



## Use it, or ...

This being the final Sunday of the year, it should perhaps be a story to kind of 'wrap up' the year, but there is a bit of a complication - it is also the 25th, and thus might deserve a bit of special treatment on *that* account. Hmm ... perhaps I can cover both requirements ...

I'm writing this on Saturday evening, after a few hours of recovery from the day's activities. And a few hours isn't really enough, because it has been a very long day indeed. I had to get up very early to finish up the house-cleaning that I wasn't able to get done the evening before, and I then had to turn the workroom upside down - put the workbenches into temporary storage outside, put all the tools and pigments into safe-keeping in the large cupboard, and thoroughly sweep, vacuum, and wipe the floor. I made some decorations from coloured paper and hung them across the ceiling, prepared some 'goza' mats on the floor, arranged a rough 'n ready series of benches around the walls, and got it all done just in the nick of time for the first guests to arrive early in the afternoon.

Yes, Saturday was the first ever Mokuhankan staff year-end party! The three ladies brought over their husbands and kids - 12 people in all - and we all jammed into the workroom for an afternoon of food, games, and whatever!

When the ladies and I were doing the planning for this a week or so ago, the delegation of jobs was pretty straight-forward; they were to take care of the food, and I was to be the 'games manager'. Six kids in a little room for a couple of hours? No problem; this I can handle. I entertained my own kids and their friends on endless occasions, not to mention running 'Kids' English' classes for many years. I have a very deep 'repertoire' of activities to call on, and the preparation was simple - just jot down some ideas on a piece of paper to jog my memory about how to get started. Once the general mood became established, I would play it by ear. The afternoon would zip by.

Hah.

'Play it by ear' works fine as long as one's ear is indeed attuned to what is going on. But given that my own kids left home more than fifteen years ago, I guess it has been at least that long since I have had 'charge' of such a group as this, and I could remember almost nothing of what used to be completely second nature.

I got off on completely the wrong foot; the kind of activity that will work well with a group of kids all the same age may fail completely when tried on a group like the one we had here - with kids aged 11, 11, 8, 5, 3, and 1. That's one tough crowd! An eleven year old of course doesn't want to be treated like a baby, and yet the younger ones simply can't keep up on an activity that will interest the older ones. So I very quickly abandoned the 'ideas' from that piece of paper, split the whole crowd into two balanced groups, and sent them off on the scavenger hunt that I had prepared earlier in the morning. For this they didn't need to go outside; with all four stories of this building being jammed with 'interesting stuff', they were kept busy for a very long time. While they were at it, I dug a few of my old wooden toys and puzzles out of storage.

These saved my life. It wasn't the best way to run a party - with kids and parents being scattered around the mats playing with different toys in smaller groups - but there was plenty of interest to keep them occupied.

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And the final 'sit in a circle and play together' activity *did* work, with the older ones happily joining the tots in the unwrapping of the present.

I say 'present' in singular, because there was just one package. One of the parents controlled the music player, and the kids passed the package around the circle until the music stopped. That child then unwrapped it, only to find that there was another layer of wrapping underneath - along with a slip of paper instructing them to 'Count backwards from ten to one - in English'. He performed the 'trick' and as the music resumed, the package moved on around the circle.

I had assumed they would be rolling their eyes at this chestnut of an activity, but found that none of them (parents included) had ever seen it. I had prepared about ten or so layers, and they actually got quite excited as the package gradually got smaller and smaller. A little 5 year old girl was the eventual 'winner', reaching the layer where the slip of paper simply said 'Congratulations!', but when she opened up the box, found nothing inside.

One of the older kids soon noticed that the box had a false bottom, and together they pried it open, to reveal a bundle of small gift envelopes, one for each person. These contained bookstore gift cards, a 'can't miss' present for kids of any age.

So the day was a success overall - the ladies really overdid themselves on the food! - but I am left with mixed feelings. Part of my self-image has been that I am 'good with kids', but I suppose I have to admit that this may be just one more of those things that somewhere along the line switches from present tense ... to past.

Use it, or lose it!

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