



Active Game Learning

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. And welcome to the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. This podcast is on teaching and learning. And our guests offer their best tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching. In today's episode, we welcome a repeat winner of the Teacher of the Year award for the College of Pharmacy, Stacey Curtis.

Stacey Curtis

My name is Stacey Curtis. I have been a community pharmacist since 1997. And I've worked pretty much my entire career in community pharmacy.

Alexandra

One of the funny things I have come to realize is that many of us discover we love teaching, entirely by accident. Much like Stacey, many excellent teachers are first dedicated practitioners in their field, who suddenly discover teaching is also their passion.

Stacey Curtis

So for the previous few years, I'd been taking pharmacy students on rotation, in the pharmacy where I was the pharmacy manager. And I loved interacting with the students. It was kind of the highlight of my day, Monday through Friday when the students were there, because I love their curiosity and their desire to learn, which really sparked in me a desire to teach and to share with them my personal experiences. And so, that summer, a position opened up at the University of Florida College of Pharmacy. And a friend of mine said, you should apply. You should you should look into it. So I did. So I accepted the part time position with the College of Pharmacy at eight hours a week.

Alexandra

What makes Stacey such an exceptional teacher is that she is constantly thinking, reflecting, researching, and discovering new and innovative ways to deeply impact her students learning. Stacey discovered active learning as a powerful means of engaging and motivating her students

to learn deeply and to have a love of lifelong learning. And her first taste of this teaching method came through, of all things, a book that she now swears by.

Stacey Curtis

I read a book called The Music Model. And it was designed by Dr. Brett Jones. And it was a research base motivation model to help instructors, or teachers, motivate students. So I read his-- he has a small book. , And really The Music Model boils down to five things. Number one is for em is the word empowered. So EM, so empowered. So the ability for an instructor to empower their students to make decisions about aspects of their learning. So really empowering them. I'd like to add the word motivate for M, as well. So you really have to motivate your students.

The U for that is useful. So making sure that your students understand that the information that you're teaching them is going to be useful for them, now and in the future. And then S is helping our students believe that they can succeed. So they, all students, whether are elementary students or graduate students, they want to feel successful. And they want to be successful. So helping them believe in their self but helping them understand the importance of putting forth effort so that they can succeed. Because really, to be successful, there is an element of effort that has to go into everything you do.

And then I, are they interested in the content, and keeping them interested in the content. And to me, it's that interest. So am I keeping what I'm teaching them interesting? Because if I'm not, if I'm just the Charlie Brown in the ear, you know Charlie Brown, wa wa wa wa, they're not, there's not-- that engagement doesn't happen. So making sure that how I'm teaching and what I'm teaching stays interested and keeping them interested.

And, the last one, the C in music is care. And so for my students I want them to know that I really do care about them. I really do. They become this motivating factor for me. And in response to that, I am this motivator for them.

Alexandra

One of Stacy's favorite pastimes is playing games. At home, she is a fierce Clue detective and Monopoly titan. At a recent conference, Stacey discovered that she could combine two of her loves, playing games and teaching, with amazing results.

Stacey Curtis

We have an annual conference every year, during the summer. It's called the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. And it's everyone in academia come together, and we learn from each other. And there was a 30 minute session on bringing games into the classroom. And so they talked about the importance of engaging your students.

Let me tell you this about me. I love games. So in my home, we have three kids. We play games every week. And I think it comes from my love of interacting and playing games with other people that I'm like, we should be doing this in the classroom. Because when you're playing a game, you not only have to think about what's going on in the game and your opponents, or your teammates for that matter because you can play games with teams, but then you also become kind of immersed into your game. So there's that whole element of immersion.

So you have engagement. You have this thinking process. You have immersion. And then you have a little bit of competition that goes into it too. So some people stem or, you know, they like to have that little bit of competition too. So I thought, well, let's bring something like that into the classroom.

Alexandra

How did she make games in the classroom come to life, and still create a rigorous learning environment? Well Stacey's first go was a swamp based take on Shark Tank.

Stacey Curtis

So the first thing I brought in was swamp tank, which is of our version, the College of pharmacy's version, of Shark Tank. And you know, the University of Florida was really fortunate to have Kevin O'Leary. He's one of the sharks from Shark Tank come to the University of Florida this year and talk about entrepreneurship and you know starting your own business. So I really love that-- the show Shark Tank, because well it's-- the sharks are kind of harsh sometimes, you know. But it's the real world. Welcome to the world, you know.

And so bringing that experience into the classroom, with swamp tank of course, because we're at the swamp, and instead of having sharks we have gators, who are real businessmen and women in our community and in the state of Florida who are really invested in watching students bring their presentations in and really helping them to think about all aspects of what would it take for them to do whatever their plan is, or whatever their proposal is for her swamp tank. So that was super, super fun. We just had our third year of this, back in December. The students really get invested in to this process of bringing their business idea to this group of gators in the swamp. And it's a great learning opportunity. But they, again, are putting together and having to think creatively. How would they make this work? They have to collaborate, so there's the teamwork. And there's that whole immersion factor.

So they really get involved in the process of bringing this business idea, and presenting it, or pitching it to this group of investors. While the money is not real, you know, it's monopoly money, but it really does motivate students innovative mindset to start thinking outside of the box of, well, how could we do things differently. And that's what we ultimately want to do. Because our health care system is somewhat broken. So we can't keep doing the norm. We have

to start thinking outside of the box. What works? You know, how can we impact our patients' lives and make health care better?

And that's essentially what we're trying to do with swamp tank, is to help our students start thinking innovatively and creatively and thinking outside of the normal box, to hopefully impact the future of healthcare so that we can help more patients in the future achieve better health outcomes, and so live longer, better quality of life. So that's kind of bringing that game, or bringing that experience, into the classroom, we're hoping helps promote future changes in health care.

Alexandra

Stacy wasn't sure what the students thought about playing games in the classroom. Did they learn? Did they have fun? Was it meaningful and worth the effort? Well, will reading her student evaluations help bring clarity to the student's perspective. And ultimately, Stacy discovered that they loved it.

Stacey Curtis

It wasn't until I sat down and read the teaching evaluations from that course-- because this is small course. There were 69 students in this course. To read their evaluations and to read their comments to me like, Dr. Curtis, keep bringing your A game to the classroom. We love it. Dr. Curtis, keep doing what you're doing. We love the engagement. Dr. Curtis, your engagement with us is everything that we want. We love it. I mean but it wasn't just one comment. I mean, I had like 40 comments like this. And to sit and read those, I mean it like kind of hits my heart.

Alexandra

I know what you're thinking. That's great for the students who love to play games. But what about the students who don't like games or who are painfully timid? Do they just sit back and passively watch?

Stacey Curtis

When you do sit down with a group of people, you have your group of people who love games. And you have your group of people who really don't, which became apparent when we did the escape box. But when the students who had never really played games before, when they started, they became fully invested in it.

Alexandra

It's nice to hear that even students who claim not to be into games inevitably join in the fun. They can't help it. It's a bit contagious, which is a good thing because creating an escape box requires a considerable amount of time, preparation, and forethought. Before beginning construction, you need to identify your goals. What do you hope for participants to achieve by solving the puzzles inside the box? In our space, we designed an escape box. And the goal is for participants to familiarize themselves with the resources available through the Center for Teaching Excellence.

Once the goals were identified, we created puzzles or tasks that help participants reach them. This is one of the more time consuming parts of creating an escape box. You'll need to comb through your resources, and the content of your course, to find things that can serve as clues to help solve puzzles or problems. You will also need to purchase or create the hardware in boxes, or envelopes, combination locks, and ties to keep your hints and puzzle solutions secured until participants find the codes to open them. Then you can build a prototype and find a group of willing participants to offer feedback.

Use that feedback to further refine the contents of your box. But keep in mind, you may have to do that more than once. One of the important aspects of implementing game based learning is to listen to student feedback. Stacey explains that it is this rich feedback from her students that has helped inform her teaching best.

Stacey Curtis

I think some of the best, or some of the most motivating, things that have come out of creating these games in the classroom for me personally, as a teacher you know as the professor, has been the feedback from the students. They can hear anybody talk any time of day on their iPhone or any of their devices. Put it at 1.5 speed, or double speed, hear what we have to say, and take from it what they want. They don't want to come in a classroom and hear us just lecture to them because it's just that background noise.

What they want is they want to come in the classroom, and they want hands on, interactive, motivating engagement. That's what they want. And to be honest with you, as a teacher, that's what I want. So I loved it. Because they said we really like it when you do think pair share, or when you do the interactive, Socratic games, or you do the, you know, xyz. Maybe try doing that with these other modules, as well. So taking that feedback, and then trying to incorporate it one module at a time, has really helped me, I feel like, develop my own teaching skills.

Alexandra

Feedback from students comes in multiple formats. Certainly, end of semester evaluations matter. But they don't allow you to make ongoing improvements. However, watching and

listening to students, in class every day, can provide those cues and give you the opportunity to shake things up a bit when needed.

Stacey Curtis

Right, and, you know, but it happens all the time. You have a group of students who, they just aren't hearing you anymore. And there's no point and continue to teach or to try to interact with somebody who, they just need a break. And so it's important to recognize when they need a break. So that what you're doing becomes meaningful and stays meaningful.

Alexandra

The audience cues you get from watching students participating in activities in class are also helpful when trying out new strategies and activities, such as role plays.

Stacey Curtis

For some of the activities, we do role plays. And so we think oh, role plays are great. We're going to get these groups of three people. We're going to have a tripod, and one person is going to be the pharmacist, and one person is going to be the patient, . And one person is going to be the observer and they're going to observe what did they do right, what did they not do right, and then how can they improve. Well it is a total bust, half the time, because you can't have three students in a tripod and expect the observer to be able to really understand what they're observing, and what went well and what didn't go well. Because they think it all went well.

Alexandra

It's OK to try out new things and have them fail. Being an adventurous teacher is a great thing. The important things to remember, when trying out new games or strategies, is to let the students know that you're trying this out, and that it is your first time doing it. And that you value their input so you can make it better the next time around. Giving students the opportunity to be heard, and acting upon their suggestions, creates community and buy in from the students. All of a sudden, your students become adventurous learners with you, and can help you make changes when things don't go as planned.

Stacey Curtis

Instead of having a student observe, we now have some fourth year pharmacy students who come into the classroom and help. So the classroom setting, I told you, is first year pharmacy

students. So now we have these students who are in their fourth year who, now, who've completed all this stuff that these guys are going to complete, they know what they are looking for. And so bringing them in to help in the classroom, to do these observation and to offer feedback, works way better than having a, you know another, first year student to help offer feedback when they don't even know how to do that.

Alexandra

As a creative and compassionate teacher, Stacey understands that it's important to keep things fresh and exciting. Any activity or game can become dull if it is overused.

Stacey Curtis

Another thing that we've done is, you know, Poll Everywhere. You know, this is technology. This was probably some of the first technology that came out where it could be interactive in a classroom. That's another thing we have to recognize too is, not to overuse technology. So we used Poll Everywhere. And people liked it, initially. But now it's kind of like oh, Poll Everywhere is still great in certain settings, but not over using it. Because when we ever use different active learning activities, or different technologies, again that causes disengagement. And then it become-- that activity becomes not as meaningful to students.

Alexandra

Keeping students engaged and motivated, , through active learning does not necessarily mean that you have to come up with a brand new game or activity every week. In fact, active learning comes in many forms and should be carefully planned to support, not replace, course content.

Stacey Curtis

So I think it's important to use active learning. Because active learning can mean many things, right. It doesn't have to be a game. It could be think pair share. Could be just talking about an idea at your table with your team. But really, active learning needs to happen with a small group of people, as well. But I think it's important to use active learning as much as possible. But there are definitely some times when you have to deliver content, where active learning doesn't work. So being able to recognize when you can use it, and when you can't use it, is important.

Alexandra

Active learning activities, and the careful planning they require, only work well if students come prepared. Now there are a number of ways to make sure that students are ready for the day's work and activities. Stacey uses quizzes to check student understanding and readiness. But you can also use concept maps or minute papers. There are a variety of methods to check student learning, along the way. And these can be used with the same result. These little check-ins along the way provide an opportunity to see if your students are progressing. And they also allow you to create connections.

Stacey Curtis

There are a certain sect of students who, maybe, wouldn't complete their modules or complete their watching their lectures prior to coming to class. And it doesn't do us any good in a classroom setting, with our active learning activities, if students aren't prepared. So to start every one of our classes, the students have watched these lectures outside of class. They come to class.

The first thing we do when we get to class is they take a quiz, every class. And that quiz is based off of the information that was in the lectures. So that's super important. And then what I can do as longitudinally look at student performance and say, oh, you know, student ABC has done poorly on the last three quizzes. So that I can reach out to the student, say hey, I've noticed you've not done well on your assessments for the past three active learning sessions. I was just checking in with you to make sure that you're OK, that you're learning the material, and that you understand what we're doing. Because from here on out, the. Course material will build so if you don't have this foundational knowledge, you're not going to do well. So I just want to reach out. And students really appreciate that.

Alexandra

So now that we're all excited and ready to create engaging games and activities for our courses, where do we get started?

Stacey Curtis

I would say start small, right. So if you're wanting to start using active learning in your classroom, and you're considering kind of flipping your classroom, I would say don't try to do the entire course, you know, a whole semesters course. Start with a module. You know, start with a section and start with a first couple of lectures and pre-record them, put them on Canvas or our e-learning system. And then, having the students watch the lectures come into the classroom.

When you're creating your active learning activities, think about if you were the student in your classroom, what would you want to take home from this?

Alexandra

Stacey is so passionate about her students and classes. It's a pleasure to listen to her insights. She offers so many great suggestions and ideas. But one of my very favorites is to keep student learning at the heart of my teaching.

Stacey Curtis

Say, OK, for chapter 12 and 13 or for module two, I'm going to create an activity. And we're going to do it in the classroom. See how it goes. And I'm going to tell the students up front, hey guys, next week when you come to class, you're going to watch your lectures before you get here. When you come to class, I'm going to have an activity for us to do. And what I want you to do is at the end of the class, I'm going to give you a little survey. And I want you to fill this out and tell me what you thought about having this activity in the classroom.

And then taking that feedback you got from the students, and reading it, but making sure you're giving them proper instructions on how to give proper feedback, right. , But definitely try it. I mean, if you fail, you fail. But you learn from our failures. And success is built on a mound of failures. So we can only be as successful as we try different things. We fail. We learn. We do it better next time. And then it becomes this really happy circle of success, because you get better at what you're doing.

Alexandra

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're happy you joined us and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.