

Building Teams and Classroom Communities

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That's the Story of My Life!

Although many celebrated figures have the unique (and probably transforming) opportunity to create and share their autobiographies, ordinary people typically do not have the chance to tell their life stories. We think they should! Therefore, this activity allows students to share some of their personal histories and to develop new connections with classmates.

Directions

- Initially, students will work individually. Ask each of them to take a piece of flip chart paper and fold it into quarters so it is shaped like a book.
- Then on the front cover of their creations, they should write the title of their stories. To add a bit of whimsy to this part of the activity, you might instruct them to choose the title of a popular novel, song, movie, or television program (e.g., *The Time of My Life*, *The Fast and Furious Life of George*, Wendy's "Believe It or Not" Life Story, "Orange County Girl").
- On the inside of the front cover (page 2), have students create an index of their lives, including the following:
 - Date and place of birth
 - Family information (e.g., number of siblings, names of pets)
 - Favorite hobby, sport, or interest
 - Favorite quote, phrase, or joke
 - Most exciting moment
 - Thing that makes them unique
- On page 3, ask students to draw a picture of their perfect day.
- Finally, on the back cover of the book, have students draw a picture of their future (e.g., family, where they are living, what they are doing).
- When all books are complete, have each student tell his or her story using the book as a visual aid. Depending on the size of the class, you may want to have students share stories in small groups.
- If possible, leave the books in a central location for the day or for the week so classmates can learn more about one another.

Examples

- A high school French teacher asked second-year students to construct stories using only the vocabulary they had learned the previous year. Then, she asked them to read their stories to one another, again using only the French they had mastered to date. Thus, the exercise served not only as a community-building exercise but as a review of vocabulary and an opportunity to polish their conversational skills.
- One elementary school teacher used this structure as a getting-to-know-you exercise during a year when she was welcoming Beth, a student with multiple disabilities, into her classroom. When Beth's mother asked if she should come and explain her child's abilities, strengths, history, and special needs to the class, the teacher decided it would be nice for all students to learn this type of information about one another. She wanted to make sure that Beth and the other students understood that all learners in the classroom were unique and special.

Students spent a day collecting information for their books; this collection process involved interviewing family and friends, gathering artifacts from home, and filling in a teacher-prepared questionnaire designed as a brainstorming tool. Then, they worked alone (or in pairs, if assistance was needed) to construct their books. The school social worker visited the class to help students express themselves and tell their stories.

The speech and language therapist also visited during this time to teach Beth some new sign language vocabulary related to the book; she also helped Beth answer all the necessary questions by using both the new signs and some pictures other students found on Google Images. Students spent two language arts periods sharing their work and asking and answering questions about their personal stories. Their books were then displayed in the school library.

- A high school psychology teacher used *That's the Story of My Life!* to give students opportunities to share personal information and to reinforce concepts from his class. Students were asked to include the following pieces of information in their books:
 - Full name
 - Place of birth
 - Family information
 - Favorite hobby, sport, or interest
 - Favorite websites/blogs/apps
 - Theorist that most intrigued them (e.g., Freud, Piaget, Bandura)

Students also had to include the results of a personality test the teacher had administered. They could choose to illustrate the results in some way or summarize them in narrative form. Finally, they took turns sharing their stories with assigned partners.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Tell or share the story of your own life; show students a sample storybook featuring your own family, interests, and dreams. If you are working with younger children and you are using this structure to teach about diversity, uniqueness,

or community, you may even want to invite other adults into the classroom to read their stories so that learners can see and hear about differences related to gender, sexual identity, family structure, and cultural and ethnic background.

- This activity is ideal for students who are new immigrants or who are simply new to the school to reveal more about themselves, their families, and their culture. Consider allowing these learners to also bring an artifact or two from home to share as a way of extending their story and further illustrating their life experience. Bringing artifacts might also be helpful for students with more complex or significant disabilities who struggle to communicate.
- Some students may need different materials to create their books; if there are learners in the classroom with fine motor problems, rubber stamps, stickers, and pictures from magazines and Google Images can be provided for them to use in the construction of their stories. Alternatively, these learners may want to construct their stories using PowerPoint or a storytelling app such as Story-Kit by ICDL Foundation.
- You will want to consider how well students know each other when designing prompts; students who have been educated together for years will be familiar with basic information about one another (e.g., full name, family structure) and may be more interested in gathering information about their classmates that is slightly more in-depth, such as their most embarrassing moment, family traditions, or travel experiences.

IDEAS FOR USING THIS STRUCTURE 

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AFTER USING THIS STRUCTURE

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Slide Show

In decades past, slide shows were a way to bond and share experiences. Friends, family, and neighbors gathered around a big screen to view images of a vacation, party, or new baby. The group would “ooh” and “ahh” with every image, and stories would be shared throughout the viewing.

Students today have certainly not experienced the type of slide show we are describing. They are growing up in a world with images that are as easy to share as they are to capture. This does not mean, however, that the community-building experience of gathering around the slide show needs to go the way of the carousel slide projector. We recommend, in fact, that you bring *Slide Show* into your classroom and use it to encourage students to take snapshots to tell their own stories and create connections with peers.

Directions

- Using phones or tablets, have students walk around the classroom or the school, snapping photos of people, moments, and things that represent them. They can take photos of others, of themselves, or of objects in the environment. They can also set up shots to create an image (e.g., scribble a phrase on a whiteboard).
- Put no limit on the number of photos students can take.
- After a set period of time, ask students to come back and review the photos they snapped.
- Now, ask them to narrow their collections down to just five images that best represent who they are.
- Finally, have students share their slide shows with a partner or small group. Repeat this final step a few times so that every slide show is shared several times.

Examples

- A physical education teacher asked her middle school students to create slide shows of themselves as athletes. She encouraged them to think broadly and asked them to capture images of their healthy habits (e.g., drinking water, eating vegetables), active hobbies (e.g., skateboarding, dancing), recently-acquired skills (e.g., doing a back flip, serving a volleyball), and wellness-related achievements (e.g., trying out for a team, running a mile, meditating).
- An English teacher used *Slide Show* both as a getting-to-know-you activity and as a way to introduce autobiography. Students initially shared a handful of slides to introduce themselves to the teacher and their classmates, but over the course of the semester, they added and edited to images to create a 10-minute story of their lives.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Create your own slide show, or share other sample slide shows so that students have a few ideas for content and style before they begin working.

- Make the task more interesting or challenging for some by introducing students to new photo editing tools, techniques, and equipment. Introduce apps such as Enlight by Lightricks Ltd. and AfterFocus by Motion One. Better yet, collaborate with your art or technology teacher on a slide show exhibition and ask him or her to work with you to teach new skills.
- Add to the drama of the activity by setting up a few projectors in the classroom and allowing students to show their pictures on the big screen (or wall or bulletin board).
- Have students start the project by brainstorming. Ask them to think about or even jot down these things:
 - Likes
 - Interests
 - Personality quirks
 - Values
 - Beliefs

Then, have them make a few notes about what types of images would capture some of these elements.

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Our Classroom—In the Moment

Mindfulness practices have gained increasing attention as a tool to advance social emotional learning in school settings (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015). In simple terms, *mindfulness* is bringing our attention to our thoughts and feelings in the present moment. Formal mindfulness programs have been established in many schools, and early research holds promise that teaching students these practices can improve their energy, self-awareness, and attentiveness, while helping them reduce stress, manage negative thoughts, and learn to view challenges as opportunities. In addition, many of these programs foster compassion, empathy, and respect among class members (Black & Fernando, 2013; Goodwin, 2015; Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013; Kuyken et al., 2013).

Rooted in the values and practices of mindfulness, *Our Classroom—In The Moment* aims to promote self-awareness, attentiveness to the immediate circumstances, and ultimately a deeper appreciation for the classroom community. It involves students using mindful labeling—the act of naming what one is observing, a foundational skill in mindful practices. Although students are doing this reflective activity individually, they are still very much actively engaged in assessing the “moment.”

Directions

- Select a time in the instructional day to introduce, teach, and practice the steps in this activity when the classroom activity level is already relatively calm and relaxed.
- If you have not used mindful practices before, it is important to provide an explanation of mindfulness as part of the introduction to this activity. Keep it simple and straightforward, as in the following example:

Today we are going to practice something called mindfulness. (Check to see if anyone already knows about or uses mindfulness and can explain it in her or his own words). Mindfulness means paying attention on purpose to what is happening right now in the present moment. This means we don't think about what happened in the past or what might happen in the future. Mindfulness can help us pay attention to and be aware of things around us, such as sights, sounds, and smells, as well as our own thoughts and feelings. Doing this can help us notice when we become frustrated, sad, or angry and then help us calm down. It can also make us aware of the good things happening around us and notice when we feel happy. Taking time to experience the present moment can help us be alert and focused in whatever we are doing. Let's try it together.

- Ask students to find a comfortable spot to sit. When teaching the process, some students might do better sitting on the floor, at a table, or in a chair away from their desk.
- Tell students that everyone will take three big “belly breaths” together to settle their bodies. Explain that a belly breath makes your stomach blow up like a balloon when you inhale and then flatten out when you exhale. Model the breathing technique.

- Guide the class to take three breaths together with their eyes closed.
- Tell students to open their eyes and think about what they notice. It can be something they see, hear, smell, or feel as a sensation or emotion. If it is something they notice in the classroom environment, ask them to just name it or give it a simple description (e.g., soft carpet, red water bottle, Julie's blue eyes). If it is a sensation, such as a physical feeling in the body, just name it (e.g., itchy nose, sore ankle). If it is an emotion, ask students to be aware of their thoughts and try to label the feeling with a single word (e.g., happy, sad, angry).
- Explain that whatever they notice, they should try to be accepting—that means not thinking about it as good or bad, right or wrong, important or not important. Acknowledge that this is the difficult part and that it will take practice to let things “just be” as they are.
- To end the activity, tell students to think of one thing in this moment that they appreciate about the classroom or the people around them.
- Allow students to share these appreciative thoughts with a partner or with the entire group.

Implementation Tip

This activity will be most successful as a complement to some basic mindfulness activities such as teaching students to be aware of their breathing, to quiet their bodies, and to be attentive listeners. Mindful Schools (www.mindfulschools.org) offers helpful introductory materials for those wanting to teach mindfulness in the classroom. Another excellent website is Mindful Teachers (www.mindfulteachers.org), which provides numerous teaching resources.

Examples

- An eighth-grade teacher incorporated *Our Classroom—In the Moment* as a regular feature of his class meeting with students at the end of each week. He gave students sticky notes on which to write their appreciations; these were then posted on a whiteboard where everyone could read them before leaving for the weekend.
- After teaching this process to the whole class, a fourth-grade teacher used it as a method to encourage reflection in the moment as her students worked in cooperative groups to solve challenging math problems. After 15 minutes of problem solving, she stopped student discussions and asked every group member to follow the protocol: take three deep breaths, observe the environment or their feelings, then share aloud what they appreciated in that moment about their teamwork. For students who frequently experienced stress or anxiety associated with mathematics, this activity provided a reminder to be aware of their own physical states, to use deep breathing (in a manner that did not make them stand out from others), and to formulate positive thoughts about their group.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Make a movie. Some students may not be able to envision what it means to be “in the moment” or may just be learning how to reflect on their own thinking. Creating a video of this mindfulness process might be helpful for these individuals. Any educator (e.g., social worker, teacher) could “act” in the video, or a few students can be taught the technique in advance and filmed engaging in the process. Since pieces of the process are silent, the actors might use a think-aloud strategy and talk through what they are observing, feeling, and noticing. Alternatively, cue cards or thought-bubble cut-outs could be used for this purpose. The whole class would undoubtedly benefit from watching such a demonstration. A few students might even use a video like this to guide themselves through the mindfulness steps during free time or at home.
- Younger students or students who have emerging language might focus on just one observation in the moment. Responses can be scaffolded by moving from more concrete observations to the more abstract ideas of feelings or emotions with each subsequent session.
- A student who is unable to speak but can eye gaze or point can be given more direct cues by a supportive peer or adult. For example, “What do you notice? Show me what you notice by looking at it.” Provide two choices of picture symbols representing emotions/feelings and ask, “How do you feel right now?” Prompt the student to eye gaze or point to the card of choice.
- After everyone is familiar with the process, select specific students to guide the rest of the class in the protocol. Get their input about the time(s) of day to engage in it. This might be particularly helpful for students with emotional disabilities or mental health needs because they will have choices in determining when these “moments” will take place. Establishing a predictable schedule that they have helped create may reduce anxiety and circumvent potential episodes of challenging behavior.

IDEAS FOR USING THIS STRUCTURE 

AFTER USING THIS STRUCTURE

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Group Résumé

Just as a résumé describes an individual's accomplishments, a *Group Résumé* (Silberman, 1996) highlights the accomplishments of a team. Asking students to create a collective profile is an entertaining and effective way to promote reflection and self-assessment. The group résumé is also a quick and easy team-building strategy; students not only find out about each other but perhaps also about themselves. This activity guides students to focus on the classroom as a teaching and learning community and helps all learners understand the resources they have in their classmates.

There are endless uses for *Group Résumé*. It can be general or focused on content (e.g., *The Catcher in the Rye* Club, the Timpani Three), and it can be used to start the year or to summarize learning at the end of a unit.

Directions

- Explain to students that the classroom includes students with many different talents, experiences, gifts, and interests.
- Divide students into small groups and give every team chart paper or newsprint and colored markers.
- Ask each group to prepare a collective résumé to advertise their accomplishments.
- Provide suggestions for categories they might include (e.g., talents, skills, interests, experiences).
- After giving the groups time to work on the project, invite them to present their résumés to the class.
- Keep the résumés hanging for the rest of the day (or week or year) so that others can see the knowledge and abilities represented in the class.

Example

- In a high school art class, the teacher asked students to summarize their end-of-the-year learning by creating group résumés (see Figure 1.1). Groups were instructed to focus, in particular, on what skills they had acquired during the year, what abilities they had gained, and what information they remembered from class discussions. One group of young women who developed an interest in Impressionist art during the year titled their résumé "Women Who Leave an Impression."

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- To be sure that all students participate, provide ideas on how to elicit information from peers. Show students how to informally interview one another and how to ask questions that will allow each group member to contribute something. For example, if a student claims she cannot think of anything to add, or if she does not have reliable expressive communication, the other team members might share their contributions first, give that student time to walk

around the room and get ideas from other teams, or let her draw or sketch ideas instead of name them.

- In their small groups, have students generate a list of questions and formally interview each other before assembling the résumé.
- Allow groups to create a video or audio résumé using sites such as Prezi (www.prezi.com) or Haiku Deck (www.haikudeck.com).
- Allow students to page through job-hunting books or to surf the web for examples of résumés. This will give them ideas for categories and content.

Figure 1.1 Group Résumé Example

Women Who Leave an Impression

Krisi, Nancy, Jen, Kana, Kim, and Katia

Qualifications

- Familiar with Impressionism
- Can compare/contrast Impressionism, Realism, and Cubism
- Can compare the styles of Impressionist painters (especially Renoir, Monet, Manet, and Degas)
- Have read autobiographies of Cassatt and Cezanne
- Have toured two major art museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago
- Have successfully completed six high school art classes
- Knowledge of the following:
 - Watercolor painting
 - Sculpture (wood and clay)
 - Furniture painting
 - Collage
 - Origami
 - Print making

Other Skills

- Sign language
- Wood carving
- Spoken word poetry
- Word processing
- Making beaded jewelry
- Sewing and designing clothes
- Making and editing movies
- Vlogging
- Singing soundtracks from musicals (e.g., *Wicked*, *Hamilton*)

Hobbies and Interests

- Reading fan fiction, watching old movies, listening to music (especially movie soundtracks), going to Great America and other amusement parks, following design vlogs, and karate

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What Is It?

Is a broom always a broom, or can it be a lightning rod, a wall thermometer, or a huge cold-front symbol on a weather map? Those questions and more can be answered during a game of *What Is It?*

This structure is similar to games played by improv groups and is, therefore, sure to bring a little comedy into your classroom. *What Is It?* inspires students to look a little differently at their notes and readings, think on their feet, and play with content. It will also, undoubtedly, make the material memorable.

This game can also help to build classroom community. It's fun, it inspires laughter, and it also provides opportunities for students to give and get support and to learn from one another.

Directions

- Begin by placing an object in front of the room and asking the group, "What is it?"
- Then, encourage students to come forward and transform the object into something related to class content. For example, if a science teacher introduces a volleyball as the *What Is It?* object, one student might suggest that it is the planet Mercury. Another may pretend the ball is an atom. A third may create a scene in which the ball represents a single drop of water.
- The actors can tell the others what they are doing and how they are using the object, or they can be more secretive about their performances and students can shout out guesses about what is happening in the scene.
- Remind the group that only one student should approach at a time to act out a scene.
- After each performance, give additional information about the scene and the subject matter to add to the learning experience. Alternatively, you could enter and extend the skit as a way to reinforce content and make the material memorable.

Example

- An American history teacher presented a roll of paper towels to his class and told students they would be playing *What Is It?* as a review game. The students were, therefore, charged with using the towels in ways that would help all of them recall the content studied during the Civil War unit. The teacher first gave the students a chance to page through their textbooks for ideas and to brainstorm in groups of three. Then, he called for volunteers. The first student came up, unrolled some of the toweling, and pretended to read the Emancipation Proclamation off the long "pages" of the roll. The next student put the towel roll on his head to represent Abe Lincoln's stovepipe hat and pretended to be visiting a camp to shake hands with soldiers in Antietam. The teacher followed the humorous portrayals of Lincoln with a summary of some of the former president's political beliefs.

Another Version of This Activity

Pair this game with a close reading activity to support students with literacy learning needs. In this version, you will have students collaboratively read a piece of text or chapter on the topic of study. Then, instead of transforming a single item, direct teams to scramble and search the room for objects that can be used to represent the important concepts, ideas, and vocabulary words featured in their reading selection.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Invite students to form small groups and, after a few moments of planning time, ask each group to come to the front of the room to act out a scene using the prop. This team approach will be particularly helpful if some students have communication challenges, motor difficulties, or struggles with mobility.
- Show the object and have students brainstorm ideas for transforming the object with partners before performing individually.
- Provide choices. Put a few objects out on a table and let performers choose the one they want to transform.

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We All Own the Problem

We All Own the Problem (Davidson & Schniedewind, 1998) is a group problem-solving process that enables individuals to consider real issues and understand the experiences of others. This structure helps teachers cultivate a sense of shared responsibility, and it promotes the development of constructive solutions to issues important to students, classroom or school problems, and even content-based questions and challenges.

Directions

- Provide students with a question, situation, or problem statement (e.g., “Describe a recent situation that made you feel excluded” or “When has it been most difficult for you to be your true self?”).
- After students write their response to the question, situation, or problem statement, put them into small groups (or into a large group if time allows) and instruct them to fold their papers and place them in the center of the table. Papers can also be placed in a container if you want to provide a sense of anonymity.
- Tell students to draw a paper that is not his or her own, read it, and think about potential responses.
- Then, invite them to answer the questions; one at a time, they should read the problem they are holding, consider it as if it were their own, and spend one minute talking about how it could be addressed. Then, the discussion should be opened up to all group members for the purpose of generating new ideas.
- Finally, have participants discuss their feelings about the process, the ideas they found useful, thoughts on using the process in other settings, and other issues that could be discussed in future sessions.

Examples

- In one middle school, this structure was used by teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors to create a forum for students to bring forward personal experiences on the themes of school safety, harassment, fair discipline, and other related issues.
- This framework was used by a teaching team in seventh grade to bring together a thoughtful group of peers who were willing to problem solve issues related to the inclusion of fellow classmates. The teaching team generated real issues and had them prepared for students to randomly select; they included the following:
 - Angela wasn’t included in the seventh-grade talent show. She didn’t even know about it. Nobody thought she had a talent. How could we change this?
 - Sarah sits alone at a table at lunch with an aide. Other students avoid that table, and she seems kind of lonely. What can we do about this?

After generating solutions, the teams of students were supported by the adults to act on their ideas.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- This structure as designed requires students to provide spontaneous responses. Many students with learning disabilities have difficulty generating ideas on the spot. The timing and pacing of the activity, therefore, may need to be altered to maximize the participation of these students. For instance, the theme of the problem-solving session could be provided in advance, so students could record some thoughts on the issue or dictate them to a peer or adult in advance of the session.
- A student who may have trouble generating ideas for the problems could be assigned to select and read the issues, then pick a fellow classmate to respond to each problem. In this situation, literacy and communication goals become the central emphasis of the activity for this student.
- Assistive technology should also be considered to support student participation. For instance, a student with multiple disabilities may be unable to generate a question or solution but may be capable of using the camera app on a tablet to record short videos of classmates reading the questions and generating solutions. These solutions and subsequent discussions could then be made available to others in the classroom. The student could also participate by selecting questions for peers to answer. If the student does not have a communication system, questions could be presented on different sticky notes or they could be uploaded to a communication app such as iComm by Accolade Consulting. Still another option is the All-Turn-It Spinner (see Figure 1.2). Photos of all the students in the group can be placed on the template, and the student with disabilities can use a switch to spin the device, and, thereby select a student to read a question or provide a response.

Figure 1.2 All-Turn-It Spinner



Source: Image courtesy of AbleNet Inc.

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Pass the Compliment

Even after being out of school for 10, 20, or even 50 years, most adults still remember being teased, ridiculed, or taunted as children or as teenagers. This experience (and low-level violence) is often viewed as a typical part of growing up. This is unfortunate because put-downs can have personal and academic implications. Students struggle to learn when they do not feel safe, and stress is a horrible state for learning (Jensen, 2009). Teachers, fortunately, have the power to create learning environments that are positive and welcoming. They can even inspire a different kind of name calling and labeling in the classroom using activities such as *Pass the Compliment* (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993).

Directions

- *Pass the Compliment* is like the old telephone game played at childhood parties. Ask students if they know the game; if some of them do, invite one or two individuals to briefly explain the structure. Then, tell the students that they will play a version of this game.
- Begin by instructing them all to think of a compliment they would like to pay to the person sitting directly behind them (or next to them or in front of them). The first person in the row begins the game by turning around and whispering a compliment to the second person in line (“I think you are creative”). The second person in line then turns to the third person in line and repeats the first compliment and adds one (“I think you are creative and funny”). The third person in line turns to the fourth person in line and shares the two compliments as well as a new one, and so on.
- When everyone in the row has received a compliment, call on those in the front to recite all of the compliments from the entire row (“I think you are creative, funny, independent, a good cartoonist, and gutsy”).
- Ask students to talk to their row members to determine if the messages got through or if some of them were lost in the process.

Example

- A fourth-grade teacher ended Friday afternoons with this community-building exercise. Students would sit in small circles and pass compliments around the circle until everyone had given and received one compliment. Compliments related to appearance (e.g., “I like your hair”) were forbidden, as were those that were too general (as determined by the small groups of students themselves). In addition, students were encouraged to use a compliment that was specific to that particular week (e.g., “Your oral report was really inventive—I loved it”).

Another Version of This Activity

Pick one or two students at the end or beginning of the day or week and have five classmates give them a compliment. Compliments can be general, or teachers can ask students to focus on something specific. For instance, a middle school teacher might read a student's story and ask his or her classmates to provide five compliments related to the story, which might include the funny title, the surprise ending, the really suspenseful part on the staircase, the good use of adjectives, or the great detail in the description of the golf course.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Help all students learn what a compliment is, what it sounds like, and what a good compliment includes. Some learners simply do not have practice sharing this type of information. For extra practice, begin or end the day or the class period by asking students to give group compliments (e.g., "We created amazing poetry this week").
- Be conscious that compliments and compliment giving vary cross-culturally, as do norms of interaction. For example, in some cultures it is expected that the person receiving the compliment will deny it to show humility. Ask your students who are English learners (and their families) about the compliments they commonly use and how compliments are given and received. Use the expertise of your English learners to teach these expressions and practices. Collaborate with the EL teacher to honor the cross-cultural differences among students.
- Bring in the school psychologist or social worker to coteach this activity. Some students (particularly those on the autism spectrum or those with emotional struggles and certain learning disabilities) may be receiving counseling or support to enhance their social skills. Involving other professionals can help students understand that cooperation and collaboration are schoolwide issues.
- Encourage older students to practice compliment giving via social media. Gratitude-focused Twitter accounts have popped up at middle schools and high schools across the country (e.g., @FFX_Ccompliments, @romeocompliments). Students don't need access to a specific account to spread the love, of course, but you might suggest a hashtag (e.g., #EastHighpassthecompliment) to get things started.
- Create a "Thanks for the Compliment" poster or chart to hang in the classroom at all times. On this poster, list words and phrases that are often used in compliments (e.g., "You are really good at _____"; "You always have great ideas for _____"). Seeing this language will not only provide a visual support for those who struggle to think of ideas for meaningful compliments, but it may also help students with emotional struggles (and others) to remember to be positive, reflective, and kind.

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Two Truths and a Lie

Two Truths and a Lie (Bennett, Rolheiser, & Stevahn, 1991; Sapon-Shevin, 2010) is entertaining and energizing and can be integrated into the classroom as a get-to-know-you activity, a collaboration exercise, a curriculum preview or review, or a content-immersion technique. To encourage conversations that may be in some way related to curriculum, teachers can ask students to focus on specific topics for the exercise. For instance, students can be asked to share two truths and a lie related to ancient Egypt, the ocean, percussion instruments, or triangles.

Directions

- Instruct students to jot down three statements about themselves. Two of them must be truths, and one of them must be a lie (see Figure 1.3 for a worksheet that can be given to each student in the classroom).
- Then, have learners get into pairs or into small groups, read their statements, and ask their classmates to guess which statements are lies and which are truths.
- If time permits, have students share short stories related to their truths and lies.

Examples

- A third-grade teacher who often had students in her classroom who were homeless and living in temporary housing used this exercise several times throughout the year to encourage students to share information about themselves and to learn about others in the classroom. She was always gaining and losing students as families moved in and out of local shelters, and she found that this activity gave all of her students opportunities to get to know each other better and provided new class members, in particular, with opportunities to share something positive and interesting about themselves even though they had missed the getting-to-know-you activities in September.

This creative teacher also used the activity to challenge her students academically and socially. If her learners were reluctant to try something new or to take a risk, she would whisper and remind them that the new learning or opportunity could be listed as one of their new truths in *Two Truths and a Lie* if they went through with the task or challenge. For instance, when one of her students refused to try simple stunts on the balance beam in physical education, she reminded him that he could boast about being a gymnast if he took the risk on the beam. Another student was encouraged to enter a community art contest when the teacher reminded her that she could call herself a “local artist” in the next game of *Two Truths and a Lie* because her painting would be on display at a neighborhood coffee shop.

- A high school art teacher asked students to choose an American artist to study for an end-of-the-year project. To get started on the projects, she asked students to do a computer search of their artists and then write two truths and one lie about them. One student, Marc, was assigned Jackson Pollock and wrote that he was a major force in the abstract expressionist movement, his style of art is

Figure 1.3 *Two Truths and a Lie* Worksheet©iStockphoto.com/
kennykiernan

Name _____

Two Truths and a Lie

Write one statement about yourself in each box. Two of the statements should be true and one should be false.

1

2

3

known as cubism, and one of his influences was Diego Rivera. Then, in small groups, students played *Two Truths and a Lie*, and three of the students in Marc's group correctly indicated that Pollock was not a cubist. The teacher pointed out that the exercise not only got students to start their research immediately, but it also gave them some introduction to or review of artists they would not be studying in great detail.

Another Version of This Activity

Have students write three facts about themselves that they think others do not know or will not be able to guess. Then, put all of the slips in a hat and have students draw them out one by one and guess who wrote each fact. After a few guesses are made, have the author raise his or her hand or otherwise reveal himself or herself.

If students share just one or two facts, you can play this game in a whole-class format. If students share three or more facts, break the class into small groups.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- If you use this activity several times during the year, students may enjoy trying different prompts. For instance, you might ask students to share one truth, one lie, and one wish.
- In some cases, it may help to give students time to brainstorm about their lives. Give them specific ideas to explore, such as "What are five things you have accomplished?" or "Name three of the riskiest things you have tried" or "What is one thing that makes your family unique?" This will give those who have difficulty thinking on their feet options for their three offerings.
- Due to communication challenges, memory issues, or other learning difficulties, some students may have a hard time coming up with three things to share. These students might be encouraged to work with family members to write their three statements, or they might complete the *Two Truths and a Lie* worksheet with a teacher or speech and language therapist who can help and potentially even give some instruction in determining the difference between truths and lies.

IDEAS FOR USING THIS STRUCTURE 

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AFTER USING THIS STRUCTURE

Did students learn what I intended? Were all students engaged? What changes might be needed to maximize engagement and participation for specific students? How can other team members be involved in co-teaching or instructional support?

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It's a Small World

Students will most likely be familiar with the expression “It’s a small world.” In this activity, they will have an opportunity to see what a small world it is in their own classroom. This team-building exercise asks students to think about characteristics that make them unique and those that bind them to others in the class.

This structure is especially useful to use in schools that are working to introduce students with different experiences or backgrounds to one another. For instance, *It’s a Small World* may be helpful to use when a school has recently welcomed new students due to boundary changes or school closings. It’s also ideal for use in very diverse classrooms where students with and without disabilities and those from a range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds will be working, sharing, and learning together. Finally, this game might be helpful to use with students who have not previously worked together in the past, as it can help to build instant connections.

Directions

- To begin the activity, ask students to find a partner. With that partner, they should make a list of at least five things that they have in common with one another, such as these:
 - Their favorite dessert
 - The month of their birthdays
 - The number of siblings they have
 - The color of the socks they are wearing
 - Their favorite movie
 - A YouTube video they love
- Once the pairs have completed their first list, direct them to split up and wander around the room, looking for someone else who shares at least one list item with them. Students then sit down with this partner and generate five new items of commonality.
- Have students repeat this exercise once or twice. When they are finished working with a few partners, ask them to come back to their seats and discuss their learning from the exercise with these starter questions:
 - What did you learn about your classmates?
 - What did you learn about yourself?
 - What did you learn about our community?

Example

- A fourth-grade teacher used *It’s a Small World* on the first day of school so that all of her students would learn more about one another. Although most of them had been educated together for at least three years by the time they arrived in her classroom, some of the students were completely new to the school because of the district’s new plan to close down a special education building and move students with disabilities into the same school as their neighbors, siblings, and same-age peers. During the activity, many students who thought they knew each other realized there was a lot they didn’t know

Figure 1.4 *It's a Small World* Idea-Generating Worksheet

Name _____

It's a Small World

Fill in the blanks with a partner. You can write your answers or draw pictures to represent the answers, or you can both write the answers and draw pictures. When you have the same answer in one of the categories, put a checkmark (✓) in the right column.

Name: _____		Name: _____		✓ here if the answers match
favorite dessert		favorite dessert		
favorite color		favorite color		
type of shoe I'm wearing		type of shoe I'm wearing		
birthday month		birthday month		
favorite movie		favorite movie		
state I was born in		state I was born in		
number of siblings I have		number of siblings I have		
last book I read		last book I read		
middle name		middle name		
_____		_____		
_____		_____		

about classmates they had been educated with for several years. Likewise, they learned they had a lot in common with the students with disabilities they were meeting for the first time. For instance, Richard, a boy with cerebral palsy, and his new classmate, Raul, realized that they both had spent time in a hospital (Raul for appendicitis and Richard for surgery on his back); both had three siblings; both had been born in Mexico; and both had the same favorite toy—the Xbox.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- If some of the students are not familiar with the expression “It’s a small world,” explain to them that it is an expression used when you discover that someone you meet has similar experiences or has an unexpected connection to you. Ask certain students to share “small-world moments” they have experienced.
- Provide possible categories for students who might struggle to generate ideas on their own. Use Figure 1.4 or generate your own categories and share them with some or all of the students.
- Walk around the room and help pairs who are stuck; share new category ideas or prompt them to eavesdrop on other groups for help. Some students who have significant speech and language issues (especially those who have difficulties with pragmatics) may need the teacher to model the question-and-answer exchange that should occur between students to uncover similarities. For example, the teacher would lead the exchange by saying this: “Mindy, I noticed that you like horseback riding. Ask Julie in this way: ‘Julie, I like to ride horses, do you?’” In addition, use your own knowledge of student experiences to ensure that learners are recalling shared events as a source of similarity. For example, you might recall aloud that six students in the classroom attended a school ski trip together.



Makin' Mottos

What do you stand for? What is your story? What are your beliefs? Many groups—including corporations, nonprofit organizations, schools, and clubs—have mantras, themes, slogans, or mottos that bind members together and advertise or promote their common purpose. In *Makin' Mottos*, students learn about this process and create their own mottos as a way to build community and articulate a shared vision.

Directions

- Begin by asking students to discuss what a motto is and why groups or individuals use them (e.g., to promote unity, to promote the ideals of a group, to create a unique identity as a team).
- Then, put students into small groups and ask them to create mottos to represent their values, beliefs, or purposes in learning.
- To assist students in their brainstorming, share some mottos of well-known groups or companies, such as the following:
 - Girl Scouts: Be Prepared
 - Red Cross: Serve One Another
 - US Marines: Always Faithful
 - Little League: Character, Courage, and Loyalty
 - Nike: Just Do It
 - Apple: Think Different
- Provide time for small-group discussion and motto development. You can be specific about what the motto must represent or leave the task more open, depending on the goals or objectives of your lesson or of your classroom. You can even tie classroom content into this activity and charge students with creating a motto for a literary character or for a historical figure.
- When groups are finished working, invite them to present the mottos to the group.
- Finally, lead a discussion about the mottos and their meanings.

Implementation Tip

Because it will be fairly easy for students to come up with a motto in a short period of time, you may want to teach them how to brainstorm and require that they do so for a given period of time before selecting one idea from a list of suggestions. Remind students that “anything goes” in brainstorming and that the goal is to generate a long list (not the perfect answer) in this stage of the process.

Examples

- A seventh-grade social studies teacher used *Makin' Mottos* in the beginning of the year to help students come together as learning teams. He asked them to create mottos that would represent their views on learning history. Group creations ranged from the humorous “Learn It and You Might Win on a Game Show”

to the more serious “History . . . Important to Look Back Before Moving Forward.” He used the activity again to have students think critically about content. During a unit on World War II, he assigned a different country to each team and asked them to generate potential mottos for their nations. He asked students to come up with several options in a period of 30 minutes, and students then chose the one that best represented the essence of that country’s struggle, attitude, and actions during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The team assigned the United States generated the motto “Making the World Safe for Democracy . . . Forever!”; the German team came up with the slogan “A Global Germany.”

- During their unit on communities, a third-grade class generated mottos for their small cooperative groups. Then, they made posters featuring their mottos and hung them around the classroom. Tiala, a student with significant motor difficulties, could not contribute to the activity as her disabilities made drawing nearly impossible. Tiala’s group therefore opted to create their poster online using PosterMyWall (www.postermywall.com). Changing the materials for this group allowed Tiala to select images, make decisions about the placement of those images, and work on her individual goals of independently turning on the computer, entering her password to sign in, and selecting a URL to get to a website.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- As a way of preparing for the activity, ask students to make a list of ideas for which they personally stand or of their values and beliefs. If students seem to need assistance with this kind of abstract thinking or have never considered their strongly held beliefs, ask them to discuss the list at home. This way, students may gain not only ideas for their mottos but tap into funds of political, historical, and personal knowledge related to their families, communities, and cultural backgrounds (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).
- Let students do an Internet search for mottos so they get a sense of how different groups are able to communicate their values or mission in just a few words. You might encourage students to search for the mottos of their states, cities, or schools; religious, recreational, or political groups that are popular in their communities; or groups they care about personally (e.g., LGBT support groups, cultural organizations).
- Have students look up *motto* in the dictionary to get a more concrete sense of the word and concept.



One Step Ahead

“I am a middle child.” “I like zombie movies.” “I have chocolate in my locker.” Find out which students in your classroom agree or admit to these statements and others like them during a fun-filled game of *One Step Ahead*. This activity gives students a chance to compare likes, experiences, and beliefs and make connections with peers. In essence, this activity is a visual assessment of students and their attitudes, knowledge, or ideas. It is also a helpful way to get “all voices on the table” without requiring verbal communication. For this reason, this structure is an ideal icebreaker or review activity if one or more students in the classroom use alternatives to speech or have difficulties with on-the-spot verbal communication.

Directions

- Ask all members of the class to stand in a line at one end of the classroom.
- Make a statement about a belief, an idea, an attitude, or some piece of knowledge that learners may possess. Instruct students to move “one step ahead” if they can respond affirmatively to the statement or if it is true for or about them. For example, if the teacher says, “I am sixteen,” then every student that age should move forward one step, and all of the slightly older or younger students should remain at “the starting line.”
- Once all first moves have been made, make another statement. Again, have students move forward if the statement is true for or about them. Possible statements include the following:
 - I am the oldest child in my family.
 - I am 12 years old.
 - I have a pet.
 - I sing in the shower.
 - I am wearing blue jeans.
 - I am afraid of snakes.
 - I am a vegetarian.
 - I read *The Maze Runner*.
- Statements can also be related to class content, such as these:
 - I can name all of the planets.
 - My favorite character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Scout.
 - I was born in New York.
 - I can name a track-and-field event.
 - I know how to say *ocean* in French.
- When the first student or students cross the finish line, discuss some of the answers and responses to the statements.

Examples

- A math teacher used *One Step Ahead* to review for a semester exam. All prompts were related to class content:
 - I know the difference between a right angle and an acute angle.
 - I know the Pythagorean theorem.

- I can bisect an angle.
- I can define *ray*.
- I can find the area of a parallelogram.
- I know what *geometry* means.
- I can name a geometry-related career.

Throughout the activity, the teacher called on individual students to share their answers and to teach mini-lessons to the rest of the group. When only three students stepped forward and claimed to know the Pythagorean theorem, he called those three to the front of the room, had everyone sit down on the floor wherever they were on the “grid,” and had the students reteach the concept at the board. Then, he asked everyone to stand and respond to the “I know the Pythagorean theorem” prompt again, waited for everyone to step forward, and resumed the game.

The prompts for the game were written by a fellow student who had been out of class for several weeks due to a serious illness. The student’s first assignment on returning to the classroom was to review the chapters he had missed and develop some questions related to the unfamiliar content. In assigning this role, the teacher created a nonthreatening and enjoyable way for the learner to immerse himself back into his studies while giving him opportunities to get some support from his peers.

- An 11th-grade teacher used the article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh (1990) to develop questions for this structure and as a method to raise awareness and open a conversation in her classroom about rising incidents of racism locally and nationally. Statements included these:
 - I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or closely watched by store employees because of my race.
 - At school, I can find many teachers who are my same race and have similar background experiences.
 - If I have an interaction with the police, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
 - I can walk in my neighborhood at night and not be seen as suspicious or dangerous.

Without saying a word, students were able to see who experienced advantages or disadvantages based on race and socioeconomic status.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- List the statements on the board if some students need visual support. Or to get students involved before the activity begins, allow all students to list possible prompts on the board and choose from this list during the activity.
- Vary the prompts so that students with different types of knowledge and expertise have opportunities to share and move. For instance, you might have several prompts related to content (e.g., “I know the difference between ___ and ___”; “I can name three facts related to ___”) and several others related to effort, attitude, or individualized goals (e.g., “I learned more than I thought I would”; “I met my individual goals for this unit”; “I could have worked harder yesterday”).

- Give students a moment to “turn and talk” about the prompt with a partner near them before asking them to move. This way, students are able to ask and answer questions (this is particularly helpful if some learners are confused about a prompt) and give individual responses before engaging in the whole-class portion of the activity.

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IDEAS FOR USING THIS STRUCTURE

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AFTER USING THIS STRUCTURE

Did students learn what I intended? Were all students engaged? What changes might be needed to maximize engagement and participation for specific students? How can other team members be involved in co-teaching or instructional support?

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Once Upon a Time

We have all heard the plea, “Tell me a story!” This activity is an answer to that request and a novel way for students to experiment with new concepts, ideas, and words. *Once Upon a Time* can serve as a brain break, a quirky review game, or a fun writing exercise. Use it to encourage creativity or to teach skills like sequencing, creating details, using descriptive language, and developing story openings and endings.

Directions

- Begin this activity by listing several categories on the board. For example, you might include
 - favorite book characters,
 - animals,
 - students in the class,
 - things you might get as a gift,
 - party games, and
 - common household chores.
- After generating the list, ask students to suggest items that would fit into the categories and write those responses on the board as well. For instance, in the “favorite book characters” category, students might name Katniss Everdeen (*Hunger Games*), Charlie Bucket (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), and Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter* series).
- Then, challenge the group to integrate those ideas or items into a story.
- Begin the story with, “Once upon a time . . .” and call on a student to fill in the next sentence. The object of the game is to incorporate as many of the items as possible from those generated in the classroom list. Therefore, a student drawing on the aforementioned categories might finish the teacher’s sentence with “Katniss was playing pin the tail on the donkey when she noticed a mouse in the corner of the room.”
- Inform students that they must contribute only one sentence at a time. Keep the story moving around the classroom until everyone has contributed at least one sentence. You can choose to end the story at that point or go around the classroom once or twice again.

Implementation Tip

Encourage students to resist overanalyzing their responses. Direct them to share whatever comes to mind. Remind them to encourage one another. This exercise should help students think flexibly and have fun.

Examples

- After teaching about avoiding colloquial language or trite expressions in their work, an expository writing teacher broke students into four small groups and told them they could invent a story about anything, but they had to incorporate at least a dozen trite expressions into the tale. She started the students out with this sentence: “I was working like a dog, feeling happy as a lark, when I saw John walking across the court, looking so angry there was fire in his eyes.” Students recorded their stories using Voice Recorder by Tap Media Ltd., an app on their tablets. All recordings were played for the class at the end of the lesson.
- A fourth-grade teacher, interested to know what facts her students had picked up during their ongoing study of the United States, asked students to tell a collective story integrating
 - a US river,
 - a symbol of the United States (e.g., eagle, flag, Statue of Liberty),
 - a state in the Midwest,
 - a famous American landmark, and
 - a US president.

To add an extra level of challenge, some students with strong abilities in language and expression were told they would have to insert a simile, a metaphor, or an example of onomatopoeia as they took their turns in the exercise.

Another Version of This Activity

Use this strategy at the start of a unit as a pre-assessment and again at the end of the unit as a post-assessment of students’ learning. Provide several categories related to important concepts, ideas, or academic language in the unit. Ask students to generate what they know in each category and then engage in *Once Upon a Time storytelling*. The story that is told may reveal students’ background knowledge or misunderstandings about key concepts. At the end of the unit, ask students to add concepts, ideas, and academic language to the original categories and tell a story based on their new understandings.

Methods to Maximize Engagement and Participation

- Many cultures have a long tradition of passing stories down through the generations using storytelling. In some cases, master storytellers use gestures and vary their voice quality as a way of enhancing their stories. To interest kinesthetic learners, consider introducing gestures and other storytelling techniques and allowing students to use them as they engage in this activity.
- To make the activity more challenging for students needing enrichment, add requirements to the task, such as “By the end of the story, you must have . . .”
 - included at least four vocabulary words from this unit;
 - shared at least three learnings from the last chapter; and
 - integrated three facts from yesterday’s lecture.

- Use an app such as Shake-a-Phrase by Artgig Studio or a tool like Story Starters by Scholastic (www.scholastic.com/teachers/story-starters) to generate ideas for stories and provide a little extra excitement and motivation.
- Allow students, if necessary, to use alternative forms of communication to participate. For instance, some students may want to use some type of pantomime during their turn. Others may need to hold up picture cards that represent people, events, or ideas. If such an adaptation is necessary, have others in the group work together to interpret the idea and add it into the story.
- After generating the list of concepts, stop the activity momentarily and give all learners time to collect their thoughts and generate ideas. Some students may even need a “cheat sheet” with possible responses for each category listed.
- If one of the students in the classroom has intellectual disabilities or communication struggles, have this individual participate by choosing a story-starter card (e.g., “Once upon a time, there was troll who lived in a classroom . . .”) from a group of three or more. Other cards could be used to inject a twist or plot change into the story (e.g., “And then something unexpected happened . . .”). The cards can be illustrated and constructed by other learners or by the teacher. Alternatively, the phrases can be programmed into a student’s communication system.

