

Building a Learning Community with Icebreakers, Energizers, and Closers

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A positive and enjoyable learning community is central to student engagement, motivation, and success. This is especially true in online learning, where physical distances make it harder to connect. Humanizing the learning experience can help online students feel more at ease, reduce the sense of anxiety and isolation, and develop supportive study habits with their peers.

A simple way to build community in the classroom or online is to incorporate icebreakers, energizers, and closers into your lessons. These short activities are not only fun and social, but can help you learn more about your students and their understanding of course concepts.

Here is a quick comparison of icebreakers, energizers, and closers:

	Icebreaker	Energizer	Closer
What is it?	A short activity at the beginning of a course or class.	A short activity in the middle of a lesson or class.	A short activity at the end of a class or lesson.
Why use it?	To make introductions, create the desired learning climate, encourage discussion, gather information about students and their prior knowledge, or communicate class norms.	To re-focus student attention, stimulate cognitive activity, or restore momentum.	To gather feedback on the lesson, check for understanding, summarize concepts, introduce critical thinking problems, or bridge to future lessons.
How do you use it?	Choose a type of icebreaker suitable to the personality of students and desired course outcomes. Technology and/or props can encourage participation and generate interest.	Use physical activity to stimulate blood flow and alertness. Energizers may or may not be related to lesson content, but should always be fun and lively.	No new information is presented. Effective closing activities establish a flow of information from the students to the instructor and their peers.

With a little creativity, many traditional face-to-face activities can be adapted to online discussion boards. Educational technology tools such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, Padlet, and VoiceThread extend the possibilities of community-building interactions in both synchronous and asynchronous settings.

Keep these tips in mind when planning community-building activities:

Keep it short and fun – Icebreakers, energizers, and closers are designed to be brief and lively breaks in your lesson. Plan activities that can be completed in about 10 minutes.

Have a clear goal – Know what you want to accomplish by using an icebreaker, energizer, or closer and select an activity that helps you and your students reach this goal. Connect the activity to the course content if possible.

Choose suitable activities – Consider the characteristics of your students, the setting, the subject matter, and your own comfort level. For example, students in programs that don't typically involve frequent class discussions may be more willing to interact through a technology tool rather than verbally sharing information.

Don't overuse – Use these activities in moderation to provide maximum impact and change it up from time to time. If you do incorporate them regularly (for example, a weekly closer), avoid using the same activity too often.

Be spontaneous! – Community-building activities don't always need to be planned. Keep a list of simple questions that can be quickly dropped into your lessons whenever you sense the need for engagement.

Whether you are teaching online or face-to-face, incorporating icebreaker, energizers, and closers will make the teaching and learning experience more enjoyable for your students and yourself.

For more information and sample activities, check out these resources:

- [Icebreakers, Energizers, Warm-Ups, and Closers](#) from [The Teaching & Learning Centre](#)
- [Icebreakers for Online Classes](#) – University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence
- Barkley, E. F. (2010). *Student engagement techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. Jossey-Bass. – available through Seneca Libraries
- Seneca's [Educational Technology Tool Finder](#)

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