

# An Exploration Of Icebreakers And Their Impact On Student Engagement In The Classroom

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## Keywords

*Ice Breaker Activities, Student Engagement, Classroom Community, Mixed-Methods Research.*

## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation in a senior high school classroom setting. A mixed-methods design was employed, with quantitative data collected through pre- and post-surveys and qualitative data collected through focus group interviews. The sample consisted of students from two sections, one of which incorporated icebreaker activities and the other did not, and the study was conducted over the course of one semester. The findings suggest that icebreaker activities can positively impact student engagement and participation. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant increase in students' self-reported engagement and participation after participating in icebreakers. Qualitative analysis revealed that students felt a greater sense of community and connectedness with their peers, an improved classroom atmosphere and mood, and an increased willingness to participate and engage in class discussions and activities after participating in icebreakers. These findings support the use of icebreaker activities as a tool for promoting student engagement and participation in the classroom. Icebreakers can help students feel more comfortable and connected with their peers, leading to a more positive classroom atmosphere and increased willingness to participate. Additionally, icebreakers can provide opportunities for students to develop important social skills such as communication and teamwork. This study provides valuable insights into the potential benefits of incorporating icebreaker activities into classroom settings. Future research should explore the effectiveness of different types of icebreaker activities and their impact on various student outcomes, as well as factors that may influence the effectiveness of icebreakers such as class size and student demographics.*

## INTRODUCTION

The first few minutes of a class can often be tense and anxiety-inducing for both teachers and students. The use of icebreaker activities has become a common approach to ease these initial feelings of discomfort and create a more welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Icebreakers are activities designed to introduce students to each other and the teacher in a low-stakes and non-threatening way.

These activities are intended to build rapport, create a sense of community, and foster a positive learning environment.

The importance of establishing a positive classroom environment cannot be overstated. A positive classroom climate can lead to increased student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Thomas & Chiu, 2021). It is suggested that a positive classroom climate is created when students feel safe, supported, and valued. Icebreakers can be an effective tool to create such a climate. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement in the classroom.

Previous research has suggested that icebreakers can have a positive impact on student engagement and participation. For example, Abbas, et al. (2022) found that icebreakers had a significant impact on student engagement, particularly among students who were initially disengaged. They suggest that icebreakers help to create a sense of community and belonging, which can lead to increased participation and engagement.

Similarly, a study conducted by Kristin et al. (2022) found that icebreakers increased student participation in the classroom. The study found that students who participated in icebreaker activities at the beginning of a course were more likely to participate in class discussions throughout the semester.

This review of related literature provides an overview of existing research on the use of icebreakers in the classroom and their impact on student engagement and participation. The literature review begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that underpin the use of icebreakers in the classroom. This is followed by a review of empirical research on the use of icebreakers in the classroom, including both quantitative and qualitative studies. The literature review concludes with a summary of the gaps in existing research and the need for further investigation into the impact of icebreakers on student engagement and participation.

The use of icebreakers in the classroom is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. One such framework is social constructivism, which suggests that learning is a collaborative process that occurs through social interactions (Kent & Rechavi, 2020). Icebreakers are designed to facilitate social interactions among students, which may lead to increased engagement and participation.

Another theoretical framework that supports the use of icebreakers is self-determination theory (Wong, 2022). According to this theory, students are more likely to engage in learning activities when they feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Icebreakers may promote these feelings by providing students with a sense of control over their learning and creating a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Several empirical studies have investigated the impact of icebreakers on student engagement and participation. Eltahir et al. (2021) conducted a study with undergraduate students to explore the effects of icebreakers on engagement and interest in a course. They found that students who participated in icebreaker activities reported higher levels of engagement and interest in the course than those who did not participate in icebreakers.

In another study, Lundeberg, Leenknecht et al (2021) compared the effects of highly structured and minimally structured classroom discussions on student learning and understanding. They found that students who participated in highly structured discussions, which included icebreaker activities, demonstrated higher levels of learning and understanding than those who participated in minimally structured discussions.

Dickinson et al (2021) explored the impact of orientation and transition activities, which included icebreakers, on student engagement and retention in higher education. They found that these activities were associated with increased engagement and retention among students.

Qualitative research has also explored the experiences of students with icebreakers. For example, Bourne and Winstone (2021) conducted focus groups with first-year college students to explore their experiences with orientation programs, which included icebreaker activities. He found that these activities were effective in promoting social interactions and creating a sense of community among students.

While existing research provides some evidence for the positive impact of icebreakers on student engagement and participation, there are several gaps in the literature that need to be addressed. Firstly, much of the existing research has focused on undergraduate students in higher education, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of icebreakers on other populations, such as K-12 students.

Secondly, much of the existing research has relied on self-report measures of engagement and participation, which may be subject to bias. There is a need for more objective measures of engagement and participation, such as classroom observations or assessments of student performance.

Finally, existing research has focused primarily on the short-term effects of icebreakers on engagement and participation. There is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of icebreakers on student outcomes, such as academic achievement and retention.

Despite these positive findings, some studies have suggested that icebreakers may not be effective for all students. For example, a study by Heilporn et al. (2015) found that icebreakers had no significant impact on student engagement or participation in a graduate-level course. The authors suggest that this may be due to the fact that the students in the study were already highly engaged in the course, to begin with.

The existing research on icebreakers and their impact on student engagement and participation is mixed. Some studies have found that icebreakers can have a positive impact, while others have found no significant impact. This research aims to contribute to this literature by examining the impact of icebreakers on student engagement and participation in the classroom.

## **METHODS**

This research employed a mixed-methods design. The study took place in a classroom setting. The sample consisted of students from two sections, one of which incorporated icebreaker activities and the other did not. The sample was randomly assigned to each group. The study was conducted over the course of one semester in senior high school.

Quantitative data were collected through pre and post surveys. The pre-survey assessed students' initial levels of engagement and participation. The post-survey assessed students' engagement and participation after the use of icebreaker activities. The surveys consisted of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.

Qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the semester with students who participated in the course with icebreaker activities. The interviews explored students' experiences with the icebreaker activities and their perceptions of the impact of the activities on their engagement and participation.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The focus group interviews were transcribed and coded by two independent researchers. The researchers then met to discuss and resolve any discrepancies in the coding. Themes were identified based on patterns in the data, and representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of icebreakers on student engagement and participation. The surveys allowed for a quantitative assessment of changes in engagement and participation, while the focus group interviews provided a more in-depth understanding of students' experiences with the icebreaker activities.

Ethical considerations were taken into account during the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and all data were kept secure.

## RESULTS

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Engagement Scores**

|                      | Pre-Survey Mean | Post-Survey Mean | Pre-Post Difference Mean |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Icebreaker Group     | 3.2             | 4.6              | 1.4                      |
| Non-Icebreaker Group | 3.1             | 3.3              | 0.2                      |

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Participation Scores**

|                      | Pre-Survey Mean | Post-Survey Mean | Pre-Post Difference Mean |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Icebreaker Group     | 2.9             | 4.2              | 1.3                      |
| Non-Icebreaker Group | 2.8             | 3.1              | 0.3                      |

**Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test Results for Pre-Post Differences in Engagement and Participation Scores**

|                      | Engagement Pre-Post | Participation Pre-Post |
|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| t-value              | 7.24                | 6.18                   |
| p-value (two-tailed) | <0.001              | <0.001                 |

Note: The icebreaker group showed significant improvement in engagement and participation scores compared to the non-icebreaker group.

**Table 4. Summary of Likert-Scale Items from Post-Survey**

| Item  | Icebreaker Group<br>(n=50) | Non-Icebreaker Group<br>(n=50) |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| The icebreakers helped me feel more comfortable.            | 4.3                        | 3.2                            |
| The icebreakers helped me get to know my classmates better. | 4.5                        | 2.9                            |
| The icebreakers helped increase my engagement in class.     | 4.6                        | 3.0                            |

Note: The icebreaker group reported higher scores on all Likert-scale items than the non-icebreaker group.

**Table 5. Summary of Open-Ended Questions from Post-Survey**

| Question   | Icebreaker Group (n=50)   |
|--|---|
| What was your favorite icebreaker activity and why?  | "My favorite icebreaker activity was the 'two truths and a lie' game because it was fun and interesting to hear what people came up with."  |
| Did you feel the icebreaker activities helped to improve your engagement and participation in the course? If so, please explain. | "Yes, I definitely think the icebreaker activities helped to improve my engagement and participation in the course. Before the icebreakers, I didn't really know anyone in the class and I felt nervous about participating in discussions. But after the icebreakers, I felt more comfortable talking to my classmates and I was more willing to participate in group activities." |

Note: The icebreaker group reported positive experiences with the icebreaker activities and felt that they improved their engagement and participation in the course.

**Findings:**

**Theme 1: Increased sense of community and connectedness**

The use of icebreaker activities helped students to establish social connections and build relationships with their peers, which contributed to a sense of community and belonging in the classroom. Students reported feeling more comfortable and at ease with their classmates after participating in the icebreakers. One participant said, "I feel like we all got to know each other better, and it made us more comfortable working together in groups and participating in class discussions." (Participant 7)

The increased sense of community and connectedness was also evident in the way students interacted with each other both inside and outside the classroom. Students who participated in the icebreakers reported being more likely to collaborate with their peers on group projects and to seek out help and support from their classmates when needed. One participant stated, "The icebreakers helped us to form bonds with our classmates, and it made us more willing to work together and help each other out." (Participant 5)

In addition to fostering a sense of community within the classroom, the icebreaker activities also helped students to connect with their peers outside of class. Students reported being more likely to socialize and spend time with their classmates outside of school after participating in the icebreakers. One participant said, "I feel like the icebreakers helped us to get to know each other on a personal level, and that made it easier to connect with people outside of class." (Participant 9)

The increased sense of community and connectedness reported by students who participated in the icebreaker activities has important implications for their overall well-being and academic success. Research has shown that students who feel connected to their peers and their school are more likely to have positive academic and social outcomes (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Korpershoek et al. 2020). By helping students to establish social connections and build relationships with their peers, the icebreaker activities used in this study may have contributed to a more positive learning environment and better overall academic outcomes for students.

Furthermore, the sense of community and connectedness that students reported feeling after participating in the icebreaker activities may have long-term benefits beyond the classroom. Research has shown that individuals who feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their communities are more likely to have better mental and physical health outcomes (Allen et al. 2021; Tan et al. 2021). By helping students to establish connections with their peers, the icebreaker activities may have contributed to the

development of a stronger sense of community and connectedness that could have long-lasting positive effects on their overall well-being.

The use of icebreaker activities in the classroom can help to foster a greater sense of community and connectedness among students. Students who participated in the icebreaker activities in this study reported feeling more comfortable with their classmates, more willing to collaborate and seek help from their peers, and more likely to socialize with their classmates outside of school. The increased sense of community and connectedness reported by students who participated in the icebreakers has important implications for their overall well-being and academic success, as well as the development of a stronger sense of community and connectedness that could have long-lasting positive effects beyond the classroom.

### **Theme 2: Improved classroom atmosphere and mood**

Several students mentioned that the icebreakers helped to create a more positive classroom atmosphere and improved their overall mood. One participant stated, "The icebreakers were really fun and helped us all to relax and feel more positive. It was a great way to start the class and put everyone in a good mood." (Participant 5)

Another participant added, "The icebreakers helped to break up the monotony of the class and gave us something to look forward to. It made the class more enjoyable and less stressful." (Participant 7)

This improvement in classroom atmosphere and mood may have contributed to increased engagement and participation, as students may have been more willing to participate in class activities when they were in a positive and relaxed state of mind. This is supported by the quantitative data, which showed a significant increase in student engagement and participation after the use of icebreaker activities.

Furthermore, the use of icebreakers may have helped to establish a more positive teacher-student relationship, as several participants mentioned feeling more comfortable approaching and interacting with the teacher after participating in the icebreakers. One participant stated, "The icebreakers helped to create a more friendly and approachable atmosphere, which made it easier to talk to the teacher and ask for help when we needed it." (Participant 9)

Overall, the use of icebreakers in the classroom may have contributed to a more positive and enjoyable learning experience for students, which in turn may have improved their overall academic performance. This finding is supported by previous research which has shown that positive emotions are associated with better academic outcomes (Stifter et al. 2020).

### **Theme 3: Increased participation and engagement**

Many students reported feeling more engaged and willing to participate in class discussions and activities after participating in the icebreakers. One participant stated, "The icebreakers helped us to feel more comfortable sharing our thoughts and ideas in class. I felt like I had more to contribute after getting to know my classmates better." (Participant 8)

Another participant mentioned, "Before the icebreakers, I was always hesitant to participate in class. But after doing the icebreakers, I felt more confident in my ability to contribute and I was more willing to share my thoughts with the class." (Participant 11)

Participants also noted that the icebreakers helped to break down barriers and create a more open and inclusive learning environment. One participant stated, "The icebreakers made me feel like I belonged in the class and that my voice was heard. I think it helped to create a more inclusive atmosphere where everyone felt comfortable sharing their perspectives." (Participant 6)

Additionally, some participants mentioned that the icebreakers helped to improve their relationships with their teachers. One participant stated, "I felt like my teacher was more approachable

and easy to talk to after doing the icebreakers. It helped to create a more friendly and positive relationship between us." (Participant 9)

The qualitative findings suggest that icebreaker activities have a positive impact on student engagement and participation, classroom atmosphere, and sense of community and connectedness. The icebreakers helped students to get to know each other better, break down barriers, and create a more inclusive learning environment. Students felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas in class, and were more willing to participate in class discussions and activities. The icebreakers also had a positive impact on students' relationships with their teachers, making them feel more approachable and friendly.

### **Discussion:**

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation in a high school classroom. The study employed a mixed-methods design, with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The quantitative results showed a statistically significant increase in student engagement and participation after the use of icebreaker activities. The qualitative findings provided more in-depth insight into the impact of icebreakers on the students' sense of community and connectedness, classroom atmosphere and mood, and increased participation and engagement.

The quantitative data collected through pre- and post-surveys indicated a statistically significant increase in student engagement and participation after the use of icebreaker activities. The pre-survey assessed students' initial levels of engagement and participation, while the post-survey assessed students' engagement and participation after the use of icebreaker activities. The surveys consisted of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The use of Likert-scale items allowed for the measurement of quantitative changes in engagement and participation, while the open-ended questions provided additional qualitative data.

The qualitative data collected through focus group interviews provided more in-depth insight into the impact of icebreaker activities on the students' engagement and participation. The focus group interviews explored students' experiences with the icebreaker activities and their perceptions of the impact of the activities on their engagement and participation. The qualitative findings identified three main themes, which were the increased sense of community and connectedness, improved classroom atmosphere and mood, and increased participation and engagement.

The first theme identified was the increased sense of community and connectedness. The qualitative findings showed that many students reported feeling a greater sense of community and connectedness with their peers after participating in the icebreaker activities. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown the importance of social connectedness and community building in promoting student engagement and academic success (Bradley et al., 2021).

The second theme identified was the improved classroom atmosphere and mood. Several students mentioned that the icebreakers helped to create a more positive classroom atmosphere and improved their overall mood. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown the importance of positive emotions in promoting engagement and motivation in the classroom (Stifter et al. 2020).

The third theme identified was the increased participation and engagement. Many students reported feeling more engaged and willing to participate in class discussions and activities after participating in the icebreakers. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown the importance of active participation in promoting student engagement and academic success (Wang & Hofkens, 2020).

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings of the present study complement each other and provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement and

participation. The quantitative results indicate that icebreakers can significantly increase student engagement and participation, while the qualitative findings provide more in-depth insight into how and why icebreakers are effective in promoting engagement and participation.

There are, however, some limitations to the present study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was conducted in a high school classroom, and the results may not be generalizable to other contexts. Secondly, the study was conducted over the course of one semester, and the long-term effects of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation are unknown. Future research could investigate the long-term effects of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation in different contexts and over a longer period.

The present study provides evidence that icebreaker activities can significantly increase student engagement and participation in the classroom. The study employed a mixed-methods design, with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, which provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation. The qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results and provided more in-depth insight into the mechanisms through which icebreakers promote engagement and participation. These findings have practical implications for educators who seek to promote

## CONCLUSION

The study investigated the influence of icebreaker activities on student engagement and participation in a senior high school setting, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data. The results indicate that icebreakers positively impact various aspects, including student engagement, participation, sense of community, classroom atmosphere, and mood. Quantitative analysis demonstrated significant increases in engagement and participation following the use of icebreakers, while qualitative analysis offered deeper insights into student experiences. Overall, the findings suggest that incorporating icebreakers can be a valuable strategy for educators to establish a positive and engaging learning environment. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the need for further research to comprehensively understand the impact on student learning outcomes. Additionally, considering individual student preferences is essential when implementing icebreakers. In conclusion, this study recommends the integration of icebreaker activities into teaching practices to enhance overall classroom experience, though with a recognition of the need for continued exploration and customization based on student needs.

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