

## **Getting to Know Your Students & Helping Them Get to Know You**

Building a sense of community is key to creating an environment that is comfortable and conducive to learning. Icebreakers are designed to help you and your students get to know each other at the beginning of the term so that you can become a community of learners who work together to achieve course goals.

According to Robert Magnan, author of *147 Practical Tips for Using Icebreakers with College Students* (Atwood Publishing: 2005), you can use icebreakers for several different purposes:

- to help your students feel comfortable
- to introduce yourself to your students
- to get a sense of your students in general
- to make it easier for your students to get to know each other
- to encourage your students to share and explore their differences
- to establish an active, participatory environment by getting the students working together in pairs or small groups
- to bring out feelings about subject and the course, to lead students into the course, and to generate interest
- to encourage students to be interested in each other, to share information and resources, and to identify their individual needs and goals

Below you'll find a few of the icebreakers that Magnan includes in his book. If you'd like to learn more about using icebreakers as well as see additional examples, please stop by the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL).

### **Greet and Meet at the Door**

Stand just outside or inside the door and welcome your students as they arrive. This can be difficult if they arrive in clusters, as is often the case close to class time. But if you block the entrance slightly, you can shape a cluster into a line and meet every student one on one.

### **What I Want to Know**

Invite the students to write down on a slip of paper one thing that they would like to know about the course, about you, about the subject matter in general, about careers in the field, and so forth. Collect those slips. Then, read each question and try to answer it. (If you get a question that's inappropriate, just skip it or comment that "That's a little personal at this point.") A variation of this icebreaker is to have students stand, introduce themselves to you and the class, and read the question that they have written.

### **Survey**

Survey the class with some questions about their backgrounds and academic situations. Ask them to raise a hand to any questions that applies to them. For example:

- How many of you were born in this city or the surrounding area?
- How many of you come from outside this state?
- How many of you were born outside the United States?

- How many of you are majoring in...? (Name areas related to the course subject.)
- How many of you have taken...? (Name courses related to your course.)

This activity gives the students a general overview of the other students in the class and it allows you to get a better sense of the needs and interests of your students.

### **MAPPING OURSELVES EXERCISE**

This exercise is designed to help us identify for each other and ourselves the places and quality of places that we find attractive. Where we come from, where we live, where we choose to go all have influences on us and help shape our values, preferences, and goals. Some of our geographies are assigned to us and some are chosen. They do not bind us. But we can use our experiences in them to help us envision better places and a better life for others and us. Sharing our insights with each other will help us understand each other and maybe see or develop a common vision of what we want in our own community.

Write out the answers to these questions. Often your first thought will be the most representative, so don't spend a lot of time thinking about them. In addition to the place, think of the qualities of that place that are important to you. You may have more than one answer for each question. Obviously there are no right or wrong answers. We will then share them on the maps provided via sticky flags or map pins without comment by others.

1. Where were you born? (red)
2. Where do you currently live? (just an answer)
3. Where, geographically, do you like to go for contemplation and renewal? (green)
4. Where will your passion for travel find you in the future? (yellow)
5. What are your expectations of this class?

### **Guessing Game**

This is an activity for large classes when there are too many students for any real interaction of significant duration. Tell the students that you're going to mention a few things about yourself and make guesses about how many of them have any of those things in common with you. You'd like them to raise their hands if you're right. Take for example, an instructor teaching introductory psychology with 100 students. She might begin by saying, "I started studying psychology because I wanted to understand myself better. I'd guess that about 50 of you have the same reason. Hands? Oh, only about 30. I'm not doing very well so far. OK. I'd guess that maybe 75 of you are taking this course because it's required. Hands? OK, at least 60 or 70—I did better on that one. I was born in Pennsylvania. I'm guessing that there are five of you who were born there too. Hands? I count eight. That's close enough...." This activity allows the students and you to get a sense of commonalities—reasons for taking the course, experience in the subject area, and so on—and to have a little fun. The students also learn some things about you in a casual, personal way.

### **What's in a Name?**

Ask the students to each describe how or why he or she received his or her name. Some may have been named after a grandfather or grandmother, an uncle or an aunt. Some may have been named after a place. Some may have been given a name picked from a book or a name that “just sounded right.”

Names and their origins can be very interesting—but sometimes a name is, well, just a name. For example, a student may have a distinctive name that reveals a fascinating story about several generations of family. The next student may be only able to say, “My name is John...and I don't know why.” If that's their first connection with the other students, it may be embarrassing. Also, some students may feel uncomfortable explaining their unusual names or perhaps not knowing the reason behind the names. You could offer your students two alternatives: “If you were to change your name, what name would you choose and why?” and “If you have any children, what are/will be their names and why?”

### **How Do You Learn?**

Tell the students that you're going to read a list of teaching approaches and techniques and ask them to raise a hand when you read an approach or technique that works well for their learning style. Here are a few to consider including in your list—make sure to include your usual approaches and techniques as well.

- lecture
- discussion
- pictures, diagrams, and graphs
- demonstrations
- working in pairs
- working in small groups
- question-and-answer
- homework assignments
- making presentations

This exercise can help you understand what approaches and techniques might work well with your students as well as help your students understand their learning styles.

### **String Thing**

This activity works best with smaller classes. Start by holding a ball of yarn or twine in your throwing hand and the end in your other hand. State your name. Then toss the ball to a student, who is to introduce himself or herself, hold the yarn or twine in one hand, and toss the ball to another student. The students continue to toss the ball until all of them have introduced themselves. Point out that all of them entered your class as individuals and perhaps strangers, but now they have started forming ties as members of a community. Then ask the students to rewind the ball of yarn or twine, by reversing the unwinding. As they try to do so, you can point out that they will leave the class at the end of the term as individuals again, but not quite the same. (To save time, you may choose to have the students leave the yarn or string where it is, as a reminder of the ties

they're forming and hope that one volunteers to stay after class to rewind the yarn or twine.)

### **Who Here...?**

Invite each student to stand and ask a question of his or her classmates, concerning their interests, experiences, or wishes related to the course in particular or to the field in general, using the structure, "Who here...?" For example, "Who here is planning on a career in this field?" or "Who here has had trouble with this subject?" or "Who here would like to take this course pass/fail or for no grade?" or "Who here reads books in this field for fun?" The other students answer in the affirmative by raising a hand.

### **BINGO**

Give each student a bingo card—a sheet of paper with a five-by-five matrix, each square containing an item such as plays a musical instrument, is a marketing major, has traveled somewhere in Europe, speaks French, etc. Tell the students that they are to move around the room and find students who match the squares on their bingo sheet. When they find a match, that student should sign the matrix square corresponding to the matching item.

### **Interviews**

Have the students form pairs and then have each partner interview the other for two minutes. (You may want to suggest some questions to start the activity or post a list of questions on the board.) Then, bring the pairs back together and have each student introduce his or her partner to the rest of the students by giving them information gained in the interviews.

Note: Keep it short and interesting. The interview should provide just some glimpses into the students. Two minutes should be enough for each set of introductions, with a minute for each student. If the class is too large for the time available, allow 30 seconds for each interview—or divide the class into groups for the introductions to take place.