

Goucher CAST Presents: Community Building Activities

Community building is SO important in your classes, it will help students make connections to you and to others in your class, which keeps them engaged and accountable and increases their chances of being satisfied, seeking assistance from you or peers, and showing up. Break out of the name-game rut (though, admittedly I usually do use a quick name-game to help me learn everyone's names fast). These icebreakers *avoid common pitfalls* like being super eye-rollingingly cheezy, asking students to share super-personal information aloud to a large group of people they barely know, or being ineffective at helping students get to know each other and make authentic connections. I hope you enjoy!

– Robin Cresiski

One-word Icebreaker

Source: <https://www.thebalance.com/my-best-one-word-icebreaker-1918427>

Before class, come up with about 10 nouns that you think students might describe differently but may not be terribly controversial or emotional (for example New York, dogs, cheese, brunch, boxing, etc.)

Divide participants into groups of 4 or 5 people (count off if that makes sense, if it's later in the semester and folks sit in common spots). For the first round, give each group a different noun and ask them to each write down 1 word they associate with the noun. They each go around the circle, stating their word, and then discussing their perspectives. This usually causes laughter and some interesting conversation, but concludes pretty rapidly. After this, you can have share outs to the larger group. You usually get something like this "our group had the word dog, and our words were "fluffy, terrifying, loyal, and Pomegranate, which was the name of Debby's dog". You can do another round of "light" nouns (words like ocean, Starbucks, moustaches), or you can move on to something that may be more serious (campus culture, student life, campus food, Baltimore, etc.). I would not recommend choosing polarizing topics (the current president, the death penalty, etc.) as distilling people's feelings into a single word does not lead to productive conversation. When moving to more serious or relevant topics, I recommend all groups having the same noun to grapple with. This could still generate laughter, but could lead to some deeper conversations as well. Debrief as a class. How did the words in different groups compare? Does the compilation of words generated by the group seem accurate, even if there are opposing words? What did you/we learn about X,Y, or Z?

Identity/Value Circles:

Source: <http://www.icebreakers.ws/medium-group/identity-circles.html>

Supplies needed: Index cards (10 per student)

Identity Circles (also known as Identity Cards or Value Circles) is a deeper get-to-know-you game, during which you will have an opportunity to discuss with many students the values that make up your identity and how you prioritize them in your life. For this activity, you will be paired up with several different people, the number depending on how many people are in your group. The activity works best in even numbers, as pairing requires. To begin, divide your group in half and create two concentric circles (one inner circle and one outer circle). The people in the outer circle should face inside, and the people in the inner circle should face outside. Each inner circle person will pair up with an outer circle person. You can stand, sit on the floor, or use chairs for this activity; whatever is most convenient. This game works best indoors. Hand out the index cards and pens to each participant. Ask the participants to think about their values or identity components. Instruct them to write one value on each index card. They should have written down 10 values in total. Some examples of categories that can be useful for identifying values:

- Race (e.g. Hispanic, Asian, Black, Caucasian, etc.)
- Religion (e.g. Muslim, Christian, Athiest, etc.)
- Sex, gender identity, sexual preference, gender fluidity, etc.
- Desired occupation/major (e.g. Engineer, Artist, Student, Teacher, Doctor, unemployed, etc.)
- Family (e.g. sister, brother, mother, father, daughter, son, etc.)
- Traits (e.g. extrovert/introvert, athletic, musical, artistic, analytical, creative, funny, etc.)
- Activities (e.g. sports, cooking, comic books, making movies, etc.)
- Health (e.g. healthy, immobile, mobile, depressed, diabetic, etc.)
- Socio-economic (e.g. wealthy, middle-class, financially struggling, etc.)

Once everyone has their values written down, have the participants share with their first partner why they chose to write down the values they did. After sharing for 5-7 minutes, ask all participants to rip up one of their cards (or fold and put away). This part of the activity gives participants an opportunity to reflect on how they prioritize their values. Ripping up (or putting away) the card should help the participant imagine living without that part of their identity. After the students have discarded one value/trait, the outer circle will rotate one partner to the right. Everyone should have a new partner now. Have the new pairs discuss which card they discarded and why. Continue this process until all participants are each left with one card — their most important value. This is a very easy, low-maintenance group activity that requires little preparation and can work for as small as 8 people to as large as 50 people. This activity is also good to help encourage people to share deeply with others with whom they would not otherwise share.

Optional instructions: Have each person create values cards and try to order them from most important to least important. Have each person share these values with each other and explain each one, without destroying the cards.

Unique and Shared

Source: <http://www.icebreakers.ws/team-building/unique-and-shared.html>

Unique and Shared is a get-to-know-you game as well as a team-building activity. The game helps people see that they have more in common with their peers than they might initially realize, while highlighting their own individual strengths that they can contribute to the group.

An indoor setting is preferable. Participants will split into groups of about five people, so this activity works fine with medium, large, and even some extra-large groups. Each group of five needs paper and a pen. Ask participants to form groups of five people with the people around them. Pass out sheets of paper. The first half of the activity is the Shared part. Instruct a note taker for each group to create a list of many common traits or qualities that members of the group have in common (aim for 10). Writing things that are immediately obvious (e.g. “everyone has hair” or “we are all wearing clothes” or “we each have two eyes”) is not allowed. The goal is for everyone to dig deeper than the superficial. Allow about five or six minutes and then have a spokesperson from each subgroup read their list. If there are too many groups, ask for a few volunteers to read their list. The second half is the Unique part. Keep the same groups or, optionally, you can ask everyone to rearrange themselves into new groups. On a second sheet of paper have them record Unique traits and qualities; that is, items that *only apply to one person in the group*. Instruct the group to find at least two unique qualities and strengths per person. Again, strive for qualities and strengths beyond the superficial and past the obvious things anyone can readily see. Allow another five or six minutes. When time is up, share the unique qualities in one of the following ways: (1) each person can share one of their unique qualities themselves; (2) have each person read the qualities of the person to their right; or (3) have a spokesperson read a quality one at a time, and have the others guess who it was.

Forced Choice – This or That

Source: Icebreakers that Rock by Jennifer Gonzalez at Cult of Pedagogy (but I learned it from Barbara Roswell)

Forced Choice asks players to choose between two options. The game works well as an icebreaker and you can ask as few or as many questions as desired based on how engaged the students are. Forced choice works for any group size as long as the room is set up in such a way that students can fit congregated on two sides (front and back of the room, left or right sides, opposite corners, etc.). Ask students to consider if they are more like This or That (see columns of This and That options). Note that you will need to remind students (maybe more than once), that **they are not choosing what they like more, they are choosing which they are more like**. Give them time to think and move, and then ask some students from each side to explain why they chose This or That. It may be worthwhile to set up a ground rule that your explanation of why they are more This (or more That) should focus on positive attributes of This (or That) rather than negative attributes of whichever they didn't choose. This is a great way to get students to know a bit more about each other below the surface and express some creative ideas. Make students commit to a side, no standing in between!

This	That
Cat	Dog
Pen	Pencil
Music	Poem
Kite	GoKart
Book	Movie
File Cabinet	Toychest

This	That
Graph paper	Canvas
Night	Day
Sequoia tree	Skyscraper
Past	Future
Lake	Ocean
New York	Colorado

A Great Wind Blows

Source: <http://www.icebreakers.ws/medium-group/great-wind-blows.html>

Special Note: this is an ACTIVE and highly kinetic icebreaker, please do not use this if there are any students in your class with injuries or mobility barriers as it will make them feel left out. Great Wind Blows (also known as the Big Wind Blows) is a good icebreaker that involves a bit of movement, a bit similar to Musical Chairs. The game gets everyone off their phones and present in class, and may help them get to know their classmates (although probably pretty superficially). You'll need several chairs (one fewer than the total number of players). Arrange all the chairs to form a circle (all chairs facing inward toward the middle). One player starts in the middle, standing up. He or she begins the round.

The game is simple to play; one person in the middle starts by saying "Great wind blows for everyone who..." and then says any characteristic that is true for themselves. For example, if the person has been to Canada before, he or she can say, "Great wind blows for everyone who has been to Canada." All players who have been to Canada before must stand and quickly find a new seat that is more than 2 chairs away from them. If the player is not able to find a vacant seat, he or she is the new person who is in the middle. Some ideas include:

- Great wind blows for everyone who has moved at least once before coming to college.
- Great wind blows for everyone who has been to another country before.
- Great wind blows for everyone who loves chocolate.
- Great wind blows for everyone who is wearing jeans.
- Great wind blows for everyone who has gone more than 2 days without showering.
- Great wind blows for everyone who is addicted to video games.

Be creative and have fun! Teachers, youth group leaders and camp counselors love this game because it gets people moving, helping to break the ice at the beginning of class or youth group, or at the start of camp. It's also a fun way to get to know interesting things about each other.

I Am From, Poem exercise

Source: adapted from <https://medium.com/fresh-darlings/i-am-from-exercise-1-bc52897f6a15>

This is an exercise that allows student to create something beautiful about who they are and where they are from. It allows students to describe their past through various senses and share that with others in the class. Here are the instructions: Set a timer for 30 seconds. Ask students to write down five concrete images you have seen at some point in your life (for students that have been blind from birth, ask them to write down something they've envisioned). Remind students not to overthink it, they don't have time! Repeat the process for each of the other senses: sound, smell, touch and taste (each time set a timer for 30 seconds and have students right down quickly about 3-5 snippets they remember from some point in their life).

Now instruct students to look at their list. There's probably some surprising and strange things in there. This is good! Have them pick out at least one from each section that sticks out as particularly unique or important to them. They do not need to seem cohesive. An example of a list (from K.E. Kimball who blogged about this exercise) included: the bottom of a swimming pool (sight), chickens in the yard squawking and pecking (sound), roses of every color and size (smell), a silk slip (touch), and the inside of someone else's mouth (taste). Have students use these snippets, with a little elaboration as needed, to create a simple "I am from" poem. Here's an example of an I Am From poem from George Ella:

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded—
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Remind students that if they get stuck, just repeat the refrain of "I am from." They don't have to stick exclusively to images you generated through the quick free write, give them permission to let their imagination go where it's called. Allow students to share their poems in partners or small groups. Depending on the size of the class and your time, you can have all students share out, or select students share out.

Mattering and Marginality

Source: Lee Kneffelcamp, adapted into an Ice Breaker by Barbara Roswell and other groups: <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/harvest/workshop8/142219.shtml>

Have students write brief responses to the following prompts (give about 4 minutes): Think of a time when you felt like you mattered, when who you were and what you did were valued. How did you know? How did you feel? What did you do?

Have students then write brief responses to this prompt (again, about 4 minutes): Think of a time when you were marginal, when you were not valued. How did you know? How did you feel? What did you do?

Students can share these in pairs or small groups. Direct students who are not sharing to actively listen and learn about their peer, and not interrupt to share their own stories or advice or thoughts while someone else is sharing. It should take about 2 minutes for each person to share, so give reminders when it's about time to switch. After the students have each had a chance to share, the small groups (or whole class) can discuss what commonalities they saw, what conclusions they can draw, and whether this exercise inspires them in some way (to behave differently, to set a goal for themselves, etc.).

Interviews

There are MANY interview icebreakers out there, but having students interview each other can be as fun or as humdrum as you make it. Try providing students with questions to ask each other that go beyond the "name", "where were you born" variety.

- It's a sunny, perfect day outside, where do you wish you could be and what would you be doing?
- What's a TV show that you watch but are a little embarrassed to admit? What do you think attracts you to this show?
- If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?
- What is one of your fondest memories or objects from childhood and why?
- If I wanted to become a very close friend to you, what would be important for me to know about you?

Live Polling

Poll Everywhere (<https://www.polleverywhere.com/>) is free and easily embeds into your powerpoints, keynote presentations or google slides so you can do live polling with your students. Ask them to use one word to describe their winter break (or summer break) and poll everywhere can put together a word cloud. See the results of a multiple-choice question live as students text in their answers on their cell phones. Or ask an open ended-question that students can answer anonymously. What about the world are you most worried about? What about the world are you most excited about? If Goucher were going to offer a unique class that you'd be the first to sign up for, what would it be about?