An (E-CORE) **Guide to**

Virtual Icebreakers: a Community Building Tool

While online environments support learners in many ways, the feeling of distance between the instructor, peers, and the environment can make relationship building with your students a challenge.[1] This Guide provides you with one tool for addressing this challenge. If used effectively, the resulting feelings of belonging to a community can create an atmosphere of comfort and trust, which in turn encourages students to participate by sharing knowledge, asking questions and supporting peers. Social presence has also been found to be intrinsically motivating for students, with learner satisfaction increasing with levels of social interaction.[2]

Icebreakers are fun activities that help people get to know each other and can potentially ameliorate the perceived distance in online learning environments. If you can successfully foster a sense of community within your course, this will help diminish feelings of remoteness, enhance the educational experience of your students, and allow for effective learning.[2]

Key Considerations In Choosing An Icebreaker:

- Keep in mind equity and accessibility when employing icebreakers. What internet connectivity and/or technology constraints might your students have? Are there any privacy concerns? Try to give students choices on how to engage in the activity to support different constraints (e.g. synchronous and asynchronous).
- Typically, personal themed icebreakers are more effective at the beginning of the term, as they help students build relationships and establish comfort in the space. It is recommended to transition to using more academic themed icebreakers once students know each other and can comfortably jump into group discussions.
- Icebreakers commonly employ online discussion boards, however online misconduct is a common concern - especially with anonymity. It is important to start with the assumption that most students are honest and want to learn. Be honest with your students about your expectations, remind them that you still expect them to conduct themselves respectfully, even if learning happens remotely. Provide examples of academic misconduct and opportunities for students to discuss academic integrity (i.e. through the discussion board, using reflection prompts).[3]
  - **Example prompt:** What have you learned about acting with integrity from this assignment, and how might this apply to your future academic or professional experiences?
  - **Hint**: Some collaborative platforms have settings that can be turned on to filter profanity (e.g. Padlet).

Icebreakers for a Variety of Situations:

Icebreaker Summary Table					
Name	**Estimated Time**	**Content (Academic / Personal)**	**Tech. Requirement**	**Prep. Time**	**Synchronous / Asynchronous**
Two Truths and a Lie	15 min	Personal	Online conferencing and/or breakout rooms	None	S
Table Topics	10 min	Either	Breakout rooms or online whiteboards	5 min	S or A
Same and Different	5 - 10 min	Either/Both	Breakout rooms or online whiteboards	5 min	S
Take a Picture of Something	5 min	Either/Both	Virtual board	5 min	S
Going the Distance	10 - 15 min	Personal	Virtual map	10 min	S
Describe Yourself in a Tweet	5 min	Personal	Online collaborative tool	5 min	S or A
Bingo	0 - 10 min	Either/Both	Online collaborative tool	15 min	S or A
Lessons for Time Travelers	5 - 10 min	Content	Breakout rooms	No	S
One Word Storm	10 - 15 min	Content	Breakout rooms and a online collaborative tool	Yes (5 min)	S

Two Truths and a Lie

This classic icebreaker can be used to foster belonging amongst a group of students, and also start a discussion about being critical of the sources we trust for information. It can be especially useful when implemented prior to a long period of group work, or in a new team setting.

Instructions

1. Ask all students to write three statements about themselves: 2 true and 1 false.
   ○ Put an emphasis on using statements that are unique (e.g. 'bucket list' experiences).
2. Explain that the goal is to convince the others that your lie is in fact the truth, as demonstrated by incorrect votes.
3. Ask one student to share their statements with the group.
4. Encourage discussion amongst the group about the potential validity of the statements, then after a short time ask the other students to vote on which statement is true and which is false.
5. Once the group has decided which statement is false, ask the first person to reveal the truth.
6. Move on until each person in the group has shared their statements.
7. Declare the student with the most incorrect votes the winner.

Alternate Version

1. Have everyone share all 3 statements.
2. Have everyone keep track of their own 'votes' for which statement is the lie.
3. Go around the circle again to share lies.
4. Get participants to reveal their scores.

Notes

● Most effective in smaller groups (4-6), but can also be used in a larger class where only 4-6 students share their statements over several classes OR 4-6 students volunteer.
● Voting can be facilitated via Zoom hand-raise, or other platform reaction tools.
● Asking follow up questions and encouraging chat about particular answers can be a way to further connect the group, if there is time available.

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/

Table Topics

This flexible icebreaker is a great way to encourage students to start getting to know each other or to initiate discussion on a specific topic. You can choose questions pertinent to the topic of your class to customize the icebreaker

Instructions

1. Define your chosen set of topic prompts.
2. Present the questions to your learners, which can be done either by:

   ○ Typing some of the questions on a chat board and asking students to write down their responses.

- Separating your students into breakout rooms and assigning each group one or two questions so that each person in the group can share their answer.

3. Give students a set amount of time (e.g. 5 minutes) for discussion before bringing them back to the larger group.
4. In the larger group, have students share a few prominent points from each group's discussion.

Tips for designing effective prompts:

- Choose an aspect of your course that students can personally relate to, if they have encountered it before in their lives they will likely have more to say.
- Ethical dilemmas make for good conversation - polarizing opinions are exciting and fun to discuss.
- The more high-level the question, the more room for creativity in responses.

Some examples of questions include:

- Is there such a thing as perfect?
- What is the meaning of 'X' to you?
- Who do you trust and why?
- If you can go back in time to your 15-year-old self, what advice would you give your 15-year-old self?
- What is your definition of being wealthy and why?
- What can you do today that you were not capable of a year ago?
- How might this course have been different 10 or 50 years ago?
- We've been learning about X recently. How do you think engineers apply this in their jobs?

Online tools you can use

- Breakout rooms.
- Online whiteboards and chats (e.g. Miro, Padlet).

Notes

- This activity can also be adapted to an asynchronous environment using discussion boards or another collaborative tool (see online tools above).

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/

Same and Different

The aim of this icebreaker is for students to learn more about their peers, specifically identifying things that they might have in common as a group, or discovering what is unique to individual students in the group.

Instructions

1. Split your students into groups of 3 - 5 and allocate them to breakout rooms.

- ○ Ask each group to write a list of as many interesting things they have in common they can think figure out - on an online whiteboard or virtual sticky note. ask them to avoid obvious things, such as all being men or women)
2. Also ask them to write one thing that is unique to each participant
3. Give them 5 minutes for this task.
4. At the end of the 5 minutes, ask each group to share their list with the rest of the class via an online whiteboard.
5. As a class, look for any emerging themes from the lists, or how different groups interpreted the task.

Online tools you can use

- Breakout rooms.
- Online whiteboard, chat board, other collaboration tools (e.g. Padlet, Lino).

Notes

- If you are working with a big class size, you can opt not to ask students to share in the big group.

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/

Take a Picture of Something

This is a fun icebreaker that helps students get to know each other using visuals and creativity. It can also be used to spark discussion as an introduction to a lesson. Finally, it can be used as a tool to help instructors and students alike get to know each other's learning environments (and thus accommodations that may need to be made).

Instructions

1. Ask students to take a picture of something.
   a. Typically, you choose a specific theme (can be in line with the lesson). For example, ask participants to take a picture of their shoes, or a picture of their workstation or the view outside their window.
   b. Remember to ask participants to take the picture and upload it before the class starts, otherwise it will take too much if they were to do it in real time.
   c. Give students the option to use a stock photo instead, if they don't feel comfortable, or don't have the proper tools to take a picture themselves (recall equity and accessibility issues).
2. Ask participants to share the picture on a virtual board.
3. Start a discussion. For example, you could ask why they chose that particular item on their desk, or what they like the most about the view they can see from the window etc.
4. Wrap up discussion by thanking students for their openness, ensuring to explain the intention behind your chosen topic.

Online tools you can use

- Online whiteboard, chat board, other collaboration tools such as [Padlet](#), [Evernote](#), or [Lino](#).

Notes

- Alternatively, if you are worried about student privacy this can be taken as an opportunity for you as an instructor to share something personal with your class and humize yourself.

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/

Going the Distance

This is a good icebreaker if your participants are located in many different geographical locations, as it provides students with a visual representation of the distance that separates them and helps limit the perception of psychological space.

Instructions

1. Prior to the class, request that students come prepared with a digital picture of themselves, and a link to a web site that is meaningful to them.
   a. if providing a digital image of themselves is not feasible or desired participants can supply something that is representative—it could be a graphic, digital self portrait, a cartoon, etc.
   b. The link could be to a personal web page, to a site they visit often, or to a site that demonstrates a hobby/interest.
2. Show a map on the screen and ask students to plot their locations, attaching the photo and link previously requested.
3. Ask students to interact with the map and gather a sense of where their colleagues are located.
4. To encourage dialogue, direct students to make contact with three colleagues who are positioned the furthest away from (or closest to) their own location on the map and then use chat and/or email to connect with their selected peers.

Online tools you can use

- [Padlet](#) Map

Notes

- This activity can help students autonomously form pairings for the purpose of class work and collaboration.
- "Study buddies" can be encouraged by asking students to follow up in the future with the person/people they spoke with.
- This activity can be reused/adapted by having students plot locations on the map of some of their favourite places (e.g. from vacations, or their childhood)

Activity adapted from: Dixon et al. 2006

Describe Yourself in a Tweet

In this activity students have to communicate, using a limited number of characters, who they are. This can be a humorous activity the students engage in as a class that aids in building community and belonging.

Instructions

1. Ask participants to describe themselves in a tweet (i.e. 140 characters or less). Provide some suggestions for how to do so for those who might struggle, such as writing their favourite saying, including hashtags, or even a gif.
2. Allow the students to see their peers' tweets as they come in.

Alternate Version

1. Make the request asynchronously before class.
2. Show the 'Tweets' during the online class.

Online tools you can use

- Google forms short answer question.
  - Use 'response validation' to set a character limit, allow respondents to 'see text responses'.
- Padlet backchannel.
- Mentimeter short answer polling.

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/

Bingo

This is a classic icebreaker that employs a table with a series of interesting facts, but instead of students mingling to find somebody to whom each fact applies, they each fill it out individually. This can be used as a tool to help you get to know your students, and can be useful in assigning them to groups based on their answers.

Instructions

1. Create a 5 by 5 table with interesting facts, one for each box of the table - for example, I have a job right now', 'I am an extravert', 'I know few people in this class', etc. Hint: it would be a good idea to tie in the facts with the topic of the class.
2. Share the file with the table with your students, either in advance or during the class.
   a. You can share by email, through the file-sharing feature of the web conferencing system or with an online sharing tool such as Google docs, Dropbox or Evernote.
   b. Alternatively, you could do the activity in real-time using a tool such as Padlet or Lino.
3. Ask students to write their name under each of the statements that applies to them.
4. (Optional, only if doing synchronously) Ask students to share the answers and discuss.

Online tools you can use

- Online whiteboard, chat board, other collaboration tools such as Padlet, Evernote, or Lino.
- Tools that allow you to create a survey, such as PollEverywhere, Google Forms, or Mentimeter.
- Email.

Activity adapted from: https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/, with input from Catherine Mavriplis

Lessons for Time Travelers

How would you begin to explain a cell phone to someone from the 18th century? This icebreaker encourages students to explore their understanding of basic concepts by explaining something as simple as a cell phone, for example, to someone who has 'time travelled from the past' - with no knowledge of the current world we live in. In this fun, yet effective, activity, students work in pairs, taking turns, to try to teach the other about a chosen modern-day technology.

Instructions

1. Choose a modern-day technology or concept for the activity - For example, toilets/plumbing, Google search, cars. Hint: This can be easily tied into course context (and even used as an introduction activity) by choosing a simple device that is related to your course.
2. Explain the task - one student will act as a time traveler from the 18th century, and the other will be tasked with explaining 'cars' (as an example) to the unaware time traveler.
3. Assign students to breakout rooms in groups of 2, give them 5 minutes to go through the activity.
5. Optional. Bring the students back to the large group and debrief on what they learnt from the activity.

Online tools you can use

- Breakout rooms.

A One Word Storm

The activity can be used without a lot of preparation, and moves quickly. It acts as a fun and interactive icebreaker but it can also be used to kick off a brainstorming session or introduce a new topic.

Instructions

1. Break the students into small groups and ask them to brainstorm ideas in the form of "one word that describes X", or "what does Y mean to you?".
2. Choose a word aligned with the class' topic, or a specific concept you would like to review.

3. Ask the team to reconvene and share their answers. The variety of one word answers will be enlightening.

Online tools you can use

- An online tool for mind mapping would work well such as Miro.
- Or, you can opt to use a word cloud on PollEverywhere or Mentimeter.

Activity adapted from: https://miro.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chapter_4.pdf

References

1. McGrath, N., Gregory, S., Farley, H., & Roberts, P. (2014). Tools of the trade: breaking the ice with virtual tools in online learning. In Proceedings of the 31st Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference (ASCILITE 2014) (pp. 470-474). Macquarie University.
2. Dixon, J., Crooks, H., & Henry, K. (2006). Breaking the ice: Supporting collaboration and the development of community online. Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology/La revue canadienne de l'apprentissage et de la technologie, 32(2).
3. Academic Integrity and Online Learning. (n.d.). Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved August 26, 2020, from http://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/academic-integrity-online-learning

Author: Danielle Pearlston   **Distributed:** *September 17, 2020*