; Efthimiou & Tucker, 2021; Rocks-Macqueen, 2015).

The popularity of Cards Against Humanity led to a proliferation of similar games including Exploding Kittens, Kids Against Maturity, and What Do You Meme?, extending to other genres. Similar to popular entrepreneurship-focused reality shows, a number of mass market, business-focused games, in a style similar to Cards Against Humanity, have emerged, allowing players to create their own Shark Tank-like pitch or showcase their unique sense of humor or argumentative skill, using zany prompt cards. The games in the activities discussed here include Silicon Valley Startups, Business Walrus, Wash A Pig, and Charty Party. While developed for mass market, the topics and in-game activities are business-focused, making them well suited to a business classroom. The value of these games is they apply across business curriculum, especially in areas like new product development, branding, and segmentation, targeting, and positioning, and can work at any age-appropriate level of instruction.

CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

The activities presented involve a variety of business-focused card games, styled similar to Cards Against Humanity, to provide opportunities to understand business principles and practice skills in a non-threatening environment. When presenting the game to students, instructors should ensure the goals of the activity are clear, students are adequately prepared with both topical and activity play knowledge, and have an understanding of the assessments and intended outcomes (Major et al., 2021). Each game is presented below with applications for various topics.

Silicon Valley Startups

Silicon Valley Startups (ages 14+) involves pitching a startup to acquire investor funding; most of the cards are outlandish, though theoretically possible for a business (Mattel, 2018). One player starts as the investor while the rest of the players are entrepreneurs; the investor position rotates each round. Players are dealt two COMPANY NAME, TARGET USER, and INDUSTRY options, then select one card from each category to craft a business pitch. COMPANY NAME cards include options like 'Creaky' + a type of vehicle, ask for a type of pasta + ask for a style of dance, and ask for any word that ends in 'tion' + 'Connection.' TARGET USER includes options like street jugglers with facial hair, fast talkers, or shoe collectors. INDUSTRY options include ghost hunting, laser hair removal, or packaged foods. At the end of the pitch, the investor draws a HOT TREND card, asking the entrepreneur to leverage the trend with their new venture. HOT TREND cards include options like regulatory challenges, portable game systems, or stem cells. When playing in class, students are divided into small groups and dealt two to three of each type per group (or per group member), to encourage discussion, flexibility, and creativity within the groups.

Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning: As players are given target users, the activity focuses on the positioning aspect of segmentation, targeting, and positioning, with students comparing their product to those on the market and drawing a positioning map of the industry. Another activity involves creating a positioning statement for the product that will resonate with the target market and explaining why it will be successful.

Integrated Marketing Communications: Students determine the media mix needed to reach the target audience, explaining why the mix would be appropriate for their target. Another activity involves identifying the types of noise or clutter encountered in different forms of media, based on the audience's characteristics.

Distribution: Groups create a product and determine the ideal method of distributing the product to their target market, focusing on the retail methods or specific retailers, or, for more advanced groups, the different steps in the supply chain that would effectively move the product through each step.

Business Walrus

Business Walrus (ages 17+) similarly involves inventing products to win billions of dollars from the world's wealthiest, most powerful investor: the Business Walrus (Clickhole, 2021). A product idea is developed based on THE ASK card (all players use the same card), using a MUST HAVE card (features required to be incorporated into their product; each player

has different options). Players are dealt a WALRUS SURPRISE, which may relate to the product or the pitch. Some examples of THE ASK include something for wine moms, a game-changing turtle innovation, or something that helps you cut back on screen time. MUST HAVE options include things like must come in a jar, must be appropriate for ages 46+, or must be powered by a tiny screaming goblin running on a little wheel. WALRUS SURPRISE include instructions like use no more than 20 words to deliver your pitch or draw an ad for your product to make your pitch more compelling.

Students are divided into small groups, given a short time frame to plan their pitch, but midway through planning, are dealt the WALRUS SURPRISE. Groups are dealt two MUST HAVE cards per person in the group, while all groups have the same THE ASK, aiming to compete with one another to win the pitch.

Presentation skills: Playing the game as prescribed is a good way to practice business pitches with odd parameters or unexpected methods (using the WALRUS SURPRISE as the guide). As different industries or businesses have different presentation requirements, the WALRUS SURPRISE is an additional twist to teach students to think on their feet and improvise.

New Product Development: The activity follows traditional game play, with students using the dealt cards (or their choice from dealt options) to create and pitch the product to the class. An alternative, non-competitive method includes varying THE ASK across the groups and make the activity more of a group discussion.

Strategy: Using THE ASK and MUST HAVE cards, determine the need or want the product is best satisfying and then craft appropriate organizational and marketing objectives.

Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning: The activity involves THE ASK and MUST HAVE cards, with groups identifying and defining their target market(s) based on what groups' needs are best satisfied with the selected MUST HAVE cards.

Wash a Pig

Wash a Pig (ages 13+) is a creative copywriting game wherein players write a headline aimed at a target group using specified stylistic requirements (Turner, 2020). WHAT cards might include a headline for a tropical resort or tires. WHO cards ask the player to speak to myriad groups including fishermen, lazy people, or people who hate their jobs. HOW cards indicate the style the headline is to be written including options like a dictionary definition, using only words ending in -y, or like a to-do list. While this is obviously suited for an advertising course or unit, it can also work for branding, positioning, strategy, and integrated marketing communication.

Advertising: Playing the game as prescribed, students focus on the copywriting aspects of advertising and marketing, writing headlines for the product, aimed at the target market. This can also be applied to external projects with students writing headlines, taglines, or slogans for clients using just the HOW cards.

Strategic Planning: Using only the WHAT and WHO cards, groups develop mission and/or vision statements for a company and identify potential organizational or marketing objectives.

Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning: Groups create a product and draft positioning statements. Groups have several options within each category to allow flexibility.

Integrated Marketing Communication: Students draft headlines or slogans across a variety of forms of mass media. Then, they develop the ideal marketing mix for their product and target.

Charty Party

Charty Party (ages 17+) is less widely applicable and mostly suited for a business research or business statistics course. Here, the prompt is a graph with a labeled X-axis, where players try to fit one of their cards to the Y-axis (Katz & Roberts, 2019). X-axis examples include drunkenness from sober to Four Loko or time of day from 8am to 4 am. Y-axis cards include things like volume of cheese consumed or panic caused by loud noises. This game also offers an All Ages version, allowing this to fit a younger cohort, such as a high school A.P. Statistics course. The game can demonstrate actual correlations, prompt discussions on humorous spurious correlations, "anecdata," and the importance of context for data. Creativity, an important element of marketing, is often about "relating the previously unrelated [or] seeing connections between things normally unrelated" (McIntyre, 1993, p. 33) and by identifying, and arguing for, potentially unexpected pairings of x and y-axis, students can demonstrate creativity and explain the logic they used to determine how x and y are related.

Business Statistics or Business Research: Students play the game in small groups, as prescribed, arguing why their response card is the best fit for the prompt, but also discussing what other data they need to defend that position. Additionally, students argue why the relationship would be a true correlation or a spurious correlation.

Strategy: The instructor pre-matches an x- and y-axis cards to prompt discussion on how different segments fit that relationship or what products would be effective at different areas of the curve.

INSTRUCTOR APPLICATION

Part of the appeal of these games is the flexibility. Games can be played following classic rules; however, they are well-suited for small group activities and discussion. The card games provide instructors freedom to adapt to the topic at hand. Classes can be divided into small groups (typically 4-6 students, dependent on class size) as needed. The games can be played using the full deck or instructors can select certain card types as activity prompts, like only using TARGET MARKET from Silicon Valley Startups or WHAT from Business Walrus or WHO from Wash a Pig. There are infinite card combinations, within and across the games, allowing the instructor to ensure students have a fresh supply of card combinations. An additional benefit for instructors is the games take away some of the mental load of creating new examples or prompts for numerous sections, groups, or even across semesters.

As previously stated, instructors should indicate the activity's goals and adequately prepare students for the topic, the game itself, and the method of assessment. Instructors should actively monitor gameplay to provide guidance and intervention if the activity gets off track or students get stuck (Major et al., 2021). Providing handouts with explicit instructions and prompts can help facilitate understanding and provide order, amidst the chaos of quirky activity prompts. Further, some activities require instructors to provide mid-game prompts like the WALRUS SURPRISE and instructors should know when and where that occurs.

These activities can translate to a synchronous online setting by pre-dealing cards to groups (through a shared online document, indicating the options for each category or prompt). As online learning continues to maintain a hold and Gen-Z often prefer online or blended courses (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018), adapting hands-on activities to online classes is essential. While

this may take away from the spontaneity, having these pre-dealt in an online form allows the information to be readily available so as to not waste unnecessary time for the activity.

CONCLUSION – WHY GAMES ARE A VIABLE PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY

As indicated earlier, games are a long used method of classroom instruction. The purpose of using Cards Against Humanity-style games in class is multi-fold. Groups are often more successful when working together, instead of working individually (Law, 2021). A key difference between playing these games for personal enjoyment and use in the classroom is the opportunity to focus on small group work, where groups may compete against one another or merely use the games to practice flexing their creativity muscles. While competition may be enjoyable, the opportunity to collaborate with peers can foster relationships, encourage teamwork, and bring about special classroom moments, all while incorporating the practice of topical skills in a fun and memorable manner (Garris et al., 2002; Major et al., 2021). The collective brainpower of students working in groups can allow for connections students might not have otherwise made without discussion.

The use of games in the classroom has "the potential to engage and excite students and aid in retention and learning of knowledge" (Coil et al., 2017, p. 7). It can liven up a classroom of students that may not know one another well or may not have had time to get to know one another. Again, what makes this activity especially viable in the marketing classroom is the infusion of humor, which has been shown to help build a friendly atmosphere that can enhance performance through improved camaraderie, communication, and relationship building (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). It provides a safe outlet for creativity, as the cards and products developed are intended to be off-the-wall, forcing students to think outside the box. Laughter over silly options allow students to relax as the environment becomes less threatening as the stakes seem lower as they are clearly "at play." Because the cards themselves are silly, students are more likely to be open to sharing ideas, compared to projects with real clients or actual existing products or services where they may be concerned the stakes are higher.

The in-class activities present a fun, hands-on approach to learning that liven up most any business course and allow students to engage with classmates on a more human level. Across the games, the cards have a wide array of potential possibilities, with ridiculous, unexpected, and utterly random card options, designed to enhance creativity through humor.

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