



Breaking the Ice: Using Icebreakers and Re-energizers with Adult Learners

Over the past several years, a number of researchers have theorized that students vary significantly in how they approach classroom learning and that each learner has a distinct and definable way of engaging in the learning process (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Dunn and Dunn, 1978; Gardner, 1983; Gregorc, 1986; Kolb, 1984; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Vella, 2002). Adult learners often arrive in our classrooms with preconceived notions of learning that are hard for them to let go. Additionally, teachers can and often do fall into this category as well, allowing a dynamic of opposition to develop. Almost all of us have faced the reluctant learner who refuses to participate in class, where nothing helps to draw him or her out of a protective shell. Educators will often seek out instructional strategies designed to build rapport, help students get to know one another, and create safe classrooms for learning where everyone feels comfortable participating. Individuals facilitating adult learning need a medley of teaching methods to be effective (Galbraith, 2004). This is when the instructional strategies of icebreakers and re-energizers can enter the learning environment.

While much of the strategies for using icebreakers and re-energizers effectively focus on children, several techniques are applicable to adult learners as well (Collins, 2010; Ukens, 1997; Zike, 1992;). Icebreaker activities, as the name implies help “break the ice” in various ways. They

help group members get acquainted and begin conversations, relieve inhibitions or tension between people, allowing those involved to build trust with and feel more open to one another. Icebreakers encourage participation by all, helping a sense of connection and shared focus to develop. Re-energizers can be used as transitions or a time to “clear the mind” encouraging vitality and enthusiasm (Boatman, 1991). Both activities also lead to a free exchange of information and enhanced communication between group members (Zwaagstra, 1997). In addition to simply helping to learn students’ names, we have found using icebreakers brings humor into the class, establishes rapport, fosters a safe learning environment, and overall assists with content learning. Therefore, it would follow that implementation of icebreakers and re-energizers in the classroom might well contribute to improved student participation, increased student persistence, and ultimately enhanced student learning.

This article centers on theories of adult learning methods and how they relate to the practice of using icebreakers in the adult classroom. While our language is geared toward the adult learning world, our experience has been that these practices also work well in a variety of classroom and group settings, both traditional and non-traditional, including professional development sessions, staff and faculty meetings or retreats, and with non-professional groups. This paper aims to support adult educators

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by developing their theoretical understanding of effectively implementing icebreakers and re-energizers in their classroom. While educators may inherently know the benefits of using icebreakers, this article is intended as a guide to assist practitioners in applying them to their daily instructional activities. We also hope this article will fill a gap as there is a lack of recent work on this topic in the adult education literature. A keyword search of ten library databases for articles published in the past five years revealed only three articles on the topic of icebreakers. One was a three paragraph book review of a book published in 2000, another was a list of icebreakers not to use, and the third was a relevant one page article on icebreakers appropriate for training and development seminars.

It is our contention that icebreakers are not one-time events to be used solely on the first day of class. In fact, we use both icebreakers and re-energizers as needed at various times throughout a course. Re-energizers can be used when energy is low and class morale is lagging, when everyone is not participating, or after a break to re-focus a group. Our use of icebreakers is guided by our understanding of adult learning and teaching principles. This article connects the methods of using icebreakers as instructional strategies to the literature on teaching adults.

Perspectives on Teaching Adults

Palmer (2007) in the tenth anniversary edition of his book, *The Courage to Teach*, reminds educators that teaching cannot be reduced to a singular technique:

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving, creative chaos. (p. 11)

It is the same with icebreakers. Icebreakers are not relegated to a single type or a “best method.” Rather having an arsenal of icebreakers and re-energizers designed to meet a variety of needs serves adult educators well.

Similarly, Pratt and associates (1998) offer five perspectives on teaching adults. The authors argue for a “plurality of perspectives on teaching adults that recognize diversity within teachers, learners, content, context, ideals, and purposes” (p. 4). Based on data from over two thousand teachers, they caution that what is to be avoided is the one-size-fits-all notion of good teaching (Pratt, 2002). Pratt and his associates developed

five categories to qualitatively describe what it means “to teach” (p. xii). Described as perspectives as opposed to methods of teaching, each represents “a unique constellation of actions, intentions, and beliefs” (p. xiv) (see Table 1). Each one of these perspectives offers the opportunity for unique icebreaker and re-energizer activities.

Table 1: Teaching Perspectives

Transmission: Effective delivery of content
Apprenticeship: Modeling ways of being
Developmental: cultivating ways of thinking
Nurturing: Facilitating self-efficacy
Social Reform: Seeing a better society

Regardless of the perspective one’s own teaching falls under, effective teaching needs to have clear and significant intentions that are respectful of learners. Icebreakers allow instructors to plan and implement a teaching method that is related to a teacher’s intentions and beliefs while also considering learning outcomes that are relevant and considerate of adult learners. Since types and strategies of icebreakers are flexible in nature, the one-size model is easily avoided.

Additional research also supports avoiding a one-size model. Thistlethwaite (1960) looked at critical variables of positive learning experiences reported by students. Strong knowledge of a subject, commonly associated with good teaching, was outweighed by all of the following factors found in positive professor evaluations (Jordan, 1982, in Weisz, 1990):

- Enthusiasm
- Personal elements
- Good communication skills
- Enjoyment of teaching

If the effective teaching of adults involves an understanding of intentionality, plurality, and knowing that

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both learners and teachers are diverse, how then can one go about deciding which type of icebreakers and re-energizers to use?

Vella (2002) in her book, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, outlines numerous principles for effective adult learning including safety, sound relationships, respect for learners as decisions makers, teamwork, engagement, and accountability. Research paralleling Vella's is found in the social interaction method by which students are encouraged to participate in "creating a more open classroom climate" (Eble, 1976; Good & Brophy, 1987; Purkey & Novak, 1984). Social interaction teaching methods are instructional strategies used by teachers to facilitate student-centered group work. Students help their peers to construct meaning through group projects, group discussion, and cooperative learning (Burden & Byrd, 2007).

Table 2: Group Dynamic Curative Factors

Universality	Connections with others, common concerns & problems
Didactic Learning	Information giving, sharing knowledge
Altruism	Helping others, can raise one's self esteem
Socialization	Benefits from interactions with others
Peer Learning	People often learn better from one another
Group Cohesiveness	Acceptance from others, belonging, support

Research on teacher as facilitator in higher education supports strong communication and problem solving skills (Delozier, 1979; Rubin, 1985; Schon, 1983, in Weisz, 1990). Additionally, cooperative learning strategies aid in teaching small-group skills, effective communication, and critical thinking skills. Elements of cooperative learning can have profound effects in a learning environment—changing a classroom from an environment where students are passive recipients of knowledge, to one in which they become active participants in their education. Concepts of empowerment, interdependence and diversity—historical centerpieces of US education goals also support effective adult learning (Steiner, Stromwall,

Brzuzy & Gerdes, 1999). Social context also affects the choice of icebreakers and re-energizers to use. Six of these factors (see Table 2) help explain the "intricate interplay of various guided human experiences" that take place in group learning (Yalom, 1985, p. 3 in Zwaagstra, 1997).

These theories, concepts, and perspectives of teaching adults inform our use of icebreakers and re-energizers with our learners. At this point in the article, we present suggested icebreakers and re-energizers that have proven successful for us in a wide variety of settings (see Table 3). Table 3 highlights some icebreakers that are designed for the online classroom. And finally aspects of group dynamics can have curative factors in adult learning settings. This is just a brief selection of those activities available for group learning environments. In addition to giving the activity name and brief description, we have organized the table to indicate the effective learning principles that come into play while doing the activity. Also included is reference information linking the learning principles. Our hope is that these suggestions with their corresponding learning principles will assist instructors in their quest for effective teaching.

Conclusion

Icebreakers are essentially short activities defined as getting to know you activities and designed to break down barriers before starting an event. Many teachers find they use icebreakers as a way to get a better understanding of their students and to help their students connect to each other. In this article, we attempted to give adult educators several examples of icebreakers and re-energizers to use in their adult classrooms. We tied these activities to principles for effective adult learning, social interaction methods of teaching, and the notion of the teacher as facilitator. No single method or strategy is a panacea for difficulties we might encounter in our classrooms. Rather, educators' benefit from a stockpile of instructional strategies. Icebreakers are one such strategy that can help teachers blend into the fabric of their students' lives. If we want to grow as teachers we must open ourselves up, find ways to connect with our students, and allow them to connect with one another. By creating space that allows students to establish trust, develop safe learning environments and assist with content learning, icebreakers and re-energizers encourage learners to move beyond simple rote, non-interaction with their peers and instructors to meaningful interaction and learning. Instructors can relate to their students in novel ways and gain respect and appreciation for their adult learners.

Table 3: Selected Icebreakers & Re-energizers

Activity	Brief Description	Effective Learning Principles	Reference
Online course Icebreakers	<p>Online students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post a favorite quote; • Post 3 words that describe their past, present & future; • Share a theme song representing their life • Describe a characteristic unique to him or herself; • Respond to the posts of other students' that resonate with them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and Accountability • Sound Relationships 	<p>Vella, 2002</p> <p>Conrad & Donaldson, 2004</p> <p>Vella, 2002</p> <p>Conrad & Donaldson, 2004</p>
Human Web	<p>How people in a group inter-relate and depend on each other. Facilitator begins with a ball of yarn - keeping one end tossing yarn to others who introduce him/her-self -continuing among the group. Each person describes how he/she relates to others, holding on to the yarn as it moves through the group. Process continues until all are introduced. To emphasize the interdependencies amongst the team, the facilitator then pulls on the starting thread and everyone's hand should move.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety • Teamwork • Social Interaction • Cooperative Learning • Teacher as facilitator • • Altruism • Socialization • Group Cohesiveness • Interdependence 	<p>Vella, 2002</p> <p>Collins, 2010</p> <p>Eble,1976; Good & Brophy, 1987; Purkey & Novak, 1984</p> <p>Delozier, 1979; Rubin, 1985; Schon, 1983 in Weisz, 1990</p> <p>Yalom, 1985 in Zwaagstra, 1997</p> <p>Steiner, Stromwall, Brzuzy & Gerdes, 1999</p>
Significant Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a coin or paper money • Look at date • Choose significant event from your life that occurred during same year • Share event with peer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and accountability • Peer Learning • Norming 	<p>Vella, 2002</p> <p>Zwaagstra, 1997</p>
ψ Imagine That!	<p>Describe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shape of a wish • Color of today • Feeling of favorite song • Taste of happiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and accountability • Critical thinking skills • Effective communication 	<p>Vella, 2002</p> <p>Steiner, et al., 1999</p>
ψ What's Unique about you? Find something else unique about you.	<p>Have participants think of <i>one</i> thing about themselves they believe no one else in the group has in common. If someone else has experienced same characteristic individual continues to share unique tidbits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altruism • Socialization 	<p>Yalom, 1985 in Zwaagstra, 1997</p> <p>Collins, 2010</p>

*Bumper Sticker	Have students reflect on their experience as a member of the class, and sum up their thoughts on the experience or knowledge they have gained so far. How would those thoughts be stated on a bumper sticker?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didactic learning • Socialization • Peer learning 	Yalom, 1985 in Zwaagstra, 1997
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity 	Steiner et al., 1999
*Stop, Start, Go	Students anonymously list on index card one thing they want to stop doing, one thing they would like to start doing, and something they want to continue doing (this corresponds to the go).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for learners as decisions makers 	Vella, 2002
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universality 	Yalom, 1985 in Zwaagstra, 1997
Learning Cells	Students read assigned materials then in pairs alternate asking & answering questions concerning material.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative learning in pairs • Peer learning 	Goldschmid, 1971
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of communication skills • Learning by teaching 	Yalom, 1985 in Zwaagstra, 1997 Nelson, 1970; Davage, 1958; Trowbridge, 1968, in Weisz, 1990

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