UDI Product: Icebreaker for a Writing Curriculum
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Description

This icebreaker introduces students to the concept of “learning styles,” allowing them to identify their own styles as well as become cognizant of other styles. Developed particularly for a writing curriculum, the icebreaker further introduces students to and engages them in the rhetorical tradition as it impacts an understanding of the writing process. Applications to other academic disciplines are suggested.

Introduction

The instructor conscious of the principles of Universal Design strives to integrate those principles throughout the curriculum. He or she can do so during the opening classes not through a formal articulation of them but through the creation of an atmosphere in which they can naturally occur. The final two principles of UDI emphasize that “instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive” and that such instruction establishes a “community of learners.” These principles identify clearly the objectives of any icebreaker, but particularly this one.

This icebreaker realizes three specific ends:

- **Exploration of the Learning Process**
  1. The instructor must acquire knowledge about his or her students and their unique learning processes. This icebreaker is “simple and intuitive” in its identification of “important information, skills, or competencies” (Principle 3) from the beginning of the course. Such knowledge allows the instructor to respect “diversity in learners” rather than “rely on retrofitted accommodations” (Principle 1).
  2. The student must acquire knowledge of his or her own learning process. This icebreaker requires the student to identify, reflect on, and explore his or her past learning experiences and then use the knowledge he or she acquires as a basis for growth and development.

- **Creation of Community**
  1. This icebreaker allows the instructor to establish a relationship to each individual student as well as to his or her class of students. The icebreaker models the type of teacher-student relationship to occur throughout the semester.
  2. This icebreaker allows the students to establish a relationship with one another. The icebreaker establishes a comfortable classroom situation that will allow students to work together as learners. Each student’s own reading, writing, and thinking skills will flourish through exposure to the learning styles of his or her classmates.
3. This icebreaker allows the student to establish a relationship with himself or herself as a learner. The icebreaker embraces a “tolerance for error,” in fact discounting the idea of “error” and emphasizing multiple ways to learn (Principle 5). Students—especially those in the developmental classroom—can identify themselves as having had successful learning experiences in the past.

- **Introduction of Course Content**
  This icebreaker introduces course content and in fact establishes an academic context for that content. Specifically, this icebreaker introduces the rhetorical tradition as it informs and applies to the writing process.

**A Note on the Concept of “Learning Styles” as it Impacts this Icebreaker**

Knowledge of learning styles can have two major applications: it can allow instructors to develop academic situations that respond to the varied ways students learn and it can allow students to understand more fully the ways in which they do learn or might learn. The former best embodies the UDI principle of inclusiveness, though it is the responsibility of the instructor also to heighten the students’ awareness of their own learning styles. The instructor might use a variety of strategies to identify and/or explain those styles: essays might be read, lectures might be given, tests might be administered, or exercises might be devised. In fact, a combination of these strategies would acknowledge diverse styles of learning about learning styles.

This icebreaker does not use the strategies identified above to explain learning styles. In fact, I would argue that prominent theories—those of Dunn and Dunn, Kolb, or Canfield, for example—are not that informative in and of themselves to the students (though the underlying concept of styles is informative to them). Thus, this icebreaker asks students themselves to identify their own learning styles. Because students identify their own styles, their observations do not neatly or completely follow any single theory (though it has been my experience in the developmental classroom, often one in which students have been identified as having learning disabilities, that the concept and even the vocabulary of learning styles is not unfamiliar to them). Nonetheless, after formally using this icebreaker in three developmental classes (and after having discussed the concept of learning styles in numerous writing classes), it has been my experience that Fleming’s VARK model is informative to students’ understanding of their learning styles or to their description of successful learning situations. Students commonly describe learning through visual, aural, reading/writing, or kinesthetic activities. (Both the VARK Site—http://www.vark-learn.com—and The Active Learning Site—http://www.active-learning-site.com/vark.htm—provide more information on VARK.) However, at no time during the semester do I introduce the VARK model or inventory or any other learning styles inventory. As noted above, one of the distinguishing features of this icebreaker as a means to explore learning styles is that it asks students to identify their own styles and then it uses the styles they have identified throughout the semester.
Strategy

This icebreaker has been applied to the developmental classroom, but it has applications to the college-level classroom. Further, this icebreaker has been applied to a writing course, but it has applications to various disciplines. I have indicated in italics typical responses generated by the icebreaker as well as my observations about the strategy.

The first class meeting covers the usual business: verification of the roster; explanation of course objectives and requirements; and review of instructor and student obligations to one another.

During the first class the instructor also introduces the activity that will become the icebreaker in the following class. Building upon the explanation of the learning situations students will be engaged in throughout the course (such as reading, writing, and discussing), the instructor introduces the fact that we always find ourselves in learning situations--curricular and extracurricular; academic and experiential. The instructor then asks students to reflect on such situations and to consider how they learned in those situations, to consider what learning styles allowed them to learn. (The instructor might offer an example, such as putting together a model [a “learning situation”] by reading the directions and by looking at the illustrations. Reading and looking at pictures are two “learning styles.” Another example might be learning about the digestive system [a “learning situation”] by reading a textbook, watching a video, and performing a lab project. Reading, looking, and doing are three “learning styles.” The instructor should limit his or her examples so as not to influence student responses.) Students are told they will have to introduce themselves to the class during the next meeting by describing themselves as learners and by referring to their learning styles.

I’ve indicated below a representative prompt, though the experienced instructor should allow the assignment to evolve out of classroom discussion. (Presenting the prompt orally and then writing it on the board will help to meet diverse learning styles.)

Prompt: “Think back on some of the experiences you’ve had both in school and out of school in which you’ve learned something. What did you learn and how did you learn? What are your learning styles?”

Students are encouraged to limit themselves to 2 or 3 styles to allow for a clear explanation and illustration of each. The prefatory reflection on learning situations (which often results in an identification of such experiences as automotive, culinary, athletic, and childcare ones, as well as academic ones) assures that students identify a variety of styles. Further, it confirms that these students—especially those in a developmental class—have had successful learning experiences. Students are told that they must make an oral presentation; no written notes or prepared texts are allowed.
During the second class, the icebreaker itself occurs. The following procedure is followed:

1. Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class. The instructor can ask for a volunteer to begin or the instructor can go around the classroom. The presentation should require “low physical effort” (Principle 6); students should determine the posture through which they will address the class.

2. As each student describes his or her learning styles to the class, the ways in which he or she best learns, the instructor records the responses (in abbreviated form) on a transparency.

   Students characteristically describe learning by reading, by doing, by seeing, by listening, by asking questions, and/or by interacting with others. Their responses will determine the learning styles I integrate into the curriculum throughout the semester.

   The instructor must record every response given, listing every point every time it is made.

3. After the presentations are completed, the instructor asks students to try to remember all of the various styles identified by the class. Students typically are unable to recreate the entire list, at least not with any specificity. Students are then asked to reflect on whether they learn through listening (a frequently identified style).

4. The instructor then projects the list of styles on the overhead. The students silently read the list. The transparency is then removed and again the instructor asks students to try to recreate the list. Again, students typically have difficulty doing so, though this learning situation has been impacted by the listening one. Students are then asked to reflect on whether they learn through reading (a frequently identified style).

5. The instructor then projects the list on the overhead again. He or she explains the concept of mapping (a prewriting/organizing strategy in which students write a subject [such as “learning styles”] in the center of a piece of paper and then draw lines radiating from that subject which indicate subtopics [such as “types of styles”]). The instructor asks students to map out the list of learning styles. The instructor then asks students to turn over the map and then try to identify the styles. Students typically have success doing so. Building on the earlier discussion of reading as a reinforcement for listening, the instructor points to the various skills employed here which reinforce one another. Students are then asked to reflect on whether they learn through writing and/or seeing and/or doing (frequently identified styles).
The procedure through which these learning styles are introduced both identifies the learning styles and embodies them. It is a model of the principle of “flexibility” in that it “provide[s] for multiple means of engaging in learning tasks” (Principle 2). Further, it presents material in “multiple” ways “regardless of students sensory abilities” (Principle 4). It is inclusive in that it acknowledges all styles of learning as valid (if not necessarily equally valuable). Students with disabilities which affect their ability to hear, see, or speak will be challenged by parts of this icebreaker, but will not be excluded from the process and will have a chance to identify a style or styles consistent with their needs. Further, all students will recognize the limitations of particular styles.

I have always been struck by the honesty with which all students describe themselves. I have had some students openly discuss learning and physical disabilities, while I have had others do so privately.

The first two objectives of the icebreaker
- Exploration of the learning process
- Creation of community
have been realized. The final objective
- Introduction of course content
can now be approached.

The instructor has required that the student introduce himself or herself orally. The instructor asks the class whether they would have preferred writing and then reading their introductions to the class. The instructor then asks the class to identify the links between speaking and writing and the possible advantages of one over the other. These questions are meant to introduce a discussion of rhetoric and of the rhetorical situation.

The class discussion usually raises varied responses to personal preference but typical responses concerning the links between the advantages of one approach to the other. Students describe the oral situation as one that offers the particular advantage of being able to direct one’s thoughts to a known listener whose body language and/or questions can guide the speaker. Further, students emphasize that the speaker can re-explain if necessary and can use language in unique ways to emphasize meaning.

I usually emphasize that as their audience, I have asked them to focus on an aspect of themselves—their learning styles—which is of particular interest to me as a teacher. I then have them reflect on how they might introduce themselves to others—an employer, a doctor, the sibling of a friend.
This discussion sets up key considerations about rhetoric. Especially, it provides a way to link the oral roots of rhetoric to the written adaptations of those roots. The instructor should identify the following factors on the board to reinforce the discussion and, if necessary, introduce those factors not raised during the discussion:

- Speaker-listener relationship
- Response to questions
- Clarity of presentation
- Unique use of language.

Next, the instructor should identify the link between these oral considerations and written ones. A strong piece of writing

- Is directed to a particular audience
- Anticipates that audience’s questions, interests, and concerns
- Presents material in a logical way
- Uses language effectively so as to interest, inform, and persuade.

The instructor could also—especially in a more advanced writing class—introduce the work of such rhetoricians as Aristotle (focusing on the concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos) or Cicero (focusing on the stages of invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery).

**Adaptation of Icebreaker to Other Academic Disciplines**

Although a consideration of learning styles is especially appropriate to a writing curriculum in which critical thinking skills are emphasized, it is certainly appropriate to any academic discipline. Whether students are in the humanities, social sciences, or pure sciences—or in a career-focused program—they need to be aware of how those in their discipline learn about and respond to the world and, thus, how they might be asked to learn about and respond to the world. The learning styles suggested by the students are especially applicable to these issues. For example, knowledge of art, or of other cultures, or of the natural world—or knowledge of culinary skills—cannot be acquired exclusively or effectively through a single learning style. Thus, discussing learning styles is an effective way to discuss methods of inquiry in varied disciplines.

*Discussions in various disciplines might follow these lines:*

*The art historian evaluating a painting reads relevant texts about the artist, the painting, and the period; looks closely at the painting; and does hands-on research that might include evaluation of the canvas and paint.*

*The anthropologist exploring a culture reads secondary and primary texts on the culture; makes observations based on the senses; and if possible participates in the life of the culture.*
The chemist evaluating a compound reads scientific studies; examines the compound using all of the senses; and performs appropriate scientific experiments.
The chef preparing a dish reads the recipe as well as texts pertinent to food history and preparation; uses all of the senses in the process of preparing the dish—checking for texture and taste, for example; and makes it several times until the recipe is perfected.

As to the issue of rhetoric, although a consideration of rhetoric is especially appropriate to a writing curriculum, such a consideration is appropriate to any academic discipline. Nonetheless, the instructor in another discipline might focus less on the use of rhetoric and more on models of rhetoric, at least initially during this icebreaker. The introduction of classic pieces of oratory—political, religious, legal, scientific—would nicely tie into the focus of a particular discipline. For example, an instructor might include Pericles’ Funeral Oration or any of Martin Luther King’s speeches to introduce a course, as appropriate. If the instructor in another discipline prefers not to introduce the concept of rhetoric, he or she might discuss oral history, looking at oral myths or stories relevant to the content of a particular discipline. The value and form of these tales as a way of knowing the world would prove a useful and interesting introduction to a particular discipline.

**Expansion of the Icebreaker throughout the Writing Curriculum**

After this review of different learning styles, the challenge for the instructor is to provide opportunities for the student to learn in different ways and for the student to use those styles that have been successful in the past while being open to advantages offered by other styles. In particular, the instructor must create both in-class and at-home independent and collaborative learning situations that reflect a variety of learning styles. The focus of this product is on the icebreaker itself. It is beyond its scope to elaborate on all of the ways an instructor—in any discipline—might incorporate those styles into a course. Two examples of many possible expansions will suffice. In order to test their understanding of a reading, students might be asked to annotate the text, search for visual clues such as subheadings or charts, and then discuss the text with classmates. In order to generate material for a writing assignment, students might be asked to acquire information through experience, observation, reading, discussion, and freewriting. The application of these suggestions to a reading or writing assignment in any discipline should be obvious.

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An effective icebreaker, one informed by the principles of UDI, can establish a classroom setting in which each student will be challenged to realize his or her potential. Further, such an icebreaker can establish a setting in which together students will engage in an active and critical interchange of ideas.