

# Teaching & Learning News

Volume 24, Number 2, August 31, 2014

## A Scientific Icebreaker – Fast Friends

by Dr. Dylan Faulkner Selterman, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland

Teachers often use icebreakers with their students at the beginning of the semester to, at least theoretically, facilitate class participation and rapport between teachers and students (and between students). However, many of those icebreakers cause students to cringe—not because they are opposed to the idea of talking to each other, but because they often consider the activities themselves as lame, boring, mundane, or pointless. Often teachers will ask students to simply state their name, hometown, desired/current major, and a “random fact” about themselves (e.g., favorite TV show, guilty pleasure, etc.). These “name game” icebreakers are extremely superficial. You may find that during these activities, students are more inclined to wait their turn to speak rather than **actively listen** to what others’ have to say.

But that doesn’t mean teachers should abandon icebreaker activities altogether. Fortunately, behavioral scientists led by Dr. Art Aron developed an experimental procedure to induce interpersonal closeness between initial strangers in a short period of time. It has been affectionate-

ly nicknamed the “Fast Friends” procedure, and contains a series of progressively deeper existential questions about people’s background, experiences, beliefs, hopes, and desires. In the original research, Aron and colleagues (1997) assigned participants to complete this activity in pairs, and then measured participants’ reactions after doing the Fast Friends procedure in 45 minutes compared to a small-talk (control group). As predicted, participants felt much closer to each other after doing the Fast Friends (compared to the control “small-talk” group), and they also said it was more fun.

Here are sample questions from the Fast Friends procedure:

- Would you like to be famous? In what way?
- Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
- What is your most treasured memory?
- What does friendship mean to you?

Contrast those with some “small-talk” questions:

- Where are you from? Name all of the places you’ve lived.
- What did you do this summer?



Dr. [Dylan Faulkner Selterman](#) dfgd-fgdfg

I have written more about this procedure here: <http://tale.umd.edu/blog/2013/09/06/face-to-face-dialogue/>

- If you could invent a new flavor of ice cream, what would it be?

When I do this activity with my students at the beginning of each semester, I instruct them to find

the nearest person in proximity who is a total stranger to pair up for the activity. I also prime them to engage in meaningful self-disclosure by showing them a brief video of others doing similar disclosure - see two examples below:



<http://vimeo.com/7920691>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hf-HV4-N2LxQ>

After students complete the activity, we come together as a whole group to discuss what everyone learned about themselves, their activity partners, and about social behavior generally. In this free-response discussion, students consistently report the following: a) they really enjoyed the activity and feel joy as a result of making a new friend, b) they were pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to talk to a stranger about their personal lives, c) they realized they had a lot in common with their activity partners (despite some initial perception of uniqueness), and it makes them question assumptions about how similar people are in the world even though

they come from different backgrounds, d) they don't normally engage in these kinds of deep questions even with close friends and family (let alone strangers), and as a result they express disappointment at the lack of knowledge they have about people close to them, e) would love similar opportunities to do similar activities in the future.

The advantage of this activity is that students not only make new friends, but they also have a first-hand experience doing an actual procedure used by behavioral scientists to study interpersonal communication, rapport/intimacy, and friendship bonds. In other words, in addition to learning about science, they are actually doing science (the same way that chemistry, biology, and physics classes contain laboratory components in which they actually conduct hands-on demonstrations of those phenomena).

Some teachers might be reluctant to give students such deep questions to ask each other, because in our society strangers do not typically interact with each other in such ways. The social norms we have for initial conversation involve "safe" topics (like the weather), and avoidance of controversial topics (like politics or religion). However, the social norm against deep conversations during an initial meeting is antithetical to what people genuinely desire. Research consistently shows that people enjoy big talk more than small talk (they rate it as more pleasurable/fun), even

in the context of total strangers. [Recent research](#) has shown that people falsely assume that others are not very interested in social engagement, which is why they tend to isolate in social settings. Once they are instructed to talk to each other, they find it intrinsically rewarding.

The conclusion? Humans are ultra-social creatures who crave meaningful engagement with others the same way they crave food. Do not shy away from instructing students to do this type of activity.

#### Reference:

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., Bator, R. J. (1997). The experimental generation of interpersonal closeness: A procedure and preliminary findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 363-377.

## Teaching & Learning Transformation Center

University of Maryland  
<http://tltc.umd.edu>

### Teaching and Learning News

Ben Bederson  
*Associate Provost of Learning Initiatives*  
Michael Koliska, *Editor*

#### Follow us:

[umd.edu](http://umd.edu)

[@cte\\_umd](https://twitter.com/cte_umd)

[blog.umd.edu/cte](http://blog.umd.edu/cte)

