

Classroom Icebreakers

Sharing Course Trepidations: Have students in pairs share a few of the concerns about the course or semester. Groups can share with the larger class if they feel comfortable; this provides validation for the students and an opportunity for the instructor to address student concerns.

Simple Self-Introductions: Have students give a selected number of facts about themselves.

Two truths and a lie: Have students share two facts about themselves and a lie (a convincing one is best). The class has to guess which one is a lie. This can be done online in discussions or in small groups if the course is large.

Draw a Picture or Doodle of a Significant Event: Have students draw a recent event they took part in or a compilation about themselves and share it with a partner and then a larger group.

Draw a Picture of Why the Student is Taking the Class: Ask students to play Pictionary to explain why they are in the class.

Bingo: Make a 5×5 grid to use as a Bingo sheet. In each box, write a “fun fact,” or something that at least one of your students will probably relate to. Some examples might be: has traveled to Europe; plays a sport; is left-handed, but they can also be related to your discipline. Have your students walk around and talk to others until they find matches; the first to find all of them “wins.”

Mini Colab: Create a “dance card” about yourself, then go around the class in 2-3 minute increments, and read another person’s “dance card” and chat – Fast-paced speed dating.

The M&M Icebreaker: Pass out a candy bowl of M&M’s (or a Lifesaver, or other multicolored candy). They can count the number of pieces that they have and share that many facts with the class or a group depending on class size. Another option is, students are given one color M&M and a question based on that color. Develop a few questions or ideas about what students can share with the rest of the class. Then, ask the students to introduce themselves to either a small group of other students or to the whole class, depending on the size of your course. When they introduce themselves, what they share or say is dependent on the color of their piece of candy. For example, a red one might mean they share why they decided to take the course or what they did over the school break.

Syllabus Icebreaker: Before distributing syllabi, have students get into small groups (3-5 students depending on the size of your course) and introduce themselves to one another. In their groups, students write a list of questions they have about the class. After their questions are written down, hand out the syllabus and have the students find answers to their questions using the syllabus. This is not only an icebreaker, but can also show students that many of their questions can be answered by reading the syllabus. Afterward, the class “debriefs” as a large group and discusses any questions that were not answered in the syllabus.

Syllabus Jigsaw: Divide your syllabus into a few major sections. Have your students get into groups and distribute one major section to each group (for example, Group A gets “homework assignments”). Each group studies the section of the syllabus until they are confident about the information in it; groups then present that section of the syllabus to the rest of the class.

Best and Worst Classes: Divide the chalkboard/whiteboard into 2 sections. On one side, write “the best class I have ever had” and on the other side write “the worst class I have ever had”. Under each of these headings, write “what the teacher did” and “what the students did” As a group, have your students share what they liked and disliked about past courses, being careful not to mention any course, department, or instructor by name. At the end, point out to students what you would like to achieve as an instructor but emphasize that you can’t do it alone.

Common Sense Inventory: Make a list of true or false statements pertaining to content in your course (for example, in a Biology course, one might read, “Evolution is simply change over time”). Have students get into groups and decide whether each statement is true or false. As a large group, “debrief” by going over the answers and clarifying misconceptions.

Anonymous Classroom Survey: Write 2 or 3 open-ended questions pertaining to course content. Consider including at least one question that most students will be able to answer and at least one question that students will find challenging. Have your students respond anonymously on note cards; collect the answers to get a general sense of your students’ starting point.

First Day Graffiti: This is an adaptation of an activity proposed by Barbara Goza in the *Journal of Management Education* in 1993. Flip charts with markers beneath are placed around the classroom. Each chart has a different sentence stem. Here are a few examples:

“I learn best in classes where the teacher ___”

“Students in courses help me learn when they ___”

“I am most likely to participate in classes when ___”

“Here’s something that makes it hard to learn in a course: ___”

“Here’s something that makes it easy to learn in a course: ___”

Students are invited to walk around the room and write responses.

The Reception Line or Syllabus Speed Dating: Students sit in two rows facing each other. They have two minutes to get to know each other and answer one syllabus question. When the two minutes are up the students move to the next seat down the line and get a new syllabus question.

Irritating Behaviors: Theirs and Ours: In groups, have students identify the following: “What are the five things faculty do that make learning hard?” Or, asked positively, “What are the five things faculty do that make it easy to learn?” Collect the lists and make a master list to share in class or online. You can also do the reverse and ask about student behaviors making easier or more challenging to teach or learn.

Sentence completion: Students are given a number of sentences that are incomplete in groups they must each complete the sentence. To make it even more fun, have them complete the sentence for each other and see how far off or close they came to the correct answers for the members of their group (a little like apples to apples).

Take Sides: Hand students a list of choices to make, some related to learning and class, others about more personal preferences and then have them mark their answers. (Option to have the groups try to decide what choices each member made before the answer is revealed). A little like would you rather?

References:

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