

**Connection before Content: Tools for Building Relational Foundations to Support
Experiential Learning**

Abstract

Building on work on psychological safety, this symposium offers several tools and approaches that instructors can implement to build relationships among students and between students and the instructors at the *start* of and throughout a course. In addition to psychological safety, the theoretical foundation for this symposium is based on what we know about effective leadership vis-à-vis relationship-building and the positive effects of nurtured relationships on long-term health and happiness. We suggest that building psychological safety *before* diving into course-specific experiential activities is paramount to their effectiveness, as is continuing to reinforce psychological safety throughout the course.

Keywords: Psychological safety, class openers, relationship building

Connection before Content: Tools for Building Relational Foundations to Support Experiential Learning

In 50 years of MOBTS, experiential learning-based pedagogy has grown from a fringe practice to become a mainstay of management education, thanks in no small part to the Society's conferences, its *Journal of Management Education*, and its *Management Teaching Review*. Experience-based pedagogy recognizes that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). While experience may drive the learning cycle, in organizations, those experiences are socially embedded; thus, learning is experiential *and* relational (Eriksen, 2012). Much work has been dedicated to developing specific experiential exercises and activities to facilitate learning for many management concepts and topics; however, less work has been dedicated to equipping instructors to create a relationally focused environment that may be more conducive to experiential learning.

Building on work on psychological safety, this symposium provides several tools that instructors can implement to build relationships among students and between students and the instructors at the *start* of and throughout a course. Psychological safety promotes learning (Baker, 2004; Delizonna, 2017; Edmondson, 1999); therefore, building that psychological safety *before* diving into course-specific experiential activities is paramount. Continuing to reinforce the importance of psychological safety is likewise critical. These tools can be deployed in any course, as they are independent of specific course content.

Theoretical Foundation

Psychological safety has been associated with improved learning and performance. Edmondson's early work (1999: 354) found that team psychological safety, which she defined as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking,” was positively associated with

team learning behaviors. Delizonna (2017) summarized a two-year study on team performance at Google, which found that psychological safety was the most important characteristic of successful team. More directly related to our goals here, Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015) noted that experiential learning requires a “safe space” that should be created from the beginning of the course. Baker (2004), who suggested that psychological safety was necessary for conversational learning through discussions of “undiscussable” or controversial topics, also argued for taking time at the beginning of a course to create that safety, although she noted that doing so may be difficult: “As each new semester or quarter begins in management education programs, there is pressure to delve immediately into the course content, to give information and answers, to establish professional credibility, and to demonstrate the efficient use of time. Stepping back a bit from these pressures to take the time to prepare the environment may not be the norm and may not be easy” (Baker, 2004: 696).

Several authors have suggested ways to improve psychological safety in the classroom. As Baker (2004: 698) states, “We can help students share responsibility with us for creating the kind of trust and psychological safety where people can begin to be vulnerable enough to question, ask for help, talk freely, and make mistakes without negative consequences.” Recently, Gavino and Akinlade (2022) provided personal story prompts to help students develop high-quality relationships and psychological safety in teams. Building on work in clinical psychology, Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015) suggest that instructors can create safe spaces for experiential learning by creating a strong “container” early on, establishing ground rules, teaching by example, listening, and modeling reflexivity. To create a “holding” space, they suggest using icebreakers and playing games to facilitate student conversation. Relatedly, but outside of the classroom, one recommendation from the Google study was to have team members “speak

human to human” through a set of questions and reflections that shows that other members or counterparts have beliefs, hopes, vulnerabilities, friends, family, wants, and wishes “just like me” (Delizonna, 2017).

Creating psychological safety to facilitate better individual learning experiences may also have positive spillover effects by encouraging helpful behaviors. For example, when examining knowledge sharing in virtual communities, Zhang et al. (2010) found that levels of trust positively impact psychological safety, and that psychological safety positively impacts knowledge sharing.

More broadly, we know that relationship-building is a critical element of effective leadership and followership; followers trust leaders who demonstrate their interest in developing and nurturing relationships (Yukl et al., 2019). Longitudinal research conducted as part of the Harvard Study of Adult Development (<https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/>) suggests that good relationships are associated with long-term health and happiness (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

Symposium Overview

This symposium includes two presenters sharing class opening activities designed to build relationships before launching into course-specific content as well as throughout the course. While the activities are described for in-person classes; they could be modified for either hybrid or virtual classes as well.

Presenter 1: Presenter 1 teaches at a regional comprehensive university with 8,500 students in the Midwest. Presenter 1 typically teaches principles of management, strategic management, and international business courses with 25-30 students. Regardless of the focus of the course, Presenter 1 begins each course by dedicating two weeks toward relationship-building

of some kind. The first session is dedicated nearly exclusively to personal introductions in two forms. First, students write down answers to several questions, some standard (major, class standing) and some less standard (favorite restaurant in town and what to order there and, importantly, a “walk-up” song that would get them excited to come to class), and then the Presenter conducts brief interviews with each student, which then also becomes a name game. After learning a bit about a student, the focus turns to the next student, who must name each student who has been previously interviewed before being interviewed themselves.

This name game is explicitly made low pressure, and students who struggle with a name may chat with the instructor or other students nearby. There are no repercussions for failure, and students see in real time that it is okay to make a mistake. By the end of the first session, the Presenter knows the names of the students, signaling the importance of that relationship, and has a list of “walk-up” songs to play at the beginning of each class session, again signaling the importance of the relationship but also providing a soft attendance incentive.

The following class session is focused on Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle and working through a learning style inventory. That lesson starts with a discussion about positive learning experiences, highlighting that students have different ideas about what makes a learning experience “positive.” Students then complete a learning style inventory and share about their own learning “shape.” The remaining sessions focus on goal setting, critical thinking, and teamwork experiences.

Presenter 2: Presenter 2 teaches at a liberal arts college with 1,800 students in the Midwest. Presenter 2 typically teaches introductory and advanced organizational behavior, leading people and teams, and leadership studies courses with 20-25 students each. For each course, Presenter 2 begins with 1-2 weeks focused on relationship-building between the students

and between the students and instructor. Prior to the first class, students complete a Google Form asking for their name as they prefer to be addressed, what they have heard about the course, any concerns about the class, and then, some questions that may strike the students as unusual, particularly for a business class. These include “What's the best thing you have ever eaten?” “What's one thing other people love but you think is totally overrated?” “What one specific saying of one of your parents or guardians is stuck in your head?” and “If you were a baseball player, what would your walk-up song be?” They're also asked if they know anyone in the class and to share their cell phone and a preferred headshot (selfie) of them.

After a rousing game of *People Bingo* (Appendix; described below), students are placed into small groups and asked to share with each other the answers to the more unusual questions. They are also asked to discuss why they think the instructor might have asked these questions and what the answers might suggest about them. Pretty quickly, the students find themselves talking about common values and experiences as well as the unique experiences that may have influenced their responses. Students then report out to the full group on their small group's findings; the instructor works to make connections between the students as similar responses from different small groups are shared.

People Bingo is a simple, yet fun, icebreaker in which students wander the classroom seeking individuals who have the characteristics listed in each square of the 5x5 bingo card. A different student must sign each square. The squares include statements such as “Has blue eyes” “Plays a musical instrument” “Wears contacts” “High school graduation class had fewer than 200 students” “Has at least three tattoos” and “Has a pet that is at least five years old.” The rules for achieving a “bingo” are the same as for the regular game – five squares completed across, down, or diagonally is a “bingo,” which the winner typically calls out with great gusto. Students

enjoy this icebreaker, and the instructor typically allows for up to six “bingos” before asking everyone to return to their seats. People are asked to give their names and identify the students who helped them achieve their “bingo” and, as with the exercise that follows, the class once again has the opportunity to discuss common and unique attributes. The instructor chimes in with her shared characteristics where appropriate. Ideally, everyone in the class will have been named either as someone who achieved a “bingo” or as someone who signed a square. The goal of these two exercises is to get people chatting with each other about the subject they know best – themselves – and to start building relationships with people throughout the classroom.

Students are also asked to participate in an “Easter Egg” hunt in the syllabus for a nominal number of extra credit points. Specifically, students must choose an appointment time to discuss their first assignment with the instructor and share both a favorite meme and a photo of a favorite animal via email to the instructor. The instructor incorporates the memes and favorite animals in the semester’s slide decks, asking students to briefly describe the significance of the memes and animal photos. Class time also features students’ “walk-up” music, either at the beginning of class or during the short break midway through the class. Students enjoy these personalized additions to the class as well as the continuing opportunities to discover what they have in common with their classmates and instructor. The memes typically provoke laughter, and the animal photos compel sharing of beloved pet stories.

Throughout the semester, the instructor engages in other activities to build relationships. As mentioned, students are required to meet to review their first assignment. This is a one-on-one opportunity to clarify requirements, address any concerns, and learn more about the student and their interests/experiences. The instructor uses information from these meetings to illustrate key course concepts, taking care to not call out people’s names without their permission. The

result is again more personalization as well as demonstrated respect for each student and the value of their experiences to the class's learning.

We know that setting the tone for a class is critical. Taking the time to emphasize the importance of relationship-building signals to the students both their value as individuals and the need for healthy relationships as the foundation for effective learning. Students appreciate being “seen” and having their experiences and values acknowledged and used to illustrate course concepts. These activities, while simple in their creation and implementation, let students experience firsthand the importance of spending time on relationships, whether in the classroom, in sports, at work, and at home. Finally, discovering these aspects of our students helps us to better understand their circumstances and, where appropriate, tailor our teaching to enhance the likelihood of students' recall and ability to apply the knowledge they have learned.

Session Description

The following table provides a timeline for a 60-minute symposium.

Timing	Activity
10 minutes	Introduction of presenters and participants
5 minutes	Brief overview of theoretical foundation/grounding
10 minutes	Presenter 1 describes and engages participants in a demonstration of a sample of class opener activities
10 minutes	Presenter 2 describes and engages participants in a demonstration of a sample of class opener activities
15 minutes	Participants ask questions and share their experiences with building relationships in their classrooms
10 minutes	Conclusions and steps for further collaboration

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Appendix - People Bingo

Has blue eyes	Plays a musical instrument	Wears contacts	High school graduation class had fewer than 200 students	Has at least three tattoos
Is wearing red	Is a Star Wars fan	Has made a meme	Has a pet that is at least five years old	Has been to something other than a Packers game at Lambeau Field
Has more than one piercing in an ear	Has three or more siblings	FREE	Has never had a pet	Speaks a language other than English
Home is a suburb of Chicago	Has broken a bone	Can swim	Is a Chicago Bears fan	Is not a student-athlete
Has traveled outside North America	Transferred to St. Norbert College	Born in July	Didn't earn their driver's license before age 18	Born in a city with more than 100,000 people