

Activities For Facilitating Connected and Inclusive Learning Environments

Division of Equity & Inclusion
University of Oregon

Rather than using 'icebreakers' and interactive activities only on the first day of class, consider using course-related activities throughout the term. A list of possible activities is provided below, and can be adapted to fit various pedagogical needs.

Student-to-Student Interaction

The goal of these activities is to provide students with the opportunity to get to know one another and build community to lessen the loneliness and social isolation of the present moment. These activities are intended for groups of 2-4 people, and each one lasts approximately 5-10 minutes. They can be used during zoom classes by dividing students into chat rooms or asynchronously as homework assignments that allow students to build community in ways that foster dialogue and engagement between classes.

When introducing these activities, tell students why you are using the activity. Note that some students might feel uncomfortable participating in interpersonal activities, especially icebreakers that are not tied to course content. Where possible, connect the activity to course content or emphasize the link to community building. It is best not to force students to participate; rather, allow them to opt out and learn by observing.

Interviews: Randomly pair students. Ask each student to develop 3-5 questions that they would want to ask others to help them get to know someone better. The pairs then pose their questions and answers back and forth. Interviewers summarize what they found out about their partners and post their partners' names and this information in a venue that is accessible to others.

Common Ground: In groups of two, students have 1 minute to find 6 things they have in common. They then pair with another group of 2 and then the group of four has 2 minutes to find 6 things that they all have in common.

Sharing Trepidations: Students get into pairs for a discussion of students' most significant concerns or fears and how they are overcoming them.

Student-to-Instructor Interactions

These activities are meant to foster a positive class climate and engage students with the instructor as part of the larger class community. By participating in these activities in pairs or small groups, these activities also promote student-to-student interactions.

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Syllabus Icebreaker: In small groups, students identify outstanding questions or complete a syllabus quiz. An alternative would be to give an “assignment icebreaker” where students work in groups to discuss and identify questions regarding assignment instructions.

Class Expectations: In groups of 2-4, students identify up to 6 ground rules for the class. Instructors follow up by summarizing and discussing the expectations with students.

Collaborative Start, Stop, Continue: Students work in pairs or small groups to provide their thoughts about what they’d like their instructor to start doing, stop doing, and keep doing in class. The groups then summarize the feedback and submit it to the instructor. Instructors follow up by summarizing the results and discussing what will change/not change, and why.

Interview the Instructor: Students work in groups to develop questions for the instructor. Instructors should clarify the areas of his/her life that are open to interviewing.

Twitter Scavenger Hunt: Students in the course work in pairs to tweet the responses to ten questions. The questions are provided at the start of class and the students have the class period to complete the assignment, either in the class or outside of class. This assignment should be linked to course or class learning outcomes.

Student-to-Content Interaction

These activities aim to actively engage students with the course material. These activities can also be used to promote student-to-student interactions when students are asked to work on the activity in small groups. By participating in these activities in pairs or small groups, these activities also promote student-to-student interactions.

The Alphabet Game: Students think of a discipline-specific concept/theory that starts with the letter A, the letter B, etc. until they reach the end of the alphabet (e.g., “What Do Sociologists Study?”). A variation would be to see how far down the alphabet the groups can get in 5 minutes. The instructor follows up with the large class. (Eggleston & Smith)

Collaborative Response: The instructor poses a question to the class and invites responses by a show of hands or via an online immediate response tool. After providing their individual response, students discuss the question in small groups. Each small group develops a group response which is then shared or submitted along with all individual responses.

Thought Provoking Questions: The instructor poses a thought-provoking, “yes or no” debatable question to which students respond individually and then discuss in groups of 2-4 (e.g., *Food banks should be discontinued because they are part of the problem, not part of the solution.*) The instructor follows up with a large group discussion.

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Using Popular Music to teach course concepts or themes: Music can be used in a variety of ways to encourage interaction and engage students in the course. One idea is to play energizing, popular music as students enter the classroom to create an informal, relaxed atmosphere, focus students' attention to the course, stimulate conversation, and increase the instructor's social presence. Increase the relevance of this activity by selecting a popular song that expresses the topic of the lecture and have small groups discuss the song's relevance. As the term progresses, ask student groups to suggest relevant songs.

Collaborative Concept Maps: Done either individually and shared, or created collaboratively from the start, a concept map can reinforce concepts learned out of class and build connections between various topics. Students map out how concepts, ideas or theories are thematically related in a visual manner. Any gaps can be useful inspiration for discussions either on a group or class level.

Find, Post & Vote: First, student groups find images from the media (e.g., advertisements, news headlines, TV shows, movies, newspapers, etc.) that portray the concept/topic being studied. Next, each group posts their image to online learning tools. Finally, the instructor creates a selection of the top 10 images and the class votes for the winners and have a class discussion on why the winners were the top picks.

Think-Pair-Share: Students take a central concept presented in the out of class material, or a particularly controversial quiz question from the prior assessment, and reflect on it individually before discussing it with a neighbor.

Think phase: students work independently and flesh out their thoughts/arguments and may write their thoughts down.

Pair phase: students discuss their response with a partner.

Share phase: elicit responses from members of the class and begin to engage your students in a wider discussion demonstrating the many different perspectives. Note that in large classes, there might only be time for a sample of groups to share with the large class.

Inkshedding: Give students up to 3 minutes to write their thoughts about a thought-provoking question on a piece of paper (students are instructed to put their name on the paper). After 3 minutes, students pass their paper to the person next to them. The receiver adds comments on what was written and/or adds to it. Repeat this process two more times with the last round returning the paper to its original author.

Source: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/creating-positive-learning-environment/inclusivity-accessibility-and-motivation/building-community-large-classes>