Icebreakers

When icebreakers work well they have a profoundly positive impact on the rapport of a group and help to create an engaged and active learning environment. This success can never be guaranteed but through proper planning, consideration and genuine enthusiasm from the person facilitating the activity the odds are greatly increased.

Key considerations when deciding on an icebreaker:

What do you want to achieve with your icebreaker?
Do you want to set the tone for the session? Build rapport between students? Lead into content in an engaging way?

Does the activity I have in mind suit the group in question?
Think about group size, the size/layout of the room, group demographics, the extent to which the group already know each other etc.

Is there a way of making the activity relevant to your subject area/session focus?
Changing the questions you are asking students as part of an activity allows you to tailor the focus - whether this is on learning more about each other or to assess prior knowledge/opinions on a particular course topic.

Would running the activity in one large group or in smaller sub-groups work better?
One large group allows all students to interact with each other, albeit superficially, whereas smaller sub-groups often mean interactions are more developed but at the cost of wider rapport building.

Sometimes the word "icebreakers" is enough to put people off
Alternative synonyms include: warm up activity, rapport building, speed meeting, networking and introductions.

Example icebreakers

Alliterative name game (most effective when done in one large group)

- Arrange the group so they are stood or sat in circle/semi-circle.
- Instruct students to take it in turns to introduce themselves and offer an alliterative adjective to their name i.e. Hi I am Methodical Mick / Delightful Deeba etc.
- Each person must say everyone else's name and adjective that have gone before them before introducing themselves.

This is an icebreaker with long lasting effects as it helps students remember each other's names and provides positive nick names and associations.

Getting to know (most effective in smaller groups)
Requires: a list of questions and either bags of Starburst sweets or singled sided coloured cards (so students don't know what colour they are going to draw)

- Display a list of questions on a projector, flipchart or sheet of paper per group.
- Instruct students to take it in turns to introduce themselves and draw a sweet/card and answer the corresponding question.
- If you want students to play this for longer than one round simply ask them to skip introducing themselves and just answer another question.

Green - My favourite TV/Netflix programme is…
Orange - To me, the hardest thing about university is....
Blue - My favourite animal is…
Purple - The country I would most like to visit is…

This activity often leads to further discussion around people's answers and common interests and gives students a starter for subsequent conversations.

If I were a . . . (works with any sized group)

- Each person takes it in turns to introduce themselves to the group and say what they would be and why if they were, for example: an animal, a tv/film/computer. game/cartoon character, a historical figure, a household object, chemical element).
- If you want the activity to go on longer than one round provide a number of potential subjects or ask groups to generate their own.

This activity is most effective when tailored to the course/situation i.e. sports students might be asked which famous athlete they would be and why.

Group web (most effective in medium sized groups)
Requires: a ball of string

- Arrange the group so they are stood in a circle.
- The first person introduces themselves and either provides one piece of predetermined information about themselves (i.e. favourite film) or a response to a discussion / piece of knowledge they have on a subject
- Keeping hold of the end of the string they throw the ball to someone across the circle from them and the activity continues until everyone has introduced themselves.
- It is important to keep reminding students that they need to keep hold of part of the string before throwing it on in order to create a web.

Once everyone has had a go and the web is fully formed you can explain to students that the web they have created is a visual representation of the way groups network/work together and how it would look totally different if someone was missing/not included.

Speed meet (most effective in larger groups)

- Arrange the group into two lines facing each other (so everyone has a partner).
- Instruct students to introduce themselves to each other with no guidance or provide a question that they must answer (i.e. where they grew up, one thing that they like about themselves or are good at etc).
- At 1-2 minute intervals ask the person on the end of one of the lines to go to the other end and the whole line moves down one person (one line stays completely stationary throughout the activity).
- You can continue this activity for a set amount of time or until students have spoken to everyone on the opposite row.

Students do not get the opportunity to interact with others on their row but it does allow them to speak 1-1 with a number of other students. As this activity is 1-1 and time limited it is not too exposing for students.

Group map (most effective in larger groups)

- Stand in the centre of the room and explains that the room is a map of the world, with Sheffield in the centre. You will need to indicate which way is North.
- Instruct students to arrange themselves in the room relative to Sheffield as to where they are from.
- Once students have completed the task go around the map asking students to introduce themselves, say where they are from and provide one detail about their home town or city.

This activity requires students to work together to find out where each other are from and how to position themselves relative to each other. It also gives students an opportunity to say something about where they are from and what makes it special/unique/interesting.

10 things in common (works with any group size)
Requires: pen and paper

- Arrange the group into pairs and give each pair paper and pen.
- Instruct each pair to find 10 things they have in common with one another.
- Move students around every five minutes so they get the opportunity to speak to a number of different people.
- You can introduce a competitive element by seeing who can find 10 things in common first and then feeding this back to the whole group.

This activity encourages cooperation between students and helps them learn a number of things about a number of students. Due to the nature of the activity each student will only be able work with a small number of other students but will find out quite a lot about them.

People Bingo (most effective in larger groups)
Requires: printed grids and pens

- Give each student a question grid and a pen
- Instruct students to find other students in the room who identify with the statements on the grid. They must find a different student for each statement.
- Either provide a time limit or turn it into a competition to see who can complete their grid the fastest.

This is a fast paced activity which allows students to rapidly exchange information with each other. Because the information students have to exchange is already provided it does not require them to come up with topics themselves which some students find difficult.

Example People Bingo grid:

Likes cats better than dogs	Doesn't know what sort of job they want	Wants to work abroad	Watches Game of Thrones
Listens to podcasts	Plays a sport	Watches the news everyday	Likes computer games
Can name three marsupials	Watches Eurovision	Can juggle	Doesn't drink coffee
Was born in another country	Has met someone famous	Plays an instrument	Can speak more than two languages