

Learnball League: Teacher-to-Teacher Staff Development

For over 20 years teacher volunteers have been showing other interested teachers how to implement Learnball, a classroom management approach that uses a sports format and peer approval to improve productivity, motivation, and behavior.



In 1964, a teacher from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, developed Learnball—a classroom management technique to improve student productivity, motivation, and behavior. Using suggestions from other teachers, Earl Bradley designed Learnball to appeal to students because student enthusiasm is a major factor in teacher acceptance of new methods (Parish and Arends 1983). Learnball is a strong educational medicine mixed with just enough sweetener to make it palatable. The medicine is discipline, cooperation, and hard work. Learnball teams are highly cohesive, family-like support groups, which adopt norms that are able to quickly and easily overcome bad habits. The sweetener is a sports format with special modifications (individualized participation and consensus) that appeals to students K-12.

Bradley understood that the success of a new program depends on teachers being able to see immediate improvements in student behaviors. While doing research for his doctoral dissertation, Bradley (1970) also had the foresight to recognize that the teacher is the key to acceptance and implementation of any program (Parish and Arends 1983). When the presenter of a new practice is a successful practitioner, credibility for the program is greatly increased (Crandall 1983). In addition, he knew that teachers are more apt to implement new practices when the program can be quickly and easily implemented, has immediate and enduring results, and provides for support from peers (Guskey 1985).

Bradley developed a dissemination model then that meets today's standards for staff development presentations.

Los Angeles Teacher Center Director Bernice Medinnis, who has introduced Learnball to new and experienced teachers, cites numerous benefits of Learnball.

Increased time-on-task, greater student involvement, and more positive student attitudes have occurred immediately where Learnball is used. Teachers are spreading the word, teaching and supporting each other as they implement the program.



Medinnis reports that there is unprecedented enthusiasm and excitement during presentations and an unusually high percentage of teacher acceptance and implementation. In addition, teachers who use Learnball consistently relate dramatic increases in student motivation and decreases in discipline problems.

A Model for Student Enthusiasm

The Learnball approach uses peer social approval as a reward. A foam ball and hoop are used (very sparingly) to create an appealing sports format. In Learnball, classroom rules become the rules of the sport. This produces immediate, positive behavioral changes, especially in students who have acquired negative habits. This approach harnesses students' interest in peer activities and sports to create enthusiasm for academic learning (Goodlad 1984). Classwork becomes a cooperative team endeavor in which the scholar earns peer esteem for superior effort and the slower student is rewarded for learning attempts. A very important Learnball feature is that all students, regardless of ability, receive learning reinforcement from their peers. Learnball creates many culture-free, gender-free roles for students, and it uses a consensus, problem-solving approach to classroom situations.

Learning Support Groups

Learnball is a strong educational medicine mixed with just enough sweetener to make it palatable. The medicine is discipline, cooperation, and hard work. Learnball teams are highly cohesive, family-like support groups which adopt norms that are able to quickly and easily overcome bad habits. The sweetener is a sports format with special modifications (individualized participation and consensus) that appeal to K-12 students.

Learnball is implemented by following procedures in the Learnball handbook. In the first step the class votes to form learning teams and adhere to a strict set of rules to achieve academic excellence.

Students form two balanced teams because that creates high morale which is the key to productivity. Team leaders are elected because high-status leaders can rally the teams to outperform each other. An assistant teacher, chosen by consensus, helps the teacher. Since students have a voice in the selection, the assistant is not viewed as a "teacher's pet." A student is selected to keep score and others are appointed to handle supplies.

Students and teacher reach a consensus on point values for classroom rules, and compliance becomes part of the learning contest. A motivational counseling technique, combined with individual and group incentives, works to extinguish bad habits and poor behavior.

The Learnball "freeze" is a way to obtain total and instant class attention. Within seconds, the teacher can shift from a class activity involving movement and conversation to a mode where students are seated, silent, and attentive.

As class begins, students focus attention and increase concentration with a "freeze." Teams earn points for being prepared, following directions, completing work, answering questions, participating in learning activities, and following the rules. The Learnball bid system allows high and low academic achievers to be team heroes. High scorers always earn great esteem, but even one point scored by any student can win the contest.

A foam ball is used briefly at the beginning and end of a lesson as a reward for work. Shooting hoops also reduces tension and makes classroom work exciting for those students who normally are not academically motivated.

To show students that they are part of a large peer network, official Learnball League International merit awards are given. League affiliation establishes an even stronger group norm to support the learning program.

Teams select names such as IBM and Apple to draw a parallel between Learnball teamwork skills and cooperation that is essential in the adult work environment.

The Learnball steps work together to produce a gestalt that maintains support groups that motivate through peer approval and a sports approach.



Support from Peers Is Essential

Bradley and his colleagues formed a nonprofit organization to disseminate the model, which evolved into a teacher-to-teacher, self-help network called Learnball League International. The League gives support to teachers through a telephone hotline and a quarterly newsletter. The Learnball implementation handbook is available *only* as part of the League membership to ensure that teachers can receive help from peers, if needed. The League guarantees success and will refund the membership cost if Learnball fails to improve motivation and decrease discipline problems. Indicative of Learnball's strength is the fact that no refunds have been requested since its inception.

The Learnball Handbook

Much of Learnball's acceptance is due to the fact that the handbook makes it easy to implement the technique in three hours or less. The handbook evolved over many years as a result of teacher suggestions. It is a behaviorally stated, "teacher friendly" manual that outlines, step-by-step, how to introduce Learnball to students, elect student leaders, form teams, and reach consensus on classroom rules. It explains how to use the ball and hoop and award points for positive classroom behaviors. When a step requires the teacher to explain a Learnball procedure to students, an appropriate speech is provided. Since Learnball is a management method, the teacher continues to use the same materials and grading system as before. Learnball does not require any changes in curriculum or in how the teacher deals with the subject matter.

Spreading the Word

The League has employed a three-step dissemination plan to inform schools about Learnball. The first step is to identify principals who are supportive of teacher attempts to improve motivation and behavior and who encourage teachers to work together. The League provides such principals with an article about Learnball that appeared in the *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* (Sneed 1983). In the second step, the principals give a copy of the article to teachers and ask for volunteers to implement the program. In step three, the teacher-volunteers present Learnball at a teacher inservice. The presentation guide provided to volunteers by the League is virtually "presenter-proof." The volunteer divides the inservice audience into two teams that engage in a Learnball contest. Questions and answers about Learnball are provided in the presentation guide. This simulation gives teachers information and firsthand experience with Learnball motivation and discipline. Videotapes are available for the presentation, and experienced staff presenters from Learnball League can assist the teacher volunteer, upon request.



Immediate and Enduring Results

Thousands of teachers use Learnball at all ability levels, in high- and low-income areas, in rural, urban, and suburban settings. These teachers report similar immediate and enduring results. Students take pride in doing homework and bring pencils and books to class to help their team. They pay attention, complete more assignments, and enjoy academic success.

The following comment is typical of teachers' reactions:

I first read about Learnball in late September when my principal circulated the *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* article. I was very much interested because the article offered a solution for the many frustrations that were taking the enjoyment out of teaching. I followed the step-by-step instructions. It was easy and fun to do. Both the cooperation within each team and the competition between teams were evident immediately. I have never seen students so motivated! I sensed a high energy level in the classroom, and that energy was focused on the lesson. Since we began Learnball, student output has increased tremendously because positive behaviors are rewarded continuously. Learnball has exceeded all my expectations! □

References

- Bradley, Earl K., Jr. "Intraclass Sociability Grouping in Secondary Schools—Supporting Theory and Functional Design." Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1970.
- Crandall, David P. "The Teacher's Role in School Improvement." *Educational Leadership* 41 (November 1983): 6-9.
- Goodlad, John I. *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984. 77, 324.
- Guskey, Thomas R. "Staff Development and Teacher Changes." *Educational Leadership* 42 (April 1985): 57-60.
- Parish, Ralph, and Richard Arends. "Why Innovative Programs are Discontinued." *Educational Leadership* 40 (January 1983): 62-65.
- Sneed, Joan P. "The MYTEAM Learnball League." *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 50, no. 1 (Fall 1983): 9-14.

Lindy Marwood is a 5th grade teacher at William Penn School, Elizabeth, PA 15063. **Frank McMullen** is a science teacher at Guest Junior High School, Roseville, MI 48066. **Diane H. Murray** is executive director, Learnball League, P.O. Box 18221, Pleasant Hills, PA 15236.

To obtain more information about Learnball, send a large business-size, self-addressed, stamped envelope to Learnball League, P.O. Box 18221, Pleasant Hills, PA 15236.

Copyright © 1986 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.