UNFREEZE YOUR CLASS

• Why Icebreakers Now?
• Break the Ice Effectively
• Four to Try

ICY CLASSROOM?

Do you have nightmares about standing awkwardly in front of a silent classroom with just one lone cricket chirping in the background? Students learn best when they are engaged and connected with their instructor (you!) and each other. Icebreakers: they’re not just for the first day of class anymore!

(cont. p2)
Yes, icebreakers can be... awkward. A little uncomfortable. And they are low-stakes ways to start participation and spark moments of engaged creativity.

**WHY ICEBREAKERS NOW?**

Icebreakers are especially useful at the beginning of the semester to help build community and get to know your students. However, short icebreaker activities throughout the semester can also be useful to maintain that sense of community and continue learning about your students.

**BREAK THE ICE EFFECTIVELY**

It's not just that you break the ice — it's also how you do it. Think about these things when you're designing group activities:

- Include everyone, regardless of their background
- Help relate their life to the course
- Identify and appreciate shared experiences
- Focus on growth and possibilities, rather than fixed conditions

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**Doodle a Significant Event:**

Have students draw a recent event they took part in or a compilation about themselves and share it with a partner and then a larger group.

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**Awkward is okay!**

Embrace the awkward to break the ice. You're all there together.

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**GET CREATIVE! Work class-related content into your icebreakers.**

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**CLICK FOR ICEBREAKER TIPS FROM CORNELL’S CENTER FOR TEACHING INNOVATION**
Students reported that classroom climate (including their anxiety levels, how welcome they felt in class... and instructor rapport with students) significantly influenced their decisions to stay in or leave STEM disciplines.

More: University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

Common Sense Inventory

Make a list of true or false statements pertaining to content in your course (for example, in a biology course, one might read, “Evolution is simply change over time”). Have students get into groups and decide whether each statement is true or false. As a large group, “debrief” by going over the answers and clarifying misconceptions.

More: University of Florida

One-Word Go-Round

This is a form of go-around where each participant only states a one-word response. This activity is often used to get a quick pulse on how a group is doing after a long or heated conversation.

More: University of Michigan

Silly Questions

Don’t underestimate the power of just sharing names/pronouns and asking questions to foster smiles and connections. For example:

- If you were a vending machine, what would you vend?
- If you had to create a new national holiday what would you do?
- What is your ‘guilty pleasure’?

Level Up by increasing the intensity of the questions every few weeks to help build trust.
Grading requires you to balance a number of factors: speed, consistency, multiple criteria, and (possibly) multiple graders, lack of clear direction, partial credit... the list goes on. Let's go over a few tips for some of the most common challenges:

(1) **Blind the assignments!!!** This is probably the action that will give you the most bang for your buck as far as grading fairly. *Taking identifying information off assignments (temporarily) helps keep personal feelings from affecting the given grade.* Some students will always be more likable than others; this is natural. Sometimes we click with someone and sometimes we don't. However, we don't want these feelings to prompt us to give some students the benefit of the doubt and be harsher with others. Blinding takes care of this problem. Even better, the SpeedGrader function on Canvas can blind the assignments for you!

(2) **Grade one question at a time.** It helps with accuracy and consistency if you grade by question, not through a whole assignment. You don’t have to remember back to how many points you took off for ‘x’ or ‘y’. This increases the likelihood that you will take the same amount off for the same mistakes and, as a bonus, it also helps you grade more quickly.

(3) **Meet with your teaching team.** Meeting with your lead instructor and/or other TAs will allow you to set standards for your grading. Rubrics are super helpful for this because they prescribe very clear grading parameters. Level this up by doing some grade norming. Grade norming is when all graders look at the same assignments separately and then compare the grade they would have assigned to each. Going over assignments in this way helps everyone get on the same page about what assignments deserve what grade. This can increase your confidence that you are grading accurately and help identify explicit criteria to focus on.

Sincerely, A TA That’s Been There
**WELLNESS WISE**

**STRESS**

**TA-ing can be stressful.** You have assignments to grade and students have questions and the work doesn't stop. Plus, you are a grad student and a person apart from your teaching. At Spring 2022 L&S TA Training, **Liz and Denise from UHS talked about stress** — what it is, where it comes from, what factors make it worse — and they shared **tips and strategies for managing it.**

Sometime when it’s right, **watch the recording** on Kaltura: https://tinyurl.com/StressManagementUHS.

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**GET IN TOUCH!**

We love to hear from you!

**Use this form to:**
- Submit a Teaching Puzzle
- Nominate someone (including yourself!) for a Teaching Win feature
- Suggest future newsletter topics

**SHARE YOUR TEACHING WIN!**

What's a puzzle you figured out, a challenge you worked through, or a teaching moment you are proud of? Share your story with us and we might feature YOU in a future issue of *Learning Forward.*