

Midwest First-Year Conference, Sept. 27th, 2013
Interactive Activities for Building Community with First-Year Students
Facilitated by Chris Cavert, Ed.D., Assistant Professor, Northeastern Illinois University

Thank you for joining me at the conference. Below you will find a brief description of the activities we participated in during the workshop. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions – contact information is below.

That First Day: (Pre-Workshop Preparations)

Before we got started we all created our Name Cards (using 3” by 5” note cards) – we wrote our first names nice and big on the non-lined side of the card (when I use this with students I also ask them to write their last name (smaller) under their first name so I can connect any information on the cards with my records (many of my students use first names that are different from the first name on record)).

Opening Considerations:

- Why use community building in your classroom with first-year students?
- What do we know about the research on first-years?
- What are some top college success skills we want first-years to know and use?

Overarching Question for the Session:

- *What college success behaviors are at play here?* (We focused on this question after each activity.)

Skill Training:

- **Who’s In the Room?** (Creating a safe environment for learning.)

Learning names is an important part of community building – connecting. We took some time to share our first name with each other – while doing this we held up our Name Card as well so all could see. (Why?)

- **The Blind Shuffle** (Learning, knowing, and using names is important in community.)

Before starting with the activities we learned the Blind Shuffle. This can be done with any sort of “card” used for activities. For the demonstration we use our Name Cards. You hold the name side of the card towards the ground. The card must be held somewhere between ones chin and waste. The idea is to exchange cards with as many different players as you can before the facilitator says, “STOP!” It is recommended that players share names with each other as they exchange.

Activities:

- **Card Return** (Learning, knowing, and using names is important in community.)

Each player has his or her own Name Card (described above). After a STOP! is called during the blind shuffle (also described above), and the facilitator sees that everyone is holding only one card s/he says, “GO!” Players flip over the Name Card they are holding, read the name, and

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then return the card to the person it belongs to. If a player receives her or his own card, s/he holds it up in the air and says, "I got my own card! Lucky me!" As people received their card they slowly moved towards to outside of the group to form a circle around those still returning cards. Once everyone is within the circle everyone can look around to practice (rehearse) putting names to faces, because, we're going to play a few more times. **Variation:** When returning a person's Name Card, find out her or his favorite food, movie, book, TV show, course in school, or junk food. Each round a new favorite can be set to discover.

- **Checking In** (Creating a safe environment and opening the space to communicate.) Here I simply went around to everyone (if I had time) and did an easy fist-bump with them, took their card, looked into their eyes, and verbally connected with them in some way. (Why?)

Using Name Cards: We discussed other ways to incorporate the Name Cards into a course: Instructor Name Recognition; Attendance Records – saving class time; Forming Groups; Random Assigning & Inquiry – "Leave it up to the cards."

- **What You Say** (Getting to know the people in the room and resources they bring.)

You'll need the standard deck of playing cards for this activity (the bigger the better). You might choose to use the 5's and below depending on the time and the number of players you have. (You also might want to split your group in half if there are more than 20 and use another set of cards – Aces to 5s)

Process: The basic idea is to deal one card to every player in the group. Then each player will give the number of responses to the topic presented by the facilitator that is equal to the number on the card. I note that the Aces are "ones" for this game. For example, ask each player to talk about him- or herself – if Bob is holding a three, he tells his partner three things about himself. Or, you could ask players to give positive feedback to as many people in the group as the number indicated on their card or, if the number they have is 3, say 3 things you want to remember about the activity as a way to process or reflect on the activity.

If you set this up as a partner activity, have players hold their cards up and find someone else doing the same thing. Players get together in pairs, share info, and then trade cards. When each person is ready to share again, they hold up their card and look for someone else doing the same thing.

Possibilities: Add a few high cards (e.g., 8s, 9s or 10s) to spice it up. Watch for the reactions to the high cards – talk about this later. You could use the face Cards for relationship questions: Kings - talk about some of the leadership qualities you observed during an activity. Queens - talk about some of the helping behaviors you noticed. Jacks - talk about a set-backs you noticed during an activity.

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- **Card Groupings** (Finding commonalities and differences creates community.)

You'll need the Deck of Cards. You'll also want to arrange the Cards in order from Aces to Kings with each rank (number) in Hearts, Diamonds, Spades and Clubs, for example: the Aces are stacked Ace of Hearts, Ace of Diamonds, Ace of Spades, Ace of Clubs. Stack the twos the same way and the threes and so on through the deck. Best played with 16 or more players.

Process: Deal out a Card, starting with the Aces, to each player in the group - ask them not to look at the face of the Card (if they accidentally do, have them exchange their Card with someone else in the group that already has a Card). When each player has a Card you will be asking the group to arrange themselves into smaller groups based on what you tell them. Players are not allowed to look at their Card and may not tell another player what his or her Card is in any way - players may not "sign language" another player's Card. Here are some of the groupings I use (not in any particular order of presentation):

- Arrange yourselves into groups based on the color of your Card.
- Arrange yourselves into groups based on the suit of your Card.
- Arrange yourselves into groups of like rank (number or face).
- Arrange yourselves into pairs based on like color and rank (use this one only if everyone will end up with a partner) or..
- Pair up with someone of a different color.
- Get together with two other evens or odds – depending on what you are holding.

With each grouping I ask players to first share names with each other and then, within 2 minutes, find as many things you have in common with each other that are not visibly noticeable (e.g., we are all wearing shirts). Go beyond the surface. After the two minutes I go to each group and ask them to share one thing they all have in common. After we find out the commonality I will ask the others, "Raise your hand if you also have this in common with this group." Looking to make connections with each other in more ways than meets the eye.

Possibilities: You could ask the players to do a blind shuffle with at least 5 other players, meeting and greeting each other along the way, before calling the next grouping - this tends to create even more player mingling about.

- **Name Tossing** (How we communicate will be important to the community.)

You'll need a safe tossable object for about half the players in the group (e.g., recyclable paper crumpled up, squishy orbs, small stuffed animals).

Process: Have your group stand in a circle - each player having a bit of elbow-room between each other. Let the players know that wherever they are they will want to know the names of the players to their right and to their left.

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Start out with one tossable – give this tossable to someone in the circle. Call out, “left.” The player with the object shouts out the name of the person on his or her left and then tosses the tossable across the circle to another player (not the player whose name was called). Once this first player has tossed the tossable s/he must move to a new place within the circle (players make room for each other when needed). The game continues to be played as players are moving to new spots. The player with the tossable calls the name of the player on his or her left, tosses the tossable then moves to a new space. As the game progresses you can change direction by calling “right” - the right player’s name must be called before a toss. You can also start adding more tossables to the mix (not too many though!!). If a tossable drops to the ground it is simply picked up by the nearest player and tossed back into the game. The game will continue to “work” as long as the number of tossable objects is equal to half the number of players.

Possibilities: When you want to take your group “over the edge” into chaos - a little crazy fun, add more (beyond the noted limit) tossables to the mix. You could also change it up by calling out, “Left & Right” – so players call out two names before they toss the object. Stop the game before the laughter subsides.

Resources:

www.fundoing.com (Activity Blog; Publications; Free Resources & Resource Links)

Twitter @ChrisCavert

Twitter: @facultyfocus (Occasional resources that connect to FYE)

Link to “First Day of Class Activities to Create a Climate of Learning” at faculty focus website:

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/>

Twitter: @chronicle (Occasional resources that connect to FYE)