A Poster for Any Occasion

by SAMUEL FISHMAN

Students display a poster describing "Blender Woman," a superhero they created.

When I began teaching in Paraguay, I ran into a series of classroom challenges familiar to English teachers around the world: a classroom overflowing with students, a large range of English abilities, and insufficient textbooks and traditional teaching resources. The activity described here is a one-size-fits-all activity that spurns textbooks and expensive materials in favor of creativity, dynamism, and fun. Students work together to design a creative project and present the final product to the class. I used this activity as a Friday afternoon wrap-up for university and high school students looking to unwind after a long week of classes. But the activity also attracts active participation in English clubs, is a great mixer for an English camp, and is ideal before or after an exam.

The activity usually lasts a little over an hour, depending on the number of students and groups participating, and the gist is as follows: Students form groups, work together to create a poster and presentation, and present before the class. Each group in the class designs a creative example within a shared category. For example, one day students were asked to make up their own holiday. On another day, they created their own travel itinerary. Once they created a new superhero. This streamlined format offers endless opportunities for experimentation and innovation.

STEP I: FORM GROUPS (5 MINUTES)

To begin the activity, students sort themselves into groups of three to five students. How these groups are formed is not crucial, but teachers should use some mechanism that divides groups of close friends and mixes language abilities. For example, one day students sorted themselves by favorite superhero (e.g., Group Spiderman, Group Iron Man, and Group Batman). Another day, students grouped themselves by favorite style of music (e.g., Group Rock, Group Pop, and Group Reggaeton). Even easier is to group students by their favorite color or birth month. The critical aspect of

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this step is that students stand up, *wake up*, and self-sort. Students must roam the classroom, using English to identify their fellow Januarians or Iron Man devotees.

Move quickly through this step to preserve time for the activity's more-important segments.

STEP II: STUDENTS MAKE THE RULES (10 MINUTES)

In this step, the teacher introduces the topic to students, but the responsibility for selecting the assignment's specific criteria is in the hands of the students. Yes—your students will create the activity themselves. Even teachers deserve a break after a long week; why not build time-consuming lesson preparation directly into the activity? For example, the week after the release of one particular superhero-based movie, I selected superheroes as a timely topic; each group was responsible for creating an original superhero to present to the class. But how? Without clear instructions, even the most gifted students will be lost.

At this stage, the teacher solicits superhero characteristics from the class. A starter question might be, "What do all classic superheroes have in common?" One student may say, "A costume," while another suggests, "An archenemy," and yet another offers, "A weakness." After a series of responses, which can be written on the board, the teacher—possibly with the help of students—selects the three or four criteria required for the activity. Together, the class has selected a handful of required criteria that all superheroes must share: costume, enemy, and weakness. Given these specific guidelines, students of nearly any English level will feel empowered to create their own superhero.

STEP III: GET TO WORK (30 MINUTES)

Armed with the project requirements, students get to work creating fun, visual posters. In their posters, students should incorporate text, illustrations, and whatever artistic materials are available (stickers, pictures from magazines, etc.). This is an opportunity for students with diverse skill sets to excel, particularly students who are visual learners or artistically talented. The posters should not be labor-intensive, but they are an effective tool for spurring teamwork and productivity among students.

It is crucial that students incorporate class content in their posters. Urge students to use new grammar concepts or recently studied vocabulary in their posters and in the presentations that will follow. Are you teaching a sports unit? No problem; students can create their own sports team. Are your students learning vocabulary related to technology? Have students create their own start-up company. If you're teaching the present progressive, ask students to use that tense in their presentations. Instructors can choose the theme based on its relevance to class content.

Poster-creation time is also presentation "prep time." During the presentations, every student must speak. In prep time, you should direct students to jot down their presentation talking points. An easy division of labor is for each group member to summarize one of the required criteria or characteristics. That is, Member #1 describes the costume, Member #2 explains the superpower, and so on. During this stage, the teacher should monitor progress, reassure doubts, and check that students are preparing for their presentations.

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STEP IV: PRESENTATIONS (15–20 MINUTES)

In the activity's concluding stage, each group presents its poster to the class. (In larger classes, have three or four groups gather together to present to one another.) This is not meant to be a stressful presentation, but it is a useful way to practice public speaking. Following each presentation, there should be a brief question-and-answer session with the class. To keep larger classes engaged, I provide my students with a reusable rubric to evaluate their peers' creations using generic criteria (creativity, artistry, use of new vocabulary and class content). If time allows, after all groups have presented, the class can vote on "best poster," "most creative idea," "best presentation," and "best use of class vocabulary."

STEP V: PHOTOS

This is a visual activity, and students should feel proud of their completed projects. Encourage them to take photos of the posters or make short videos to show off on social media with English hashtags. In addition, the most colorful and visual posters make for excellent classroom decorations.

This activity is adaptable and reusable for nearly any topic. In addition to superheroes, I have asked students to design and pitch their own product, their own social-awareness campaign, and their own monster. Almost anything goes. However, this activity is also an opportunity to review or incorporate class content, either directly or indirectly. Before exams, each group could be assigned an exam topic to illustrate and present to the class. These posters should be saved and used as teaching tools in the future.

Students enjoy this activity, and it requires almost no prior planning. The only necessary materials are paper and writing utensils, but poster paper and markers or colored pencils are ideal. The activity empowers students to use creativity, critical thinking, public speaking, and teamwork. They help set the rules of the assignment, they design a creative project, and they present it to their peers. Some of the successful topics I have used include the following:

- create your own business

- create your own music festival

- describe your ideal weekend

- describe your ideal romantic partner

Not every topic is appropriate for every context, but in general, the zanier the topic, the better—and the more it will engage students to activate their creativity superpowers. I encourage you and your students to have fun and get "postering"!

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