ESL Icebreakers:

Learning English and More

Scott Foster

Colorado State University

EDAE 620 Processes and Methods

Tobin Lopes, Ph.D.

February 20, 2011

Abstract:

As instructors of adults, we are tasked with not only providing knowledge and a means of learning, but also committed to understanding and implementing a variety of methods and strategies to facilitate and stimulate the learning process in our students. Icebreakers are an effective way to introduce a new learning concept that gets their attention and establishes the theme of the broader concepts yet to come. It’s a way to energize the group and to focus their attention directly or indirectly on a topic or concept. It can often be used as a first step in the facilitation process as a way to open their minds to the impending lesson.

This paper will address two icebreakers that I’ve developed and will implement in the coming weeks for the advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) Class that I teach. Both not only help facilitate the broad goals of the program – developing our students’ English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, but also tie into multiple current, and upcoming assignments serving a number of purposes including meeting the State of Arizona’s Adult Education Standards, preparing them to eventually move on into General Educational Development (GED) programs and beyond, and acquiring life skills such as leadership, career attainment and advancement, and civic awareness and participation.

ESL Icebreakers:

Learning English and More

In conjunction with a current assignment and in anticipation of some upcoming assignments, I have developed two Icebreakers for my advanced ESL class designed to energize and familiarize my students with our class agenda in the coming weeks. The first Icebreaker, “My Inspiration” I will implement for my next class on 2/23/11 and the second one, “King of the World” at a later date.

Both have strong ties to a new program being implemented through Rio Salado College’s free Adult Basic Education (ABE) Division, the ABE Congress. This program has been designed to teach GED and ESL students about the government process in the United States, foster leadership skills, and inspire them to become involved in a new “Congress” or Student Council being formed of students elected by their classmates to represent them in regular meetings that will address their needs and concerns at a school level, local level and state level. These Icebreakers will also be useful energizers for some related assignments we are currently working on and will be working on to achieve other objectives as well.

**Icebreaker Activity #1 – My Inspiration**

**Assignment:**

My Inspiration

We have all been influenced by other people to achieve our goals and shape who we are as individuals. Please write down answers to these questions

Who has inspired you? (It can be someone you know, a friend or relative, or a famous person).

What have they done that inspires you? (Tell us why they inspire you or have inspired you).

What have they inspired you to do or become? (How have the affected you)?

How will their legacy affect you in the future? (How will you live your life differently because of them)?

**How This Icebreaker will be Implemented:**

At the beginning of class, I will post the assignment on the projector screen and ask them to respond to each question in writing with complete sentences and telling them that we will then take turns reading those responses aloud in class. I will also post a definition for the word “legacy.” I will give them five minutes to develop their answer and then take as much time as needed to allow each student to read his or her response. For an ESL class of 20 + people, short icebreakers are hard to do if they are to be meaningful.

**Rationale for Icebreaker:**

* As with all our class activities, this exercise will help them acquire stronger English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and help build their English vocabulary.
* This exercise will help them to achieve a State of Arizona Standard for their learning program, “Student will be able to summarize and predict.”
* This exercise will give them practice using various past, present, and future verb tenses.
* This exercise will help the students learn how to introduce a person or thing. I have presented them with an assignment to research on the internet, and write a five paragraph paper on an important historical figure. This assignment is designed to help prepare them for future assignments should they decide to move on and pursue their GEDs and/or post secondary educations. We are dissecting the assignment into parts and will be covering how to write an introduction later in class that day.
* This will be used the first day of the new ABE Congress program being implemented throughout the Rio Salado College ABE program. The program provides instruction to GED and ESL students on the government process in the United States. It also calls for the creation of a “Congress” made up of representatives elected from each class who will then meet on a regular basis to discuss their school, communities and state. It is intended to instill a sense of civic awareness and responsibility so that they can become better citizens and instill leadership qualities to help them grow as individuals and enhance their self-esteem. An array of coordinated assignments will be given out as part of this program including the nomination and election of their representative. This exercise will help them be able to do future assignments relative to introducing, supporting, and nominating candidates for their Congress.
* This assignment is also designed to get them thinking about inspiration and what inspires them. My hope is it will prompt at least some of the class members to take the Congress seriously and influence them to become actively involved in the Congress, their school, and their community.

**Icebreaker Activity #2 - King of the World**

**Assignment:**

King of the World

Let’s imagine for a moment that you have just been elected King of the World and have the power to immediately change anything you want in the world. What five things would you change first and why? Think about it for a few minutes, and write down your answers.

**How This Icebreaker will be Implemented:**

At the beginning of class, I will post the assignment on the projector screen. I will tell them to write their answers in complete sentences, and then share them with the class.

**Rationale for Icebreaker:**

* As with the previous icebreaker, this exercise will help them acquire stronger English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and help build their English vocabulary.
* This exercise is designed to get the students thinking about what is important to them and what they would like to change about the world. It ties in again with our ABE Congress project at Rio Salado.
* It gets the students thinking about taking action to make changes in their world.
* It is a lead in for the nomination of a class representative for the Congress that we will do later that class.
* It gives the students practice using future verb tenses.
* This exercise, in conjunction with other announcements and ideas I will introduce later in this class, is designed to get them thinking about the subject of empowerment and motivate them to view themselves as having empowerment to affect their lives through proactive involvement in the government process.

**Conclusion**

Icebreakers are an effective way to introduce a topic in a creative, thought provoking way that can then be tied to a concept or lesson in class. Good icebreakers prepare the student for an assignment or learning topic to come. Icebreakers are effective on multiple levels when they can address an array of learning goals simultaneously.

I am anxious to see how effectively these two icebreakers prove to be in helping the students as they tackle the assignments and challenges of the weeks to come in our class, and achieve their goals and the goals of Rio Salado.