The "So What?" Game

OK, it's not much of a game, but calling writing activities "games," even at the college level, earns an immediate buy-in that "writing activity" never seems to accomplish. Twenty Questions is a pretty terrible game too, but no one protests that it's not really a game. So I call this a game, and students happily join in, even asking me if we can PLEASE play the "So What?" game in class again. If you don't want to trick your students with diction, you can call this the "So What?" writing activity.

How It Works

The "so what?" game helps students push each other towards finding significance in their thesis ideas. Students pair up and ask each other "so what" questions.

The only rules are that the questioner must only speak in questions (although the questions can be more specific than just "so what?") and that the answerer cannot say "I don't know." When the questioner feels that the answerer is reaching a potentially fruitful point, her final question should be, "Can you apply that point to your argument?" Here is a sample dialogue between two students about the recycling essay:

> Student 1: What's the significance of recycling not being a panacea? So what?
>
> Student 2: People talk about recycling like it's going to save the world, but it's just not that great.
>
> Student 1: So what?
>
> Student 2: So people always make it seem like a bigger deal than it really is.
>
> Student 1: So what?
>
> Student 2: They should stop trying to convince people that recycling is so great for the environment. People freak out if someone throws a plastic bottle in the trash, but recycling it is only marginally better for the environment than the landfill is.
>
> Student 1: Really?
>
> Student 2: Yes, recycling costs so much money, requires extra trucks on the streets, and produces a lot of byproducts.

Student 1: What should we do instead?

Student 2: Probably the best thing would be creating biodegradable containers for drinks and stuff instead of relying on so much plastic. Recycling is an okay thing to do if you have tons of plastic, but not using so much plastic in the first place would be much better.

Student 1: So what?

Student 2: The big public campaign to increase recycling misleads people into thinking that they're benefiting the environment when there are actually much better things they can do.

Student 1: Like what?

Student 2: Like I said, encouraging or forcing companies to use materials other than plastic and encouraging people to purchase products in other packaging. Plastic bag taxes are way more effective in reducing plastic waste than recycling programs are. So maybe a plastic bottle or plastic jug tax would work too?

Student 1: What about materials other than plastic?

Student 2: Well, aluminum recycling is more efficient than plastic recycling, and paper recycling is pretty much neutral.

Student 1: Can you apply that to your argument?

Student 2: Yeah, I guess I should just be focusing on plastics recycling instead of all kinds of recycling. I'll adjust that in my thesis. And I can talk about what programs are better than plastics recycling and why. Basically, I can show how cities are wasting money by focusing on plastic recycling but aren't really helping the environment. Those programs just make people think that plastic isn't bad for the environment when it really is.

Student 1 used some of Student 2's answers to generate new questions, but most of the work was performed by Student 2. The argument improves through its narrower focus (just plastics) and the "call to action" of alternatives. By honing the topic and exploring its implications, the essay is strengthened in two ways.

Switch Places And Continue The Conversation

Following a conversation like this one, the questioner and answerer switch roles and perform the same exercise on the other student's draft. The questioner need not even

have read the answerer's draft in order for the "so what" game to be effective. This activity can take as little as ten minutes of class time, five minutes per answerer. Allowing more time can help students more fully develop their thinking, but you can also assign the continuation of the conversations as an out-of-class activity.

The students can even text each other to reach their answers if they'd like, with the added benefit of having their thinking in writing, which can be used during the drafting process.

Less Work For You

As a teacher, I could read a draft of this essay and say, "You need to focus the thesis more and offer more concrete solutions to the problems you raise," but those may feel like insurmountable instructions without the organic growth that occurs in conversation. The student's coming to those conclusions on his own, through dialogue, makes them feel more integrated, more meaningfully self-generated, and truer to his beliefs.

Lessen Vulnerability

When students engage in this activity, they may feel initially vulnerable. But when they see that everyone benefits from this game, they see that fully developed arguments don't appear out of nowhere.

To that end, I use myself as the first example by ask them to question me about a topic of my current writing. When I begin with a partially-formed thought – as we all generally do in our writing – and students watch it grow before their eyes, through my answers to their questions, they see that this work is part of every writing process and not a flaw unique to them. That universalizing lessens their vulnerability, which enables them to explore their ideas with more freedom and less self-consciousness.

Moving Beyond The Game

As students address the questions that can help them improve their writing, they start to pose such questions to themselves, with the ultimate goal of not needing an external inquisitor. This activity thus provides skills with which they can improve future essays rather than feeling dependent on others' feedback.