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Non-Alcoholic Flip-Cup as a Strategy for Teaching Group Decision Making: Applied Practices Within the Classroom

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Non-Alcoholic Flip-Cup as a Strategy for Teaching Group Decision Making: Applied Practices Within the Classroom

Rationale: Regardless of the topic of inquiry for the particular unit during which an instructor uses this pedagogical strategy, one thing is for certain: that group decision making was part and parcel of the discussion. Forming groups requires decision making. Communicatively adopting roles requires decision making. Conflict management (and even conflict avoidance) requires decision making. Issues of leadership (contrived or emergent) require decision making. As such, this in-class ‘game’ is as much about making decisions as it is about illustrating key small group communication theories (e.g., Role Theory, Muted Group Theory, Behavioral Contagion Theory, Social Identity Theory).

How it Works: The ‘game’ is non-alcoholic flip-cup, which requires just a few things. First, it requires that all players understand the goal of the ‘game’ (for one team to flip over its plastic cups more quickly as compared to the opposing team). I have found, in the past, that the great majority of students know about the ‘game’ and have played it before. However, re-explaining it would be a great idea and would also calm the anxiety and social fears of those who have not heard of, or played, it. It also requires a six-foot table, a plastic/recyclable cup for each registered student, and a container of water (which will be refilled multiple times throughout the course of this activity). Depending on the size of the class, it would be best to have approximately six small teams. I usually have a limit of 18 students in my class, so, each semester that I teach the course, I tend to have six groups of three students each. In fact, this could be a great teachable moment, either at the start of the activity or at the end of it, posing the following question: what could (or what did) happen differently if there were fewer or more members on your team? This could link back to Functional Theory or perhaps Systems Theory, and can be used to help explain the role of dialogic exchange during the small group process. Once students are in small groups (while I let them choose their own groups, this is certainly a decision left up to you), you should have them talk just a bit about non-activity-related ‘things.’ Shortly thereafter, you will hand out the rules. These are not the rules of non-alcoholic flip-cup. They already know this as a result of your introducing the ‘game’ prior. However, these are the rules of *your* ‘game.’

Rules: As those of us who teach communication (from interpersonal to group to organizational) know, rules become the basis for dialogic interchange. We do things differently and say things differently and relate to people differently and respond to messages differently to the extent that we know, and understand, the rules that guide prototypical interactions. Regarding rules, I do like to have the groups compete against each other. It makes it much more fun. Believe me. Perhaps the winning team gets candy or bonus points on some assessment criterion. But having a fun competition makes the activity all the more exciting and, as I have learned, more educational. The following are the rules for each of the seven rounds:

Round 1 (Team 1 v Team 2; Team 3 v Team 4; Team 5 v Team 6)

Player 1 may flip as many times as they need in order to successfully have the cup land
Player 2 may only flip five times to successfully have the cup land or the team must start over
Player 3 may only flip four times to successful have the cup land or the team must start over

Round 2 (Team 1 v Team 3; Team 2 v Team 5; Team 4 v Team 6)

Player 1 must flip with their non-dominant hand
Player 2 must flip while hopping on their one foot
Player 3 must flip while tapping their head with their other, non-flip hand

Round 3 (Team 1 v Team 4; Team 3 v Team 5; Team 2 v Team 6)

Player 1 must make sure that the cup flips over twice in the air before landing successfully
Player 2 may only flip using their non-dominant pinky finger
Player 3 must flip while looking straight up at the ceiling

Round 4 (Team 1 v Team 6; Team 3 v Team 5; Team 2 v Team 4)

Player 1 must flip using both hands at the same time

Player 2 may only flip two times to successfully have the cup land or the team must start over

Player 3 must flip using any four of their fingers

Round 5 (Team 1 v Team 4; Team 2 v Team 5; Team 3 v Team 6)

Player 1 must flip with their eyes closed

Player 2 must first count from 1-50 (out loud) before they can flip

Player 3 must flip using only the ring finger on their non-dominant hand

Round 6 (Team 1 v Team 2; Team 3 v Team 4; Team 5 v Team 6)

Player 1 must successfully land three cups before Player 2 can begin

Player 2 must successfully land four cups before Player 3 can begin

Player 3 must successfully land five cups

Round 7 (Team 1 v Team 3; Team 2 v Team 5; Team 4 v Team 6)

Player 1 must engage in a reverse-flip (starting brim-side down instead)

Player 2 must spin around five times before they can begin flipping

Player 3 is not allowed to use their hands to drink the water or to flip the cup

Summary: Other than instilling in students the rewards of working in groups and the obstacles and opportunities provided as a result, a multitude of post-activity talking points can be made by both instructors and students. How and why did teams decide which player was going to adopt which rotation in each of the seven rounds? Upon what was this based? How did this come to influence the outcome of the scores? The group solidarity? And group commitment, satisfaction, and motivation? Did certain things about the group communication and group engagement process change within teams over the course of the activity? If yes, what are the implications? Even more importantly...if no, what are the implications? What was the communication like among teams? Was there collective cheering? Was their constructive 'trash talking' and competitive dialogue? Like any pedagogical activity that instructors undertake in their classrooms, this non-alcoholic flip-cup 'game' is opportune for turning the theoretical into the practical: showcasing how and why even the [potentially] slightest of decision making necessitates communication, and good communication, before, during, and after the activity explained here.

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