

Community Building: Getting to Know Your Class

Community building activities are extremely useful in breaking down barriers between students in order to build a sense of community and facilitate class participation. They are particularly important if you plan to have your students interacting and working in groups. By encouraging greater connections between students, community building can enhance group processes and thus the quality of group work produced. Effective community building will create a positive group atmosphere; will help students relax and alleviate some of their initial anxiety; will break down social barriers; will energize and motivate; and will get students excited about the course content.

Following are some ideas for how to get your students better acquainted with one another and to build a sense of community in your tutorial.

Community Building Activities

The key with community building activities is to keep them relatively light-hearted; don't choose activities that will force students to reveal aspects of themselves that they are not comfortable revealing. Their main objective is to build a community of learners and not to expose vulnerabilities or sensitivities.

- **Interview your neighbour:** Have students work in pairs to interview each other for a few minutes. They can take notes about their interview partners that will be reported in a summary to the rest of the group. The interview can be focused on a student's major/minor, year of study, reasons for taking the course, goals for the future, and other background information. You could also ask light-hearted questions such as hobbies, favourite movies, etc. The interview could also focus on the course subject material as a way of introducing students to the subject matter or to check prior knowledge.
- **What's in a name?:** Ask everyone to say their (preferred) name, and ask them to give at least one piece of information on why they were called this name (or some interesting feature of their name, such as a different way of spelling or pronouncing it).
- **Pack your suitcase:** Ask students to make a list of 10 things they would pack up in the event of a disaster, or going off for a whole year to another country that is far away. 'Things' packed do not literally have to fit into a suitcase, and students cannot take other humans with them. This gives students lots to talk about before starting actual group work.
- **Biography Bingo:** Create a bingo sheet based on discovering information about your classmates and information about the course material. Students must move around the room and ask questions of their classmates to score a bingo (4 or 5 squares crossed out in a row). Examples: find someone who was born outside of Toronto, find someone who can explain what a vector is, find someone who has a birthday in December, find someone who wants to pursue graduate studies, find someone who can define quantum physics in 5 words or less, find someone who

hates chocolate, find someone who is majoring in Physics, etc. This community building activity not only helps students get to know one another but can be used to introduce them to concepts and skills they will be learning in the course.

- **Character Descriptions:** Get students to write down one, two or three adjectives describing themselves. Put these on a stick-on badge. Have class members find someone with similar or opposite adjectives and talk for three minutes with the other person.
- **Hopes and fears:** Get students to write down their fears and hopes about the course on anonymous cards. Collect the cards and read them out loud, noting key commonalities on the board.
- **Standing order:** Ask students to stand in a line around the room in a certain order. For example:
 - alphabetically, according to first name
 - sequentially, in order of birthday month and day
 - distance that they live from campusThey will need to speak to each other to figure out where to stand.
- **Something I have with me:** Ask students to introduce themselves and describe something that they have in their wallet, pocket, bag that will tell others something about them.
- **On the plane:** Ask students to introduce themselves and say who they would like or hate to sit next to on a plane, and explain why.
- **2 truths and a lie:** Students jot down two facts and make up one lie about themselves. Students then pair off and tell each other their three “facts” and each has to guess the other’s lie. Both students then form pairs with other students and repeat the process.
- **Defining a term:** Get students to try to define a term. Who knows what “Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia” is a fear of? Nearest guess wins. If that's too easy you can try Arachibutyrophobia, Alektorophobia, Ephebiphobia or Anglophobia.

Ideas for how to learn your students’ names

Knowing and using your students’ names is a great way of showing interest in your students as individuals and creates a much more comfortable and collegial atmosphere in the classroom.

- **Name tents:** Ask students to write their names on a folded index card on their desks for the first few classes.
- **Seating chart:** For the first few classes ask students to sit in the same place to help you learn their names more quickly.
- **Picture:** Take a picture of students as they are seated (and ask them to keep these seats for the

first few classes) and write in their names next to their images. (This should only be used with the express permission of ALL students in the class.)

- **Name game:** Ask students to tell you their names and one personal detail about themselves (e.g., “I have two cats” or “I play the flute and the cello”). As each person says his or her name, you as the instructor must recall not only that person’s name and the personal detail, but also the name and personal detail of the student before him or her. In the end, you’ll have to recall all your students’ names! As an alternative, you can also use this to help students learn each other’s names: have students sit in a circle and have each student recall the person’s name sitting next to him or her as you move around the circle.
- **What’s your name?:** Asking students to say their name before speaking to the group.
- **Repeating the name:** When students speak in class, always repeat their name in your response to them.

Pre-Assessment & Activating Prior Knowledge

You can adapt many activities to check students’ prior knowledge.

- **What do you already know on the topic?:** Ask students (in groups or pairs) to jot down the most important thing they already know on the topic that the group will be exploring. Then each student will read out his or her idea, and each idea can be recorded on a flipchart or on the board.
- **Free association:** Get students to free-associate with a key word in the title of the course. Ask students to call out their associations, and then write them on the board without comment. Once the board is filled, work with the students to evaluate these words into positive, negative, or content-oriented categories. Then discuss them as a group.
- **Interview your neighbour:** This is a variation on the above mentioned community building exercise. In pairs, students introduce themselves to each other. The key is that they have to write down their partner’s interests/knowledge and concerns about the course. Each person present’s their partner’s response to the class. As the information is revealed, you note it in columns on the board called “Interests” and “Concerns”. You can then debrief both.
- **3-2-1:** Get students three things they already know about course content, 2 things they want to learn and 1 question related to the content.
- **KWL:** Begin the class with a three-column organizer: What I Know, What I Want to know, what I Learned. Have students fill in the first two columns in advance of the lesson. Return to the last column as a summarizing strategy for the lesson.

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