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Bingo for beginners

Angela Coco
Southern Cross University

Alex Cody
Queensland University of Technology

Gillian Lupton
University of Queensland

Andrew G. Peake
University of Queensland

Kirstyn Shaw
University of Queensland

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Angela Coco, Alex Cody, Gillian Lupton, Andrew G. Peake, Kirstyn Shaw, and Ian Woodward

Bingo for Beginners: A game strategy for teaching large classes

by

Angela Coco, Alex Cody, Gillian Lupton, Andrew Peake, Kirstyn Shaw, and Ian Woodward
Department of Anthropology and Sociology, the University of Queensland

ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates the use of a game strategy to deliver substantive sociological information to a large first year class. The strategy also enables teachers to elicit reactions to the process which then serve as teaching points about the theory and practice of social research. In this process ideas about theoretical concepts and operational definitions are tackled in a manner which students find meaningful and enjoyable (and therefore memorable). The approach would be suitable for modification to other large group teaching situations.

Introduction

As an everyday rule of thumb, universities value seriousness and scholarship over frivolity and fun; according to this principle a traditional 'lecture' acquires a naturally preferred status over a 'game'. However, just as systems of cultural value shift over time, so do attitudes toward teaching strategies. The blurring of social-cultural boundaries which accompanies such changes has been foregrounded by social scientists in notions of postmodernism, postindustrialism and post-Fordism. The shifting distinctions between work and play are a good example of the type of social transformations evident in the late twentieth century. In the post-Taylorist world managers (and university lecturers) know that people work best when they have a level of enjoyment associated with their work. When work has a fun element it is likely to be perceived more positively, and addressed more productively. This is the broad context in which games as a teaching tool can be situated.

The Bingo game entitled "The Body Show" was devised as an alternative to the lecturing mode for delivering information to a large first year class. The topic was 'Sociological approaches to the study of the body' in a subject entitled *Society and Gender*. The advantages of a Bingo game were that it enabled all students to participate equally and in this case they would be reflecting on issues about which everybody makes decisions on a daily basis. Further, participation in such a game would raise issues that provide teaching moments in which to elucidate sociological concepts and methods.

Literature Review

Most of the games used in sociology classes encourage students to reflect on important, often abstract, theoretical themes. Glasberg et al (1998) were concerned with the ideological nature

of children's games, Groves et al (1996) were interested in making apparent issues of structural inequality and Levinson (1980) explored the nature of interactions in families and marriages. The sting in the tail of such games is that, as well as being fun, they provoke reflection on more serious issues. Simulation games seem successful at allowing students to empathise with the social situations of others and to reflect on the nature of their own social position. Along similar lines, one of the key aims of the Bingo game was to encourage students to reflect on their own cultural choices. This means that during the progress of the session students were enabled to identify their location in terms of body practices in relation to that of peers. The Bingo game however had the further advantage that it provided a context in which teachers could model some aspects of the practice of social research by integrating methodological processes with substantive theoretical material. For example, students could observe some of the links between social scientific ideas and indicators that might be used to research them.

A core benefit of using games in sociology relates to linking enjoyable and memorable experiences to important sociological content. Games show up, through simulation, the tacit rules and knowledges which structure individual experience and generate social patterns. Particularly in larger classes, individuals can begin to map their own position within the group, and reflect on the constraints and opportunities which have determined their social position. This is an especially potent idea in Groves et al's (1996) 'Reversal of Fortune' game, and O'Brien and Foley's (1999) 'Dating Game'. Our Bingo game was also designed to demonstrate to students the structured nature of personal choices. As such, like these other games, it demonstrates neatly key ideas which sociologists have traditionally denoted through the terms structure and agency. These include such issues as the ways people's choices and personal tastes are to some extent determined by class, income, age, gender and social context.

Our literature review reveals that there are several aspects of the use of games in teaching which can be extended by using a Bingo game approach. Firstly, in sociology classes, games are most often used as one-off strategies, they tend not to be used repeatedly throughout courses nor last more than one teaching session (1-2 hours). An advantage of the Bingo game is that it could be used more than once in the same subject. Secondly, unlike other games such as those of Groves (1996) and O'Brien and Foley (1999) the content of the game is independent of the processes used to play it. A third issue regarding the use of games is that most tend to require a teacher-led debrief in order to encourage students to forge links with course material. The advantage of the Bingo game in this instance is that debriefing also functions as educational interaction. Finally, one of the advantages of games is that they can be used for large groups, though often this will involve the formation of a number of smaller groups. The networking game of inequality using pieces of string to denote social and economic resources, developed by Groves et al (1996) works best with groups over fifty, while the revision games played by Grauerholz (1991) and Childers (1996) could also be applied to larger groups. A significant advantage of our Bingo game is that it could be used for very large groups or smaller groups equally effectively.

There are dangers with using games however. In the first place games work best when students have confidence in the proven abilities of instructors to manage large groups. Clear instructions need to be given, and thorough preparation must form the basis for the generation of sparks of insight that come with successful teaching. Also, because of the randomness built into some games (e.g. Groves et al 1996, O'Brien and Foley 1999) instructors need to understand that key points don't always emerge for the players fully formed. The game

format means that sometimes individuals develop surprisingly 'wacky' interpretations of the pedagogical purpose of the game. Clearly, well planned debriefing sessions are the best way to clear up misunderstandings and to smooth out the bumps generated by random effects.

The ideas discussed above are related to the pedagogical use of the game strategy; however there also need to be clearly defined aims specific to the game itself. Further, outcomes of the process need to be consistent both with the idea of a game (that is, we enjoy the process and someone 'wins') and with education (that is, we learn something relevant). We will structure our discussion by first providing a brief overview of the theoretical issues that form the substantive knowledge base for the session. Then the specific aims of the game, the way it was designed, the materials needed, and organisational processes and materials will be described. This is followed by a discussion of the teaching points we developed as they related to the content of a first year sociology class.

Theoretical Background/Context

Synnott (1993) argues that bodies and body parts are densely inscribed with cultural symbolism, which indicates what should be considered; public or private, positive or negative, moral or amoral. These patterns of valuing intersect with political, economic and sexual issues. The attributes, states and functions of the body, and the senses are also symbolically marked. Notions about height and weight, eating and drinking, making love, non-verbal gestures and body language, even diseases like colds and AIDS are both physical and social phenomena.

As well as being physical and biological, the body is also primarily the 'self'. Our personal identities are shaped through it. We can see how the idea of self relates to embodiedness when we consider how our self concept changes when our body changes, for example, at puberty, pregnancy, old age (Synnott, 1993: 1-3). Clearly, as these examples illustrate, our sense of identity is also related to our physical sex attributes. So the sense of who we are is highly dependent on our bodies.

Social controversies rage about the ownership of the body. Issues revolve around what should be the boundaries between bodies and the limits of institutional control. Therapy, for example, intervenes both at the individual level of one's body image and at the interpersonal level when it addresses sexual relations. What is the body's meaning, its value, the criteria of life and death? The ongoing debates about abortion and euthanasia are evidence of the salience of the body in investigations of social relations (Synnott, 1993: 3). In spite of this, study of the body is a relatively recent phenomenon in sociology. It shares this new attention with other areas such as violence, sexuality, the emotions and war, all of which have bodily connotations (Scott and Morgan: 1993). As a team the Society and Gender staff found themselves questioning just what would be acceptable and what would not be offensive to people in a lecture theatre. We even anguished over showing certain images, wondering if it would be illegal to show them if some of the students were under eighteen years of age (the age of consent in Australia).

Constructing and Playing the Bingo game

Aims:

In the first instance, the Bingo game, which came to be known as "The Body Show", was seen as a way of delivering substantive information about the cultural sites of inscription on the body as well as about diverse body practices. From a more abstract point of view it was to be a reflexive tool for testing theoretical concepts and discussing sociological methodology. The game was also a process to collect information about students' body practices whereby they could position themselves vis--vis student peers thereby providing an experiential illustration of the theoretical material. To provide closure and add interest, we aimed to collate information gained from students' records on the Bingo sheets and to present a profile of the class on each variable. Finally we sought feedback on the use of this strategy as a teaching tool

Design of the Game

As readers may know the public kind of Bingo game involves a reader calling out random numbers while participants have record sheets in front of them with a selection of fifteen numbers. The person to win a game is the first person to have all of their numbers called. They call out 'Bingo' and win the game. To adjust Bingo for our purposes we needed to devise questions to which students would be able to answer 'yes' or 'no'. If 'yes' they would mark off a square on their record sheet, if 'no' they would not do anything. (Illustrations of record sheets are in the Appendix). We devised five games, each on a particular theme derived from issues in the sociology of the body.

We wanted students to reflect on the ways they use cultural artefacts and the meanings they attach to their bodies. Questions were devised in relation to; 1. Body image, 2. Food, 3. Adornment, 4. Technology, 5. Pain & Pleasure. Each of these areas constituted a separate game, that is Game 1 was 'Body Image' and so on.

To develop questions teachers agreed on labels for dichotomised concepts around which questions for the Body Show would be devised. These were as follows:

Body image: - Healthy - Unhealthy

Food: - Adventurous - Conventional

Adornments: - Expressive - Functional

Technology: - Hi-Tech - Luddite

Pain/Pleasure: - Unconventional-
Conventional

For each of these terms, a set of ideas was agreed upon. In terms of *body image*, 'healthy' meant people had a realistic image of their body size and shape. They saw themselves in a positive light and paid moderate attention to fitness and other people's perceptions of them. For example one question asked was, "When people compliment you on your appearance do you usually believe them?" In the *food* category 'adventurous' was defined as a tendency to try many kinds of foods and ways of eating. Conventional on the other hand was the

stereotypical (Australian) western tradition, eat take-aways frequently, meat and three vegetables for the main meal of the day. 'Expressive' *adornment* was understood as those extra decorative things people might use on their bodies which are more expressions of aesthetic taste and individual style than functional objects, for example jewelry as opposed to a watch. In the *technology* category a 'luddite' was understood as a person who avoids technology and resists technological trends. A 'hi-tech' person was one who knew, understood and engaged in as many technological communications and leisure activities as possible. *Pain and pleasure* are often associated with ethics and morality. An 'unconventional' attitude was described as one where the person seemed to subscribe to the notion that pain and pleasure can occur together as part of the same experience or to achieve some higher purpose. 'Conventional' meant people separated pain and pleasure and made decisions as if pain or pleasure was an end in itself.

Organisation of the Game

To ensure that the game was conducted in a lively manner without unnecessary periods where the students were left unoccupied, materials were designed to facilitate each stage of the game process, and for gathering and recording information. Prepared materials included:

- Students' record sheets (Figure 2, in Appendix). These were 4 X 4 matrices in which eight of the small squares were blocked out and eight left blank. Each matrix was labeled with the game name and number. On the reverse side we provided two feedback questions; 'Please tell us your reactions to the Body Game process', and, 'If there were any questions that did not apply to you could you indicate which ones? Why did they not apply?'
- Lists of questions for the 'Caller'. For each game sixteen questions were devised, eight for each label in the category. So, for example, for Game 2, Food, eight questions were devised which were considered to be indicative of an 'adventurous' approach to food and eight questions related to a 'conventional' approach.
- Tally sheets used to record the numbers of students in each category (Figure 1 below)
- Tabular sheet for recording and adding tallies produced by each person who tallied (Figure 3, in Appendix)
- Overhead transparency, used for constructing a histogram (Figure 4 below), with axes labeled: No. of Students X Category (i.e. Image, Food, Adornment, Technology and Pain/Pleasure)
- Coloured A4 sheets with large labels, (e.g. Image/identity - Healthy) a couple for each game and a different colour for each game.

Playing the Game

There were three aspects to be considered in playing the game; instructions to students, the caller's questioning strategy and the identification of winners. Each matrix was dedicated to one game (e.g. Game 1 - Image/Identity). As an introduction, the aims of the game and its relationship to sociology of the body were explained in a manner similar to the discussion provided above, though with more detail about theoretical and practical applications related to the sociology of the body. The mechanics of the game were then described. When a question was asked students were instructed to think 'yes' that applies to me, or 'no' that does not apply to me. They were encouraged not to think too long about the answer but to just

react with the first impression that came to mind. If 'yes' they should colour, check or otherwise mark a small blank square. When all eight blank squares in a Game were checked they were to call out the name of that game, for example 'Image'.

The caller used the sets of questions appropriate for each game. When calling the questions, certain principles needed to be kept in mind because the outcomes of the games also were going to be used to analyse students' responses. Firstly, in order that someone would win a game the caller needed to call mostly questions from one pole of the category, for example in the case of Image/identity, either from the Healthy or Unhealthy set of questions. Secondly, the number of filled in squares on each game was going to serve as a kind of Likert scale and the students divided as to whether they filled in 5 or more squares or less than 5 squares. So more than 5 squares on the Image/identity Game meant that those people had a relatively 'healthy' perception of their body image according to the arbitrary categories we had devised. This meant, of course, that the caller would have called questions mostly from the 'Healthy' set of questions. The pattern of questioning was varied in order to avoid a response bias setting in.

'Winners' were given an A4 coloured sheet of paper with the name of the game on it. The labels were; Image and Identity - Healthy: Food and the Body- Conventional: Adornment - Functional: Technology - Luddite: and Pain and Pleasure - Unconventional. In this way students knew in which category their winning of the game had placed them and had time to reflect on their reactions. These sheets were later used for identification of winners and discussion of the adequacy of categories.

Tallying Class Responses

With such a large number of students a speedy counting strategy needed to be devised and materials were organised so that a minimum period of time was taken to calculate proportions and record data. The class was divided into eight sections marked out by the placement of teachers and students who were enlisted to help count. Students were instructed to attend always to the same person for counting. The Caller asked students to raise their hands for each category, for example, "Hand up if you scored less than 5 on Game 1"; then those who scored five or more on Game 1. Counters recorded the tally on Tally Sheets which had been prepared beforehand and labeled for ease of reference. The Tally sheet reproduced below illustrates how the questions were called in each game and which of the dichotomised concepts functioned as the winning label. That is, what was to be counted as a win in each game was indicated by the captions associated with a score of 5 or more on Tally Sheet. These correspond to the labels on the Winners cards listed above.

Figure 1: Sample of the Tally Sheets used to record numbers of students scoring 5 or more or less than 5 in each category

The Body Show Game

Tally Sheet please write in large figures

Game 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	≥ 5 - Healthy	< 5 - Unhealthy
Game 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	< 5 - Adventurous	≥ 5 - Conventional
Game 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	< 5 - Expressive	≥ 5 - Functional
Game 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	< 5 - Hi-Tech	≥ 5 - Luddite
Game 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	≥ 5 - Unconventional (Mix pain and pleasure)	< 5 - Conventional

The game and input to this point took 45 minutes. Students were then given a 15 minute break during which teachers calculated totals for each category on the Tabular tally sheet (Appendix: Figure 3) and reproduced them in the form of a histogram on the transparency prepared with Table axes (Appendix: Figure 4). The histogram derived from students' responses in the Society and Gender class is reproduced in the section below where we discuss the 'results'.

Using the Outcomes as Teaching Tools

Whole class and small group formats were used to discuss issues and ideas arising from playing the game. A practical small group activity helped to consolidate knowledge and to develop understandings about sociological concepts and methods. Whole class observation and discussion of the histogram provided an opportunity for teaching practical skills in diagram reading and suggesting hypotheses.

Discussion of Issues

It became clear during class discussion that people often did not agree with the labeling of categories or the definitions of contrasting concepts. Some students indicated that for various reasons some questions did not apply to them. Students who 'won' were asked to comment on how well the category indicated by their winning of the game applied to them. One joint winner of the technology game was labeled 'luddite' but he demonstrated that he was absolutely obsessed with high technology; at the same time, others who won the body image ('healthy') and technology ('luddite') games said the category fitted their understanding of themselves quite well.

The process of constructing the questions and categories for the body image game was instructive in conveying to the students an understanding of the process which researchers use to construct questionnaires to be disseminated to large numbers of people. Not only do adequate definitions have to be agreed upon, but researchers also have to try to avoid constructing questions which are based upon cultural, gendered, economic or class biases. For example, one question we did not use was "Do you nearly always eat your main meal with a knife and fork?" This question reveals a western bias as there would be a number of people in the *Society and Gender* subject who may usually use chopsticks or a fork and spoon. Such a question would not give a good measure of 'conventionality', since for some people using chopsticks might be the conventional thing to do.

It was explained that in order to be sure the question measured what we wanted, we had to be certain that the person's reason for answering a certain way was a matter of taste, personal choice and/or sense of identity. We had to be very careful not to frame questions in which people's choices and therefore their responses to our questions would be unduly affected by level of income or social connections. These latter issues are important and in a full study people would be asked about them. But financial and status issues were not the focus of our Body Show lecture which aimed to gain an idea of people's body practices and their sense of self associated with that.

Practical Activity

One obvious category not used in the Bingo game was 'Clothing'. In order for students to gain some experience in question design and strengthen the points made above, they were asked to construct questions for the Clothing category according to the dichotomy 'Unconventional' - 'Conventional'. As suggestions were made they, of course attracted critiques thus elucidating for individuals the kinds of assumptions they work with which are often invisible to them. Following are the questions which were devised by the class:

Functional

1. Do you wear clothes to bed?
2. Do you wear work clothes to social occasions?
3. Do you wear clothes for sun protection?
4. Is comfort more important than fashion?

Expressive

1. Are you an impulse shopper?

2. Do you think colour co-ordination is important?
3. Do you wear designer jeans?
4. Do you dress to suit your moods?
5. Do you wear a hat at night?

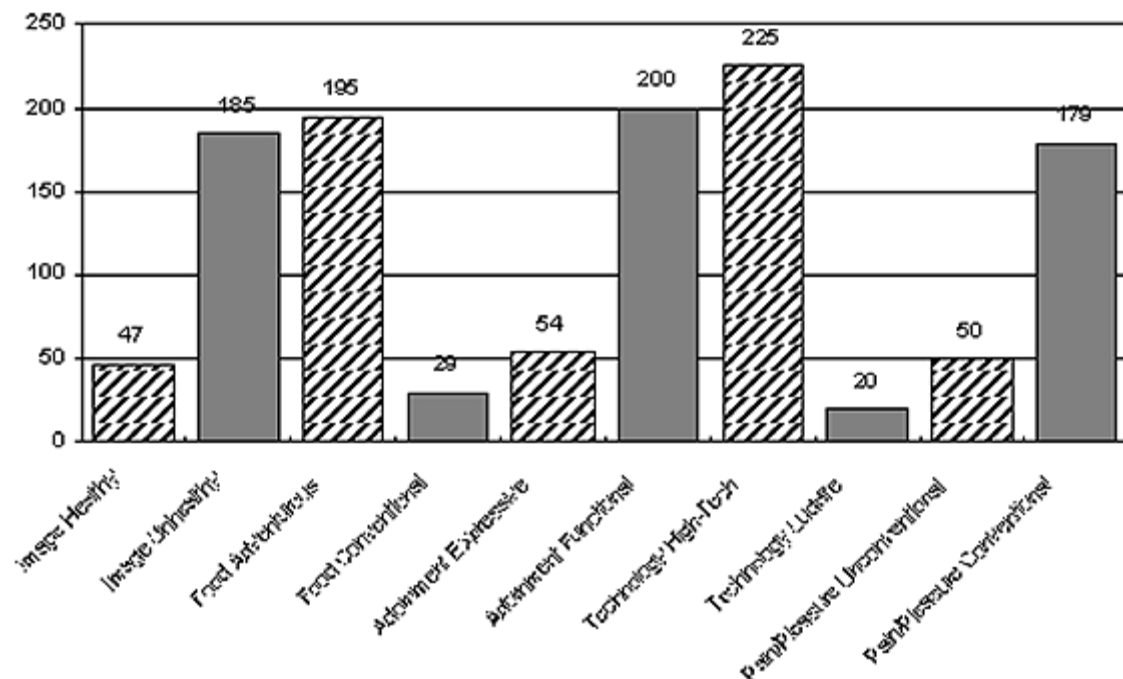
The practical exercise was useful in three ways. Firstly, suggestions from this exercise gave students an experiential understanding of the difficulty of generating appropriate questions for a diverse group of people and the issues that needed to be taken into account. It challenged them to provide clear definitions and/or rationales and to come to agreement with the larger group. Finally, it generated some questions that could be used for similar games in the future.

Discussion of the Histogram

By way of introduction to this section we explained to students how questions for the games were designed and grouped. Also we described how we delivered a set of questions in specific ways in order for the game to 'work'. Following is a description of the kinds of issues we raised with respect to the 'results'.

The histogram was read for what it might reveal about students' body practices and the reasons these results were achieved. For example, looking at the Adornment bar, we questioned, why would most students in this class appear to have a 'functional' attitude towards their use of adornment? Observations were made about the proportions of students in each category. For example, according to our definitions most first year students in the Society and Gender use a variety of technological devices, 225 students compared with 20 students who avoid them. One hundred and eighty-five students seem to have an unhealthy body image compared with forty-seven students who have a healthy body image.

Figure 4: Number of students in each category for the five Games (Dichotomised as scores of 5 and above or less than five)



We could make other observations from looking at these results. For example, if everyone registered their responses for each Game all of the numbers would be equal but if we add together the number of students for each category (Game) we get the following results; Body Image 232; Food, 224; Adornment, 254; Technology, 245; Pain/pleasure, 229. More students registered their responses for 'Adornment' than for any other category. Why? We could argue that it is easier for others to see if they are telling the truth, than for the other categories. Obviously we do not know the answer, but we could speculate many reasons. An important point for the students to understand is that when constructing questionnaires and analysing the information researchers have to take into account the fact that some people do not respond to all questions. Also, they might be selective about how much they reveal to a researcher, even if the process is anonymous. As one student pointed out, and as others indicated on the feedback responses, The Body game was not an entirely anonymous process, a factor which might have biased people's responses.

In summary, the discussion of the histogram served a number of pedagogical purposes. It:

- taught students what a histogram is
- taught students how to read a histogram
- provided immediate feedback on a process
- gave students a kind of profile of the first year sociology class in terms of body practices in which they could locate themselves.

Feedback and Conclusion

To what extent did we succeed in our stated aims? Time consuming as the development of innovative teaching strategies may be, it is probably easy compared to assessing their success or failure. In the case of 'Bingo for Beginners' we have only two short term measures of outcome: the 'feelings' of the two groups involved in the process, the students and the teachers.

Student Feedback

Fifty seven students who took part in the session returned the feedback sheets supplied. (We did not count the numbers present: based on responses recorded in the histogram we estimated approximately 260). As there was no pressure on students to reply, we considered this an 'acceptable' result. Not surprisingly, almost all comments were highly favourable, though three of them considered the session 'boring' or 'pointless': what the remainder of the class thought is impossible to guess.

Most responses may be grouped into four categories. Firstly, most students thought the exercise "fun" (e.g. 'Really enjoyable lecture' 'It was good - a fun way to add a bit of variety to lectures' ' A fun way to learn). Secondly, about half commented on its 'novelty' value (e.g. 'A nice change from the normal lectures'). Thirdly, and most importantly for us, nearly all thought the session 'informative' (e.g. 'A better insight into such topics' 'Relaxed and informative session' 'Interesting and provided good information). Finally, quite a few approved of the participatory nature of the exercise (e.g. 'good because it was an interactive

approach with students, so we were more likely to remember the concepts' 'It was good to have a session like it where everyone was involved'). Of course these are impressionistic responses: if the participants had fun and retain the information they felt they absorbed, the exercise would be successful.

Teacher Feedback

As participants in constructing and administering the game, the teaching team felt extremely positive: though it took a lot of work, it was enjoyable and the quality of material was enhanced because the process enabled everybody to contribute. Additionally, we recognised that on subsequent occasions, the game would need only minor changes.

We concluded that the approach clearly held the attention of the class and they appeared, through their involvement, to absorb knowledge on both a skills level (i.e. designing research material) and a substantive level (i.e. understanding how culture is inscribed on the physical body). However, we recognised that some measure of information received and retained needs to be developed; we also believed the game's effectiveness could be improved by a clearer presentation of the substantive implications. The approach appears translatable not only to other areas of sociology but to other disciplines as well; in addition it could be used in smaller groups or as a tutorial exercise in which students could be involved in devising a similar game for the class.

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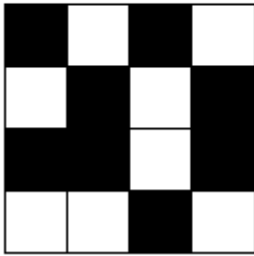
Appendices

Figure 2: Bingo Game sheets used by students to register a 'yes' answer

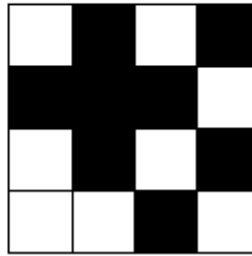
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The Body Show Game

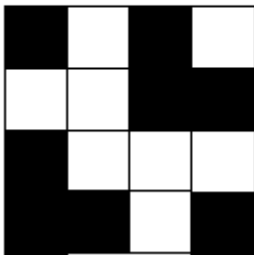
Game 1 - Image/Identity



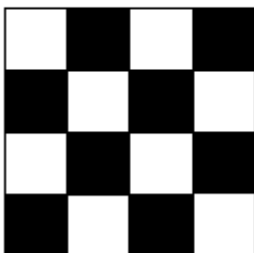
Game 2 - Food



Game 3 - Adornment



Game 4 - Technology



Game 5 - Pain/Pleasure

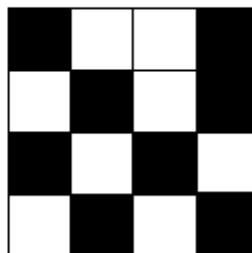


Figure 3: Tabular Sheet used for recording and adding tallies produced by each person who counted

