



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN  
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

## *Creating Community in the Community College Classroom... or, It's Okay to Break the Silence*

Almost every community college instructor has experienced the uncomfortable sound of silence that occurs on opening day each semester as students enter the classroom and quietly, warily take their seats, watching and waiting. As instructors we tend to stand at the door and cheerfully greet each student, or calmly wait behind the podium pretending to concentrate on a last-minute paper shuffle, or enthusiastically hurry into the classroom after all the students have found seats. Regardless of how we begin, silence and an accompanying sense of distance persist.

At this moment the "community" in community college becomes a misnomer. Unlike four-year residential colleges where a sense of community among students develops as a result of dorm life, social clubs, varsity sports, or Greek organizations, rarely is there a ready-made community for community college students unless the instructor takes time to create one. Creating a community within the classroom begins when students interact with other students in such a way that connections begin to form.

Ice breakers and warm-up activities encourage the building of a classroom community. Instructors discover that ice breakers not only help students get to know and like each other, but such connections reduce attrition, involve students in their own learning, and improve classroom discussion and interaction.

What follows is a series of ice breakers that work. Some are more practical for small discussion groups; others work better in large lecture settings. Some can be accomplished in three to five minutes; others require more time. All are classroom-tested by successful community college instructors.

### **Paired Interviews**

For this ice breaker, allow five minutes total interview time and, depending on group size and time constraints, 15 to 60 seconds reporting time per person.

- Pair students quickly (if one student remains, you act as his/her partner until a latecomer arrives).
- Ask students to interview each other. For the first two minutes, one partner is the interviewer; when

you call "time" after two minutes, the partners switch roles.

- The interview can be structured; you can give suggestions or specific questions to ask: Name? Where did you grow up? What is your favorite leisure-time activity? Why are you taking this course?
- At the end of the four minutes of interview time, begin the reporting back phase, indicating to the students how much time each should spend introducing his or her partner. Model the activity by reporting first.

Students enjoy learning about each other and about you; they reveal more information about each other than they would if asked to introduce themselves. This activity also provides an excellent way for you to begin learning students' names. As students introduce each other, jot down names and make an impromptu, informal seating chart. Then, for the remainder of the class period, you can call students by name.

### **Index Card—You Tell Me, I'll Tell You**

This ice breaker takes little time and works well for any size group. It serves to help you gain rapport with students.

- Distribute two index cards to each person, making certain the cards are different (i.e., color, size, lined/unlined).
- Ask the students to use one card (specify which) to tell you anything they want you to know about them as individuals. It can be specific to the class or just to them. Indicate that you would like the student's name on the card and that you consider this card confidential. (You will be surprised at the candor students exhibit. Students have written such comments as: "Please don't call on me to read out loud"; "I've always done badly in math, and I'm afraid I'll fail this class.")
- Collect these cards while students are completing the second set.
- On the second set, ask students to write a question about you or the course. Indicate no names are necessary and that you'll answer the questions.



- After you collect the second set, thumb through the cards, answering those you can on the spot. You might take the last few minutes of class to answer others.

During the next few class sessions, try to answer all the questions. Your candor will help students feel comfortable with you and the course.

#### Great Questions

This ice breaker works well with small or large groups, and the time it takes is easily controlled by the instructor.

- Begin by deciding (before class) on three questions you'd like students to ask each other and then discuss as a class. They may be generic or discipline-specific, but should be open-ended and have the potential of a wide variety of answers. Examples of questions are: If you could change one thing in today's world, what would it be? What do you like best about (your college)? What do you want to be doing in five years? What frustrates you most about...? Which president has had the greatest impact on our country? Why do people have math anxiety?
- Once you've selected three questions, put them on the board or project them on a screen. There will be two rounds of questions.
- In the first round, ask the students to move around the room, find someone they don't know, ask him/her the questions, and jot down the responses.
- In the second round, ask students to move to another person. Each student's responses to the questions should be different from those given during the first round, forcing students to stretch their thinking.

After a few minutes, halt the "interview exchange" and have students return to their seats. As a class, discuss the responses to the questions.

#### Organized Sit-Downs

This activity can serve as an introduction to a topic or general theme of the course.

- Once students are seated, ask them to re-seat themselves according to whatever "theme" you've chosen. For example, a U.S. History class might be asked to seat themselves in the rough shape of the United States based on where they were born.
- Indicate general areas of the room, such as "down front is Mexico and South America, to the right California and Pacific areas." But, since one of the objectives is to get students to make contact with each other, it is wise to let them sort out the details.
- Once everyone has found a seat, you might follow up with some appropriate questions: How many of

you are native New Yorkers? Michiganders? Or, in the case of the math class, you might talk about average height, frequency, or range.

Whatever the theme of the organized sit-downs, encourage students to introduce themselves to each other. Place yourself in the appropriate seat.

#### Find a Person Who...

This simple activity is easily tailored to different classes and updated each semester.

- Prior to the first class meeting, write 10-15 statements on a sheet of paper with a blank space after each. Make a copy for each student.
- Title the paper "Find a Person Who...." Sentences vary from personal information to discipline/course information, such as: Find a person who is left-handed, is on this campus for the first time, likes to snow ski, is a native of California, jogs/walks 15 miles or more each week, is working towards an A.A. degree.
- Distribute the papers and encourage students to mill around the room asking questions of each other. A person who fits the statement signs his/her name on the appropriate blank. A person can sign only once on each sheet of paper.
- When it appears that many have completed the exercise, call time; have students return to their seats, and as a class discuss the responses to the questions: "Who is left handed?" "Do we have any native Californians here?"

If you complete this exercise just prior to a break, you'll find increased conversation between students which carries over during this free time.

By breaking the silence that accompanies every first class, you are encouraging community. And when students risk—just a little by sharing something about themselves—you are building a basis for open discussions later in the course. Consider using ice-breaker activities periodically, not just on the first day, to help students form new connections and build more diverse communities.

*Sharalee C. Jorgensen, Dean, Community Education*

For further information, contact the author at Mira-Costa College, One Barnard Drive, Oceanside, CA 92056.

*Suzanne D. Roueche, Editor*

November 9, 1990, Vol. XII, No. 27  
 ©The University of Texas at Austin, 1990  
 Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER  
 institutions for their own personnel.

*INNOVATION ABSTRACTS* is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for \$40 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.