

Weave Course Content Into Your Icebreakers

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It's always a good idea to use the beginning of a training session as a time to get to know your participants and for your participants to get to know each other. By doing so, you begin to create the interactive community that sustains active learning.

There are hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of social icebreakers that trainers have invented. (My own book, *101 Ways to Make Training Active*, has 23 of them.) They tend to be fun, fast-paced ways to structure social interaction so that even the shiest participants don't have to get up much courage to participate. The techniques employed in these activities include:

- polling or voting
- conversing in small groups or pairs
- playing a game
- mingling in an open space
- obtaining very brief verbal responses
- drawing
- singing
- movement

A good case in point is an activity known as "Human Scavenger Hunt." This is a popular icebreaker that can be designed in a number of ways and for any size group. It works for any population, since it fosters social interaction and uses physical movement right at the beginning of a program.

The activity requires the trainer to devise six to ten descriptive statements that complete the phrase "Find someone who" Statements typically refer to personal information such as: find some who . . .

- has the same first initial as yours

- ❑ likes/enjoys _____ (reading mysteries, hip hop music, crossword puzzles, etc.)
- ❑ has _____ (a pet, a tattoo, a birthday this month, etc.)
- ❑ is motivated by _____ (a special friend, a good preacher, money, etc.)
- ❑ dislikes _____ (exercise, eating breakfast, clutter, etc.)
- ❑ owns _____ (a blackberry, a skateboard, a wok, etc)
- ❑ has already _____ (been to our new warehouse, had a vacation this year, dozed off today, etc.)

The human scavenger items are given to participants with the following instructions: “This activity is like a scavenger hunt, except that you are looking for people instead of objects. When I say ‘begin,’ circulate around the room looking for people who match these statements. You can use one person for only one statement, even if he or she matches more than one. When you have found a match, write down the person’s first name.” When most participants have finished, the trainer calls a stop to the hunt and reconvenes the full class. A token prize can be given to the person who finishes first, but more importantly, the trainer surveys the entire group about each of the items. (For example, the trainer can go through the alphabet and ask all the people whose first name begins with A, B, C, and so forth to raise their hand and introduce themselves to the class.)

There is no law, however, that limits the activity to personal information. Here is an excellent opportunity to engage participants in the class content right from the start. For example, an item can ask for finding someone who knows a fact or concept from the subject matter you teach. You might ask: find someone who knows . . . what OSHA stands for? the site of our corporate HQ? one way to limit a web search? You can also ask who has recently read a book about _____, has had previous training in _____, or has a great idea for _____.

Another example of a social icebreaker that can go beyond personal information is one I call . . .”Stand Up and Be Counted.”

The process involves explaining to participants that you would like to conduct a quick survey to help everyone know "who's here?" The trainer asks participants to *stand up and be counted* if something about to be said applies to them. Here are some statements that relate only to personal information:

Stand up

- if you drink milk every day.
- if you have more than 3 siblings.
- if you have met someone famous.
- if you root for (supply team).
- if you love chocolate.
- if you are left-handed.

Added to this mix (or replacing the items entirely so that they only refer to the subject matter) might be:

Stand up.....

- if you have used a personal coach.
- if you believe that the customer is always right.
- if you think your writing skills need to be improved.
- if you prefer brainstorming over analyzing.
- if you can create a spreadsheet.
- if you know when to use it's and its.

So, think about the social icebreakers you already use or ones you might use in the future. Don't limit them to merely "getting to know you." Introduce your subject matter within these openers. By doing that, you'll advertise some of the elements of your upcoming classes, help participants to become familiar with some key items, and hopefully build interest in what's to follow.

Besides "social" icebreakers, also consider using "learning" icebreakers.

"Learning" icebreakers ask participants to respond to initial questions about the class content, to try out learning activities related to the subject matter without previous instruction, or to view presentations or demonstrations that give an initial description of knowledge and skills to be learned later on. These activities help to introduce a class in a dramatic, active manner that draws participants into the class right from the beginning.

A simple immediate involvement technique is called *Active Knowledge Sharing*. It would work with any group and with any topic.

Active Knowledge Sharing

1. Provide a list of questions pertaining to the subject matter you will be teaching. You could include some or all of the following categories:

- words to define (e.g. "What is "six sigma"?")
- multiple choice questions concerning facts, concepts, procedures, and so on. (e.g. "Being a team player does not involve: a) patience; b) collaboration c) sharing the credit and d) constant fun.")
- people (important to the subject matter) to identify (e.g. " Who is the author of the book *Good to Great*")

- questions concerning actions one could take in certain situations (e.g. "How do you ask a person to listen carefully to what you're about to tell them?")
- incomplete sentences (e.g. "The most important new initiative in this company is _____.")

2. Ask participants to answer the questions as well as they can.
3. Then, invite them to mill around the room, finding others who can answer questions they do not know how to answer. Encourage participants to help each other. Or invite participants to compare answers with a partner or small group of peers.
4. Reconvene the full group and review the answers. Fill in answers unknown to any of the participants.

Another "learning" icebreaker is called "True or False?" Create an equal number of statements about your subject matter that are true or false. Assume that your participants don't know the answers to many, if not most of the statements. Place participants in small groups or pairs and invite them to guess which statements (listed on a sheet of paper or displayed on a board or screen) are correct and incorrect. It's a wonderful way to make them curious about what they will learn, without any stigma that they do not know the answers.

A different way to create "learning" icebreakers is to ask participants to try out a skill before they are taught how to do it. At first, this idea might sound bizarre. Wouldn't participants be embarrassed or angry? If a playful mood is created, however, trying to do something you're not sure how to do can not only be fun but also can be motivating. For example, you could ask participants to attempt such things as:

- Solving a case problem
- Writing a mission statement
- Doing a scientific procedure
- Operating a machine
- Speaking in a foreign language (with lots of hand motions!)

There is no limit to the ways in which you can create a learning icebreaker. Experiment. Think "out of the box." Once you come up with a winner, you can use it year after year.