

Duane Kindt demonstrates classroom dynamics with a ball of string.

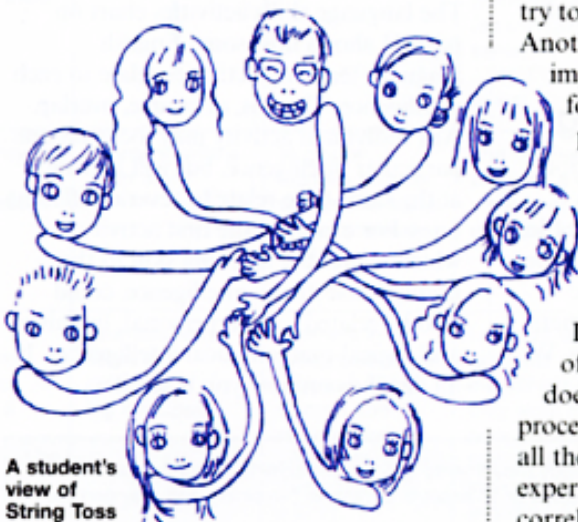
String Toss

Teachers are well aware of the complex nature of classroom dynamics. Balancing numerous (and often contending) aspects of the learning and teaching process to achieve efficient language acquisition is a large part of their responsibility. But students, too, can help make their classes more conducive to learning by understanding that the language classroom is a complicated, dynamic system. Each person in the classroom has great influence on everyone else and shares in the construction of the knowledge which emerges from their collective experience. One way to demonstrate these rather complicated concepts is with a simple activity called 'String Toss'.

What is String Toss?

String Toss is an activity I learned from Diane Larsen-Freeman as an MA student at the School for International Training, Vermont, USA. Participants (students and teacher) sit in a circle. The teacher explains that everyone will have an opportunity to say something about a chosen topic. On the final day of our MA course, the topic was 'our course experience'. But other topics can, of course, be used. Examples are 'simple self-introduction', 'favourite movies', 'what you did during the holiday' and so on. After introducing

the topic, the teacher starts by providing a model. Then, one by one, students wishing to speak raise their hands and the ball of string is thrown to them. They give their comments while holding the ball, and when they throw it to the next person, they hold on to the string. After the last student has spoken, the ball is thrown back to the teacher, who offers a final comment. Thus, after all participants have contributed, the string connects them.



A student's view of String Toss

All connected

The significance of this connection is immense. From a systems theory viewpoint, all individuals can and do influence one another greatly. Though we cannot predict when and to what degree this influence will occur, we can predict that it *will* occur. To demonstrate the fact that we are all connected and influencing one another in the classroom, I simply tug on the string and ask students if they can feel it, which they can. I then ask a few students to tug on the string. We can feel their tugs as well. I explain that, like this string, our words and actions have a huge influence on one another. This may seem rather obvious, or even trivial, but seeing the classroom from this point of view has profound consequences.

All unique

One consequence is that instead of seeing each student as learning for himself or herself, they appreciate the influence they have on one another – be it in action, words, attitude or understanding. I emphasise that the information offered by every participant during String Toss is unique to our class. No one else has this exact information or this experience, and we all share in this knowledge. In this way, students see that each member of the class is a unique and important contributor to everyone else's experience and knowledge. This is an important step towards building respect for one another and learning to value each other as teachers as well as fellow learners. Students have often commented that simply seeing this demonstration has completely changed the way they look at the classroom. One student, for example, wrote that rather than 'always hoping to be with good partners', she decided to try to be the best partner she could be. Another wrote, 'Today I learned a very important and wonderful thing. I found that we were very precious partners for each other. This is great! I was encouraged by you and everyone. I won't forget today's class. Thank you!'



Demonstrating the complex nature of language classrooms as a system doesn't have to be a complicated process. By seeing the string connecting all the participants in the learning experience, students can begin to make correlations with actual events in the classroom. As they learn from one another, influence motivation positively and negatively, offer encouragement and understanding, and recognise the large part they all play in the learning outcomes of the whole group, they realise that this simple demonstration has significant implications for their learning – not only in the classroom, but in the rest of their lives as well. *JP*



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