Online Openings

First contacts create a lasting impression. The first 10 minutes of any initial meeting between two people lays the groundwork for almost all assumptions and decisions about the ensuing relationship. This is true with the opening of your online session. The opening of your virtual online training session should accomplish the same things that an in-person opening accomplishes. It should include an initial assessment of your learners' skill level; establish session expectations and norms; identify who is in the group; promote interest and enthusiasm; and put participants at ease.

1   Picture Me

Overview

Use this strategy to assist in creating connections among participants virtually and increasing engagement. It promotes interaction and goodwill toward each other and reinforces the concept of "I like these people, and we're in this together."

Participants

Up to 12 people in a webinar or virtual meeting

Procedure

1. Prior to a webinar or virtual meeting, ask participants to email you a photo of their favorite vacation spot (pick one topic or leave it open), of them as a baby, of their pet, of their kids, or they can pick their own topic that relates to the meeting's content.

2. Also ask them to send a *brief* description (one sentence preferably) of the content of the photo and/or why they chose that photo.

3. Post the photos between content throughout the meeting as a way to break up the concepts and give people's brains a "refresher." Don't post them all at the same time.

4. Thank everyone at the end of the meeting for participating by sending in photos.

5. End with a collage slide of all of the photos.

Variations

- If participants know each other, you can ask them to guess at the end of the training session whose picture belonged to whom.

- Give a prize to whoever guesses the most correctly or whoever can remember all of the different photos and the people. If you tell them at the beginning you'll be doing this, it will spur people on to pay attention to the whole virtual learning from start to finish.

- If the meeting is long enough for breaks, have the photos rotate during that time.

Case Example

In a training session about virtual team building, begin with a slide that says "Picture Your Team." Post the first photo and caption. After debriefing each virtual team topic or activity, post a new slide and caption. This activity will sustain interest and provide a break during content-rich e-learning.

Contributed by Rob Fletcher, Quixote Consulting.

2 You Intro Me; I Intro You

_____ Overview _____

Paired participants introduce each other.

Participants

Any number, but time could be an issue if the group is large; on the other hand, if the group will meet together more than once, the time investment for future engagement is worth it

Procedure

1. Pair participants using chat rooms or breakout rooms.

2. Assign two to four short bites of information that each should learn about the other. Allow about six minutes.

3. Bring the group together and ask participants to introduce their partners.

Variations

• This can easily be done in a classroom setting.

• To save some time, pair participants before the session and have them meet their partners prior to the start.

Case Example

Virtual team members, located in three different countries, were each paired with someone prior to the session. They were to connect and learn three pieces of information about their partners.

- Name, location, and job role

- What excites them about being on the virtual team

- The aspects of teamwork about which they want to learn more

At the first meeting, members were given time to introduce each other. Pairs were given a task to complete before the next meeting a week away that explored some of the issues the team was facing.

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3 Quote Me

_____ **Overview** _____

Use this strategy as an opener to get participants thinking about the topic.

Participants

4–20 in most learning situations

Procedure

1. Prior to the session, select a number of quotations that relate to the topic. Plan on one quotation for each three to four participants. In a group of five participants or less, assign each person a different quotation.

2. Assign the quotations prior to the virtual classroom and ask each person to think about how the quotation relates to the topic and be prepared to discuss it.

3. Introduce the activity by explaining that you want to start the participants thinking about the topic.

4. Assign individuals with the same quotation to a chat room.

5. Give the subgroups 10 minutes to discuss the quotation as it relates to the topic and how they have seen the meaning of the quotation demonstrated in the workplace.

6. At the end of the designated time period, ask representatives from each subgroup to summarize the subgroup's discussion for the rest of the group.

7. Follow up with questions such as the following:

- What was your reaction to the quotations?
- How relevant are the quotations to the topic?
- Which quotation had the most meaning for you? Why?
- What was the benefit of this activity?
- How might you draw on these quotations in your role at work?

Variations

- As an intersession assignment, participants would present their interpretations of the quotations and personal examples to the rest of the group. Interpretations could also be posted to the group's wiki or blog.

- The procedure can be used in a classroom setting to stimulate discussion or as an assignment between sessions in a multisession course. Post the quotations on flipcharts and have participants form around each flipchart.

Case Examples

1. In a session on leadership, you could do the following:
   - Assign the following quotations:
     - "You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within." Bob Nelson
     - "The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority." Ken Blanchard
     - "People tend to resist that which is forced upon them. People tend to support that which they help to create." Vince Pfaff
     - "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others." Jack Welch
     - "Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish." Sam Walton
   - Ask participants to respond to the following:
     - What the quotation means
     - How it relates to one's success as a leader
     - Cite specific examples where they have observed this principle being applied (or not applied) in their workplace

2. In a program on dealing with change, you could do the following:
   - Assign the following quotations:
     - "We must become the change we want to see." Mahatma Gandhi
     - "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." Charles Darwin

- ◦ The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones." John Maynard Keynes
- ◦ "Any change is scary, and when we are scared, we use our power of fantasy to come up with scenarios of disaster." Dr. Arthur Freeman and Rose Dewolf

- ◆ Ask participants to respond to the following:

  - ◦ What the quotation means
  - ◦ How it relates to the topic of change

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Contributed by Karen Lawson, Lawson Consulting Group, Inc.

4   Using Prezi to Build Community in the Virtual Classroom

──────── Overview ────────

The goal of this activity is to provide learners with a chance to get to know the other learners in a new course environment. Using the multimedia presentation tool, Prezi, learners create a short presentation to post on the Learning Management System (LMS) to introduce themselves, their backgrounds, and their interests.

Participants

15–20 new learners at the beginning of an online class.

Procedure

1. Develop criteria for what you would like your learners to share in their presentations. (Examples can include where the learners grew up, whether they work, a learning goal for this course, interests and activities, as well as a question for the rest of the group.)

2. Have the learners complete their virtual presentations and post a link on the LMS.

3. Set up a virtual space (wiki, discussion board, or other space) to allow the learners to respond to each learner's question of the group.

4. Provide a time line for the learners to review the presentations and to provide feedback.

5. Have the learners reflect on the process by writing a short reflection piece addressing the activity.

6. Debrief at the start of the first synchronous virtual setting, facilitating the discussion and breakouts.

   ◆ What did you learn about your fellow learners and yourself?

   ◆ How might this be helpful to your virtual learning experience?

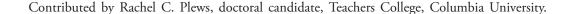   ◆ How is a sense of community important in the virtual learning environment?

Variations

- Create small groups (three to four learners) to work together and review each other's presentations. Depending on the size of the group, reviewing a large number of presentations can be time consuming for the learners.

- Allow learners to use different media tools to develop their introductions (Google Apps, PowerPoint, Word, or other Internet-based applications).

Case Example

For an undergraduate course that is an introduction to education, learners were asked to build the presentations around the following specific prompts:

- Give us a face to the name! Provide an image of yourself.
- Tell us about your educational background.
- What do you like to do when you aren't in school or working?
- What type of teacher do you want to be and why?
- Ask a question of the group—something you would like others to share with you.

Contributed by Rachel C. Plews, doctoral candidate, Teachers College, Columbia University.

5 Instagram Intros

Overview

Use this strategy for virtual introductions using a photo from a phone or desktop.

Participants

Interaction is best with 50 or fewer participants

Procedure

1. In your welcome materials, send instructions on how to set up an account with Instagram and how to use hashtags (this is a great job aid). Ask participants to use a photo from their phone to introduce themselves. The photo can be of something that they love, an activity that they enjoy, or someplace that they've been.

2. If they don't have any photos on their smartphone, they can take a "selfie" with a drawing to answer the question. If they don't have a smartphone, they can use a photo from the Internet to respond to the introduction requirement.

3. Tell participants that you have posted your photo and introduction as an example.

4. Have participants upload their photo to Instagram plus a very brief introduction that connects them to the photo.

5. Encourage the group to use a hashtag to catalog their introduction by subject as well as #introduction to make it easier to find later.

6. At the start of the session, explain that the group includes all types of learners, from different areas and backgrounds. (Give examples of one to three learners.) Encourage learners to connect and reach out to each other.

Variations

- Ask the participants to submit a bio with their photo.

- If you are trying to have participants connect with others, you can ask them to find similarities with one to three other participants.

- In a smaller group setting, you can ask participants to introduce another participant.

- You can also use another social media platform, like a Facebook Group, a Google+ Community, Pinterest shared board, or LinkedIn Group.

Case Example

I recently celebrated with my kids at a church Family Night.

My bio: I have 20 years of experience in human resources, training and development, and talent management functions. As CEO of Price Consulting Group, I am a trainer and facilitator. I have four kids ages 5, 7, 10, and 15, and am married to a Marine. We live in Yuma, Arizona. #HR #introduction

Contributed by Dr. Kella Price, SPHR, CPLP, Price Consulting Group.