Social Connection Startups

Interview Pairs

Find someone in the class that you do not know. “Interview” them, asking them their major, why they are taking the course, and what they hope to get (or hope doesn’t happen) in the course. Reverse roles and be interviewed by your new classmate. Then, for a smaller group (e.g., tutorial size, n=16), you can have people re-seat themselves in a circle or horseshoe, and go around the room, with each person introducing to the rest of the class their “new classmate.” This is a nice twist on “introduce yourself.”

Finding an Ally

Another thing that is good for early in the semester is to have students identify their “backup person” – someone whose notes they can borrow or who will pick up handouts and note announcements if they happen to miss class. I have them swap first names and contact info (e.g., phone, email). First names are less threatening (and easier to remember) than first and last names. I also lighten this activity up by saying, “don’t worry, you don’t have to marry this person!”

Problem Solving in Pairs or Groups

Pose a simple question related to the course material. For example, you have just presented to the class some research findings. The question might be “Notice that on average this class gets most of its weekly activity from “vigorous” activity, while the average Canadian adult gets most of her/his activity from “moderate” activity. Why do you think this is?” Then, tell students to get together in pairs, tell them to introduce themselves by first name if they don’t know each other, discuss the question briefly, and then WRITE their answer on a piece of paper which they hand in – anonymously. I find that asking students to write something down focuses them on the task, and knowing that they will hand it in – even if it won’t be marked, seems to add importance to the task so they put more effort into it.

Pairs are good for the beginning because in larger groups a shy or uncertain student can be overlooked. As the semester goes along, I use more activities in groups of threes or fours. I sometimes structure these as “with at least one male and one female in each group.” This helps break up “cliques” and exposes students to more different classmates. In the first minutes of the activity, I walk around and check on group composition: “okay, you’re three; you’re three; you’re two, you’re four – one of you join that pair to make a three [friendly but matter-of-fact; they almost always will move, but if they don’t I’m not rigid about it. Instead I’ll say, “Well, you’re just two, so you’ll each have to be extra-creative” or “Well, you’re four, so you’ll have to make a special effort to include everyone.”]
With larger groups, I still task them with course-related questions. The interactions they have over this question DO have a social function, but it is not solely a social function. For example, form groups of four with at least one male and at least one female. Identify things that make being a university student stressful, and brainstorm solutions. One member of the group will note the solutions in his/her notebook. (In this course, each student keeps a notebook, in which she/he writes during class. I collect all notebooks at the end of class, read them, and write comments in them, and return them at the beginning of class the following week. The notebook activities count for a total of 10% of the course grade). Then, review your list and rate each suggestion as a “1” if the solution targets the individual, “5” if it targets the setting, and 2, 3, or 4 to represent intermediate points along this continuum.

**Activity Breaks**

As an exercise break during a three-hour class, I ask the group, “Get together in two’s or threes, and follow me as we walk a lap around the hallways of Blusson Hall.” This was fun, social, active, and took less than five minutes total. The time was about 6 p.m., so the halls were virtually deserted.

I have groups of threes give oral presentations to the class in the later weeks of the semester. The class knows this is coming up. I use this as an incentive for them to “shop around” in the activities in the early weeks. “Don’t always work with the same people. It’s good to meet lots of people so you can make connections that you might want to later use to study together or with whom to do your oral presentation.”