

8 Group Learning Activities for Building Safety and Trust

1. Team Résumé: The small group works on a collaborative document or virtual whiteboard to draft a résumé.¹

Benefits: The résumé activity helps to build a sense of team identity. Because it focuses on strengths and experiences, the team learns about one another and begins to take pride in their team's unique talents and skills. By completing this collaborative and visual task, the team cultivates a sense of self-efficacy, that they can accomplish a significant undertaking in a relatively short period.

Process: Provide students a list of elements they should include in their résumé. Depending on the age group, this might range from their pets to their professional experiences. Here's a quick list of ideas: educational background, professional skills related to the course, strengths they bring to a group setting, hobbies, unique perspectives they bring to the group, pets, favorite food, favorite musicians. Have fun with the list, creating a mix of elements that help the group get to know one another and those more directly related to the subject matter of the course. Students then post their contributions to a shared document or virtual whiteboard. Set a clear time-limit for this segment and ask students to refrain from noting their names by each element. It's a team résumé, and this helps for the next part.

In the second phase of the activity, students ask questions about the contents of the résumé. E.g., "Wait a minute, who in the group used to be a lifeguard? I was, too." Or "I think I saw that Sharia was typing that she teaches marketing courses to high school students. Could you tell us more about that?"

In the third phase, the team selects one or two people to share the highlights of their team résumé with the large group.

2. Apprehensions and Expectations: Each member of the group shares a fear (or apprehension) and a hope related to the class experience.

Benefits: This is a useful initial group exercise because it addresses the affective elements that motivate behavior. By sharing our concerns and hopes, learners are entrusting their feelings to the group. The process generates empathy and, in turn, creates a foundation of trust and safety for the group.

Process: There are two different approaches to this activity. The first way starts with a group member volunteering sharing one thing they are concerned about as they begin the class and something they hope to get out of the course experience. After sharing, they choose another team member to share next. The second way is for teams to use a collaborative document or virtual whiteboard, where students post their fears and expectations. They can mark the fears and hopes they share in common with others by placing their initials or # symbols beside them. This more visual approach shows the common emotions the team is experiencing. After the whiteboard time, the team then moves to share about their contributions.

¹ Jessica Mansbach <https://dl.sps.northwestern.edu/blog/2015/07/the-importance-of-icebreakers-in-online-classes/>

3. Notes of Appreciation: Students record things they appreciate about their team members and their contributions to the group. This is an add-on activity to supplement a learning conversation or other collaborative tasks.²

Benefits: Think of this activity as a maintenance protocol to help small groups nurture trust and safety. Through appreciation, students are reminded they belong and that the group values their unique contribution.

Process: During any discussion, team members jot down a 2-3 of notes of appreciation. These should be specific and related to the contributions their peers make during the assigned group activity. E.g., "Alexis is so genuine in how she listens. I see this in how she asks follow-up questions to us."

At some point in the small group discussion or activity, the learning team pauses to share their notes. If the group is large, they may want to choose someone to appreciate at the start of class. This both makes the activity more manageable and makes sure no one is unintentionally left out.

Educator Stephen Brookfield notes that most people lack practice giving specific appreciation and need the teacher to model it to the class. He recommends that learners indicate how their peers impacted them through a particular action. E.g., "I appreciated when you said, "... because it challenged me and helped me realize that..."³

4. Best Thing This Year: This is my favorite question to ask people at a party or to someone I've just met. Why? Because human beings tend to focus on what's wrong, and this focuses on what's going well. It uses the question, "*What is the best thing that has happened to you this year?*" (The time period can be adjusted to fit the context).

Benefits: By sharing a highlight of the year, learners start the group with a positive tone. Students share something important to them, often life-shaping events. This makes for a great, low-stakes way for small groups to get to know one another.

Process: Provide everyone a few minutes to think about the question and prepare their answers. Each person shares when they feel they are ready. After a student shares, the group takes a few minutes to ask each speaker questions about the event to understand the details and its importance to them.

5. Good, Bad, and the Ugly: In this activity, students share what makes for good and bad small group experiences.

Benefit: In *The Good, Bad, and the Ugly*, the group comes to consensus on what they desire from their learning team and collectively define what a safe group looks like in concrete terms.

Process: Using a virtual whiteboard or collaborative document, students create a table with three columns: Good – Bad – Ugly. In each column, students type in what makes for a positive group experience and what makes for a miserable experience. Use the ugly column to note the very worst aspects or serve as a place for silly remarks. Instruct learners to reference their past experiences.

² *The Discussion Book*, 37.

³ *Ibid.* 40-41

Peers can upvote elements they agree are essential or have also experienced by marking them with a # symbol or with their initials.

In the second phase, each member shares one element they contributed to each column of the document, providing explanations for why they are important. As group members share past small group experiences, the team should be curious and ask questions. A simple but compelling question to ask is, "What was that like for you?"

Groups can conclude by asking a group representative to share three takeaways with the large group. Alternatively, groups can take what they learned from the activity to create a set of group etiquette commitments.

6. 1 Quote and 2 Values: In this activity, each student shares a quote they appreciate, explains why it's important to them, and shares two values that play an essential role in their life and relationships.

Benefit: This discussion surfaces some of the core values that define and motivate each learner's style of relating to others. The activity can cultivate understanding and become a reference point for learners as they move into future discussions.

Process: This discussion requires some preparation. Provide students with instructions the night or week before class. It helps to require each student to post their quote and two values to an online discussion board or assignment module before the live session. In the live session, students share and ask one another questions. Supply sample questions that help to stir curiosity. E.g., "Why would you say that's so important to you?" "Could you share a story or example where that value was at work in your life?" "How does that value (or quote) impact how you relate in a group like this?"

7. Stories and Questions: Learners share a story that has been formative in their lives. Teachers can provide further direction for students to choose a story that relates to the content of the course or the larger curriculum.

Benefit: The group gets an early opportunity to practice listening skills, which in turn builds trust with each person who shares.

Process: Each learner shares their story. Listeners concentrate on being attentive to the speaker. When the storyteller concludes, each listener shares something that stood out to them about the storyteller or their story. "Something I learned about you..." is a helpful listener response stem. The next phase moves to a few minutes, where listeners ask questions about the story and the storyteller. In the final step, each member notes something they appreciate about the storyteller. The storyteller concludes their turn by sharing something they appreciate about the team.

8. Circle of Voices: To begin, employ a more structured activity such as Brookfield and Preskill's *Circle of Voices*.⁴ Think of this as training wheels for your group.

⁴ Brookfield, Stephen, and Stephen Preskill. *The Discussion Book: 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking*. First edition. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016, 9-12.

Benefit: This exercise helps cultivate group safety because it answers the question, "Will I be heard?" It also answers the question of "Will our teacher lead us, or will he disappear when it comes time for breakouts." Though you may not be participating in the discussion(s), the structures you provide will demonstrate your leadership and direction.

Process: *Circle of Voices* begins with a question that combines two elements: 1) the topic of the course and 2) the personal experience of your learners. My favorite prompt is, "Share a story about when..."

For example, in an 8th grade American History course, we might set the conversation up this way:

"We begin this course looking into the peoples of North America and the arrival of the first explorers and settlers in the New World. I'd like you to share a one-minute story with your team about a time in your life when you encountered someone very different from you, or when you found yourself a part of a very new group."

Next, allow your learners a couple of minutes to reflect and jot down some notes. This tells more introverted students that they are safe to think before speaking and helps those of us who perhaps tend to speak before thinking.

When this thinking time concludes, each group member shares their response without interruption. In the *Circle of Voices* activity, it's recommended students go around the circle and share in an established order. However, in Zoom, there is no visible circle. The order of people on my screen may be different than those on your screen. Because of this, it may help to go alphabetically by first or last name.

After this first round of sharing, things change, and students can share at will. However, *students can only speak about the contributions made by others during round one*. At this point, students can get fixated on the limitation. Because of this, it's helpful to remind them of the things available in their discussion toolbox: they can ask questions, show appreciation, explain why a peer's point resonated with them, or ask for more detail. Post this or a similar list in the chat before going into breakouts. Give your groups a time limit for this segment.

When the time is up, ask students to reflect in the large group setting about what they learned from the experience.