

## Warming-Up with Playful Routines

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### ABSTRACT

Art educators commonly incorporate warm-up exercises into their classroom routine. This illustrated text presents how incorporating play and humor into the warm-up ritual can reduce students' anxiety and support creative thinking. In addition to sharing practical examples that she has used in K-12 and higher education settings, the author also provides research on the connection between playful cognitive activity and innovative problem solving. She highlights scholars who suggest that appreciating metaphorical humor and creative thinking both involve discovering unanticipated connections between seemingly unrelated things.

KEYWORDS: warm-up exercises, humor, play, creativity

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Art educators commonly incorporate warm-up exercises into their classroom routine. This illustrated text presents how incorporating play and humor into the warm-up ritual can reduce students' anxiety and support creative thinking.

I typically associate the word "ritual" with terms such as routine, repetitive, predictable, and familiar. Creativity, on the other hand, requires disruption of established patterns and understandings in order to generate something new. When viewed in this way, rituals and creativity appear to be at odds. However, artists often employ specific rituals to support their creative pursuits. This might involve playing or listening to music, drinking coffee, dancing, meditating, or lighting candles prior to or during their visual art-making activities.

Art educators aim to facilitate lessons that provide an appropriate balance of structure and freedom. This careful balance resembles the relationship between predictable routines and spontaneous play. In this visual narrative, I will highlight how employing playful warm-up activities at the beginning of art class can support creativity while establishing a healthy, safe, learning environment.

Several years ago, while researching and implementing strategies to promote creative thinking in my elementary art classroom, I discovered that engaging students in short activities that involved humor and spontaneity quickly activated their creative problem-solving skills and established a more congenial learning environment.

As shown on the left, warm-up exercises included "seeing into" or finding recognizable pictures within nonrepresentational imagery and collaborative art-making that builds upon someone else's existing drawing.

Throughout my elementary art teaching career, I discovered that implementing similar activities with an element of time-sensitive pressure encouraged students to fully engage in a playful way. To me, these fast-paced exercises resembled visual brainstorming. I designed them to liberate my students' minds from the restrictions that could stifle their imaginations.

Although I did not incorporate these activities routinely as warm-up exercises at that time, I have since revisited this concept with my current students at the beginning of each class.

Warm-up exercises serve a variety of purposes in the art classroom. For example, secondary level art teachers implement bellwork activities to ensure that students are engaged in productive activities while they are waiting for other class members to arrive. This activity could be directly related to the day's lesson objectives, or it could be an independent exercise intended to simply activate students' imaginations, provide an outlet for personal expression, or practice art-making skills.

Aside from the informal exercises that students complete prior to the beginning of class, art teachers often start their lessons with some form of guided introductory exercise in order to help students refocus after transitioning from previous activities. The structure of most art lesson plan templates includes an introduction or anticipatory set, which aims to activate students' existing knowledge on the topic or skill which will be addressed in the lesson's objectives. These specific warm-up activities prepare students cognitively, physically, and psychologically for the more complex learning that will occur later in the lesson. Educators of all disciplines recognize the importance of warming-up; whether this is practicing musical scales, stretching your muscles, retrieving simple facts, or reviewing concepts before applying them to higher-level thinking exercises.



### The Value of Playful Warm-Up Exercises

Art education scholars have emphasized the connection between play, humor, and creativity while providing both theoretical evidence to support their claims as well as practical ways to use humor and play to promote creative thinking (Gillespie, 2016; Gude, 2004, 2007, 2010; Klein, 2013; Macintyre Latta, 2013; Marshall et al., 2021; Tornera & Kan, 2017; Walker, 2022). They often highlight that members of the Surrealist movement participated in parlor games to activate their creativity (Brotchie & Gooding, 1995) and describe specific ways that these ritual activities can be adapted to suit students in art classrooms today.

A recent publication by Sydney Walker, *Artmaking, Play, and Meaning Making* (2022) showcases how specific artists over time have used play in their creative practice. Walker draws upon theories suggesting that conformity and conventional thought can stifle creativity, and she points out how some artists intentionally pursue nonsensical ways of thinking in order to stimulate their imagination. She explains that engaging art students in playful activities can serve as an intellectual tool that triggers new thinking and supports their ability to generate imaginative solutions to visual art-making challenges. Walker emphasizes that students should not aim to resolve contradictions, but rather allow paradoxical tensions to inspire unanticipated questions and curiosity. Although playful cognitive activity often disrupts logic and reason, Walker explains that the degree of disruption must sustain the artist's and/or the viewer's interest. Achieving the appropriate balance of absurdity and recognition allows the producer and/or receiver to experience a meaningful connection with the content. I will later reinforce this concept with additional research that highlights how "getting" a joke is similar to "getting" art.

After witnessing my previous elementary students' positive responses to engaging in brief, creative problem-solving exercises during art class, I decided to incorporate this ritual into my college-level teaching practice as well. I began this ritual in the spring of 2020 when our course format abruptly shifted to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I recognized that my students needed to feel more personally connected to one another. In addition, I knew that regularly adding humor and play to our weekly zoom meetings would help counteract the feelings of anxiety and confusion that many of my students expressed at that time. I decided to resurrect the playful games that I had facilitated with my elementary students in order to model a successful way to generate an environment that is conducive to creativity as well as meet my students' present circumstantial needs.

Revisiting my appreciation for playful warm-up exercises in the art classroom inspired me to continue researching the relationship between humor and creativity, and how teachers use playful warm-up activities in both virtual and in-person educational settings. I learned that education scholars have recognized the importance of creating a healthy, online learning environment by incorporating humor, ice-breakers, and other warm-up exercises aimed to relieve anxiety, promote a sense of community among classmates, and allow students to shift their attention from previous activities to the on-line classroom (Sajjani et al., 2020).

While acknowledging the social and biological correlation between creativity and humor, education and psychology scholars (Beghetto, 2019; Hatcher et al., 2019; Kudrowitz, 2006; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999; Stevens, 2014) highlight how similar brain activity occurs during an "ah ha!" and a "ha ha!" moment. In addition to artists, designers working in research and development and other professionals have been using humor and improvisation exercises to stimulate and enhance innovative thinking (Kudrowitz, 2006).

Researchers recognize that appreciating metaphorical humor and creative thinking both involve discovering unanticipated connections between seemingly unrelated things. When these unexpected connections are too obvious, the output is not considered creative or funny. However, if a connection cannot be made, then the output is considered confusing (Kudrowitz, 2006). Successful humor and creativity both result when the producer and/or the receiver experiences an exceptional balance of unanticipated congruity between dissimilar things.



As I continue to teach art education courses both remotely and in-person, I've enjoyed maintaining this ritual and have increased my collection of activities that promote both "ah ha" and "ha ha" moments that require participants to spontaneously generate metaphorical solutions. These playful games often stimulate multiple human senses and learning modalities while calling upon physical, verbal, and visual responses. Successful games include exercises commonly used by improv comedians as well as creative problem-solving drawing activities that stimulate students' divergent thinking abilities (Cook, 1999; Marshall & Donahue, 2014). As shown below, one of my personal favorite drawing games involved illustrating a silly joke.

My students have repeatedly expressed interest and appreciation for these weekly rituals. When participating remotely, even students who opted to leave their camera off decided to turn it on in order to fully engage with our group activities. After witnessing this take place on several occasions, I was convinced that beginning each class with a playful warm-up exercise was worth continuing. Practicing this ritual has consistently promoted a sense of connectedness and community within my remote and in-person classroom settings.

I would like to say thank you to my current students who agreed to share these warm-up exercise drawings that involved generating metaphors for how they felt at the beginning and the end of their student teaching semester.



At the beginning of student teaching, I was as nervous as a cat about to take a bath.



At the beginning of student teaching, I was as scared as a lady bug who sees a spider.



At the end of student teaching, I was as proud as a tree that has weathered the storm.



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