

Resource Guide

Using “Icebreakers” to Build Community and Introduce Skills

Icebreakers, often defined as techniques to introduce people to each other, are frequently used during the first week of classes to help instructors and students get to know one another. While this can be useful, when designed with the skills and knowledge of a specific course in mind, icebreakers can introduce students to the content of the course as well.

Icebreaking strategies generally fall into one of two different categories.

Person-Centered Strategies – “getting to know you”

Person-centered icebreakers focus on learning about students as individuals. They often facilitate learning names and associated personal characteristics, beliefs, or experiences that either make a student unique or show commonalities among classmates. For example, students might take turns introducing themselves by name and pronoun preference, and saying something they found interesting about their summer.

Tips for facilitating a person-centered icebreaker

- Provide written instructions for completing the activity on the board, screen, or a handout. Students whose first language is not English, who have processing differences, who are feeling anxious, or who just arrive late to the classroom benefit from the opportunity to read the directions.
- Direct students to work in pairs or small groups before turning the full group. Many students are uncomfortable with self-disclosure to a large group of strangers, it helps to practice in a lower stakes situation first.
- Begin the icebreaker by using yourself as an example. Introducing yourself in the ways you are asking students to introduce themselves, enables students to get to know you, and clarifies the directions more concretely.

Course-Centered Strategies- “what is the course about”

Course-centered icebreakers focus on learning something about the knowledge and/or skills necessary for the course. They often facilitate an introduction to ways of knowing or learning from a particular disciplinary perspective. For example, students might be given the task to search for information on a topic using a specific database or within a defined set of parameters.

Tips for creating a course-centered icebreaker

- Focus the work on one representative subtopic of the course. Because this is an introduction to the course, students will only be able to digest a small slice of the course. Choosing a subtopic that is in some way indicative of the types of topics covered will give students a clearer understanding of the course as a whole.
- Consider the ways you expect students to learn in the course. If students will be expected to learn in groups or expected to learn through reflection, designing an icebreaker activity to introduce this way of learning sets students' expectations of the work of the course.
- Use an icebreaker activity to show students how experts in your field think and/or solve problems. Treating students, even non-majors, as novices in your discipline or field of study can invigorate students' interest and investment in the knowledge and skills of the course because they see how they are connected to something beyond the classroom.

Making Connections

When designing the most effective icebreaker activities for a particular course, instructors often find that combining person-centered and course-centered strategies best meets their goals. For instance, if students will be expected to complete projects in teams, engage in group discussions, or complete field work together, building community among students is a core outcome for the course. Building an understanding about how to learn through that method is also an outcome. Thus, creating an icebreaker that combines both categories can serve a dual purpose.

Of course, icebreakers can serve multiple purposes at a variety of times during an academic term. Although we often associate icebreakers with the beginning of a term, they can be implemented throughout the term in order to introduce new content or skills as well as to bridge learned knowledge and skills with new ones.

Resources

Conrad, Rita-Marie. and J. Ana Donaldson. "Characteristics of an Effective Icebreaker." *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*. Jossey-Bass, 2011.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.