

## Using a Prompt Ball to Promote Engagement and Creativity in the Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

In our courses we not only need to connect the content in a practical way with our students, but the activities and interactions in class must compete with all the other messages and activities pulling at the student's attention. Professor and psychologist Todd Kashdan says, "If you want people to be interested, committed, and willing to devote effort to learning, mastering, and using these skills for the long haul, then you can't avoid the initial step of stimulating excitement." Finding ways to add a bit of the unexpected and promote creative thought in a class can greatly enhance the students' engagement and the enjoyment for everyone in the room. A teaching and training tool known as a prompt ball has been used for many years in adult training, common education, and therapy to promote engagement and creative thinking and can be used and adapted in higher education classrooms as well. Prompt balls are made with the general shape of a soccer ball and on each of the polygonal sections that make up the construction there is a question or activity. The common practice is to toss the ball to a participant, and they must answer the question or perform the activity under their right or left thumb when they have caught the ball. Once they have answered the question or responded to the requested action, they gently toss the ball to the next participant. This article explores the use of the prompt ball and introduces a more flexible alternative for the higher education classroom to increase the engagement, active learning, and creative thinking of students.

### INTRODUCTION

In an article about using a desktop escape room (Duggins, 2019), the mashup term *engactive* was used to describe a teaching approach that is both engaging and active. Engaging in that it captures the attention of students and active in that it seeks to place the students in a position to be actively involved in their own learning or in other words, to do something other than sitting and listening. Examples of *engactive* approaches include gamification, game-based learning, escape rooms, various brainstorming techniques, icebreakers, and many more. The incorporation of *engactive* practices is not about entertainment or edutainment and there are strong pedagogical reasons for including *engactive* practices in a classroom. In a study seeking to answer the questions, "does active learning boost examination scores" and "does it lower failure rates," Freeman, et al. (2014) found that "the average examination scores improved by about 6% in active learning sections, and that students in classes with traditional

lecturing were 1.5 times more likely to fail than were students in classes with active learning.”

Cavanagh (2019) relates a quote from the professor and psychologist Todd Kashdan that reads, “If you want people to be interested, committed, and willing to devote effort to learning, mastering, and using these skills for the long haul, then you can’t avoid the initial step of stimulating excitement.” Engagement is a necessary first step for learning (Cavanagh, 2019). This is at the heart of engaging learning. It is imperative that instructors do not seek to entertain, but to make connections as quickly as possible with our students. These are connections between the instructor and students, among the students, and connection to the content. Engaging practices are not entertainment but tap into some of the same emotional responses that entertainment also provides.

Engaging practices and activities are also important in setting the tone and atmosphere of the class, especially when used during the first few class meetings. At the beginning of a course students are seeking to find their way in relation to the instructor, classmates, and content. It is during these early days that the instructor can set the tone and atmosphere so that students see and feel the excitement of the content but also understand that the classroom is a safe place to explore their own ideas and inputs.

Often in the first class an icebreaker is used to get the class started. A thoughtful icebreaker is an effective engaging activity and a useful way to begin to build connections in the early days. “Icebreakers are an effective way to create these connections and can contribute to a positive learning environment as well as introduce important content. Students will also make a judgement about their participation and whether it is safe for them to contribute: it is our role to set conditions where students will feel safe to take risks and actively participate in class activities” (Kavanagh, Clark-Murphy, & Wood, 2011, p. 85).

An increased engagement level is also needed when connecting students with important and high-stakes information that will be included in assessments of their learning. Using engaging approaches to review class content can help students to engage more deeply and in creative ways with the material.

Emotion, persona/performance, community, and stories are the four principles that Cavanagh (2019) promotes in a guide to make a classroom more engaging. These principles as presented by Cavanagh include embedded active learning. In discussing the importance of connecting with students’ emotional lives, Cavanagh highlights the idea from Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2015) that “When educators fail to appreciate the importance of students’ emotions, they fail to appreciate a critical force in students’ learning...One could argue, in fact, that they fail to appreciate the very reason that students learn at all.”

Persona/Performance is about recognizing the role that an instructor’s persona and performance have in the students’ engagement of the material. As previously

stated, the role of the instructor is not as entertainer, but it is no less than an evangelist for the content and field of study and this requires an increased degree of excitement and/or passion.

The principle of community involves fostering an environment where community is built, and each student feels safe to bring their full self to the class. Cavanagh states that through establishing a sense of community we can predict whether the students become active learners in the class, have high or low anxiety, and even earn better grades.

The idea of story in an engaging classroom is to use our “most natural form of thought” (Schank and Abelson, 1995) to weave the various bits of knowledge and experiences into a learning story for the course. This is done through the instructor sharing their own stories or compelling stories from the field, but also helping the students to identify and tell their own stories around the content and ideas in the course.

The use of engaging activities and approaches directly address these four principles. Commercially there are tools that one can purchase to incorporate engaging activities in class. Examples include the Thumball®, Game of Things®, and Table Topic® Conversation Starters.

## PROMPT BALL OVERVIEW

The purpose of this article is to highlight a specific tool known as a prompt ball to promote engagement and deeper learning. The term prompt ball is a general term for the commercially available trademarked product known as a Thumball®. Thumballs®, and other conversation prompts have been used in adult training, common education, and therapy for many years. The commercial Thumball® product is a ball made with the general shape of a soccer ball and on each of the polygonal sections that make up the construction there is a question or activity (Figure A). The common practice is to toss the ball to participants, and they must answer the question or perform the activity under their right or left thumb when they have caught the ball. Once they have answered the question or responded to the requested action, they gently toss the ball to the next participant. There are dozens of Thumballs® available for purchase including topics such as Common Ground, Icebreakers, Emotional Intelligence, Ethics, Conflict Resolution, and Injury Prevention. There are Thumballs® that are made so that one can write their own questions with a permanent marker or pen. These commercial products are useful, but the downside is that they are rarely aligned to the content of the higher education classroom, or the questions quickly become known and stale.

## Classroom Use of the Prompt Ball

To adapt this tool for the higher education classroom one can use a multi-sided polyhedron foam die with the numbers printed on the sides of the die or ball (Figure B). There are also smaller multiple-sided dice that are used for different board and fantasy games that can be used in place of the larger foam version. These balls and dice can be found with varying numbers of sides. The larger foam version and smaller dice are

readily available from educational suppliers as well as stores that sell games and game pieces.

**Figure A**

**Thumbball® Example**



**Figure B**

**Prompt Ball Examples**



The use of the numbered prompt ball allows the instructor flexibility in the variety of questions or activities that are associated with each number. An instructor only needs one prompt ball or smaller die but can customize many different sets of questions and activities. The instructor would project the questions or have them written on handouts and the students would then respond to the corresponding question or activity on the prompt ball.

## EXAMPLES OF USES

There are numerous ways to use this teaching/learning tool. The following section will highlight a few specific uses within business classes as well as some of the other general uses in any classroom, training, or meeting.

### Use In Business Classrooms

- A. Entrepreneurship: Often there are instructor resources that are provided with various textbooks and curriculum that can be used as the foundation for the prompt ball. In the Entrepreneurship: Practice and Mindset textbook authored by Neck, Neck, and Murray (2025) there is an instructor resource provided titled Mindset Vitamins. These are a series of 112 questions or activities that can be used to help the students get into an entrepreneurial mindset for the upcoming class. Some of the questions are:

- What was the last thing you did differently?
- What is the difference between learning and failure?
- What is the difference between “what are you going to do” and “what are you going to do next”?
- What do you do when you just don’t know?

If using the 20-sided prompt ball an instructor can assign twenty of the Mindset Vitamins a number and have the student take turns answering the question or doing the activity that is determined by rolling or catching the prompt ball. Another alternative is instead of having each student answer a different question in the class session, one could toss the prompt ball once and the students would answer the same question.

- B. Quick Pitch Practice: This activity is inspired by the commercial party game Silicone Valley Startups®. Depending on the number of sides on your prompt ball/die create three separate numbered lists. For this example, I will use the 20-sided prompt ball. The first list is twenty different industries. The second list is twenty different target users or personas. The third list is twenty trends such as A.I., Social Media, Drone Usage, etc. Determine if you want the students to pitch in pairs or as an individual. Select a student or team to pitch first and roll or toss the prompt ball to randomly determine the industry and target user/persona then allow a couple of minutes for the student or team to quickly create a pitch between one and three minutes long. This often leads to highly improbable, strange, and funny mixes, but that is part of the exercise. It is meant to spur the students to be quick thinking and creative. Once they have made their pitch, roll the prompt ball one last time to determine which trend they will address in their business and have them explain how that trend affects their business or will be addressed or incorporated. Here is an example:

- Industry: Wedding Planners
- Target user/Persona: Retirement Home Residents



- Current Trend: Deep Fakes

Once the industry and target user are chosen, tell the student or team that “You are a new wedding planning company that is focused on planning weddings for retirement home residents. You have two minutes to put together a pitch that is 90-seconds long. Be sure to focus on the problem you are solving and the value proposition of your offering.”

After the student or team pitches their business, the prompt ball would be rolled or tossed again, and the current trend of deep fakes is selected. Now tell the pitching student or team, “That is an interesting idea you have presented. Deep fakes are a big trend right now. How will you deal with this in your wedding planning company aimed at retirement home residents?” Then allow the student or team a brief time to answer the question. The instructor can introduce a competitive aspect to the activity and have the class vote to select the best pitch.

C. Marketing: Teaching the 4 P’s of Marketing: In this activity a prompt ball would be used to assign individual students or teams a product, price, place, and promotion and must creatively develop a marketing event or activity. To prepare for this classroom activity, the instructor would create four different lists of items with each list specific to product, price, place, and promotion. The lists would include the same number of items as is on the instructor’s chosen prompt ball. The student or teams would then roll or toss the prompt ball to randomly determine one each of the 4 P’s of marketing. Just as in the pitch practice example above, this activity would lead to some interesting and funny situations, but the goal is to get the students engaged in creatively and actively using the concepts and seeing how concepts that they would not normally put together might be possible or to show how important it is to make sure all the P’s fit together for a viable marketing process.

## Opening Day/Icebreakers

Develop a set of question to begin building community and help the students to get to know each other and the instructor. Toss the prompt ball around the room to break the ice in an engaging and surprising way. It is important that the instructor also participate in answering the questions or performing the actions to build connections with the students. Getting students talking to each other about themselves and their ideas is one of the principal purposes of an icebreaker and makes students aware of their similarities and differences (Kavanagh, M., Clark-Murphy, M. & Wood, L., 2011). The icebreaker questions can be more lighthearted or serious. They can be tied to the content or to current events. Characteristics of good icebreakers are that they (1) focus on participants to getting to know each other and the instructor, (2) set expectations of openness and trust (community) in the room, (3) asks the students to be engaged and active in the class.

## **Prepare for Creative Work**

Creativity and innovative thinking are skills that can be strengthened with practice. One can use a prompt ball to kickstart a creativity session or limber up the minds of the students. If one teaches classes early in the day the use of the prompt ball can help get students minds into gear and provide a bit of wake-up activity. Often laughter accompanies prompt ball activities and laughter is one of the best ways to gain student's engagement.

## **Spot Check for Content**

To help determine if the students are picking up on the most important content of a lecture or lesson one can pause the lecture or discussion and begin passing the prompt ball around having the students answer questions about the content. This approach puts a different spin on a pop quiz.

## **Exam Review**

The instructor can use the prompt ball to review key information that will be on exams and quizzes. This approach brings a higher sense of engagement and anticipation to a normal exam review and gets the entire class involved in the process.

## **Make Random Assignments**

Use the prompt ball to make random assignments of projects or activities. An interesting innovation activity is to assign students a problem that they must explore and quickly devise multiple solutions. To add a bit of spontaneity, assign various problems to the numbers on the prompt ball and begin sending the ball around the room to make the assignments.

Another creativity activity that includes building communication skills is to randomly assign students an industry, target market, and fictional company name and have them quickly develop a product and then pitch that product to the class. By tossing the ball multiple times and using three different numbered lists the students would be randomly assigned the industry, target market, and company name.

## **Student Led Assignments**

Allow the students to produce their own set of questions or activities associated with the content or a project in the course. For example, if a student were assigned a review of a chapter or company, the student could develop a set of questions that she would answer based upon tossing or rolling the prompt ball. This approach would create a completely different dynamic in doing a presentation as the student would not know the order of questions or topics until the prompt ball was passed around, but because the student developed the questions, they would be able to show mastery of the topic or information.

## **REAL LIFE EXAMPLE OF USE FOR EXAM REVIEW IN BUSINESS COURSES**

The following is an example of using the prompt ball for a final exam review in two different business classes. For the final exam review in an International Business

Course and a Principles of Management course, the instructor developed twenty concepts that were integral for success on the final exam. The instructor gave handouts with these twenty concepts to every student during the final exam review.

The instructor explained that the prompt ball would be gently tossed to the first student and that student's left thumb would indicate the number on the corresponding handout. The student would then explain all that they could about the concept to the best of their ability. All students were encouraged to write their answers and key information on their handout to develop a review sheet. If a student did not know the concept or was limited in their knowledge the other students were encouraged to answer. If students struggled with the correct answers, the instructor explained the concept. After the first student finished their turn, the ball was tossed randomly to the next and so on. After the final exam, the students were asked to reflect on the activity and provided feedback. Of the 40 total students in both classes, there were 29 that submitted feedback. In evaluating the feedback, the following themes were noted.

1. Increased Student Engagement and Participation: Many students commented on how the activity kept them alert and actively involved in the learning process:
  - Fun and Interactive: Words like fun, cool, enjoyable, and not common were used. (Comments 2, 8, 11, 13, 22, 27).
  - Active Participation: Students commented on how everyone was involved, and some noted that the activity promoted class-wide engagement (Comments 15, 17, 19, 23).
2. Effective Study and Exam Preparation Tool
  - Clarified Difficult Concepts: Students indicated that the prompt ball activity helped them better understand content they had struggled to find in textbooks or understand in lectures (Comments 10, 12, 21, 29).
  - Helped Identify Knowledge Gaps: By receiving unexpected questions, students could assess what they knew and what they needed to review more (Comments 3, 22).
  - Encouraged Peer Learning: Students benefitted from hearing others explain concepts and actively helped each other (Comment 15, 19, 27).
  - Served as a Memory Aid: The exposure to varied examples and explanations reinforced memory (Comments 12, 21, 24).
3. Development of Additional Workplace Skills: Though not a primary objective, the activity also supported personal growth.
  - Social Interaction: The active use of the prompt ball encouraged students to talk to one another and build classroom rapport (Comment 11, 23).
  - Public Speaking and Quick Thinking: Students had to answer questions on the fly, improving spontaneity and confidence (Comment 22, 24).



## EXAMPLE STUDENT COMMENTS

Some of the comments from the students that highlight the benefits are below.

- “It was cool. It kept me on my toes. You knew you’ll get a ball so I started looking through the questions to know the answers”
- “It was an accurate way to gauge students’ understanding of the topic on the spot”
- “I enjoyed the prompt ball activity. It was something fun that got to involve the whole class. I think it was effective in refreshing our memory on topics we had gone over towards the beginning of the semester. “
- “My experience in the prompt ball, I would say, was very engaging. It gave me a sense to kind of hear everyone speak. I did enjoy it very much. It was a pretty cool idea. It could also be a way to learn everyone's name at the beginning of the semester as well.”
- “I think the prompt ball activity was very effective and useful. It allowed us to review for the test as a class but also engaged us to participate and pay attention. In my opinion it was more effective than just standing in the front of the class and the teacher going through the review. It also allowed us to review the answers in a simpler manner and more common language than the slides or the teacher presented in information in.”
- “Yes, it was most definitely effective. It helped everyone get involved and understand the material. There was engagement throughout the class. It helped because you were there to explain information if there was an uncertainty. It was a little hard because we had to cover so much information in such little time, maybe two class periods would have been better!”
- “The Green Prompt Ball was an educational and sometimes frightening event. It was helpful to hear how other students understood those concepts rather than hearing the definition spoken word for word. It was enjoyable as well. It was unpredictable as you never knew what kind of inquiry you would get.”
- “I did find the Ball game to be effective in the way that it requires all students to participate and answer the questions that will be on our test. For those that paid attention and took notes, it helped prepare and answer the questions for our final.”
- “I think this was very helpful. I got to study in class and heard multiple different answers that helped me better understand certain concepts. This way we had a fun way of learning and still got to study the review.”

## PROMPT BALL BEST PRACTICES

Because there are only numbers on the prompt ball there are an unlimited number of questions and activities that can be associated with each number. A key to successfully using the prompt ball is to keep changing and adding new associations to keep the activities fresh.

When tossing the prompt ball in the class be sure to set which thumb (left or right) will determine the question to be answered. The ball can be rolled as well instead of tossed and the number on the top would be the one to determine the question or activity.

As seen by the comments from the students who used the prompt ball for exam review, they were highly engaged and active in their review process though use of this teaching tool. For instructors seeking to build stronger connection with their class and between students as well as create a more engaging learning environment, try using a prompt ball activity with some of these suggestions or create your own. It is an inexpensive and low-tech way to increase engagement and interest for students.

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