

## January/February 2002 - Icebreakers

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Found at:

[http://adulted.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&zTi=1&sdn=adulted&cdn=education&tm=42&f=10&tt=14&bt=1&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.ion.illinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2002\\_01/index.asp](http://adulted.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&zTi=1&sdn=adulted&cdn=education&tm=42&f=10&tt=14&bt=1&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.ion.illinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2002_01/index.asp)

### What is an Ice Breaker?

Ice breakers are activities or modes of discussion used to help individuals ease into a group setting. Some ice breakers are done in groups and some can be individually completed. Others involve physical activities while others can be purely mental. Any activity that suits the intended purpose can be used.

### For what are ice breakers used?

They can serve many purposes from facilitating introductions, to prior knowledge assessment, to several other reasons outlined below and others that have probably been inadvertently omitted. Also note that a single ice breaker could easily fall into several of the categories. They are not intended to be mutually exclusive and you should design or choose activities that meet all of your intended needs.

- **Facilitating Introductions** - When groups first come together, interactions and discussions can be hindered by timidity, a lack of understanding the norms of the group, and/or simple unfamiliarity among other possibilities. Ice breakers can be used to create familiarity within the group and ease everyone into the group process. The desired end result is a more open discussion forum and pleasing environment within the group in which the group process can continue.
- **Prior Knowledge Assessment** - One pedagogical advantage of using ice breakers is that they provide the instructor an opportunity to assess student prior knowledge. They can then lead to the identification of individual needs within the group while also introducing everyone and helping to create a healthy group environment as with facilitating introductions.
- **Environment Creation / Fostering Group Unity**- The environment has already been mentioned in each of the above uses. A primary purpose of ice breakers can be to help create an open environment in which all participants are willing to open up and participate. Participants need to be encouraged to open up to one another and relax. The introduction and the method by which the ice breaker is carried out can also be designed to encourage a break down of status/race/gender/etc. barriers that may pre-exist in the group. As members of the group get to know one another for better or worse, a form of group unity develops, especially in situations in which a common goal both exists and is known by all.

- **Topic Segues** - When starting a new topic, ice-breakers can be created to introduce the topic. Often, some form of prior knowledge activity can be used to this end. These are also particularly useful when the members of the group already know each other by one means or another.
- **Preparation of Participants** - Many learning environments (and this concept is particularly true in online education) require some form of introduction in order to be fully utilized by the participants. By structuring the ice breaking activity into the learning environment or course management system, students can get to know one another while getting to know the course delivery method.
- **Energizers** - Some ice breakers are designed simply to energize the group of participants. Although less common in an online course where there is unlikely to be a physical task to perform, they can still be very useful in face-to-face workshop environments for second day/morning activities to help wake up everyone.

### **When does one use an ice breaker?**

Usually, an ice breaker is used at the beginning of a session or course in order to let everyone in the course get to know one another. However, they can be useful within a course as well. Whenever group formation occurs, such as before a group project, ice breakers can be useful. Ice breakers by definition occur at the start of a process. It should be noted, though, that the ice breaker activities that one may have in his/her repertoire need not be limited in use to the beginning of a process. For example, ice breakers in the knowledge assessment category could be used whenever a new topic is introduced in a course, although they would then be called knowledge preassessments.

### **Why are ice breakers so important in an online course?**

An ice breaker, though comprising only a small portion of the total time spent in any meetings/class/group/etc., can be of vital importance to the success of any group process. There are many small group theories that describe the stages of group development from a collection of individuals to a cohesive whole. Some form of interdependence is often the end result in a successful group. But to achieve this level, the individuals in a group must get to know one another and an environment must be created in which everyone feels open to discussion and friendliness. Only through this discussion can the group process evolve, especially in an online course where text-based discussion may be the only form of communication. In an online course, the need to establish such an environment of open discussion where everyone can get to know one another must actively be sought in order for it to develop in a reasonable amount of time. Ice breakers help the instructor to develop this environment while performing any of a number of other functions as described above.

### **But I thought these were just for face-to-face events.**

True, many activity-based ice breakers that energize groups are designed mainly for face-to-face environments. But there are many styles of ice breakers, and any ice breaker that can be modified to depend mainly on text based dialogue can be a success in an online course.

### **Choosing an ice breaker.**

When choosing an ice breaker there are 3 questions to keep in mind. First, what are your goals (instructional and group goals)? Second, who is your audience (including their reasons for being there and personal goals)? Third, is the ice breaker connected to its purpose?

The first consideration when choosing an ice breaker is the purpose of that ice breaker. Earlier, it was noted that ice breakers can have many purposes. Determine what your goals are, and then you can connect the activity to the goal.

Next you have to look at your audience. If you are working with a group in which everyone already knows one another, then a get to know you exercise wouldn't serve much purpose other than to take up time. An alternative activity should then be considered. Likewise, if you are working with an audience that could potentially have a good level of prior knowledge, the ice breaking activity might be designed to probe this knowledge so that the instruction could be modified to best serve the students.

Finally, make sure that the ice breaker you choose is actually connected to the intended purpose of the ice breaker. Not all ice-breakers work for all intended ends. For example, a sing-along activity that might be useful as an energizer would serve little function towards everyone getting to know each other by name unless the sing-along activity also incorporated name games. Then the activity would serve a dual purpose, with one of those being the intended and the other possibly being beneficial in the given context.

### **Additional things to consider.**

How many people will participate? Some activities work better for small groups and others for larger groups. For instance, a name game exercise involving memorization of terms becomes difficult for the participants when the group exceeds 9 people in size.

How much time can be allotted? Some activities take longer than others. If you only have 5 minutes (which will rarely be enough time and 15 would be a more appropriate minimum), then you have to plan an activity or choose one that can be completed in the time available.

Where will the activity take place? For online education, the activity will likely take place in some form of online discussion forum. Therefore, only activities that can make use of a text based forum should be chosen.

### **O.K., I think I have it now. But where can I get ideas for ice breaker activities.**

The resources included at the end of this article contain numerous ideas for ice breaker activities.

## Resources

One might ask where one can go to find ideas for ice breakers. Well, there are any number of Web sites out there with large lists of ice breaking activities. While there are numerous resources that one can find concerning ice breakers when searching the billions of pages on the World Wide Web, the following resources were useful in the organization of this paper and contain information that is either particularly useful or easy to adapt to the online workshop or course.

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