

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



Breaking the Ice: Another Semester Begins

Another academic year is about to begin. It is always interesting to notice the behavior of college students as they take their seats on that much anticipated first day of class. There is often a general sense of stillness and uneasiness that fills the room. Students, who in other settings might tend to be boisterous and laughing, take on a more serious and somewhat tentative demeanor. They watch as others enter the room, taking an occasional glance at the professor assigned to teach the class. During those awkward moments of waiting for class to begin, students may wonder what the semester will hold; they may ponder how much and how hard they will need to work, and maybe even give some thought to what they will learn. In spite of these initial feelings and behaviors, we also know that things do change as the semester proceeds. Students acclimate themselves to their surroundings, strike up friendships with others in the class, and become more comfortable with the expectations, quirks, and behaviors of the professor.

In this issue of *The ToolBox*, we will explore some strategies for “breaking the ice” on the first day of class. The goal of these activities is to move beyond “party games” toward three important outcomes:

- 1 Create an environment in which students can form positive expectations about themselves as learners
- 2 Create an energy and attraction to learning and to the subject matter that will be covered during the semester
- 3 Begin the process of creating a learning community in which people support and encourage one another during the sometimes challenging process of learning new skills and concepts

As you consider these strategies and the degree to which they may be applicable in your classroom, please consider the following guidelines:

A key goal of the icebreaker is to build a level of comfort among your students—to create an environment where students feel accepted and valued and believe that they can be successful. This is a great way to start each new semester.

Many millennial students are often reluctant to express their opinions in a classroom setting. There may be many explanations for this phenomenon. It is logical to speculate, however, that one reason is a fear that they will say something that would bring embarrassment. The proposed icebreakers focus on getting students involved without forcing them to speak or share in any setting other than a small group.

Having fun while learning is a positive outcome. It is good to hear our students laughing and engaging with one another as they learn together as part of a community of scholars.

Participating in icebreaker activities also provides you with a nonthreatening means of getting to know your students. They get to see you as a “real” person from the very beginning of the class.



Ways to Break the Ice

Post-It Note Voting

You can probably remember students who sat through an entire semester in your class and never expressed an opinion or made a comment. It's not that they didn't have opinions, thoughts, or feelings, it's probably just a matter of not feeling comfortable in expressing those emotions and ideas in front of a group of their classmates. One way of involving all of your students is "Post-It Note Voting." Here are the steps:

- Create an imaginary continuum on the blackboard/whiteboard in front of the room with extremes like "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree."
- Give your students post-it notes of various colors.
- Pose a question from your course or discipline that relates to current events in the world and requires a thoughtful or value-based response. For example, you might say,
 - ◊ The minimum wage should be raised to \$9 per hour, or
 - ◊ College tuition should be free for all individuals who wish to pursue a degree
- Different color post-it notes are used for each question; students then post their responses along the continuum.
- Follow-up discussions can be conducted in small groups about the trends and frequencies of various answers and the varied reasons people used for taking a strongly affirmative or negative position.

Permission to Speak

There is often a natural separation that exists between faculty and students. One interesting way of connecting with students is to give them this direction: "I would like to get to know each of you, but quite often, in a class this size, it is difficult to initially make those connections. My encouragement to you, when you see me on campus, is to stop and introduce yourself." You will be amazed at the number of students who take advantage of this "permission to speak" with you.



People Search

A fun strategy for getting people to quickly interact with one another is to invite them to participate in a "People Search." This is, in a sense, a human scavenger hunt. Each member of the class is provided with a grid containing 12 squares (i.e., 3 columns and four rows). In each of the squares is a brief description of someone they need to search for in the room. Examples include:

- A person who is left handed
- Someone who has more than four siblings
- A person who is willing to stand on a chair and sing "Mary Had a Little Lamb"
- Someone who has lived in more than five states
- A person who was born outside the United States
- Someone who knows the names of the seven dwarfs
- A person who plays more than two musical instruments

You can create additional ideas based upon your locale, the course that you are teaching, or the types of students that are part of the group.

Students are given the task of circulating around the room looking for people who meet the criteria listed in the squares of their game sheet. When they find a person who meets one of the criteria, they ask that individual to sign their name in the appropriate square. The goal is to find signatures for each of the descriptors. An important ground rule is that each person in the room can only sign one other person's game sheet.



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