

Active Focusing Activities

Group Juggling

10–15 minutes, grades 4–12

Gather together five pairs of balled-up socks or five soft balls; it is very important that the balls are soft and cannot hurt anyone and that they are not too light to be effectively tossed. Tell the students this activity is about being fully present and ready to learn.

If you have not already done so, discuss “presence.” Ask students what it means to be present and what keeps people from being present (worry, preoccupation, fatigue, indifference, chemicals, and mental habits like daydreaming or always focusing on the past or future). Explain that one of the goals of this class is to understand more about how to manage our distractions and be present for our learning.

Hide all but one sock or ball near you (in a bag on your chair, for example). Form a standing circle with enough room so that students can swing their arms easily. Tell them you are going to toss the ball and make a pattern that the group can remember. Each person gets the ball once and only once. As the teacher, you will go first, saying the name of the person you are going to toss the ball to. If you do not know his or her name, make eye contact and ask the student to share his or her name. That person will again make eye contact and call out the name of another person he or she is going to toss the ball to, and so on. Remind students to remember who they are throwing to and who is throwing to him or her. Ask students to put their hands behind their backs after they have received the ball. (Watch carefully as the group creates a pattern—if someone gets the ball a second time before you have completed the pattern, you must stop and correct or the game will not work.) When everyone has had the ball, the last person tosses the ball back to you, the facilitator.

After you create the pattern, ask the group to toss the ball again, creating the same pattern they just made. Emphasize that it is important to toss the ball so that the others can catch it (no fast pitches) and to help each other out if someone forgets who he or she threw the ball to originally. The goal is to work together to have success and fun as a group. After the group has completed the pattern a second time, ask them to repeat the pattern quickly, this time without names. Give lots of positive feedback.

At this point, ask students, “Do you think you could handle two balls?” Remember: the pattern stays exactly the same. You always throw to the same person and receive from the same person. Start the first ball and wait a few seconds. Then start a second ball. After an experience of success with two balls, introduce the third ball. Keep adding balls if the group is succeeding, until you are tossing all five at the same time. The activity ends when you have received all five balls back again. Then congratulate the group.

You can expect a lot of laughter and zaniness and, if students hold their focus through the laughter, lots of success. If students get critical when someone drops a ball, encourage them to stay positive and help each other out. Remind them that it’s okay to make mistakes and that they can just pick up the ball and go on.

Take just a few minutes to debrief when the game is over. Ask students what they think this game has to do with being present. With creating community? With learning? This is a good time to make a statement about welcoming mistakes: “Perfection is about no mistakes, but this class is about excellence, and excellence welcomes mistakes, because they can bring laughter and learning.” Students will often talk about the importance of learning to focus with lots of distraction. Have a conversation about how the principles of group juggling apply to learning (cooperation, focus, being present, learning from our mistakes, and so on).

20 Things on a Tray

15 minutes, grades 5–12

This exercise demonstrates different styles of learning. Before coming to class, gather twenty objects from around your house. Pick objects that are different but similar in some ways. For example, some objects could be the same color, others could begin with the same letter of the alphabet, and some could have the same function or usage (such as scissors, needle, thread, and material). Display the objects on a tray so they are all visible, and cover the tray with a cloth.

When students enter, ask them to sit in the circle. Have the tray of objects completely covered. Pass out a pencil and paper to each student. Tell the students that in a moment you are going to uncover the tray for 2 minutes. During those 2 minutes, students must try and remember as many objects as they can. Then you will cover the tray of objects again and students will have a few minutes to write down everything they remembered. They will keep their lists to themselves. After 2 minutes, go around the circle and ask students to share one thing on their list and how they remembered it. The one rule is that students are not to shout out, “I remember seventeen objects,” or “I remember nine.” What is important in this activity is not how many objects we remember, but *how* we think and remember.

After everyone has had a chance to share the objects he or she remembered and how he or she remembered, uncover the tray of objects and ask students to notice which objects they remembered and which they overlooked. Remind them that this is not a competition. You can also have the students collaborate to create as long a list as they can together, and then move to the discussion on ways of remembering.

Ask different students to raise their hand and explain how they remembered what was on the tray. After three or four different memory styles are described, ask, “What did you notice about the methods people used to remember?” Some may say they counted the different colors (for example, they saw four blue, three red, a green, two blacks, and many multicolored). Someone else might say he or she took a picture of the whole tray and recreated it when recalling the objects. Someone else might have looked for the connections between objects, or alphabetized them, or created a story connecting the objects. If you have time, you can invite a person who created a story to tell the story. Talk about the different ways we learn and how this activity relates to the classroom. Explain that this is a class that honors our differences and encourages us to look at our individual approaches to life and learning.

Pop Up

5 minutes

In this simple focusing activity, students “pop up” or stand up if a particular statement applies to them. For example, say, “Pop up if you play a sport” or “Pop up if you enjoy reading science fiction.” Identify a series of questions that is relevant for your group. This exercise will help you get to know everyone in the room.

Variation: “How Many of You . . . ?”

In this variation, bring your group into a standing circle. Ask the students to take a step into the circle if the question or statement applies to them. For example: *How many of you play sports? How many of you play an instrument? How many of you were born here in this state?*

Gotcha

5 minutes

Gather your group into a standing circle. Let students know we are going to engage in an activity that will build our reflexes. Ask everyone to extend his or her left arm with the left palm opened. Then ask participants to take the index finger of their right hand and place it into the left palm of the person next to them. Say that on the count of three you are going to ask everyone to try to catch the person’s finger that is in his or her palm and not be caught by the other person. Count 1, 2, 3, and see what happens. Generally this leads to a great deal of laughter. Then reverse hands and do the activity again. This is a great way to gather a group at the beginning of class or after a break.