



Using Icebreakers to Build Community

It's the first day of class, and students nervously find their seats. They may or may not know anyone in the class. Tension of the unknown is palpable. Students are unsure what to expect: *What will this course be like? Will it be easy or difficult? What will the teacher be like? Will I like him/her? Will I enjoy the course?*

As a math teacher, I often find students come to the first day of class with a lot of anxiety. One of my goals on the first day is to help students feel more relaxed, which I find conducive to their learning. I attempt to interject humor into my introductions, much like I do with my teaching, which I think helps create a more relaxed atmosphere. However, I don't believe humor leads to better and deeper learning. To achieve better learning, I aim to create a learning community in my classrooms.

There is research, and perhaps some personal experience, to support the notion that building a community in the classroom promotes learning. Some benefits include:

- A sense of belonging that leads to better attendance and retention;
- An increase in collaboration and accountability;
- A shared sense of purpose that increases motivation; and
- The development of relationships with peers, which promotes a deeper feeling of belonging to the college.

So, how do I build a community of learners in my classroom? I try to start on day one.

Find a Partner

On the first day of class, I take a moment to introduce myself. I go beyond just my name, title, and office location. Instead, I share a bit of my educational and family background, as well as a few other things I think students might find interesting, with the hope that I make myself more approachable and relatable. I then ask students to find a partner they do not already know—a.k.a. their new best friend! I give them a few minutes to introduce themselves and have a short conversation including their name, program of study, an interesting fact about themselves, their biggest fault as a math student, and one thing that makes them happy. With this activity, students are engaged in lively discussions with their classmates on the very first day of class. Finally,

I ask students to introduce their new best friend to the rest of the class by sharing their program of study and their interesting fact. As an added benefit, students who may feel uncomfortable talking about themselves in front of the class may be comfortable introducing someone else. This short icebreaker takes less than ten minutes, but it helps students learn their classmates' names and lays the foundation for future group discussions.

When slightly modified, this activity works in an online format as well. For instance, I ask students the same icebreaker questions, but I require them to post a video of themselves answering the questions and provide a typed script in the discussion forum. Then students must reply to at least two of their classmates, therefore making a connection with multiple peers. Students must respond with more than a cursory reply. I have found that students often respond back and forth several times, creating a conversational feel in the online environment. Students usually find shared interests, situations, and future goals, which I believe fosters the development of our online learning community and can be quite a departure from some unengaging online learning environments.

"Have You Ever . . .?"

Another useful icebreaker activity on the first day of a face-to-face class allows students to find common ground with their classmates. The entire class stands in a circle with one person in the center. The person in the center introduces themselves, which reinforces name recognition, and asks "Have you ever . . .?" to identify other students who have shared that experience. For example, "Hi, my name is Ms. Thomas. Have you ever ridden a rollercoaster?" If any of their classmates standing in the circle have had that experience, they will leave their place in the circle and find another open spot. The last one to find a place becomes the center, and the activity continues. I try to get everyone into the center position at least once. Students generally start the activity uncertain, but they end up laughing and enjoying hearing what other students have experienced.

The activity helps build community in several ways. First, students learn a bit more about each other and find things in common with their classmates. Often, students choose to say they have simply "owned a dog" or "been to the beach," but even these ordinary shared experiences create a sense that everyone is there for the same reasons—to learn math, pass the course, and graduate—and that they're all in this together. Secondly, the activity requires students to share a physical space. In a face-to-face course, the classroom is a physical space inhabited by mind and body. Often students

are as uncomfortable with sharing physical space as they are sharing intellectual space. In the first few rounds, students are acutely aware of the space they occupy in relation to others. However, as the activity unfolds, students become more at ease sharing the physical space. I am upfront about the extensive use of group work in the course, and students begin to acclimate on the first day as they work to form a community of learners that will work together.

Additionally, these types of activities are often unexpected in a math class. Consequently, they help set the stage for a different kind of experience. I want students to embrace the uncomfortableness that comes with learning math in a way, a way that is different from many or all of their past experiences learning math. Although I do provide mini lessons throughout the course, I hope to deconstruct the mystic “sage on the stage” mentality—that is, that all knowledge is held by the instructor and students are vessels ready to absorb information through knowledge-transfer (i.e. lectures). Lectures have their place, but they should not be used in place of active learning. Rather, lectures should provide a backdrop of information to enhance students’ ability to be critical thinkers and learners.

The Maze

Another example of an activity I have used in the early stages of a course is one in which students work as a team to find their way through a maze. On a 5x5 grid on the floor (I tape off square floor tiles), students start at one side of the maze and must use trial-and-error to move through a predetermined path, moving into a square before I tell them if they have made the correct move or not. If students move into the wrong square, they leave the maze, and the next student makes an attempt. Students successfully complete the activity once everyone has moved through the maze without errors. Written instructions for a variation of this activity are available at <https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/lessons-maze>. I use this activity for several reasons, including teamwork/ community building, redefining failure, asking for help, and out-of-the-box thinking.

Reflection

With all of these icebreaker activities, a brief reflective discussion upon completion helps students make sense of their experience: why we did the activity and what they can take away from it. For certain icebreakers, a debrief is less effective—after simple introductions, for example. However, I do take a few minutes after the “Have You Ever . . .?” common ground activity for students to uncover the importance of creating a community and learning about each other so we can better learn with each other. For the maze icebreaker described above, the reflection might include asking:

- What happened during the activity?
- What elements were necessary to be successful?
- Were individual students successful? Was the group successful?

- What does success mean?
- Were individuals successful on every turn?
- What is failure?
- Describe something at which you’ve failed.
- Did you “fail” when you made a mistake?
- How can we reframe “failure?”

During the activity, I like to have one step in the path be outside the well-defined 5x5 grid. Then during the discussion, I can address the importance of creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, and risk-taking. During this discussion, you can also touch on the importance of the individual asking for help from the community and a myriad of other concepts that may be relevant to your classroom community.

Conclusion

By the end of the course, not only do many students know all of their classmates’ names, but they have also worked with many of their peers, and have had personal interactions with even more. Students collaborate on assignments in and out of the classroom and communicate with peers on a regular basis. They learn from their classmates and develop interdependence and leadership skills. The icebreaker activities help students feel more relaxed about the course and set the precedent that students are expected to engage with and learn from each other. Students learn they must work as a community of learners to be as successful as possible, starting on day one.

What icebreakers have you found helpful in the classroom? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook](#).

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