

**SECTION  
5B**

# Icebreakers and Interactive Activities

**W**e try to give our students an experience of hands-on, immersive learning. We work with teachers to develop lessons that provide students with opportunities to learn by interacting with texts, ideas and each other. In order for students to work together well in small groups, it is helpful to provide opportunities for students to get to know each other, explore group dynamics and develop a positive group identity. We encourage teachers to use icebreakers, energizers and interactive activities. These experiences can help students develop friendships and supportive relationships that will improve their attendance and retention, sense of satisfaction and, ultimately, achievement. Interactive activities help students learn to work collaboratively with others, articulate their ideas and listen to others, all skills that are important for the workplace. Plus, the activities are fun. It's important to send the message that learning should be interesting and engaging, especially when so many adult learners have had traumatic experiences in school.

Many of the following icebreakers and interactive activities were developed for working with youth, but work well with people of all ages. These activities are appropriate for use with groups of adult students, teachers, parents or mixed audiences, since they give people a chance to become comfortable in new settings, develop trust and create a group identity. The opportunity to talk with and learn from peers can enrich any learning experience.

If you haven't used icebreakers in a class before, you might try an activity with your coworkers in a staff meeting. When we first started using interactive activities with students, we tried out a different activity every staff meeting. It was a great way to practice the activities and learn more about each other. As a place to start with students, name games during the first weeks of class are a good choice, since they give students a chance to learn and use each other's names, an essential part of working as a group.

When doing icebreaker, teambuilding, and warm-up activities, it's important to have a short debrief afterwards. This gives the group a chance to reflect on the activity and identify what can be learned. The learning is experiential and can be more powerful when we reflect on its meaning. These activities should be used to teach, not just to break the ice. These two questions will help students process their experience:

- What was this activity like for you?
- What can we learn from this activity? or  
Why do you think it's important to do an activity like this?

The first question gives students an opportunity to talk about whether they enjoyed the activity, were uncomfortable at any point, or would like to make a suggestion for improvement in the future. The second question helps students think about the purpose of the activity, which may be different with each activity. In the memory game, for example, one of the goals of the activity is for students to practice listening carefully to each other, something that is often difficult.

It's important to keep participation voluntary in icebreakers and similar activities. I try to make it clear that it's always okay to sit out the activity or pass when a question comes to you. People don't usually sit out for long, once they see that everyone is having a good time, but we should always leave an opening for participants to opt out.

This is a short list of the possible activities that you can use with a group. Many of these activities came from the wonderful book, *Moving Beyond Icebreakers*, by Stanley Pollack and Mary Fusoni, from the Boston organization, Teen Empowerment. The book is comprehensive guide to using interactive processes in classrooms, meetings, counseling groups, etc. Teen Empowerment also has a YouTube channel where you can watch groups interact through planned activities. This is a great way to see what an icebreaker can look like before you try it in your class.

## Check-Ins (For the Beginning of Class)

### WARM-UP QUESTION

A warm-up question can give everyone in the class a chance to introduce themselves and start to participate in a low-stakes way. In new groups or whenever a new person joins the group, participants should say their names when answering the question of the day. Here are some samples. You might also use questions related to the content of the lesson and which function as a pre-reading activity:

- What would you be doing if you weren't here?
- Share a memorable learning experience outside of school.
- Describe a time you tried something new and what happened.
- Share a time you had trouble learning something that you eventually mastered.
- Name one of your strengths and one area you would like to improve.
- Talk about your first job.

## HIGHLIGHT/LOWLIGHT

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I have used this check-in as a regular opener in youth classes, in particular. Ask participants to talk about a highlight (something good that recently happened, something they are proud of, etc.) and a lowlight (something that is challenging or difficult). It's important to make it clear that no one is required to share anything with the group. This check-in can quickly let you and everyone else know when good things are happening in your students' lives and should be celebrated, as well as the challenges where students may need support. You will also learn when a student isn't feeling well and may not be up to participating in his or her normal way.

## Name Activities

### MEMORY GAME

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This activity is great for a new group of students, but can be used throughout a semester. The first person starts the activity by introducing herself and answers one or two questions (the name of a pet they once had, their favorite tv show, their worst job, desired career, a place you would like to visit, etc.). The next person starts by introducing the first person and repeating what he said. For example, "This is Eric. The worst job he ever had was as a dishwasher in a buffet restaurant." Then the second person introduces herself, also answering the question. The third person introduces the first two people and then introduces herself. The last person in the chain will need to introduce all the people in the room. For an added challenge, participants can answer and remember two questions.

In the debrief afterwards, students will most likely give these reasons for why the activity is important:

- To learn each other's names
- To learn about each other
- To sharpen their memory since school requires remembering lots of things

All of these reasons are true, of course. We also do activities like this because it helps us get used to speaking in order and listening carefully to each other, two qualities that are important for a well-functioning class. Some students will talk about the importance of listening to the teacher, which is important of course, but we also want to underline the need for students to listen carefully to each other, an element of basic respect and collaboration in the classroom.

### THE VALUE OF MY NAME

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This can be a good introduction for a math class. Work out the value of your name in advance (A=1, B=2, C=3,...). My first name, Eric, is 5-18-9-3. I would start by telling the group that this number (5-18-9-3) somehow represents me and ask for guesses about what it means. Is it part of your social security number? Your high school locker combination? If the group struggles to figure it out, I would say that these numbers represent my name. Once the group figures out the trick, ask everyone to convert their name into numbers. Have students write their numbers on the board and see if everyone in the room can convert them back into names.

### NAME AND ACTION

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This is a good activity for a new group getting to know each other. The group should stand in a circle, which enough room to move arms and legs without bumping into each other. Each member of the group will introduce themselves one at a time by stating their first name and making an action that goes with their name. Examples include palms together for someone who wants to express their peacefulness, or a shadow jump shot for someone who likes basketball, or pretend writing for someone who likes to write poetry. You might want to make clear that the actions should not be offensive to anyone in the group.

Model the activity by introducing yourself. Everyone in the group should then say your name and do your action at the same time. The next person in the circle then teaches the group her name and action, after which the group says the person's name and does her action three times.

*Note:* An alternate way of running this activity requires the group to repeat everyone's name and action from the beginning as each person adds their action, similar to the memory game.

### BALL TOSS

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This is a good activity for students who know each other and have been through a couple other name activities, but may need some practice with each other's names. Students stand in a circle with enough room to move their arms. Tell the group that we are going to practice our ability to focus and pay careful attention to each other. In the activity, one at a time, participants will say, "*Here you go, (student's name),*" and throw a ball to another member of the circle. The person catching the ball will say, "*Thank you, (student's name).*"

You should model this activity with a student by first catching that person's gaze, saying, "*Here you go, Natasha,*" and telegraphing the

throw, making sure she is ready. The first time you do this activity, it is important to tell students to make sure the other person is ready before throwing. Each person should throw to a person who hasn't received the ball yet, with the facilitator getting the ball last. In the second round, go a little faster, but follow the exact path from the first round. Students should throw to the same person they threw to before.

- **Challenge:** By the third round, if the tossing is smoother and the names are getting easier, you can add another ball to the mix. Wait until the ball is about halfway through the chain and then throw to the first person in the chain, saying, "*Here you go, (student's name).*" You might wait to do this on a second day if it took a while for students to get comfortable with one ball.
- If there was a certain amount of confusion in the activity, you might ask the group what that was like for students who were trying to make the activity work. How does this relate to what can happen in a classroom when we need to work together to learn? This can allow for a conversation about the effect on a classroom when students aren't attuned to each other. What could we do as a group to make this activity work better? Sometimes it just takes practice, which can be true of being a student as well.

### HISTORY OF MY NAME

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This is a simple activity that works best with smaller groups. Ask participants to think about the history of their name, including first, last, middle or nicknames. What is the history of your name? How did you get your name? Were you named after an older relative? Does your name have a meaning? Is there an interesting story connected with your name? Go around the room listening to everyone's stories.

You can learn useful things from this activity. For example, many people don't like their given names and prefer to use other names. This is also a great way for other students to learn the pronunciation of other participants' names. We also learn about our participants' families and what is important to them as they talk about their names.

### NAME CONTEST

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Use this activity after a few sessions where participants have started to learn each others' names through activities. Ask a volunteer to go around the circle and say the names of every participant. When that person completes the group or can't continue, ask another participant to go the other direction. You might give a prize to participants who can name everyone in the room.

## Getting to Know Each Other

### NAME BINGO

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Make a bingo card with different statements that might apply to the people in your group. Participants talk to each other to collect signatures for people that satisfies the statement in the box. You can include other people's signatures once. Declare a winner when someone has a signature in every box on the card.

Examples of questions include:

- Plays the same sport as me
- Likes to fish
- Is reading a good book
- Speaks more than one language
- Has carpentry skills
- Has been to another country
- Plays a musical instrument
- Is a good cook
- Has a great-grandparent still living
- Loves math

### MAKE A MAP

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This is a great activity for large groups. You and your group will make a human map of the geographical region where people live. If your participants travel to get to your group, make the map larger. If you are working with people in a neighborhood organization, make it just big enough to include where people live. Determine the directions (north, south, east, west) in your classroom, gymnasium or open field. Tell the group that we are going to make a map of our town (city, neighborhood, state). Identify landmarks in different parts of the classroom. Tell the group that we are trying to make an extremely accurate map of the area, based on where people live. Participants should place themselves in relation to other people and landmarks in the room. Give them some time to talk to each other and figure out where they should be. Once everyone is settled, ask participants to introduce themselves to someone who lives nearby and talk about what they like about the area. You might also have people introduce themselves to the larger group from their position and talk about one thing others might not know about where they live.

### FIVE THINGS IN COMMON

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In your groups, take the next five minutes to find 5 things that everyone at your table has in common. Your goal is to find commonalities among your group that are unique, things that aren't true about the other groups here. You're going to have to investigate and be creative. Ask each other questions. After five minutes, ask each group to read off their list. If any other team generates the same idea, then it must be crossed off the list. Any idea that was not included on another team's list results in a point for the team. The team with the most points after all the reading of the lists is declared the winner.

### TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

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Model this activity by writing three sentences (two true and one false) on the board about yourself. Write truths that are hard to believe and lies that are difficult to distinguish from the truth. (These statements are about me, so you should write your own.)

- *I rode across the United States on a bicycle.*
- *My name was changed when I was one year old.*
- *I always knew I wanted to be a teacher.*

Tell the group that their job is to figure out which of these statements is a lie. They should ask you questions and judge by your answers: How long did it take you to ride across the country? Where did you sleep? On a bicycle? It's fine to continue lying. At some point, ask the class to vote on the lie. Reveal which statement is the lie. Now, pass out index cards and ask participants to write their own two truths and a lie. After collecting the cards, you might read a card aloud and see if the group can guess whose card it is, then ask the group to guess the lie by asking questions. You can keep the cards and have 1-2 participants answer questions as an icebreaker at the beginning of each class or as an energizer after a break. You can also have small groups play the game with each other, so that everyone gets a chance to answer questions.

### CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

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This exercise is great for building relationships among members of your group. It is especially useful when a new group is forming because it gives participants a chance to have a series of individual conversations. I have used Concentric Circles with students, teachers and administrators and it has never failed me.

Form two concentric circles of chairs, one circle facing out and one circle facing in, with one chair for everyone in your group. Each person in the group should be sitting across from one person, so they know who they will be talking to. (If you have an odd number of participants, you can participate in the conversations, interrupting yourself to move the group to a new topic of conversation.) Tell the group that they will be having a series of conversations on different topics. Apologize in advance for interrupting them. After a few minutes on each topic (enough time for each member of the pair to share), interrupt the group and ask the outer circle to move one chair clockwise. The inner circle should stay seated.

Choose a progression of questions that start with everyday topics and can move toward more subject-based questions. The questions should be on a specified topic and arranged logically.

- Talk about the place where you grew up and some of your earliest memories.
- Talk about your favorite and least favorite teacher from elementary school.
- Talk about a time when you had difficulty in school.
- Talk about your career goals.
- Talk about how being in this program will help you accomplish your goals.
- Talk about where you hope to be 5 years from now.

## Closings and Evaluation

A quick closing at the end of each class is useful as a quick assessment of what students learned and how they are feeling about the class. It also signals a formal end to the session. If you are comfortable receiving the feedback, allowing participants to rate the class is very useful for letting students express accomplishments they are happy about, as well as improvements that could be made. As always, it is important for the facilitator to participate and model openness by sharing as well.

- One word checkout (one word that sums up how you feel about today's group)
- One thing you learned today
- Rate today's class from 1-10. Explain your answer.



### GROUP NORMS: PAIR SHARE–GOOD CLASS/BAD CLASS

I recommend this activity at the beginning of any class with youth. Through it, we learn about students' previous experiences in school. It also helps participants start to develop self-awareness about how certain behaviors affect their peers. Here's a prediction: Everyone will talk about how they were unable to concentrate in classrooms where people talked over each other and didn't pay attention to the teacher or other students. The goal is to set norms based on positive and negative experiences people have had in school.

*A tip:* It's nice to do this activity early in the semester, before students have examples of being frustrated in your class! It's always easier to talk about what happened elsewhere.

- 1 **Turn to a person next to you.** Think about classes you have been in (HSE, high school, middle school). Talk about one that was a good experience and one that was not. What made each class effective or ineffective? (Maybe define "effective" as a vocabulary word.) The things we recognize as effective from previous classes should become our group norms, if possible.
- 2 **Easel paper with two columns ( – & + ).** Pull answers from the group and take notes of the main examples they relate. (Start with the positive.) What do they like in a class? What is effective and helps them learn? What do they dislike? What is ineffective and keeps them from learning? (Encourage students to talk about their own actions, other students' actions and the teachers' actions.)
- 3 **Focus on the positive.**
  - What positively-stated norms do we want to have as a group? (If students make suggestions such as, "No one should come late to class" or "We shouldn't make fun of other people," thank them for the suggestion and ask if they can communicate the same idea in affirmative statements, such as, "We will come to class on time" or "We will support other students and help them learn.")
  - Which of these norms do we want to commit to as a group?

Someone takes notes on easel paper.

- 4 These are some examples of guidelines you can use in any group or class. You might ask your class if they would like to include any of these guidelines in the class norms.

*(continued on next page)*

Guideline	Explanation
<b>One mic</b>	One person should speak at a time. We will try not to interrupt each other and speak over one another.
<b>Ouch/oops</b>	If you are offended by something someone said, you can say, "Ouch! When you said..., I felt like..." If you accidentally offended someone, you might say, "Oops! I didn't mean to offend you. I understand now what that was like for you."
<b>Full participation</b>	Do your best and do what you can. Participation looks different for different people. Some people are enthusiastic and jump in. Some people need some time to think. What does participation mean to you?
<b>Minimize distractions</b>	We are all adults and have responsibilities outside this room, but we are putting this time aside for ourselves, to invest in our future. We agree to limit our use of phones and other distractions that pull us away from learning.
<b>Have fun!</b>	Learning should be fun! We are here to enjoy ourselves while we improve our skills and learn about the world. Together, we can make this a good experience.