Book Training Games

Steve Sugar and Jennifer Whitcomb
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Recommendation

Game play, one of the most basic vehicles for learning, is a highly successful employee-training tool, because game-derived learning stays with the student. In this practical guide, training experts Steve Sugar and Jennifer Whitcomb provide user-friendly, step-by-step instructions for choosing, planning and implementing training games. By modifying familiar game formats, such as bingo and tic-tac-toe, according to your training objectives, you can create a fun, interactive learning environment. Simple game play is a far more effective way to teach than just giving out reading materials. The authors provide instructions for 11 training game formats that you can tailor to your needs. Plus, the book comes with a CD with templates and instructions for each one. What's missing? Well, even with the thorough introduction and instructions, readers might welcome a few extra pages explaining a bit more about the philosophy and pedagogy behind these exercises. The bibliography does list additional resources for some of that information. *BooksInShort* recommends this manual to human resources professionals and managers who see the potential of using training games to enhance their employees' learning experiences.

Take-Aways

- Game play provides a friendly, fun vehicle for learning.
- A training game is an interactive, rule-based activity that teaches participants something of value.
- To select a training game format, first consider your overall teaching objectives.
- An effective training game must be simple and engaging. It should strike the correct balance between entertainment and education.
- Preparation is the key to running a successful game.
- Use a "game plan" form to organize and get ready to run training games.
- Questions are often central to various types of game play.
- The best training games are "low tech" and use materials found in most offices.
- A facilitator takes care of the logistics and ensures that trainees have a positive learning experience.
- You can choose among 11 basic game formats to meet your teaching objectives.

Summary

Why Games?

Why should trainers include games in their repertoire of teaching tools? People are comfortable playing games. After all, they played games as children and often learned valuable lessons from them. Games create a friendly, pleasurable environment for corporate learning. Lastly, games invite participants to interact with materials and with other people in hands-on learning.

> "Training games, learning games, classroom games, performance games – whatever you call them – are a delightful way to bring key topic areas to your learner."

Take this example: Sister Cecelia was frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the orientation program at the hospital where she worked. The new hires didn't seem to absorb the information presented to them during orientation lectures. She solved that problem by introducing a game called "Orientation Bingo." The participants enjoyed learning the material in a fun, interactive format that involved calling out answers to questions so they could earn squares on the game board. The human resources trainers who presented the game conveyed information about the hospital with new energy, and the trainees responded to their enthusiasm. Moreover, the game was effective in teaching the material. Departments throughout the hospital reported higher productivity from the new staff.

"Successful training games are easy to describe – they're simple in design and simply fun to play."

Games are a wonderful vehicle for teaching because:

- Games are enjoyable, entertaining, meaningful and motivational.
- They provide "valuable feedback" to participants and trainers.
- "Games are experiential" and hands-on, so people want to learn.
- Games strengthen teams and encourage collaboration.
- They put people at ease and make learning comfortable.
- They can "reveal real-world relevance."
- Games help learners absorb new material faster and remember it longer.
- They enable trainers to diversify their learning formats and techniques.

What Kind of Exercise Constitutes a "Training Game"?

A training game is an interactive, rule-based activity that teaches participants something of value. Training games (also called "learning games, classroom games, instructional games or performance games") have five essential elements: "contest, interaction, structure, outcome and topic information." A contest is a competition between two or more participants. This competitive element distinguishes games from other basic learning activities. Interaction refers to the interplay between participants, while the structure is the actual format of the game. The outcome is the method by which one person or team wins the game. Topic information is the material conveyed to the participants. It is what the trainer wants them to learn by playing the game.

"As trainers, our goal is to make the training event memorable, whether the topic is assigned to us or is one we've chosen."

To choose the right training game, begin at the end, that is, by considering what you hope to accomplish and what information you want to impart. Next, specifically identify the topics you wish to cover. Decide which type of game best meets your objectives. Select a game that covers the primary point of the material, reveals how much trainees know about the topic, stimulates your learners intellectually and gives them the chance to demonstrate their abilities. When you pick a game, think about where it fits in your overall lesson plan, and then consider such practical aspects as cost, time, preparation needs, space requirements and benefits. Answer these questions:

- "Why do I want to use a game?"
- "How will I link the learning to the overall curriculum?"
- "What do I expect will happen to the learner and the content?"
- "How much time do I need to prepare?"
- "What is the purpose of the learning game?"

"A successful game can energize almost any content and produce powerful new understanding for your trainees."

Perhaps the most important question to ask when selecting a training game is, "Would I want to play?" To teach people effectively, a game must be enjoyable, simple and appealing. It must strike the correct balance between entertainment and education. If it's too much fun, it might not teach the material properly. But if you overload it with content, it won't be a game any longer. A game must be logistically flexible in regard to its number of participants, the levels of ability they are required to have, the type of content you wish to convey, the time it takes to complete the activity and the resources needed to stage it.

Getting Ready

Preparation is the key to running a successful game. If you are a trainer, you have to cover a few steps after you decide what kind of game will work best. One standard practice is to set up a "game plan" form to help you organize the activity. In addition to the name and format of the game, list the materials you will require, indicate how you will set up the room and what furnishings or equipment you need. Then outline the rules of the game. Your plan should include a description of the game's purpose, such as examining subject matter, introducing a theme or activity, teaching an idea or skill, demonstrating a concept, or providing advice, feedback or constructive criticism. Once your objective is clear, gather the materials you'll need to convey the lesson in your game. Resources for subject materials include trade magazines, Web sites, books, journals and the human resources departmental library. Your planning form also should include a section for the postgame debriefing and follow-up.

"Today's adult learner learns best when she or he is actively engaged with the topic."

Participants are generally glad to learn in a game format, as opposed to a lecture, but prepare for awkward situations. If someone tries to control the dialogue, thank him or her, and turn away just a bit to ask someone else a question. To engage people who don't seem ready to participate, ask a few simple yes-or-no queries to draw them in, such as, "Ken, do you agree?" If any players are impolite, irritated or overly assertive, take a general recess and speak to them privately. If they continue to undermine the activity, you may have to ask them to leave. If players miss too many game questions, that could end the fun, so prepare extra-helpful examples, direct some questions to the whole audience, make your questions clear or rephrase them to be more user-friendly.

A Few Simple Questions

Questions are often the basis for the various types of game play. Cull through your materials to develop the questions you will use for your training game. Choose among "direct, fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice and true or false" questions. Whatever type you select, make each question clear, concise and conversational. Write your questions using three different steps: Identify the primary learning points and compose questions that address these points as if you were administering a test. Next, prioritize the queries according to the importance of the material they reflect. Last, think about how each question works alone and as part of the whole exercise.

"Make notes when you are observing the game. This will help you tailor your questions to the participants' experience."

Effective training games are "low tech" in that they don't require a complicated setup or intricate materials. In fact, you can play the best games just about anywhere, with supplies you'll find in most offices. The four, basic fundamental game formats are:

- **"Manual games"** – These games, like bingo and tic-tac-toe, use pen and paper.
- **"Card games"** – These activities use question-and-answer playing cards or flash cards.
- **"Board games"** – These use a customized board, question cards and markers or tokens.
- **"Prop games"** – These games use blocks or dice, and wall charts or floor grids.

The Facilitator

The facilitator takes care of the logistics of the training game and ensures that the participants share a positive learning exercise. The facilitator's goal is to enhance the learning process. The game is just the first stage of that process. It provides the opportunity for learners to experience the subject matter firsthand. Facilitators want to host training games that are experiential in that they connect learners with the material being taught in an interactive activity. Participants gain knowledge from their real-time experience during game play.

"Game play should create a buoyant, smiling learning zone...where it's fun to participate and learn."

During and after the game, trainees can observe and consider their reactions and the other participants' responses and behaviors. Next, they can connect their observations to the subject matter, and then, finally, they can apply the material they learned from the game to their real-life work activities. The learning doesn't end when you declare a winner. In fact, the postgame debriefing is an important part of the learning process. By asking open-ended questions, the facilitator keeps contestants involved, allows everyone to state his or her thoughts and feelings, and provides feedback about the shared experience. The facilitator should ask questions like:

- "What was your overall reaction to the game?"
- "What did you experience?"
- "What did you learn?"
- "What would you change the next time around?"

"Whether the game has gone well or gone poorly, learning has occurred."

Plan the debriefing process ahead of time, just like other aspects of training. Think about what kinds of questions you want to ask. When the game is finished, give participants a short break and reconvene in a large group. Ask questions and make sure that everyone has a turn to respond. Be neutral yet positive so people feel comfortable talking about their thoughts and ideas. Some trainers find it helpful to make notes or lists on a chart or whiteboard to record the players' responses.

A Selection of Popular Training Games

You can use these 11 basic training game formats as they are, or modify them to meet your goals:

1. **"Bingo Hunt"** – Contestants search for objects that fit clues on each space of their game boards in this mash up of bingo and a scavenger hunt.
2. **"Board Bingo"** – In this bingo variation, participants split into two groups and play against each other, winning squares on the board by answering questions correctly.
3. **"Card Sort"** – Each team gets an identical stack of cards. The teams race to tape the cards in the right categories on a wall chart. For example, each card could show a work-related activity or material ("open cans of paint"), and the teams could sort them as hazardous or not hazardous.
4. **"Get-Set"** – Teams take turns using their problem-solving skills to answer sets of five questions, gaining points for correct answers and penalties for incorrect ones.
5. **"Match Point"** – Trainees race to fill a grid by brainstorming items that fit a category, like "new uses for existing products." They match one idea to each letter of the alphabet.
6. **"Quiz Challenge"** – As its name suggests, this contest involves answering a series of questions. The twist is that teams must first estimate how many questions they think they'll get right.
7. **"Review Bingo"** – Use this game to make sure that participants have learned the content of handouts and reading assignments. Trainees find answers in their learning materials that match clues on a bingo-style game sheet.
8. **"Sand Trap"** – This is an excellent vehicle for encouraging team bonding. In this game, people must work together to solve a problem and advance across a floor grid.
9. **"Signature Hunt"** – The trainer puts clues about each individual participant within a grid on the game sheet. Then, contestants must find the people who match each clue and obtain their signatures. This is a great way to introduce co-workers, team members or project participants to each another.
10. **"Tic-Tac-Topic"** – Learners play this grid game in pairs. They win squares by answering questions correctly until one person gets three boxes in a row.
11. **"Toss Up"** – Make sure you have room for contestants to toss Koosh balls or beanbags at a target. Participants earn the chance to make a throw by answering questions correctly.

About the Authors

Steve Sugar specializes in "fun with a purpose" books including, *Games That Teach Teams, Games That Boost Performance* and *Primary Games*.
Jennifer Whitcomb is a training instructor and a principal of the Trillium Group.