

Fire-Starter

THE 1-2-3-4 GAME

USES. This Fire-Starter is an excellent way to get students energized about many diverse topics. It has been used in PSYCHOLOGY classes to explore how people deal with frustration and how they abuse power. I found it useful in HISTORY classes in two ways: first, when discussing the ideas of Karl Marx, to illustrate his view of class divisions in a society; and, when studying various revolutions such as the French or Russian, to help the students understand the stratification of those societies. In a GOVERNMENT or CIVICS class, the focus can be on the behavior of those in various economic levels of society. Finally, in ECONOMICS classes it can be used to show how economic power affects the behavior and attitudes of the participants in the system.

SETTING. This exercise is very simple and is similar to many board games. Divide the class into groups of four. Any extra students can be assigned the role of dealer or observer. Each set of four students needs a deck of cards with the number 1, 2, 3, or 4 on one side of each card. On the board make a matrix with each student's name down the left side and the numbers 1 through 5 across the top. (There will be five scored rounds and this is where the scores are posted. If the class is too big to do this, assign extra students to each group as dealers/scorekeepers and give them each a similar matrix on paper.)

THE GAME. The objective of the game is to amass as many points as possible. There is one winner in the entire class. There are five rounds each worth 100 points. In each round the dealer gives each student a card face down. On the command of the teacher, the cards are turned over and shown to everyone in the four-person group. Students must combine with another player or other players to add cards that total 6 or 7. These possibilities are:

1+2+3
2+4
1+2+4
3+4

When the students agree to combine they also must agree how to divide the 100 points that are available during the round: 50-50, 40-60, 10-90, etc. Students have 15 to 30 seconds (the teacher announces the time available) to negotiate and signal their agreement to combine and divide the points by shaking hands. If no agreement is made in the allotted time, then no one in the group gets any points that round. Students need to remember that they are competing against all their classmates, not just those in their group. The person with the most points at the end of five rounds wins and gets the prize, which the teacher should make significant.

HINTS. I suggest you play the game without introduction so that the relationships of the players will be as natural and initially competitive as possible. The teacher should put the number combinations that equal 6 or 7 on the board; some students have trouble calculating quickly. It might be good to have a practice round to make sure everyone understands the game. Extra students who are dealers, score keepers, or observers should

be privately instructed to watch the reaction of players when they get their cards, especially the numbers 1 and 4. Likewise, they should observe the behavior during negotiations of those two. If the teacher wants, the game can be played by only one group of four and the rest of the class can observe. Finally, the teacher needs to make sure the prize is worth “fighting” for to raise the pressure on the players. If desired, there could be a punishment for the person with the lowest score.

PROCESSING. How this is processed depends on why it is used. Some general ideas:

1. The numbers represent those without power (1), those with power (4), and those in the middle (2, 3). Discuss how each student reacted when he got his card and during negotiations.
2. Did the students with 2 and 3 ever try to combine with 1 to overcome the 4? Discuss why this might have happened.
3. Assuming that 1 represents the lowest class of a society, 2 and 3 represent the middle class, and 4 represents the upper class, discuss the behavior of each in terms of economic, social, and political roles in American society.
4. One important theory that tries to explain human violence is the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Explain and discuss this in light of the behavior of the students drawing the 1 card. (To focus on this idea, the teacher can direct the dealers in some groups to repeatedly give the same student the 1 card.)
5. One theory of revolution focuses on the frustration of the middle classes as the catalyst for revolution. Discuss this in terms of the behavior of the students getting 2 and 3 cards.
6. Did the four students in one group give points to one person to insure a member of their group won the game? Discuss how this might reflect nationalism and ethnocentrism.
7. Discuss how the randomness of the cards represents the randomness of our lot in life: It is hard to make much headway if one is dealt a 1 card, and life is pretty easy if one is dealt a 4. What can or should be done about this, if anything? But what if the dealer (the government, the rulers, the wealthy) secretly keeps handing out the 1 cards to particular people on purpose?
8. Remembering that families and work environments are also societies, discuss how this game relates to students' family and work life. How is power distributed in these environments, how is it shared? Do groups form and target their energies against the perceived exploiter? Do roles shift in various situations as different people gain and lose power?

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