**THE IMPORTANCE OF ICEBREAKERS IN ONLINE CLASSES**

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If you read the *Chronicle Of Higher Education*or follow coverage about online learning in popular media, a persistent question emerges: How can teachers build community in online courses? These publications frequently cite the importance of creating community in online courses. But, as instructors and designers, how do we do that? How do we create a supportive, friendly, intellectually stimulating learning environment among adult learners who may never see each other in person?

One way to create this sense of community is through the use of icebreakers. Icebreakers are interactive activities that help students and instructors get to know each other. Doing these icebreakers serves multiple purposes. First, they connect students to each other and lay the groundwork for an interactive and collaborative learning experience. When one of the first activities students do is to participate in icebreakers, instructors set the tone for a high level of participation and interaction. Second, regular contact with students, particularly at the start of class, shows that instructors are interested in getting to know their students and are invested in their learning, which can help increase students’ motivation to perform well in class.

To begin to create a sense of community when we teach online, many instructors invite students to introduce themselves on a discussion board. Instructors ask students to share some basic information, such as their work experience and academic experience. Sometimes, students are asked to share a fun fact about themselves. Using discussion boards for introductions is certainly a worthwhile activity that helps students become acquainted with each other and get a glimpse of the variety of experiences they all bring to the class. But there are additional strategies to help students in online classes get to know each other and to involve the students in the course content in an interactive way. Included in this blog post are a few suggestions for building community in online courses through the use of icebreakers.

**HOW TO BREAK THE ICE ONLINE**

In a webinar on how to enhance student interaction in online classes, Dr. Kimberly Stott, former Executive Director of Faculty Development at University of Maryland University College’s Center for Teaching and Learning, described several icebreakers that can be done in online learning environments, and are appropriate for adult learners. These icebreaker activities, Dr. Stott explained, can achieve one of three specific aims, or a combination of them. Dr. Stott adapted these icebreakers from the book *101 Ways to Make Training Active* by Mel Silberman.

As you plan your icebreaker, think about the goal you are trying to achieve. Three common purposes of icebreakers are to encourage teamwork, assess students’ content knowledge, and immediately involve students in learning. Below is a description of an icebreaker that serves each of these purposes, along with an example of how to do each type of icebreaker.

1. Team-Building Icebreakers: These help students become acquainted with one another and create a spirit of cooperation and interdependence.

Example: Human Scavenger Hunt.  Here are the instructions for the activity.

1. Tell students to create an initial introductory discussion post in which they tell you and their classmates a bit about themselves (e.g., what they hope to learn in this course and how it might help their career goals, etc)
2. Tell students to review their classmates’  introductory discussion posts
3. Tell students to complete the [**Human Scavenger Hunt Worksheet google doc**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZyquvTqYlMjII694e1yQl8pv4_GS3xwcLni3zU65aFg/edit)
4. Tell students to post the link to the completed [**Human Scavenger Hunt Worksheet google doc**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZyquvTqYlMjII694e1yQl8pv4_GS3xwcLni3zU65aFg/edit) on the discussion board, along with a few thoughts about how they liked the activity and what they learned about their classmates through it.
5. On-the-Spot Assessment Icebreakers: These help you learn about the knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of students, especially as they relate to the subject matter being covered in the course.

Example: Group resume. Here are the instructions for the activity.

1. Create groups of between 3 and 6 people. Provide the groups with a link to the [**Group Resume google doc**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sfVGccy_TtUSsT5gbANBr1S7W4kDEFSO9hZBovedzhM/edit).
2. Tell students to use the [**Group Resume google doc**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sfVGccy_TtUSsT5gbANBr1S7W4kDEFSO9hZBovedzhM/edit) to work together to create a team resume. The resume should include information that highlights the experience and talents of your members.
3. Tell students to post the link to the [**Group Resume google doc**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sfVGccy_TtUSsT5gbANBr1S7W4kDEFSO9hZBovedzhM/edit) in the Group Resume discussion forum.
4. Tell students to review the Group Resumes created by their peers and use the discussion forum to comment on the accomplishments of their peers
5. Immediate Learning Involvement Icebreakers: These create an initial interest in the course topic and help students form connections to the subject matter out of the gate.

Example: Really Getting Acquainted. Here are the instructions for the activity.

1. Randomly assign people a partner (or to a group with two other people) in the class, using Canvas’s groups tool. Supply some questions that the partners can use to interview each other.
2. Ask students to take 30 minutes to get to know their partners. They can do this via Skype, phone, Google Hangout, or if they live close enough, in person.
3. After the interview, ask the partners to introduce each other to the rest of the class via the Introductions discussion board or in a short video.

In this post, I have just scratched the surface of the many ways to break the ice in online classes. Investing the time in doing these activities with your students early on in the course pays dividends throughout.