

## Title: Learning through Experience: How to Provide your Students with Hands-On Networking Experience while Creating a Better Classroom

### Introduction

Speed networking, a professional take on speed-dating, has become increasingly popular in higher education over the past decade. Speed networking can be used as an icebreaker in which, rather than sharing things about themselves like “I like long walks on the beach,” students can talk about their educational aspirations or affinity for research.

An engaging and interactive icebreaker can set the tone for an engaging and interactive semester by establishing class norms early and previewing the semester, helping students make connections across the material. In addition to simply meeting their new classmates, speed networking initiates actual conversations with others, including the instructor, which can empower the students and make their personal experience in the class more meaningful. Overall, this can lead to a more inclusive classroom climate, making the learning experience for all individuals more comfortable, collaborative, comprehensive, related, and significant.

Speed networking can enable students to make more diverse connections by talking to students that they typically would not interact with. It can also help students become more comfortable participating in the classroom and can help establish a more intimate setting conducive of student learning, in which students are more likely to share their thoughts and opinions. Networking is particularly valuable for individuals from underserved or disadvantaged groups, as it can enable them to break out of existing circles of associates to make more beneficial contacts. These brief encounters can have lasting effects leading to future or professional relationship development among classmates (e.g., picking well-suited partners for group work) and better teamwork.

For instructors, speed networking enables them to provide students with one-on-one attention and focus. This can supply instructors with information for later reference or for the purposes of personalizing subsequent lessons. One potential downside to speed networking is that there may be a decrease in the quantity of students with whom the instructor gets introduced to, but it will increase the quality of the conversations that the instructor does have, in comparison to other ice breakers, such as simple introductions around the room. By speaking with students about topics related to the course, the instructor may also be able gauge the class’ overall understanding and familiarity with the upcoming material.

### Theoretical Foundation

As suggested by Maxine Adebola (2013), this session can be thought of as ‘scholarly tailgating’ that is diverse and inclusive in nature. Speed networking is a way for individuals to meet a lot of different people, but only for a brief (less than five minutes) period of time (Bick, 2007). Research has found that networking has many potential benefits for participants, including an increase in resources, commitment, and trust (Peltomäki & Husman, 2002). Through speed-networking, students develop informal support networks with each other. Informal support networks are defined as groups of individuals that people seek out for advice, emotional support and credible information (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy & Kram, 2012). These support networks often become the study groups and team projects they form later in the semester. Networking also has long-term implications. For students who are exploring career opportunities, such as undergraduate juniors and seniors and graduate students, networking can

assist with career development, job opportunities, and lead to overall success (Ansmann et al., 2014).

Speed-networking also fosters an inclusive environment for the range of diversity in our classes uniting students regardless of age, gender, or personality. For example, there are a variety of current popular press articles highlighting the relevance of extroversion to networking behaviors, indicating that those who are introverted are less likely to engage in activities (such as being the first to speak up in a group or the first to initiate conversation; e.g., Cain, 2013) that encourage this type of relationship-building; this has been supported by current research (Wolff & Kim, 2012). In addition, women can find themselves being excluded from certain networks, and younger women can be further disadvantaged in such networks (Tonge, 2008), regardless of whether they are aware or unaware of the potential benefits of networking (Singh, Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2002). Presently, most of our undergraduate students are young Millennials and Generation Z (also referred to as iGen). These students comfortable communicating in non-face-to-face environments, heavily relying on social media outlets for communications (Ferri-Reed, 2014; Soto & Lugo, 2013; Williams et al, 2010; Zenke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Speed networking compels them to have face-to-face interactions early in the term and encourages them to communicate with their classmates in person. The increased reliance and expectation of asynchronous communication and social media presence, particularly by these students, may create a chasm in effective communication across generational boundaries in classes where non-traditional students are present. Speed-networking provides a link between generations providing network opportunities where all ages feel included and valued. Lastly, in line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), this exercise increases social interactions between students of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations and identities, and even religious affiliations, which based on contact hypothesis can reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and increase positive attitudes towards others (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Heinze & Horne, 2009; Jung, 2012).

#### Learning Objectives:

1. Instructors will learn to facilitate a low stakes networking event among their students, representing growing professionals.
2. Instructors will acquire skills in classroom management, by monitoring student discussions and understanding how to assist when students struggle.
3. Instructors will be able to create a more inclusive classroom environment; one that emphasizes collaboration with classmates and respect

#### Session Description

This workshop will be conducted in three discrete but related sections. This will maintain the interest of the group participants and allow for different activities to inspire and invoke different ideas among the various contributors.

The workshop will begin with a welcome to the session, the organizers will introduce themselves and explain the purpose, expectations, and agenda. Next, the organizers will explain speed networking, how speed networking can be used as an icebreaker in the classroom, and the benefits of the speed networking exercise. We will also briefly discuss our experiences with the exercise, and potential issues that might arise. This last approximately 10 minutes and will provide a springboard for the rest of the workshop.

The next section will be the speed network activity. This is an interactive way for the members to learn how to do this icebreaker in the classroom, as well as experience what they have

learned from the perspective of the student. There will be three rounds which enable each participant to have one-on-one interactions with three other participants in small but dedicated time slots, as if they were the students. We believe three rounds is enough for the participants to get a sense of the activity, understand its benefits, and ask questions so they can implement the activity in their own class. This activity will be approximately 10 minutes.

The final 10 minutes of the session will be a debrief of the workshop. It will outline practical suggestions from the session and be a summary of take-aways, or actionable items from the discussion. This would allow participants to come away from the session with some practical tools that they can apply in the classroom. Alternative suggestions (such as triads for large groups) will be made by the organizers and welcomed from the participants. They will also be asked to share their own ideas and recommendations at this time. Participants will also be permitted to ask questions they may still have and provide critiques and highlights of the session.

Time allotted	Total time	Module	Details
10 m	10 m	1: Welcome	Agenda & Introduction to Speed Networking
10 m	25 m	2: Speed Networking	Activity
10 m	30 m	3: 'Take-aways'	Summary & suggestions

### Exercise Overview

The speed-networking icebreaker is hosted by the instructor in a typical “speed-dating” fashion: half of the students will stay seated while the other half move from one person to another after each ‘date.’ Arrangement of seats will vary by class, depending on the desks and layout of the classroom. The instructor will begin by communicating the speed networking rules up front, explaining the length of time for each ‘date’ and the direction in which the students should move.

The students are instructed to briefly introduce themselves to their partner and chat for the remainder of the ‘date.’ Instructors may wish to tailor the activity by providing course-specific discussion prompts to create directed but unstructured conversations that center around topics covered class. For example, a research methods course can be given a question such as “do you think there is a relationship between ice cream and murder?” Organizational Behavior classes might be prompted to “describe a really bad job or boss you’ve had.”

Once in their pairs, the instructor starts the timer and allows the students to begin. Each date should be approximately 3 minutes long allowing enough time for basic introductions and the exchange of ideas. The length of time can be longer or shorter, depending on class size and how long the instructor wants the activity to last. At the end of the allotted time, the instructor will signal to the students the round is over and they are to move on to the next person. It is helpful to have a bell or loud timer to indicate the end of each round.

As with any in-class activity, there may be some logistical concerns and possible complications. As aforementioned, classroom size and desk arrangement will determine how students move their seats and form pairs, and how far apart each pair is from the others. In addition, in large classes, conversations tend to be louder, so instructors should be aware that this may be a noisy activity. Furthermore, in larger classes there is more opportunity for confusion about where to move (especially when students have to go to the other side of the room). Clear instructions at the begin typically reduce confusion later in the session. Lastly, if there is an uneven number of

students in the class, instructors may choose to participate in the activity themselves. Personally, we enjoy joining in during the exercise, as it allows us to get to know a few students as well.

Our session will provide an opportunity to learn about and participate in a non-traditional and fun icebreaker for students. In addition to our goal, we anticipate the discussion and activity will spur new ideas for icebreakers and ways to build and inviting, active classroom climate.

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