

Student Engagement and Fun: Evidence from the Field

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ABSTRACT

How do you entice students to engage with the class, its content, and each other? Student engagement has been linked to deeper learning, making connections to topics, and improved course performance. However, engaging students can be challenging. Recent studies have linked fun in the classroom with engagement. Fun can be categorized as fun activities and fun delivery. While fun characteristics are identified, specific examples are not presented. This paper fills that gap by presenting two fun cases in business courses. The cases illustrate that fun activities can be developed for all types of courses: undergraduate or graduate courses, online or face-to-face courses, and various subject areas. The first example is a fun activity in a face-to-face undergraduate accounting class. The second example used a fun delivery method to introduce an exercise on brand relevance in an online MBA marketing class. In general, the projects increased student engagement and course performance. Implications for classroom application are provided.

Keywords: Engagement, Deep-learning, Active learning, Fun

INTRODUCTION

Faculty have the responsibility to encourage active student engagement in learning. Ideally, students will “engage in experiential and active learning designed to be inclusive for diverse students and to improve skills and the application of knowledge in practice” (AACSB International, 2017). Student engagement “typically refers to the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences” (Jennings & Angelo, 2006, p. 6). Engagement is generally described as a multidimensional phenomenon with behavioral and affective components. Engagement facilitates deep learning but requires students to be connected to their courses and materials (Dennen, Aubteen Darabi, & Smith, 2007; Kehrwald, 2008; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Swan, et al., 2000), with the instructor, and with each other (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

The AACSB holds engagement to be one of the fundamentals of business education, yet we still struggle with it. The AACSB’s mission is “to foster engagement, accelerate innovation, and amplify impact in business education” (AACSB International, 2017). The standards state that quality business education cannot be achieved without engagement, creating challenges for business schools and faculty.

While surface learning generally focuses on retaining facts (DeLotell, Millam, & Reinhardt, 2010; Draper, 2009; Fink, 2003), deep learning, which is attributable to the seminal work by Marton and Säljö (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Maron & Säljö, 1997), focuses on connections between topics and is associated with interest, application, and understanding. Engagement, like deep learning, has been associated with improved student outcomes like improved critical thinking, grades, and persistence (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2007).

Fun makes the classroom, and learning, enjoyable and fights distraction and ennui. As stress and anxiety causes blood flow to leave the frontal lobe of the brain (flight or fight response), enjoying oneself actually provides more blood flow in the brain for learning. An enjoyable experience can generalize to enjoying the topic, the class, or learning.

Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, and Michel (2014) created and validated a scale to assess fun in the college classroom. Through this process, the identified two primary categories of fun associated with increased engagement – fun activities and fun delivery. Fun activities are generally hands-on activities that increase social interaction between students including games, friendly small group competitions, and instructors bringing in food. Fun delivery is focused on the instructor and their delivery methods including humor, storytelling, attention getters, and instructor demonstrations of course content. The study used three elements of engagement from the extant literature – cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement (Connell, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Kong, Wong, & Lam, 2003; Rich,

Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Cognitive engagement is generally viewed as concentration or focus. Emotional engagement is the energy or positive emotional response. Physical engagement focuses on the energy or effort put forth. The Tews, et al., study (2014) found correlations between both fun activities and fun delivery with overall engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and physical engagement. In their random coefficient model, they found a significant positive relation between fun delivery and the forms of engagement. The study relied on various components of courses (games, humor, etc.), but the authors did not provide examples of these components in college level courses.

Fun activities reflect a variety of hands-on exercises and ways to promote social involvement among students, including friendly small group competitions, playing music, field trips, games, instructor bringing in food, and hands-on activities. A hands-on approach to demonstrating a course concept is a useful strategy to increase engagement and active learning. For example, Lee and Hoffman (2015) asked students to create infomercials to teach the AIDA Model (Attention-Interest-Desire-Action). The real-world problem and hands-on nature of the assignment resulted in increased engagement and a stronger sense of community.

Fun delivery, in turn, is more instructor-focused, capturing an instructor's mode of delivery and his or her presentation skills. Fun delivery encompasses a variety of elements, including attention getters to generate student interest, instructor demonstration of course content, interactive lectures, and instructor storytelling.

FUN ACTIVITIES IN BUSINESS COURSES

Within the literature, fun is associated with increased engagement and engagement is associated with improved learning outcomes. However, the literature is light on examples of fun within business courses. Some instructors may feel it is too challenging to include fun in their course due to subject matter, course level, or delivery method. Providing a fun experience in an online course may feel like an insurmountable obstacle. Accounting may be seen as a dry subject with little opportunity for fun.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that fun activities and fun delivery can be infused in a variety of business courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in traditional or online delivery methods, and across subject areas. The first example took place in a traditional, face-to-face undergraduate accounting class using a fun activity, a board game, to walk students through the accounting cycle. The second example used fun delivery to introduce an exercise in an online MBA Marketing class. Presenting both cases demonstrates the flexibility and generalizability of fun in business education. Both exercises increased student engagement and learning outcomes.

Face-to-Face Undergraduate Activity

Undergraduate students can find themselves distracted during class by various electronic devices, lack of sleep, lack of interest in the subject, and others around them. Undergraduate accounting courses, in particular, have a reputation of being boring and dry – especially for non-accounting majors. To encourage these students to focus on accounting, a fun activity was introduced to engage the students. Monopoly® was used to provide an activity with which many students were familiar and as an interesting and unusual activity for class. Students were surprised and excited to be presented with a stack of Monopoly® boards at the start of class.

Students at a midsized, private, AACSB accredited institution in the northeast formed groups of four or five players. The rules were altered slightly to accommodate class time such as requiring students to purchase the first available property on which they landed. Students were also permitted to purchase houses and hotels for their properties once they owned the property. Further, the initial cash disbursement to players was treated as an initial offering of stock of their corporation, which was recorded on a transaction sheet. Next, students were required to spend \$M100 purchasing supplies, which was also recorded on the transaction sheet. Students recorded the events of each turn or event - including when another player paid them rent or unexpected cash inflow. For unusual transactions – paying hospital fees for example – students were told to record the item as a tax expense, medical insurance expense, or service revenue. The game continued until each player recorded 12 events. After recording the events, students were required to prepare journal entries for each transaction. Once they recorded the journal entries, students had to post the entries to the t-accounts. After posting, students prepared an unadjusted trial balance. From there, students were given information to prepare adjusting journal entries. For example, they were told that any depreciable property they purchased had a ten year useful life with no salvage value and they were to use straight-line depreciation. Additionally, only \$M40 of supplies remained on hand at the end of the period. For any borrowed funds, interest accrued at 10%. Once pretax income was calculated, students were to calculate income tax expense at a rate of 30%.

If the player had positive net income, they were instructed to declare and pay a \$M100 dividend. Students then prepared adjusting journal entries and posted to the t-accounts. After posting, students prepared an adjusted trial balance. From the adjusted trial balance, students prepared the financial statements - Income Statement, Statement of Retained Earnings, Balance Sheet, and Statement of Cash Flows. Next, students prepared closing journal entries, posted them, and prepared a post-closing trial balance. At the next class meeting, there was lively discussion about what was considered winning - having the highest net income, owning the most properties, having the most cash in hand, or some combination of the characteristics.

The game is designed to create transactions for the students to use to complete the entire accounting cycle - evaluating events to determine if there is a transaction, recording (journalizing) the transactions, posting the transactions to t-accounts, preparing an unadjusted trial balance, preparing adjusting journal entries (AJEs), posting the AJEs, preparing an adjusted trial balance, preparing the financial statements, preparing closing entries, posting the closing entries, and preparing a post-closing trial balance. As each student has a different set of transactions, it is hard to cheat. They might work together to figure out each step, but they must then do the steps independently. Additionally, there is no solution manual online for the students to use as a guide. Additionally, playing a game in class - especially accounting - captured the attention of students and got them to engage with accounting concepts.

In total, 59 students at this institution took Principles of Financial Accounting from this instructor without using the Monopoly® project and 81 students across two semesters have taken this instructor with the Monopoly® project. The students who completed the Monopoly® project were asked to take a short survey regarding the project. The questions used a 7-point Likert scale. The results of the survey are presented in Table 1. In general, the students believed the Monopoly® project helped them bring together the steps in the accounting cycle and prepare for the exam. Additionally, they believed that the project was fun and it encouraged them to have fun in the course. In open ended questions, students stated:

“I was excited to do something fun in class.”

“It was refreshing to have something different, familiar, and engaging. The Monopoly® project helped me to apply the concepts I learned in class.

“I was very intrigued and interested to start.”

“I was excited and immediately engaged.”

“I was excited that the class was able to better learn the content in a fun way”

“It was a good time.”

Overall, the use of the Monopoly® project in a traditional, face-to-face undergraduate accounting course was successful.

Table 1 Survey Results for Monopoly® Activity

Question	Mean
The Monopoly® project helped me bring together the steps of the accounting cycle.	6.02
The Monopoly® project helped me prepare for the first exam	5.74
The Monopoly® project helped me understand the concepts within the accounting cycle	6.11
The Monopoly® project was fun/enjoyable	5.52
Playing Monopoly® in class encouraged me to have fun with the material and in class.	6.27
The Monopoly® project motivated me to do well on the exam	4.84
The Monopoly® project increased my interest in accounting	5.42
The Monopoly® project encouraged me to put forth effort in the class	6.04

In addition to having fun in the course, the Monopoly® project appears to have improved learning outcomes. The use of a hands-on case where students were engaged with generating the underlying transactions resulted in students performing better on the next exam covering the accounting cycle than in previous years where the Monopoly®

game was not used. In semesters without the Monopoly® project, the exam average on the exam after the material covered by the Monopoly® project was approximately 77% and in the Monopoly® semesters the average on the same exam with similar questions was approximately 87%. Additionally, performing the entire accounting cycle from start to finish helped students find the areas where they were weakest/struggling, so they could focus their study time on those areas. The hope is that students will also retain the information better as they had the hands-on exposure rather than using just an online homework manager or doing parts of the accounting cycle independently.

Online Graduate Activity

Online courses present unique challenges with respect to engaging students. It is sometimes difficult to develop dialogue among the participants due to the asynchronous structure, distance between members, and that posts are semi-anonymous, as students may not see more than a contributor's name. These limitations can reduce the ability of online students to engage with a course. Specifically, online courses should encourage social presence, community, and meaningful interaction (Bigatel, Ragan, Kennan, May, & Redmond, 2012; Dow, 2008; Hill, Song, & West, 2009). Rosie (2000) found that overall engagement and with deep learning were highly correlated with interactions between students and teachers. But, Burch, et al. (2016) found that online sections of the same class had lower overall student engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement in class, and cognitive engagement outside of class than the on-the-ground sections.

The goal of this project was to create an assignment for students that would engage the five primary senses, build suspense, and leverage novelty and surprise to captivate them during the first week of their MBA Marketing Management course. The inspiration came in the form of an article in Smithsonian magazine on the 80-year history of SPAM® (a canned meat product produced by Hormel).

The rich history and rich cultural context of SPAM® seemed appropriate to showcase a long lineage of brand management while having fun with a product. As SPAM® has been much maligned and become a cultural joke to many, its quirkiness seemed just right to spark engagement.

Before the start of the class, students were mailed a 12-ounce can of SPAM® individually wrapped in plain brown paper with a sticker that read, "Do not open until instructed to do so." The intention was to ensure delivery well in advance of the class to build suspense. This was followed by an email a few days after mailing to announce the delivery. This is the same protocol followed when mailing surveys. An accompanying letter reiterated the timing of opening the package. It also advised that if their household was Kosher, Muslim, or vegan/vegetarian, they were not to open the package but to take it to a friend or neighbor who would handle the package for them.

Within the course, a "Lesson" was built as part of the first week's lecture. The Lesson assigned the Smithsonian article, discussed the value of a strong brand, allowed the students to open their packages, and introduced the assignment. The final assignment was for the students to create their own videos similar to 3-minute Instagram cooking demos. They were given a choice of a cooking demonstration, sharing the experience of tasting SPAM® for the first time, or of developing a non-food use for the product.

To set the tone and provide an example, the first author made her own video. The goal was to show off the age of the brand in an amusing way and to provide one sample video. The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/JZ0rNJbNp4A>. Each student made and uploaded their video to the online class assignment dropbox. The most imaginative were presented to the class as the SPAMMIE Award winners. The Award for Most Creative in fall went to a parody of Dr. Seuss' Green Eggs and Ham available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd_PF53HpOY.

The project used SPAM for two semesters and then Ritz crackers were used in the third semester to ensure that the results were not driven by the novelty of the brand. For the Ritz project, students were mailed 11.8 ounce boxes of Ritz with similar instructions to the SPAM assignment.

Students were surveyed using an adaptation of the Online Student Engagement Scale (Dixon, 2015). The questions were scored on a 5 point Likert scale where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree. Seventy six percent of students surveyed agreed that the "The SPAM® assignment, compared to assignments in other MBA classes, encouraged me to have fun in online chats, discussions or via email with the instructor or other students (more than I already was)". Three quarters of the students reported that the process of making their own video encouraged them to have fun and to get to know other students in the class. Students found the exercise to increase their interaction with fellow students in the class. See Table 2.

Table 2 Responses to Fun Questions for Spam®/Ritz® Activities

	Semester 1 – SPAM®	Semester 2 – SPAM®	Semester 3 – Ritz®
Making my own video encouraged me to have fun in online chats, discussions or via email with the instructor or other students (more than I already was).	3.19	3.8	3.32
Making my own video motivated me to get to know other students in the class (more than I already was).	3.8	3.76	3.59
The SPAM®/Ritz® assignment, compared to assignments in other MBA classes, encouraged me to have fun in online chats, discussions or via email with the instructor or other students (more than I already was).	3.2	3.9	3.3
The SPAM®/Ritz® assignment, compared to assignments in other MBA classes, motivated me to get to know other students in the class (more than I already was).	2.9	3.8	3.24

The survey also revealed an increase in overall engagement. Students felt the assignment increased their interest in class and they perceived the assignment to be engaging and worthwhile. See Table 3.

Table 3 Responses to Engagement Questions on Spam®/Ritz® Activities

	Semester 1 – SPAM®	Semester 2 – SPAM®	Semester 3 – Ritz®
This exercise actually decreased my interest in marketing. (reverse coded)	1.85	2	2.33
The SPAM®/Ritz® assignment helped me feel more engaged with the professor.		3.72	
All in all, I found the assignment to be engaging and worthwhile.	3.9	3.96	3.71
This was an effective way to begin an online class and draw students into it.	3.95	3.84	3.86
The SPAM®/Ritz® assignment was unlike any I've had in other classes.	4.45	4.76	4

Over 90% of all students found value in the exercise, some citing the unusual brand, when SPAM was used, having a package mailed to their house, and the process of making their own videos.

Open ended questions captured students' opinions about the exercise:

- After the videos were posted, I felt I got to know the other students better (even students I have known for 3 semesters).
- I also think it created a great rapport amongst students and made the professor more approachable. There is a more lightheartedness to the class which is typically difficult to accomplish.
- I feel more engaged and looking forward to reading upcoming materials.

A word cloud was created of the open-ended responses that visually represents the relative ranking of each word. This is shown in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION

This paper described two tactics to introduce fun in the classroom with the purpose of enhancing students' engagement. In the undergraduate accounting class, students who participated in the Monopoly® exercise felt like the project was fun and as an added bonus, scored better on exams than did students in classes with a traditional classroom approach. In the online MBA class, the students perceived that the project increased the effort they expended on the course, made the material more relevant to their lives, and improved their sense of community

within an impersonal delivery format. The use of student videos not only increased engagement but also increased students' interactions with each other, fostering a sense of online community.

Figure 1 Word Cloud of Student Responses



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This paper contributes to the literature by providing examples of fun activities and fun delivery that can be used in multiple disciplines in the business curriculum, in traditional and online delivery formats, and at the undergraduate or graduate level. The results of the projects demonstrate that fun activities in class results in students feeling more engaged in the course, with the material, and each other.

While these activities encouraged students to have fun in class, there are some limitations. For the Monopoly® project, some students have never played the game and need some guidance and learning how to play the game. If students are absent in class when the game is played, there are online Monopoly® games that students can use to generate the transactions for their accounting cycle.

Sending food to students presents several challenges. First, it can be expensive and time consuming to mail the packages to students. Additionally, some instructors may need to get addresses directly from students if they do not have access to that information. Rather than mailing the package, the instructor could ask students to purchase the item for the project. However, this would eliminate the suspense aspect of the project.

Dietary restrictions are a serious consideration. As demonstrated here, this activity worked with different products – SPAM and Ritz crackers. An instructor could find a food item with fewer restrictions and provide students who do not want to interact with the product the opportunity to have a friend or neighbor help them with the project.

Similar activities can be utilized in other business courses to engage students and encourage them to have fun in class. Specifically, games can be used to teach strategy or operations tasks. Additionally, this paper was able to demonstrate that hands on activities can be utilized in traditional face-to-face classes as well as in an online setting. While it takes time to create these assignments, the benefits to the students are certainly worth the effort.

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