

Amateur Rumpelstiltskin: Spinning Straw into (Chaska) Gold, er, Purple

First off, everything that Jamie says: ditto. Same for Chris.

Secondly, **each and every program develops an identity.** Do not underestimate your role in shaping that identity. Embrace, enhance, tweak, change, push, usurp, or surpass expectations and limitations. In other words, *keep it fresh* for yourselves and your kids by constantly finding new challenges, new learning opportunities, and novel ways of going about your daily business.

Sitting and reading questions just doesn't do it for most of us. If *we're* bored, our kids are bored. Give yourself permission to *mix it up* by adding these and other twists to your practice regimen:

For practice:

1. *Do something physical.* Run some stairs. Do hand exercises. Play air piano. My kids run laps on occasion, all under the premise that Knowledge Bowl is an *academic sport*.
2. *Warm-ups:* Take some *white-out* to a sheet of ten toss-ups or multiple-choice questions. White-out everything but the pertinent information needed to answer the question or make an educated guess. Devote the first five minutes of practice to letting the kids individually decipher the clues to arrive at answers. This activity gets the brain rolling, hones deductive reasoning skills, and promotes constructivist learning, not to mention sharpening intuitiveness.
3. *Practice skills.* My teams historically struggle with written rounds. As a consequence, we take a practice here and there to refine our reasoning skills on tests. Whether we use a sample of 30 questions, or a test of 180, we talk our way through the exam methodically. We *organically* build a test-taking schema that works for the team. Other exercises exist for improving speed, sharpening listening skills, and motivation.
4. *If you have multiple coaches, rotate.* Keep it fresh for yourself and your kids by working with different coaches in content-specific areas. Should I want my teams to practice Geography, I'll send my kids to Stephanie (Forsland) and swap for hers. Should the season reveal a weakness in Science, my top teams may practice with Mary (Henle). Not every program has the personnel to make such trades, but your building and district *do have* content specialists in most of the areas covered by Knowledge Bowl. Schedule a tutorial with one of those teachers or community members, or simply invite them to "sit-in" on practice to throw out bits of information proven germane to the questions. Enhance. Enrich. Enhance some more.
5. *Play games.* So many interactive, trivia-oriented board games are now available. You can find any kind of *Scene-It* or *Trivial Pursuit* imaginable; there's also *Buzz Time Trivia* (a dry version of bar trivia), or you can go one step further and take the kids to Buffalo Wild Wings some night and play trivia from your table. Play, play, play. It's all about play.
6. *Build team through nurturing relationships.* Trust and mutual goals are important to the success of any team, but lest you start holding hands and amping-up "Kum-by-ya," it's important to note that intuitive and empathic thinking can be practiced. We haven't used it lately, but playing the game *Taboo* can be particularly effective at building camaraderie, teamwork, and honing listening *and* anticipation skills.
7. *Incorporate some sort of "send-off":* Kids intuitively know when practice is winding down. Don't make it so easy for them to escape your clutches! Give the kids a "pass out

the door” by answering questions in areas where your team has relative weakness. For instance, my kids have to answer rapid-fire questions on the topics of *theater and musical theater* right now, but earth science is just around the corner. The last few students who don’t *earn their pass* have to help tear down equipment and clean up afterwards.

Outside of practice:

1. *Recognize that learning doesn’t stop with class and practice.* Encourage your kids to host a weekend film festival; attend plays, musicals, concerts and other cultural events together.
2. *Design an online scavenger hunt.* Send the kids to *Wikipedia* to find specific information about **Heile Selassie**, and thread that through to a search on his exile in **Bath**. Once looking up Bath, have the students find its connection to R.B. Sheridan’s play, *The Rivals*. Once there, send them to the *New York Times* Online to figure out which Hollywood actor is currently starring in a revival of *The Rivals* on Broadway . . .
3. *Make folders or binders for them, or better, have them compile their own or for a fellow teammate.* I frequently photocopy articles, stories, lists, factoids, and other miscellany students may find useful for competition. *Put them to work* collecting their own.
4. *Encourage as much outside reading as possible.* Magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Entertainment Weekly* are particularly good for current events, but if you want the good stuff . . . the obscure, the irreverent, the arcane and profane, check out *Mental Floss*. It’s one-top shopping for egg-heads and want-to-be-savants. It’s almost orgiastic in its celebration of knowledge. A great read!
5. *Creatively use your classroom as a repository of knowledge.* Décor, availability of resources for check-out, or even an open door to discuss perspectives on string theory or plate tectonics can do wonders for increasing excitement about Knowledge Bowl.

There . . . I’ve given away too many secrets. Go. Leave me now! I’ve said too much already . . .

Best of luck to you and your teams!