Tools of the trade: 'Breaking the ice' with virtual tools in online learning

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The reality is that online learning can be a daunting and lonely experience. This is why icebreakers can be a rewarding practice for both students and educators. The use of icebreakers allows students studying online to introduce themselves and become familiar with other members of the group and/or community. Not only are these icebreakers used as a starter within the first weeks of study, but they are also used to help motivate students throughout the course. Highlighted in this paper are particular online (virtual) tools that can be used as icebreakers within an online learning environment and help shift the view of isolation associated with learning online and create a more engaged community of practice with effective learning.

Keywords: Virtual tools, online learning, icebreakers, student engagement, student participation, community practice

Introduction

In this paper, the authors introduce the concept of using icebreakers to ease the pressure on students who are new to online learning and aims to help shift the notion of isolation within online study. It provides ideas about creating and maintaining interactive and motivating learning environments that will help 'break the ice' and keep students engaged. Online facilitators have to pursue different learning approaches designed to help students get to know one another, and create safe classrooms for leaning (Chlup & Collins, 2014). The introduction of icebreakers within a learning environment can build on connections and trust before undertaking weeks of study. When deciding to undertake study online, which can be a feat within its self, it's another obstacle trying to become more included in a unit (subject) and not become socially isolated. University courseware is rapidly becoming more available online and this allows new social interaction to take place. Using the Learning Management System (LMS), in this case Moodle, online facilitators can use specific virtual tools to help shift the isolation and involve students from across the world to participate in discussions and/or activities and work together to build an effective community of practice. The rhetoric is that online learning is collegial and social but the reality is that this requires establishment of 'community', and icebreakers can achieve this.

Background and context

The University of New England (UNE) had just over 21,000 students enrolled in 2013. Of these students, there were 21.2% enrolled to study on-campus, 78.7% off-campus, and 0.1% through other means. Students who study on-campus reside in or near the university and attended lectures, workshops and tutorials in a face-to-face setting. Off-campus students study from their home and receive all their study materials through Moodle. Study materials are html pages, downloadable PDF documents, podcasts, videos, discussion board forums, chat rooms, blogs, wikis and a variety of other interactive resources. With a high proportion of UNE students studying off-campus, while juggling their personal and work commitments, it is most important to maximise interactivity and develop social presence, without taking time from learning activities within an online course.

In a traditional on-campus setting, the use of icebreakers would be used in a face-to-face interaction to help

create a positive group atmosphere, breakdown social barriers and help people to get to know one another. In online contexts, icebreaker activities include additional techniques that utilise several technologies to further develop a sense of community. Icebreakers are especially important for online learners as face-to-face interaction is not commonly available. Icebreakers are tactics that are vital in creating openness and trust. They are activities that are designed to help students begin to feel comfortable (Boatman, 1991) and make students aware of similarities and differences among them. These activities are not only used as introductions but they are also used to help 'reboot' and motivate student moral throughout the duration of the course, allowing for student engagement, social interaction, networking and building a sense of community (Chlup & Collins, 2014). Kavanagh, Clark-Murphy and Wood (2011) proclaim that to make connections between people quickly and effectively we need to find new ways for interactions. Icebreakers are an effective way to create these connections and can contribute to a positive learning environment as well as introduce important content.

Literature review

While the growth in the use of online learning environments has been rapid, it is important to remember that the learning will not happen without enhanced instructional design and facilitation (Dixon, Crooks, & Henry, 2006). Part of this enhanced facilitation depends on the engagement of the learner as part of an online community, which needs to be crafted through activities such as icebreakers. The use of these introductory activities can not only encourage the use of a range of online learning platforms but can set the scene as an important component of an online learning space (Dixon et al., 2006). Icebreakers should get people learning immediately about the topic and meeting fellow participants. A well-designed icebreaker also helps to quickly assess participants; their current skill or knowledge levels; their attitudes to you and the learning environment (Collins, 2010). Icebreakers allow learners working at a distance to make connections, learn about each other, and encourage the development of trusting relationships. These relationships will then support collaborative learning and constructivist learning environments (Dixon et al., 2006). By making learning personally meaningful, the constructivist perspective, which emphasises collaboration between peers and teachers, (Salmon, 2002) enables icebreaker activities to be used for student orientation and online socialisation, which is written in more detail in the next section.

Well-designed icebreakers should be ungraded and used purely as a team-building exercise (Kavanagh et al., 2011). They should be brief, relatively low-risk input, and partaking by all students to create a level of comfort (Boatman, 1991). A strategy used for putting students in charge of their own learning is by offering the notion of the student led discussion to students (many of whom are used to lurking in online discussions) through a sequence of icebreaker activities (Pelz, 2010). Icebreakers should engage students in simple activities in order to encourage them to interact, providing learners with a brief reasoning behind the activities including some references to literature that discusses the importance of community building and collaboration (Dixon et al., 2006). Learners do not think about the purpose of an icebreaker – it is how they expect teaching sessions to start – you need to give them a purpose (Collins, 2010). Icebreakers can assist the lecturer to show enthusiasm about the content area and learning, and about the students themselves. One way to do this is to make a link with prerequisite knowledge and relate the content to what a student will be familiar with. Links should be made between the unit and the career that a student may be working towards (Kavanagh et al., 2011).

Salmon's five-stage framework

In helping to explain the purpose of icebreakers in engaging students and helping in the progression to the next stage of learning, we look at Gilly Salmon's five-stage framework of teaching and learning. In summary, the five-stage model provides an example of how students can benefit from increasing skill and comfort in interacting and learning online. The model shows how to motivate online participants, to build learning through appropriate 'e-tivities' (in this case icebreakers) and to scaffold learners through training and development (Salmon, 2002). The five stages are:

- **Stage 1** is the beginning of the process where *access and motivation* of students into online learning are essential fundamentals for online participation.
- **Stage 2** involves individual students finding their online identity and then connecting with others who may share the same interests to interact with. This stage is most important to *online socialisation* and is where icebreakers are used to help create and maintain social presence and a sense of community. With the aid of an icebreaker, students become comfortable in an online classroom where participants are geographically detached and create a 'bond' with peers of the same interests and backgrounds.
- At **Stage 3**, students engage in mutual *information exchange.* Moving forward and including Stage 3, teamwork occurs whereby each student supports the other students' goals. The use of an icebreaker leading

to this stage allows students to build relationships with one another and feel comfortable in participating in dialogue and essentially helping each other in the exchange of information. So far these three stages in the framework are more general than learning specific and students are seeking a community with their peers.

- At **Stage 4**, we shift from generalised learning and community to a community of practice. The next two stages are more specific to learning needs and course-related group discussions (*knowledge construction*) develop, and the interaction becomes more collaborative. To help develop this community of practice and interactions between students, an icebreaker may be used to help 'reboot' in these last two stages by asking students (or group of students) to partake in another icebreaker related to a specific context or theme. By this stage students will be interacting with peers that have the same shared values and background from the connections made earlier in Stage 2.
- Working together at **Stage 5**, students look for more benefits and become responsible for their own learning (*development*) to help them achieve personal goals and reflect in the learning process. Having interacted in online icebreakers, students who have made these relationships with their peers will most likely connect and network outside the formal learning platform.

Virtual tools

Presented in Table 1 are selected virtual tools highlighting the diversity of icebreaker activities that can be incorporated into a teaching and learning unit. These tools allow students to experience technology in a different way and to share creativity and ideas with their peers. Quick Response (QR) codes are offered in the first column assisting the reader easy access to the tool's URL. The second column provides a brief description of the icebreaker and some examples of how to use them. The final column provides areas where the tool can be used effectively. Also, for convenience are the URLs of each of the tools and URLs to examples of the tool in use.

Table 1: Selected icebreakers

Virtual tool	Brief description and example of icebreaker	Effective learning
Popplet	Popplet is an online mind mapping tool. Example: Students can answer a question from the lecturer by branching off into their particular interests and connect to other students who share these same interests.	• Engagement • Social interaction • Connectivity • Visual learning http://popplet.com/ http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/
Padlet	Padlet is 'paper for the web' and allows students to participate by adding to a 'virtual pin board' using text/ images and audio/video. Example: This tool could be used throughout the duration of the unit allowing students to add and collaborate as a group and reflect on the process after the unit is complete	• Engagement • Social interaction • Connectivity • Curation • Visual/auditory learning https://padlet.com/. http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/
ToonDoo	ToonDoo provides an easy way to create a comic strip. Example: As an introduction, students can create a comic strip that tells peers something about them. Students can either link to their ToonDoo or embed it into a discussion forum to help trigger conversation in the early weeks of teaching. http://www.toondoo.com/	• Engagement • Social interaction • Humorous • Auditory learning • Creativity http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/
PowToon	PowToon allows the user to create an engaging animated presentation. Example: For a marketing unit, students could create a short animation about a particular product that they want to market and embed into a discussion forum or wiki for comments.	• Engagement • Social interaction • Connectivity • Auditory learning http://www.powtoon.com/ http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/

YouTube Playlists	YouTube Playlists are a collection of videos that are compiled into a list. Example: A playlist could be used as a 'reboot' for a music subject. Students create a 5-song playlist of a particular artist (i.e. Mozart) that has previously been taught and comment on the music and what they have learnt about the rhythm etc. This playlist can be embedded into the LMS discussion forum enabling other students to comment.	• Engagement • Social interaction • Connectivity • Peer learning • Auditory learning https://www.youtube.com/ http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/
Aurasma	Aurasma is an application (app) that allows for augmented reality (AR) without the need for barcodes (Aurasma, n.d.). By creating an 'Aura' the facilitator can bring AR to the learning experience while using their mobile device. Example: Ask a question and create an Aura for the class that reveals the answer.	• Entertaining • Auditory learning • Cognitive learning http://www.aurasma.com/#/explore http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/
ZeeMaps	ZeeMaps allows users to create and publish interactive maps and pin point their location on a world map. Example: Ask students to add their name, location, introduce themselves (add a photo) and identify 1 interesting fact about their location.	• Engagement • Social interaction • Connectivity • Curation https://www.zeemaps.com/ http://naomimcgrath.wordpress.com/online-ice-breakers/

Tips for effective icebreakers

To be able to use the tools provided in Table 1, one needs to follow some simple steps for creating effective icebreakers. Tips for effective icebreakers include:

1. Keep it simple and easy to follow
2. Be creative and different
3. Provide learners with a brief reasoning behind the activities and link with prior knowledge
4. Make it fun and engaging, don't make it seem like a chore
5. Consider your skills and those of your students
6. Keep in mind technology constraints/requirements

The tools highlighted above were chosen to show the variety of virtual tools that are open source and can be used by online facilitators no matter what their skill set maybe. The tools are simple to use and allow for numerous possibilities in creating icebreaker activities.

Conclusion

Icebreakers enable students to become familiar with one another and begin to develop a learning community. The use of icebreakers can also contribute to developing cultural awareness and tolerance, breaking down barriers, and overcoming separation and loneliness (Kavanagh et al., 2011). It is important, however, to ensure that these are seen by the students as an important part of the learning process and effective in engaging the full online group. A variety of virtual tools may be useful in varying the engagement as well as providing students with new communication and IT skills that can be used throughout their learning.

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