

Energise Your Learners with Icebreakers

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Icebreakers are commonly used as a method for learners and educators to become acquainted before starting a session. Importantly, they have been shown to enhance learning for a variety of reasons including: energising learners, encouraging bonding between learners, and providing educators with an insight into group dynamics. Traditionally, icebreaker activities have constituted face-to-face scenarios in group settings. However, as medical education has evolved to include virtual learning, so too, icebreakers need to become virtual (Chlup and Collins, 2010, Conrad and Donaldson, 2004). This How To describes the various benefits of using icebreakers in educational settings and the different types of icebreakers that can be used.

Benefits of using icebreakers for learners

Create a safe learning environment - Icebreakers engage learners as they get to know each other, helping to relieve any tensions within and between learners so that they feel comfortable with each other and where group work is involved. This encourages the development of a safe learning environment (Rudolf et al, 2014).

Group Bonding – This occurs within the group as rapport is established through the use of icebreakers, and this enables learners to develop a shared focus, enhancing subsequent learning (Chlup and Collins, 2010).

Learner/Teacher Bonding - Just as icebreakers can create learner-learner bonds, they can also lead to bonding between the educator and learner. This can improve the learning environment as learners may feel more comfortable to participate by asking or answering questions posed by or to the educator.

Fostering readiness to learn - Icebreakers are also important strategies to foster readiness to learn as they can prime learners with regards to bringing to the forefront any experiences and knowledge they may unknowingly have regarding the subject material, knowledge on which further learning can be built.

Preparing learners for upcoming tasks – Icebreakers can also prepare learners for upcoming tasks such as group discussions, if similar tasks are used as icebreakers. This may improve the degree of engagement and comfort of the learners to participate in subsequent tasks, and therefore enhance learning.

Group dynamics – Icebreakers may reveal the extent to which different learners engage in the activity. Some may readily participate while others may require great encouragement to do so. This may alter your approach with upcoming tasks you have planned. They can highlight how well different learners work together early on which may influence how you divide learners into groups for group activities.

Reveal level of experience and knowledge - Introductory icebreakers may reveal different experiences and level of knowledge amongst the learners. This can therefore be used in the lesson to make the subject more relevant and also enable learners to learn from each other's experiences. It can also provide you with early insights into how well you have pitched the session and you may consider altering your lesson plan.

Features of effective icebreakers

It is important to consider the choice and design of the icebreaker in the context of the learners, learning environment and forthcoming topic and activities which follow the icebreaker. The following features enhance the icebreaker's ability to engage learners and foster future learning:

- **Focussed:** It is important to decide on the aim of the icebreaker. Consider carefully its purpose for yourself as an educator and in what way it enhances learning.
- **Relevancy:** The task needs to be relevant to the forthcoming topic and activities. This helps prime learners and initiates recall of knowledge that may be related to the upcoming topics.
- **Learner readiness:** The learners need to be ready for the activity and so tasks are more effective where no prerequisite skill or knowledge are necessary.
- **Appropriate complexity:** It is important to carefully consider the complexity of the task to increase the chance of student engagement and enjoyment with it.

Types of icebreakers

As educators, we are all likely to have taught learners who do not know each other and whom we have never met before. Therefore, we may be unsure not only of their knowledge and experience in the subject we are about to cover, but also of group dynamics and how these may impact participation in tasks we have incorporated into our lesson plan.

Icebreakers broadly fall into the following categories: introductory icebreakers, team-building icebreakers, topic exploration icebreakers and activity introduction icebreakers.

- **Introductory icebreakers:** for learners and educators to get to know each other. This can include names, background and level of experience. Introductory icebreakers can also involve learners and educators revealing an unrelated fact about themselves to the group to make them more comfortable talking aloud in front of one another.

- **Team-building icebreakers:** for learners to work together to solve a task. This group activity can be novel and not related to the forthcoming subject material or tasks. It supports learning through group interaction.
- **Topic exploration icebreakers:** to gently introduce the topic or subject material that is about to be covered. This is particularly useful if the topic is new to the learners. It can help learners to recall any related experiences or cognitive schema which they can then modify.
- **Activity introduction icebreakers:** for learners to try out an activity similar to the ones about to be used in the forthcoming lesson, but not related to the topic.

This allows the group to familiarise themselves with the practical or technical aspects of tasks and fosters learning of subject material later in the lesson

Icebreakers in the virtual environment

It is important to consider how ice breakers can be adapted for the virtual learning environment. You will need to consider the digital resources available to you, and may need to put learners into groups in advance. It is a good idea to monitor individuals' engagement with tasks to maximise groupings for future activities. Below is a list of some examples.

Examples of face to face and virtual icebreakers.		
Type of icebreaker	Face-to-face session	Virtual sessions
Introductory	In pairs, one person asks the person next to them facts about themselves which the person then has to remember so as to introduce their partner to the rest of the group.	Use a virtual platform. This can be achieved using a thread, or group chat whereby each person can post specific information about themselves either in real-time with others or in their own time for others to look at a later time.
Team building	This can include small groups being asked to work together to build an object or solve a puzzle.	Use an online video showing how to build an object and an online video calling platform to try and construct the item together. This would require materials which the learners who are not in the presence of the educator can access.
Activity introduction	Where upcoming tasks involve group discussions word naming games not related to the subject material can be used such as word chains games or naming games. An icebreaker could involve watching a video clip of something not related to the subject material and can be followed by group discussion of the video clip.	Same as for face-to-face except using a thread or video calling for group discussion not related to the subject material. The same task of watching a video clip would be suitable with group discussion using a discussion thread.
Topic exploration	Using question and answers to help learners recall previous knowledge e.g. using discussions, flip charts, 'turning point' devices.	Smartphone applications e.g. polleverywhere. This engages the learners in anonymous question and answer sessions to help learners recall knowledge.

Conclusion

There are common features of icebreakers which are necessary whether it be in virtual form or face-to-face. It is important to ensure that icebreakers are related to future tasks in order to engage the learners early on. An ice-breaker should be of the appropriate complexity and not require prerequisite skill. As virtual learning becomes more prevalent, it is necessary to consider the use of virtual icebreakers, not just as a way of engaging students, but also allowing educators to get to know and interact with their students.

References and further reading

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