

Similar and Different: An ice-breaker activity that builds community

Overview

Research on effective teaching and learning practices recommends that we integrate active and collaborative learning activities into the classroom to enhance student success (e.g., Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2006; Prince, 2004). Yet, in order to expect students to work effectively, we need to plan purposeful activities that will enable students to build community and rapport with each other. This is especially important during the first few class sessions when we are setting the tone and expectations for our courses.

One of my favorite activities to get to know students and to help them get to know each other is an ice-breaker that I call “Same and Different¹.” Ice-breaker activities are critical to developing a positive classroom climate that is conducive to learning, especially through interactions among students (Magnam, 2005). Typically, I use this ice-breaker when my purpose will be to integrate frequent team activities and/or to have students participate in long-term team activities or projects.

Preparation

First, to clarify purpose, talk with students about the importance of collaboration or teamwork and share your rationale for integrating collaborative activities into your class. Next, provide a brief overview of this activity’s importance (e.g., “This activity will help you to get to know your teammates.”).

Procedure

1. Instruct the students that you will be dividing them into small groups. In each group, members will need to identify four things that they ALL share in common and four areas in which they are unique or different. In addition (time permitting), instruct each group to come up with a team name and a team theme song. Divide students into groups of three or four.
2. Distribute a large post-it or handout (see sample below) to each group. It is helpful to provide instructions on the handout or to project them on a screen.
3. Provide colored markers to each group.
4. Monitor the groups and encourage them to stretch beyond the obvious (e.g., “We all have brown eyes” or “We all are in Teacher Education.”).
5. If a group finishes early, encourage them to try to find additional commonalities or ways in which they are unique. You could also ask them to pick a team mascot or other team-focused activity.
6. Debrief the activity.

Tips

1. This works best with teams of four students.
2. Depending upon your goals for integrating collaborative learning in your classroom (short-term versus long-term teams), consider making visible how you group students into teams (e.g., Based on available student data, group students by discipline or group students randomly. For example, you could ask students to “find four others who have on similar shoes.”)
3. Try to avoid giving prompts (e.g., “Do you all live in a residence hall?” or “Does anyone speak a foreign language?”). I find that students will often come up with very unusual characteristics if they are left to struggle a bit with this activity.

¹ The original source for this activity is unknown. I participated in this activity as a student in a course that was part of a Master in the Art of Teaching program at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since then, I have used it and refined it in my own courses and faculty development activities.

4. I usually don't assign roles with this activity. However, I would encourage that you consider asking for volunteers within the team to act as a scribe. This activity works best when students ask questions, probe, and listen to each other's answers.
5. Consider how you would like to debrief the activity. Do you want groups to share their team name and theme song? I typically ask groups to share their team name and what they have in common with each other, due to time constraints.
6. I keep all of the large post-its/handouts and review them to help me customize content for my class and/or to help me to better understand a particular group of students. In one class, I discovered that all of the members of one team shared that they had lost a family member recently.

Time Required

This activity takes about 20 – 30 minutes. Debriefing can take 10 – 20 minutes, depending upon the number of teams.

Online Alternatives

- Ask students to participate in this activity online by using a discussion board or a collaborative technology tool (e.g., [Prezi](#) or [Popplet](#)).
- If you use synchronous collaboration platforms such as Wimba or Blackboard Collaborate, you could assign teams to breakout rooms and then enable screen sharing to debrief their responses.

Resources:

Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., & Major, C. H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2006). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*. (3rd Ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

Magnan, R. (2005). 147 practical tips for using icebreakers with college students. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Prince, M. (2004, July). Does active learning work? A Review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231. DOI: 10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x. Retrieved from http://ctl.t.jhsph.edu/resources/views/content/files/150/Does_Active_Learning_Work.pdf

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