TRIED AND Tweaked:

Activities to re-energize your peer learning sessions

The Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) Program
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

Edited by Justin Paz and Mary Lilly
July 15, 2014
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Foreword

For readers familiar with our first volume, “Two (or more) Heads are Better than One: Adventures in leading group learning – a facilitator storybook”, you already know that the Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) program at the University of Minnesota is committed to sharing the classroom experiences of our undergraduate facilitators. The stories in that book were meant to stimulate discussion of interpersonal practices in handling situations and relationships relevant to a broad spectrum of peer learning programs.

In this second volume, “Tried and Tweaked: Activities to re-energize peer-learning sessions”, our undergraduates have assembled a collection of activities they designed and conducted in their weekly sessions. Many of the activities developed from an emphasis on two particular principles (there are eight) that guide our peer-learning sessions: modeling productive learning behaviors, and engaging students with each other.

Justin’s introduction provides a modest description of the thoughtful discussions that take place in the weekly team meetings, where facilitators share challenges they are having in planning and conducting their sessions. I too attend these meetings – organized by sciences, math, and humanities – and can vouch that all the leaders and facilitators are guided by the same goal: to conduct engaging and productive sessions that increase confidence, persistence, and deeper understanding of the content. The spirit in which session activities are designed is one of creating an informal, social, and welcoming environment. Facilitators encourage each other to take risks and offer support and advice to help their teammates to be successful.

Our PAL facilitators are further motivated to develop a committed following of attendees throughout the semester and this collection is a testimony to the enthusiasm and courage so many leaders bring to their PAL sessions. Even with careful planning, they often are unsure how things will go, especially when trying something new. Bolstered by good training, a can-do attitude, and the support of their team, the PAL facilitators at Minnesota are a curious and enterprising group; they try, they tell, and they tweak. While no narrative can ever really replace the actual experience of that “first time” playing a game of “Chemistry Bingo” (7.1) for a review session, or guiding students to create an “Ultimate Exam Page” (9.5), this collection offers inspiration and tips to session leaders who are looking to spice things up. Use them as you see fit; how you do so is of interest to us and we welcome your comments. Thank you for reading and be in touch.

Mary Lilly
Peer-Assisted Learning Program Director
University of Minnesota
Introduction

During my undergraduate studies at the University of Minnesota, I benefitted from several invaluable experiences, but none were more rewarding than the three years I spent facilitating peer-assisted learning (PAL) sessions for students taking chemistry. For two of those years, I also served as the Sciences Team Leader of my six PAL peers. My responsibility was to help my teammates build on their strengths, improve their skills, and become more confident. I did this by asking them to take time during our weekly team meetings to reflect on their classroom experiences. My goal was to inspire the facilitators to use the challenges they faced in the classroom as opportunities to learn and master their craft.

The PAL program at our university provides training and resources to help facilitators design fun and productive activities, but often uncontrollable variables in our sessions can (and do) complicate and derail the best of plans. I discovered that if our team didn’t consistently reflect on our session plans, facilitators wouldn’t notice if students had improved their study skills and their understanding of the concepts. As a result, facilitators would miss opportunities to adjust their activities to suit their specific classroom environment. We talked at length about these issues at our meetings, critiquing and tweaking activities based on our goals for the session. A key component was a discussion of the successes and struggles of the previous week’s PAL sessions – what worked and what didn’t. As team leader, I worked hard to create a level of trust so that facilitators would be honest in their recounts; we all liked sharing our notable successes, but it was the “not so glamorous” stories that provided the most fruitful discussions. Through “full disclosure” on everyone’s part, problems were discussed openly, good ideas flourished, and we all saw real improvement in our leadership and in the productivity of our PAL sessions. Reflecting on our own performance, and learning to be intentional in our plans for every session, became so important to us that we also held discussions on Moodle so our ideas and remedies would be available to future facilitators.

Last spring, University of Minnesota’s PAL Program Coordinator Mary Lilly proposed an idea to all the team leaders: creating a book of activities that facilitators could reference while planning their sessions, knowing that the activity had actually been tried and evaluated. We found the Moodle forum to be a convenient way to archive each facilitator’s experience of conducting a noteworthy activity – what they did, how it turned out, and recommended adjustments if they were to use it again. What has emerged is an authentic collection of activities that have been tailored to specific courses to achieve specific goals for the session.
Planning sessions with *specific goals* is a big part of the PAL training that all facilitators participate in each semester – every PAL session needs to have *learning objectives* that describe what the students will be able to do at the end of (and hopefully because of) the session. The template we use (along with an example) can be found in the Appendix. In our team meetings, we discussed being intentional with the students about the goal, and not simply showing up with a random list of homework problems for the students to trudge through. When deciding that goal, facilitators were expected to consider the type of material being learned, the degree to which the students understood the concepts, and the unique group dynamics of their sessions. As we considered how to organize the stories in this book, we chose the same criteria. The title of each section indicates a general goal that guided the facilitators when they designed their activities; these include: *Applying Study Skills, Grasping Concepts*, and *Reviewing for Exams*, to name a few.

It should come as no surprise that we discovered that group dynamics vary dramatically from one group to the next; an activity might work great for one, but fail miserably in another. For example, in the story, *Student-Led Discussion* (3.6), Jeanna used PowerPoint to introduce questions and promote discussion. Since the majority of her students were very outgoing and enthusiastic about the subject, this turned out to work very well. On the other hand, in the story *PowerPoint – Is it worth it?* (5.3), Samara struggled to get good participation out of her students because too many of them were distracted. She describes a large group of 20 plus students, many of whom were either uncomfortable with starting discussion, or needed a more stimulating and less passive activity. Just because a group tends to be very quiet does not mean that an activity won’t work, it just needs to be delivered in a format that fits the dynamics of the group. We found it was usually easier to adjust our activity than to change the students. Other typical dynamics facilitators encountered were sessions of either too many introverts or too many extroverts; sessions where students were too good of friends and easily got off topic; overwhelmingly anxious students; and groups that either really enjoyed or intensely disliked competition.

Since the story about each activity in this collection arises out of a unique setting, some activities may not fit your specific environment. Our hope is that you will combine your current knowledge as a peer facilitator with the many choices of activities we present in this volume to ultimately structure an engaging and productive session plan that will bolster your confidence, even before entering the classroom! This collection of “tried and tweaked” activities will re-energize not only the session atmosphere, but you as the facilitator as well. We look forward to inspiring new and veteran facilitators alike so they can develop and archive their own collection to pass on.

*Justin Paz*

*University of Minnesota*

*B.S. Biochemistry, 2013*
Acknowledgments

It wasn’t too long after “Two (or More) Heads” rolled off the press when I began to think about sharing the creative talents that our PAL facilitators employ when planning their weekly sessions. Already familiar and well-practiced in the art of reflecting and storytelling, these students come to our team meetings to report the inventive and engaging activities they have planned, along with honest recollections of the success (or lack of) they have experienced in executing them. Once again I was fraught by the thought that when those facilitators graduate their creativity and experience go out the door with them; would each new group have to reinvent the wheel?

It became clear that a second volume of first-hand narratives was the route to go in an attempt to capture the wisdom and brilliance of such talented students. I was fortunate to have a motivated, organized, and extremely diligent facilitator – Justin Paz – to lead the effort. Justin is a three year veteran of the PAL program, with steadfast enthusiasm for the many benefits of peer-assisted learning sessions, for both students and facilitators. A creative planner and a willing experimenter, he gathered the narratives – by way of our program’s Moodle site – edited them, and developed a user-friendly format for the collection. I am so grateful that he has given so generously of his time these past 13 months, even while fully immersed in the rigors of the first year of dental school.

As with the previous volume, I could not have produced the product you hold. In addition to Justin’s dedication, many facilitators contributed their stories with a similar dedication to sharing experiences so that others can benefit from both their successes as well as the not-so. Thank you to all who so generously offered such authentic narratives for this project: Aaron, Addison, Alina, Alyssa, Amanda, Amber, Andrew, Beth, Cameron, Deanna, Elaina, Hannah, Jake, Jeanna, Jennifer, Jered, Jessica, Justin, Kaiwen, Katie, Kelley, Lauren, Lia, Matt, Mercedes, Mindy, Samantha, Samara, Sara, Summer, Tali, Tara, Tim, and Trent.

Thanks to the continued trust in our vision by Lynell Williams who, as Director of the SMART Learning Commons, oversees various academic support programs at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

My continued appreciation and gratitude goes to Dr. David Arendale for providing the peer-learning community with his scholarship on learning assistance and, in particular, the guiding principles for PAL group facilitators; his support and enthusiasm for this project have been unwavering.

Mary Lilly
PAL Program Director
University of Minnesota
SECTION 1: Applying Study Skills

The purpose of peer-assisted learning goes far beyond simply facilitating students’ learning of the material. PAL is an opportunity for students to discover and practice a variety of study methods specifically suited to the course content as well as to learn how to identify their weaknesses and overcome them while preparing for the next exam. The activities in this section are designed to help students practice using various study techniques to help them decide what works best for them.

College can be very demanding and it requires adjustments in students’ study methods, often course by course. Activities in this chapter open the door to methods the student may not be aware of. By modeling how these alternatives work directly with the course content, the facilitator shows students how to apply them. From creating Venn Diagrams, to organizing notes, or doing post-exam reflections, these activities are great for both the beginning of the semester and when students are looking for different ways of studying because they struggle to understand and retain the material for exams and writing papers.

~Justin

Improving students’ study skills appears to involve raising their awareness of what they are doing, increasing their repertoire so that they can choose to do different things when it seems appropriate and tuning them in to task demands so that they can recognise what is required.

– Graham Gibbs, Raising awareness of best-practice pedagogy
1.1 Developing a Thesis

Supplies/Prep: Post-it® notes with assigned roles for each group (Coordinator, Recorder, Critic, and Speaker); knowledge of what makes a good thesis statement.

Students in the English literature course I facilitate for sometimes struggle with developing a good thesis for their writing assignments. In order to help them with this, I facilitated an activity that would help them create good discussion questions, which could then be used to set up a thesis. At the beginning of the session, we discussed as a group what made a good thesis.

Then, I put the students into groups of four to create discussion questions based on a recently assigned text. After each group came up with at least two discussion questions, I had students trade their questions with another group. The students were given time to think of an answer and then briefly present it to the class. Following the presentations, students had to describe a thesis topic they could create based on any of the discussion questions presented today. To confirm students' comprehension of the day's discussion, I had the students turn in their thesis statements at the end; I was pleasantly surprised with their work.

~Amanda
1.2 Note-taking and Active Reading

**Supplies/Prep:** Copies of two recently assigned readings. Prepare several questions for each reading - to be shown on the screen, projector or given as handouts.

I used an activity to practice note-taking skills and active reading skills. In preparation, I selected two readings (each short enough to read in 15 minutes) that the students had been recently assigned in lecture; I then generated questions from the readings.

I asked students to individually read the first article and take notes in a separate notebook. I suggested they record the important themes, events, and issues, as well as identify confusing vocabulary. After they finished reading the text (15 minutes), I removed the article so they only had their notes. I showed students the questions and asked them to first answer the questions and then reflect on the quality of their note-taking skills. They had a difficult time answering the questions the first time around.

At this point I encouraged them to use each other as a resource and see how their peers took notes, observing different note-taking methods. As a large group, we discussed how to identify what is important in the article. I asked them to share their methods of taking notes and describe what aspects were most and least helpful. I repeated this entire process with the second reading. The students improved their ability to identify important themes and were better able to predict the questions. They also adjusted the way they took their notes, using what they had learned from their peers and their own note-taking the first time around. It was exciting to see the progress they made simply by tweaking some of the skills they already possessed.

I find that the value of this activity is that it gives students concentrated time to recognize their weaknesses and begin to make improvements. With the second set of questions they showed a lot more confidence.

~ Mercedes

---

**Subject Area:**
- Humanities
- Social Sciences

**Grouping:**
- Small groups
- Large discussion

**Notes:**
This activity works well early in the semester so students can assess and improve their note-taking skills, especially in a class based heavily on readings.

Use questions already prepared in the textbook that go along with the readings when writing the questions for the session. It saves time and highlights what the text identifies as important.
1.3 Organizing Textbook Material

Supplies/Prep: Create a concept map or an outline that is partially filled in, one copy per student, and a whiteboard for presentation. Students should bring notes and a textbook.

In STATS 1001, an important study skill is active reading of the textbook. Since the homework questions and most of the material on the exams come from the textbook, having a good understanding of the text is essential. To help the students better organize the information in the textbook, I use two different outlining activities.

Last week, I used a concept map to have them organize one of the central concepts of the chapter. I created a partially filled in map, with the central theme in the middle. The students worked in pairs to fill in the missing parts of the map. I drew a copy of the map on the board, and asked each student to come to the board and fill in part of it, and then explain that part to the class. This week, I had the students fill in a partial outline of the textbook chapter to model one way to take notes out of the book. I filled in some of the outline, and had the students fill in the rest. Both of these activities highlighted effective ways of taking notes, and helped students pull out relevant information from the text.

~ Cameron
1.4 Focusing on Concepts with Note Cards

**Supplies/Prep:** Blank notecards (4-6 per group). Select specific concepts to have students focus on. They will need their textbook.

In the Sociology PAL session I facilitate, students sometimes struggle recognizing the important themes and concepts of a chapter. When that happens, I like to do an outlining activity that gives them practice in identifying the main ideas. The nice thing about this activity is that it doesn’t take a lot of preparation other than knowing which concepts you want the students to identify.

I give each group of students 4-6 blank notecards and ask them to come up with one key concept per notecard from the chapter. Once all the groups have finished, they write their concepts on the board. As a class, we then have a discussion about the concepts, noting similarities and differences between them. Point out repeating themes as they are most likely key concepts. My role is to help students organize smaller ideas under the appropriate main concepts.

This activity can also be used to review before a quiz or an exam. I have done this activity many times as a PAL facilitator and it always goes really well. First year students sometimes have trouble with the sheer amount of reading they have for their classes, but an activity like this helps them to more easily recognize what they are supposed to be learning from a really long chapter as they read it.

~Amber

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<thead>
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<th>Subject Area:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
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<table>
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<th>Grouping:</th>
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<td>Small groups</td>
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<tr>
<th>Notes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remind students that a word and definition does not count as an important concept. Do this activity early in the semester so students get practice identifying main ideas while reading each chapter in their text. You could take picture(s) of the board work and send them to the students after the session.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5 Note-taking in Lecture

Supplies/Prep: Construct a lecture outline with parts left blank (students will fill in), one copy per student. Students will need their own lecture notes or handouts.

Note-taking is one of the first study skills that I model early in the semester. Freshmen often don’t take detailed lecture notes because their high school courses never really required it. This activity shows new strategies for note-taking that they may not have seen before and helps them decide if they need to change their note-taking technique. I take notes in a traditional outline form. For this activity I type up my lecture notes in the outline form and selectively delete key words and important definitions. I then hand out the outline and ask students to use their own lecture notes to complete it. At first I have them work individually; after about ten minutes I have them form groups of three to share knowledge and notes to complete any missing parts. The objective is to see how their classmates take notes and hopefully see a new strategy to use in the future. After the groups have filled out the outline, we go over it as a class; usually at least one group has the outline complete.

One time I ran into a slight hiccup that actually worked in my favor. During the first lecture the professor said it wasn’t necessary to take notes because the lectures were available online with accompanying slides every week. Even so, I still thought note-taking was an important skill to model. When I introduced the activity in PAL a few days later, the students immediately told me, "But the Professor said that it wasn’t necessary if we did not want to." I told them that as a student that had taken the course, my lecture notes helped me immensely even though the lectures were posted every week. I also reminded them that they could of course use the lecture slides online, in addition to any notes they had taken, to fill out the outline.

But even with the slides, most students found that they could not fill out the whole outline on their own and some even had trouble completing it in their groups. The activity demonstrated that lecture slides can be vague when trying to recall the whole lecture for studying purposes and that it really helps to take your own notes!

~ Tali
1.6 Note-taking in Lecture – 2.0

Supplies/Prep: Generate an outline for students to use during PAL session covering one or multiple lectures.

Over the course of the semester, I found that many students were not paying as much attention to lecture as they should and some were not taking notes at all. To counteract these behaviors, I created a lecture outline. I laid out specific guidelines that they needed to follow and I made the outline fairly vague.

Earlier in the semester we had done a lecture outlining activity that was much more structured and had a lot of “fill in the blank” sections. This time I left the outline much more open so that it required more critical thinking and interpretation. As a result, I noticed more discussion in the small groups – while students completed the outline – and in the large group, when we went over it. In many parts of the outline I asked for examples from the text that reinforced what the professor was saying. Students became even more familiar with the text and they selected relevant quotes, as they would do in their final essay. As a result of doing this in small groups first, we had many more examples to discuss in the large group.

~ Tali
6.5 Station to Station

**Supplies/Prep:** Decide on the number of concepts to review (each station is a specific concept). For each station prepare 2-4 problems, each on a separate worksheet with the solutions on the backside.

During my first semester as a chemistry facilitator, I used a review activity that went really well. I set up six different stations around the room; each station had several problems related to a particular concept, which was labeled above the problems. Working independently or in pairs, students chose which concepts to practice, went to that station, and did the problems (can be either taped to the wall or to the top of the table). I wrote the solutions on the back side of the problem so they could check their answers.

Many students said this was one of their favorite activities because it allowed them to work on only the concepts they needed the most help with. They also liked it because they could work at their own pace and didn’t have to wait for others to finish. I found that when the students were able to work at their own pace and choose their own problems, they asked great questions and used each other as a resource. For me, success in a PAL session is witnessing the “ah-ha!” moments, when students finally understand a concept that previously had been difficult for them.

~Jessica
SECTION 10: Why Won’t You Tell Us!

Every facilitator in our PAL program has experienced the student(s) who just wants to know the answer or if they are doing the problem right. While facilitators want to be helpful, a hallmark of PAL, and most academic support, is that when a student asks for an answer, the facilitator responds with something other than a simple “correct or incorrect.” Section 10 is different than the previous sections in that these aren’t really activities, but rather real accounts of how facilitators handled this situation. They were able to help students understand why their answer was correct or incorrect by using alternative strategies that promoted critical thinking and boosted students’ confidence in their problem-solving skills.

~Justin

A major issue for students who attend PAL sessions is understanding the role of the PAL facilitator. The natural belief is that participants ask questions and PAL facilitators provide answers. Changing this dynamic is one of the most challenging and important actions that the PAL Facilitator will take.

– David Arendale
10.1 Ask Your Peers First

To do this successfully you need a sense of who in the session seems to grasp the material, and allow that student to support other students.

When students ask me if their work is correct or what the correct answer is, I first delegate the question to other students and to the book for help. As they begrudgingly take out their lecture notes or book, I remind them of what I told them the first day of the PAL sessions – my role is not to teach but to guide them towards the correct answer, and towards feeling confident in their answers. At this point, discussion within the group ensues as they work out what they think might be the correct answer. When I notice a student grasping the concept more quickly than others, I ask him or her to direct the other students to the page number in the book or to paraphrase the book’s explanation. This has proven to be very effective because the discussion is engaging and challenges them to learn how to use their book to teach themselves, rather than someone providing the answer:

~ Lia

Notes:
Set the class guidelines and expectations at the beginning of the semester. Let them know that you are not simply going to hand out answers; you will push them to understand it for themselves.
10.2 Confidence is the Issue

The key is to not give in when pressured by students.

One of my chemistry PAL students asked me "Why are we even here?" because I would not confirm if one of her answers was right or wrong. The first question I usually ask them is, "Why aren't you confident in the answer you worked out?" They then stammer a bit and so I ask them what part they are unsure about. Often they say either they just want to know if they are doing it right or they show me a specific step they are unsure of. I usually try to refer them to another group that understands this problem or I ask them leading questions to see if they can get to the solution on their own. If they can show me how they got to this point in the solution, I say, "I would be pretty confident in what you have."

~ Jake

Notes:
Try not to get too frustrated with students who are persistent or rude, as seen in this example. If they see you getting flustered, that’s a sign to them that the power has shifted into their hands.

Be cool and calm, and remember that the focus is on learning, which is why you’re not flat out providing any answers.
APPENDIX

PAL Session Plan – sample (developed by facilitators in U of MN PAL program)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>Elaina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>College Algebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
<td>Week 8</td>
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What were the main concepts this week?
1. Direct and Inverse Variation
2. Graphing polynomials
3. Review for exam

Which concepts were the most difficult?
1. Circles! (Completing the square to find the characteristics, mainly)
2. Difference quotients (from last week but it was on the homework)
3. Graphing functions, i.e. rational functions utilizing symmetry and domain

What prior knowledge is needed to understand/work with these concepts?
Definition of a function, how to find out if interval has positive or negative values, definition of lines and their equations, distance formula/equations, symmetry tests, circle equation, how to complete the square, how to find max/min of function, composite functions, how to find domain/range, several standard graphs.

Learning Objectives: What will students be able to do at the end of today’s session?
1. Be able to write/graph circle based on several given characteristics (complete the square)
2. Know how to transform graphs and use symmetry/domain to graph unknown equations
3. Figure out an unknown value given several others and their relations

“Warm-up” activity to begin the session?
Brainstorm how to study

Closing activity to end the session?
Cheat sheet for the upcoming midterm
Left-over questions

Grouping strategy this week:
They will choose their own groups today

Timing – minutes for each Use this if time management is your focus:
OR: jot down additional notes/special considerations for the week

| Warm-up: | 5 |
| Activity: | 25 |
| Presenting/sharing: | 15 |
| Closing: | 5 |
Activity Reflection – sample (developed by facilitators in U of MN PAL program)

Name of Activity  Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?  Section 7.13

Date Activity Used  4/20/14  Material Covered  Gas Laws

Grouping strategy used (if applicable) I used playing cards, numbers 2-6. Students picked a card as they walked in. Those with the same numbers became a group.

Modifications made to book activity I removed the $300, $4000, and $64000 questions to save some time because I didn’t know if we would get through all the questions and have time for review.

What worked about this activity? Because of the competitive nature of the game, the students were focused on the problems the entire time. Also, there was enough time after the game to go over confusing problems. I had students who got correct answers to put their work on the board and lively discussion followed. that followed each question.

What could be improved for next time? I need to do a better job of clarifying the game rules. Next time I would print out the rules and give a copy to each group to read before we start. The explanations took away time and some of the excitement. It was hard to monitor the success of individual groups because they mainly worked on their own (aside from the lifelines). I could have done a better job of walking around and asking groups to explain their thinking to me so I could assess their comprehension.

Did activity achieve its intended goal? Since the exam was 3 days away and most of the students knew the material, it was a fun and successful way to review for the midterm. The group was lively and on task for the entire period. They enjoyed the competition and the relaxed atmosphere reduced some of that pre-exam stress.

Activity Rating: ★★★★☆

The above guide can be used to reflect on your own peer learning activity, whether it is based on one from this collection or one of your own. Either way, reflection is an important part of facilitation. Consider both the positive and negative aspects of the session to determine if the students achieved the goals you had in mind. Push yourself to think critically about what worked and what didn’t. Just because the students completed the activity doesn’t mean they truly saw improvement in their learning. Analyze what they said as well as the peer-to-peer interaction: was there too much down time or not enough time? What were the group dynamics? How about the attitudes of individual students? Did some groups fall behind? This reflection can be an excellent resource for shaping your future sessions; plus it will be valuable to review if you or other facilitators want to use the activity another time. Best of luck!

~Justin

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