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An Imaginary Party Sparks Academic Conversations
By Lauren Zucker

One of my goals this past school year was to create more opportunities to get my students out of their chairs. We had all grown too comfortable sitting at our desks and using our devices—myself included—and I wanted to encourage students to put down their devices, get up from their seats, and talk to each other about academic topics.

My students had just turned in essays, and there was that sense of relief in the room that becomes palpable at the conclusion of an assessment. As I gathered the papers together and placed the stack on my desk, I felt a tinge of sadness; I didn’t want to be the last reader of these well-crafted pieces. Scanning the room, I saw my students poised to passively receive the next instructions. I sensed an opportunity to enliven the classroom by getting students talking and moving. I strayed from my lesson plan and started to improvise.

“Imagine you are a guest at a sophisticated, adult gathering. You don’t know anyone at the party, so you walk around waiting to strike up a conversation with someone. When your eyes meet someone else’s, you reach out your hand to shake theirs, exchange names, and begin making polite small talk.”

At actual adult gatherings, these conversations can be a bit awkward at first, I told students, but adults generally try to find common ground. Often people ask where you’re from, or what you do for a living, I explained. Or someone might bring up something interesting they’d read or watched recently. For our purposes, I told students, the interesting thing they’d done lately was that they’d just finished some writing, and they were eager to share their findings with anyone who might listen.
I improvised the ground rules. I would play some jazz music, and students would walk around the classroom pretending they were guests at a party filled with strangers. When the music stopped, they’d approach someone nearby, introduce themselves, and shift the conversation towards the ideas they’d articulated in their essays. Before we started, I called a student up to help me demo the conversation. Once students found a partner and began to chat, I heard a mix of shy, animated, and mock-serious voices. After two minutes had passed, I challenged students to continue asking questions to the first speaker before shifting to the other person’s topic. Most memorably, there were smiles throughout my high school classroom.

This “mocktail party” activity has become a regular feature in my classroom, and I invite fellow educators to adapt it to suit their needs. During a recent iteration, I circulated as my students chatted, offering them imaginary hors d’oeuvres and listening to their conversations. I’ve added more real-world variables by teaching students how to politely exit a conversation, and how to gingerly insert themselves into a conversation already in progress. Throughout the activity, they practice speaking about academic topics, listening actively, and asking pertinent follow-up questions. We reflect aloud together afterwards, discussing which aspects of the conversations felt natural, and which were more difficult. Many students recently shared that they need more practice sustaining a conversation while speaking face-to-face.

By reading the room and following a whim one afternoon, I transformed the energy in my classroom and developed a lesson that does not require any technology. To push ourselves and our students out of our comfort zones, educators must experiment with new techniques without fear of failure. This
activity is significantly more dramatic and playful than my standard lessons, and has inspired me to continue to leverage the power of imagination in the ELA classroom.

Lauren Zucker teaches high school English in Allendale, NJ, and earned a PhD in Contemporary Learning and Interdisciplinary Research from Fordham University. Her research interests include adolescent literacy, digital reading, and reading motivation. She blogs about her teaching and research at www.laurenzucker.org.

“Hold It” by Bridget Fajvan

Bridget Fajvan is a sophomore at Newton High School in New Jersey. Her interests include horseback riding, writing and reading. She loves the color green because it’s the color of nature and the heart chakra. She loves her friends, her mom and dad, vintage clothes, and her two cats. As an artist, she likes to draw more than anything, and she loves to experiment with new styles.