Connecting with Youth: Icebreakers and Reflections

This is a collection of activities to enhance youth engagement and connection. Each activity is identified as an Icebreaker (I), Energizer (E), or a Reflection (R), often belonging in more than one of those categories.

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Comfort Zones (E) (R) Time: 5-10 min. Materials: Reflection statements, zone signs

Description: The space is divided into three zones and participants choose which one fits with their experience. This activity can be used to gauge comfort with content, a process, or other issues.

Directions: 1. Designate three “zones” in the room: one for “comfortable”, one for “stretched”, and one for “overwhelmed”. Typically this is done as three areas along an imaginary spectrum line; one side of the room is comfortable, the other side is overwhelmed, and the middle is stretched.

2. Read a series of reflection statements.

3. For each statement, ask participants to place themselves in the zone that most closely matches their feeling about the statement. Silent reflection after each statement is often best, but asking volunteers to share why they moved where they did is sometimes appropriate.

4. At some point during the activity (typically at the beginning or end), you might talk about how “stretched” is the zone in which the most learning occurs. People can’t learn if they stay in their comfort zone, nor does learning occur when people feel overwhelmed.

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Famous Trios (I) (E) Time: 5 min. or < for groups less than 18. Materials: Famous trio cards

Description: Form groups of three using sets of cards.

Directions: 1. (Before activity) Decide how many different groups you need and for each group, create a set of cards that reflects a famous trio.

2. As you begin the activity, distribute one card to each participant.

3. Explain, “Your card contains one member of a famous trio. Find the other two members of your trio to form groups of three for the next activity.”

4. Go around and make sure that groups are forming correctly.

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Green Light, Yellow Light, Red Light (R) Time: 5-15 min. Materials: Large paper or dry

erase board, markers

Description: Participants collectively reflect on the things they would like to continue doing, the things they would like to stop doing, and the things that they would like to start doing.

Directions: 1. Post a piece of large paper (chart paper works well) or use a whiteboard, and draw three columns.

2. In column one, “green light”, participants list the things that they would like to start doing.

3. In column two, “yellow light”, participants list the things that they would like to continue doing.

4. In column three, “red light”, participants list the things that they would like to stop doing.

5. This can lead to a discussion about what may need follow up and planning based on the lists they generated.

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Interesting Objects (I) (E) (R) Time: 10-15 min. Materials: Box or bucket with a wide variety of small

objects or photos

Description: Participants are asked to select an interesting item from a box of random materials or photos (these can be things you find around the house, magazine photos, etc.) and talk about how it represents some aspect of their learning experience. The use of the object as a metaphor for the experience often leads to engaging and interesting comments that would not otherwise have been made.

Directions: 1. Each participant selects an object from the box. The box should contain many more objects than there are participants in the group to give more ample choice for the participants.

2. Once each participant selects an item that is interesting to him or her, ask him or her to share how that object represents some aspect of their learning experience.

3. In an opening activity, the object can represent something participants hope to receive from the day’s session.

4. In a closing, the object can represent something that they will take away from the day’s experience.

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Productive Peers (R) Time: 5-15 min. Materials: Paper or index cards, pens

Description: Participants write a question, issue, or problem on a piece of paper or index card and pass these to other group members who share responses, solutions, or ideas.

Directions: 1. Have participants write a question, issue, or problem on an index card or sheet of paper.

2. Have participants pass the cards clockwise.

3. The recipient brainstorms at least one response, solution, or idea on the topic written on the card or paper they received.

4. The original card is returned to the original author for review. Responses may be posted around the room or shared with the large group in another way.

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Quotation Stations or Bus Stop (I) (E) Time: 10-15 min. Materials: Several quotes (at least 4)

printed (one per page)

Description: Participants choose from several quotes or statements related to the course and discuss why they chose it.

Directions: 1. Post several quotations or statements related to a topic around the room at the “bus stops”.

2. You can either have volunteers read each quotation aloud or ask participants to go around, read each quotation, and stand by the one they like the most.

3. Once everyone has chosen a quotation, participants can discuss with others at that quotation station why they chose it.

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Rating Scale (I) (E) (R) Time: 15-20 min. Materials: Reflection statements,

signs to mark the continuum

Description: A way to form groups while reflecting on comfort or readiness level within your workshop/program.

Directions: 1. Prepare a series of reflection statements based on the course.

2. Prepare signs with the numbers 1-5.

3. Instruct participants, “I will read each statement twice. After the second time, decide where you would place yourself on the continuum.”

4. Each time participants place themselves, give them an opportunity to speak with others who rated themselves equally, then ask one or two people to share the small group’s sentiments with the larger group.

5. After the last statement has been read and participants have shared their thoughts, they can be instructed to work with the group they are with. If you need to split or combine groups due to size, do so.

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A Rose, a Thorn, and a Bud (I) (E) (R) Time: 5-15 min. Materials: None

Description: Using symbolism, the trainer asks participants to identify three areas of learning. What the rose, the bud, and the thorn represent will be related to concepts addressed or activities completed in the day’s learning.

Directions: 1. Have participants write or say one of each of these in regard to their learning:

1. Rose: Something that was positive, something they are proud of, or something they liked.
2. Thorn: One thing that was challenging, that they would have liked to be different, or

something they did not enjoy.

1. Bud: A new idea they hope to develop.

2. They can share these with the trainer, a partner, in a small group or with the group as a whole. Depending on the time available, the trainer can have them share in more than one way.

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Stand Up If… (I) (E) (R) Time: 5-10 min. Materials: Statements

Description: A series of statements are read aloud, and participants are asked to stand when the statement read is true of them.

Directions: 1. Read a series of statements which may be true of various participants.

2. Tell participants that if the statement is true for them, they should stand, then sit down again before the next statement is read.

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Step Forward, Step Back (I) (E) (R) Time: 5-10 min. Materials: None

Description: A series of statements are read aloud, and participants take a step forward or back depending on their answers.

Directions: 1. Have participants line up on one side of the room facing you.

2. Read a series of statements which may be true of various participants related to your session content (such as “step forward if you are improving at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” or “step back if you were discouraged by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”).

3. Participants can discuss the variety of “locations” people are once the activity has ended and how that affects their learning and confidence.

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Think-Pair-Share (R) Time: 10-20 min. Materials: None

Description: Participants work individually, in pairs, and finally in the larger group in response to a prompt. This simple exercise can really help get a conversation going, especially when participants don’t feel comfortable sharing in a large full group. Sharing with a partner also helps build connections between participants.

Directions: 1. Participants review or consider a question, a video clip, article, or other prompt. You might have participants write down their initial responses. Let them know that they will be sharing their responses with others.

2. Have participants form pairs.

3. Participants discuss their thoughts with their partner.

4. Have volunteers share a summary of their discussion with the whole group.

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Thumbs (R) Time: 1 – 5 minutes Materials: None

Description: Participants share how they felt about the day’s learning.

Directions: 1. Ask participants to show how they felt about something they are learning/practicing.

1. Thumbs up means they are feeling confident.
2. Thumbs sideways means they are feeling so-so.
3. Thumbs downs means they are feeling discouraged/frustrated/etc.

2. After the whole group has shown their thumb positions, ask for volunteers to share why they felt that way.