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Rapport Building Isn't Just for Interviews

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The first investigation course I ever observed began with a knowledgeable subject matter expert providing a lot of information on risk effective decision making. It was a relatively new 10 day course on team investigations. I asked the course manager why there was no icebreaker or introduction exercise? Can you guess what the response was? "There isn't time to do one."

The course manager had a strong background in interview and interrogation, including some time as a polygraph technician. I was completely new to the world of law enforcement, and during the interview and interrogation portion of the course he was explaining to me the importance rapport building as the basis for interviewing. Seizing the opportunity, I asked, "Don't you think the same concept applies to training?" We had a conversation about how the concept of rapport building is also important for training, and all future offerings of that course began with an icebreaker.



Like many aspects of training, the icebreaker has fallen victim to poor design. Instructors have stopped doing introduction exercises because they became a standardized introduce yourself to the class which no one saw value in. Think about the connection to rapport building in your job...why is it so important?

Icebreakers serve a number of purposes:

- Get people interacting and talking to the group
- Increases comfort level
- Networking
- Provides insight in to the level of experience in the class
- Sets the tone for the course - you are going to be participating, not sitting and listening
- Energizes people
- Get participants thinking about the topic
- May set expectations for each other
- Identify the participants' expectations for the class

If you've ever watched or been an instructor struggling to get people to interact and ask questions, there is a good chance the class didn't start with a well-designed icebreaker. Your content is important and you probably feel you don't have at least 20 minutes for everyone to do some sort of introduction, but the benefits to the rest of the course make the time investment worthwhile.

Design Tips

Considerations are:

- Course topic
- Size of the class
- Time
- Format
- Do the participants already know each other?



Course Topic

The exercise must be relevant to the course. If it's a course on investigating online crime, it's not appropriate to have people act like or name their favourite animal. I think a drama or improv class is the only place an exercise like that would be acceptable. What would be effective for a course on conducting online investigations? You could consider having the participants investigate each other online and see what they can find out. This exercise could also be continued later on in the course to demonstrate what was learned throughout the course. I spend a lot of time pondering and researching options for icebreakers because first impressions are important, and this is the place to focus in on the course topic.

Size of the Class

The number of participants in the class effects which types of exercises are feasible. If you're facilitating a class of 15 and a class of 50, is it feasible to have everyone stand up and introduce themselves individually? Time is a consideration, but more importantly what is gained by listening to 49 people introduce themselves? Are you going to remember any details about an individual? With the smaller class, there is enough time for a more in-depth introduction which incorporates the course topic and something to support bonding. In a class of 50 participants, that is not effective; therefore, you'll want to consider a group exercise which provides an opportunity for a participants to get to know a few other people on a deeper level. The group exercise should incorporate a discussion or an objective, in addition to introductions. If the class size is manageable, have each group report a response to the discussion or relevant information on their experience or course topic.

Time

Ideally we always have enough time to meet the learning outcomes, but realistically we're often given a set amount of time for a course before the learning outcomes were even drafted. Hopefully I have convinced you with this article that the time invested in a suitable icebreaker is worthwhile, but there are times when the type of activity

is limited by the amount of time available. If time is really tight, decide which of the icebreaker outcomes is most important and develop an exercise to achieve it. If it's important to get people talking, to increase participation throughout the course, give five minutes to talk to one or two people sitting near them. Potentially have them discuss a topic associated to the course and have volunteers share the outcome. This format minimizes time and also works for large groups.



Format

How is the class set up? Is it a small class in a course with a lot of group work or scenarios, or is it a large class in an auditorium for an information session? The amount of space and room layout could impact movement. It is encouraged to get people up and moving, but in some situations it won't be possible.

The class may already be set up with pods or tables pushed together for participants to sit in small groups. If they will be discussing or working in those groups throughout the course, use the icebreaker to get to know each other and possibly assess how they work together as a group. Consider starting with a topic related discussion question, or a challenge to complete.

Existing Relationship

The design of exercise will change depending on the

existing relationship between the participants. If the course is being offered to a squad or department which work together, a basic introduction is only beneficial to the facilitator. If I'm designing for a group of participants who already know each other, I'll challenge them to learn something new about each other. One exercise I've done is to have everyone write 3 interesting facts about themselves on a card and put their name at the bottom. The facilitator reads out the facts and people guess who they think it is. This game can be stretched out throughout the duration of the course by reading out a few cards after every break.

Conclusion

I see a lot of instructors using the same *stand up, introduce yourself and your years of service* for every course. While that format can be the basis of the exercise if it fits, in order to be effective there needs to be additional components for the value to be realized. Do not limit to years of service, find out how much experience they already have on the topic. Then add something personal which gives people something to talk about. I have used additional questions such as, what did you do on your last set of days off or last vacation, and what was the worst job you've ever had. You'll be amazed at the things you learn about people, and how often you'll hear someone referencing what was said during a break. We are trying to break the ice to create an easier path for the rest of the course. **ILEETA**

About the Author

Kerry Avery is the owner of [Odin Training Solutions Inc.](http://OdinTrainingSolutions.com) Kerry has a Master's degree in Education from Athabasca University and over 13 years' experience designing training programs, including 8 years working with law enforcement to develop classroom, online and blended learning courses. Kerry has presented at the ILEETA, IADLEST, and IACP conferences. Kerry has also developed and released an e-learning program on the instructional design process. She can be reached at Kerry.Avery@shaw.ca.

