Using ice-breakers to encourage classroom confidence

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What is the idea?

Many active learning techniques focus on students working together and discussing ideas in small groups. Yet many students, particularly in their first year at university, are extremely anxious about doing so, fearful of making mistakes and being judged by their peers. Instead of using an ice-breaker question once in the first week of term, this idea suggests tutors use one at the start of every session. Students are given a couple of minutes to chat in pairs about their responses to the question and then asked to share their answers with the rest of the group. This exercise works best in groups of 20 or less, where hearing all the responses is not too time-consuming.

Why this idea?

Using regular ice-breaker questions at the start of every seminar helps students to get to know their fellow students more quickly and ensures that everyone in the class can say something without fear of being ‘wrong.’ This is important in getting students used to voicing their views publicly. Although many tutors use ice-breakers at the start of term to encourage students to get to know each
other, it is challenging for students to build good working relationships when they may only see a particular set of classmates in one group, once a week. This activity helps to reduce the time it takes for groups to cohere and contributes towards better social support amongst students which in turn fosters engagement (Xerri et al., 2018). Being able to contribute in a low-risk way in response to a question that is not related to the seminar topic, encourages anxious students as there is less risk of peer judgment, and this builds their confidence, making them more likely to participate in later discussions (Micari & Pazos, 2014). Students have a short conversation about a random question at the start of the session, which ensures that they engage with at least one other student and prepares them for the interaction required in seminar learning activities. Repeating this activity at the start of each seminar creates a behavioural prompt that learning activities are beginning and helps focus their attention whilst creating an upbeat mood for the session.

How could others implement this idea?

In the first session, the tutor explains the purpose of the ice-breaker activity, making clear that its purpose is to help them get to know each other but also a chance to say something low-risk that won’t be wrong. The tutor poses the question to the students (verbally and/or on a whiteboard or screen) and instructs them to spend two or three minutes talking with the person next to them about their responses. Then the tutor invites someone to volunteer to share their response, and once they have done so, asks the person they were chatting with to share theirs. Once students realise how the activity works, there are usually volunteers, and the tutor can then randomly ask students for their response or simply follow the order of seating. In cases where students are still extremely anxious about speaking in class, the tutor can agree that one person from
the pair can feedback both responses. Where this has occurred, the anxious student usually joins in after a couple of weeks and informal feedback from such students suggests that this approach is helpful in building up their classroom confidence. The actual ice-breaker questions can sometimes be broadly related to the topic i.e., in a history seminar, ‘if you could go back in time to one event, what would it be and why?’ or ‘which person living or dead would you most like to meet, and why?’ More often, they can simply be generic questions. Be wary of questions that might elicit unwanted disclosures (of criminal activity) or that highlight classroom inequalities (‘your best ever holiday’) or about topics that might be problematic e.g., avoid questions about food if you have students with eating disorders. Below are some sample questions:

1. Who is your favourite cartoon character?
2. What would your superpower be?
3. If you were an animal, what would you be?
4. Which film would you like to watch for the first time again?
5. If you could meet anyone who is no longer alive, who would you meet?
6. If you had to choose a karaoke song, what would it be?
7. Who is your favourite fictional character – film, TV, games, books?
8. Which fictional world would you like to live in (or visit)?
9. If you didn’t need to sleep, what would you do with the extra time?
10. What languages can you speak, or would you like to be able to speak?

Transferability to different contexts

Using an ice-breaker at the start of every session works in a wide range of settings. I have used it mostly in weekly seminars and fortnightly workshops, in-person and online. One limitation is how
much time it takes to hear responses. In groups of 20 or less, the activity in its entirety can be done in about ten minutes, but with a larger group, this could be reduced by selecting to hear responses from only some of the group. If this is done, then it is useful to note whose response was heard so that different students can share their replies the following week. Hearing only from some students does reduce the benefit of getting all students to speak, but still helps build relationships and creates a positive group dynamic.

Links to tools and resources

Innumerable lists of ice-breaker questions can be found using a Google search online.

References


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