

BROWN: Math games can be a way to learn crucial life lessons

May 10, 2013 - 5:00pm JASON BROWN

This has been a busy time for me. A couple of weeks ago, I gave a keynote address at the Emergent Learning 2013 conference in Halifax.

On the same stage at the World Trade and Convention Centre the night before was the renowned Deepak Chopra, and it was an honour to speak after him the next day. Or perhaps he opened for me. I will have to meditate on that.

And just last week, I was invited to give another featured lecture in Toronto at the Ontario Association for Mathematics Education conference. Another big gathering — there were more than 1,300 participants. At both events, I gave a mathematics and music presentation, complete with my laptop, an electric guitar slung around me and a band of musicians. You just can't beat the draw of live math and music.

What impressed me was the sheer number of engaged adults — lifelong learners. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, so many people leave intellectual challenges behind them, as if such endeavours are the antithesis of fun. When we were young, mastery, whether it was attempting to walk, learning a sport or game strategizing, was just the end of a wonderful journey.

Right now, I have three graduate students and several colleagues with whom I am working on a variety of different research projects. These projects vary from applied problems on networks and music to abstract ones in algebra. Each has new avenues to explore, and more for me to grasp.

At the Ontario conference, I was given a book by Carol Dweck called *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success*. It describes how the world is divided into two — those who have a fixed mindset and are afraid to get out of their comfort zone and those who have a growth mindset and are eager to take on new challenges.

I was very fortunate to have a mother (one of the smartest people I have known, having skipped three grades in public school) whose mantra was that when an opportunity arises where you are unsure whether you can handle it, say “yes,” and then worry about how to do it. Those words have always pushed me way beyond what I thought I could do.

What I want to pose to you is that no matter what the state of your home or professional life, life is always better the more you learn. And get away from the mindset that sees failure as something to avoid. Being right isn't all that it is cracked up to be. (Anyone who is married will realize the truth in that statement.)

So I will leave you with a little math problem you can play with your children or around the water cooler. The game is called Nim, and you play this two-person game with a stack of coins. On a player's turn, they remove one to five coins from the stack, and the person who removes the last coin wins. Play it. It is not so easy to guarantee a win.

But if you think about things differently, it is simple, and what you need to do is turn your mind around and think about the end of the game. Convince yourself that if you leave your opponent with exactly six coins, you will win. Then the time before, you can ensure you win if you leave the other person with 12 coins. And so on — the winning strategy is to always leave your opponent with a multiple of six coins. Try it.

Of course, it is just a game, but perhaps you have learned that sometimes it is best to strategize from where you want to end up, not where you start. Another life lesson to learn.

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