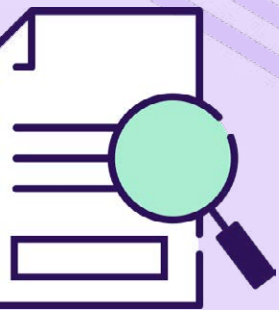
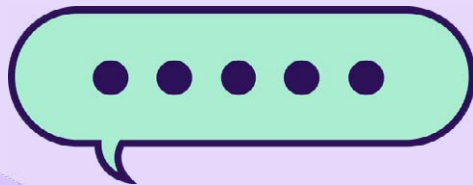


TOP HAT



The Best Classroom Activities for College Courses

45+ ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO BUILD
CONNECTIONS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Dynamic activities and team-building exercises aren't just for the corporate workplace—they can also be used in the classroom to encourage collaboration, problem-solving and decision-making.

Through engaging team-building activities students learn to listen, trust and support each other. They also develop valuable life skills such as communication and collaboration, which can't always be learned from a textbook.

Here are 47 team-building activities to implement in your classroom.

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ACTIVITIES TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

Team-building activities help foster a sense of community in your classroom. These activities are designed to build connections, wherever learning takes place.

1. AROUND THE WORLD

GROUP SIZE: 100 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous)

With online learning, students may be spread across the globe. This activity aims to humanize the learning experience by revealing which students are in close proximity to each other. If you're teaching synchronously in Top Hat, create a click-on-target question and upload an image of a map. Have students click on the country they are currently in. If you're teaching asynchronously, consider using a discussion board where students can post their location and a fun fact about the country they're in.

2. PUB QUIZ

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–7 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

You don't need to hang out in an actual pub for this team-building activity; the idea is to mimic a trivia pub night, fostering teamwork in a fun environment. For online courses, instructors can make use of Zoom rooms to organize teams or groups. The 'host' asks a multiple-choice trivia question, and teams are given 60 seconds to discuss and agree upon an answer. You can use generic quiz questions (from the board game Trivial Pursuit, for example), or you could relate questions back to the course material. The team with the most points wins (consider giving bonus marks on a recent quiz as a prize).

3. IDEA BUILDING BLOCKS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide the class into teams and present them with a problem related to your course material. One team member writes down a solution and passes the piece of paper along to the next team member, who builds upon that idea. The paper is passed around until each team member has added to the original solution. When their time is up, a spokesperson can present their ultimate solution to the rest of the group or to the class. This activity helps develop students' problem-solving and collaboration skills, with learners working towards a common goal.

4. SPAGHETTI TOWER

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–10 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide students into teams and provide them with 'building' materials, such as dry spaghetti, marshmallows, string and tape. Set a time limit for designing and building a spaghetti tower (one that's structurally sound, of course). When their time is up, the tallest freestanding tower wins. Prizes can range from bonus points on the recent assignment to a short extension for their next paper or report. There are several variations on this, such as building a pyramid with paper cups, but the idea is to promote communication and collaboration—and provide a little incentive as well.

5. NAME GAME

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Distribute a sticky note to every student and have them write down the name of a famous scholar in your discipline on the note. Students can then place the note on their forehead and interact with their classmates, asking questions to understand which person they are embodying. This exercise helps students loosen up and informally interact with their classmates. It also helps them learn about a historical figure previously unknown to them.

6. RATHER THAN

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This icebreaker allows students to learn about their peers' preferences and personalities, all while testing their memory. Have one student share something they'd like to do, such as skydive. The next student restates what was shared plus adds something that they would rather do (i.e., "skydive, go snorkeling.") The activity continues until every student has had a chance to contribute. In a synchronous online class, consider taking a screenshot of your Zoom tile view and sharing it with the class so students know what order to proceed in. This activity helps students practice their active listening skills in medium-sized groups.

7. SCAVENGER HUNT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Scavenger hunts aren't just for kids. While this icebreaker game requires some preparation, it encourages students to work together: planning a strategy, dividing up tasks and communicating progress. Split your students into teams and give them a time limit to find as many items as possible on a list you've provided. You can make this more challenging by offering clues or riddles rather than the names of items.

8. A SUDDEN STORY

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Start this activity by telling any story—academic or otherwise. It could be, "Yesterday, I logged onto Facebook and started to scroll when suddenly..." Then, have students add onto your story by asking them to contribute a line and finish with 'suddenly' before passing it onto the next person. Students aren't expected to repeat what was contributed before them, they just need to add a line. If you're running this activity online, consider sharing a screenshot of your Zoom view so students know who's next in line. This exercise lightens the mood in your class and allows students to interact with one another in an informal way.

9. BEACH BALL

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ahead of class, write different get-to-know-you questions on each segment of a beach ball. The questions could be “what was one of your highlights from the summer?” or “who is your celebrity idol and why?” Arrange students in a circle and toss the ball. The student who catches it answers the question closest to their left thumb, then tosses the ball to another student.

10. IT WAS THE BEST OF CLASSES, IT WAS THE WORST OF CLASSES

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide your whiteboard into two sections. On one side, write “the best class I ever had” and on the other side, write “the worst class I ever had.” Without referring to specific professors or courses, ask students to share what they liked and disliked about their previous courses. Make a list of these items to potentially implement—or avoid—in your own course this semester.

11. WHAT’S IN FRONT OF YOU?

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous)

This icebreaker helps to humanize the reality of online learning. If students are comfortable doing so, encourage them to share a photo of what’s in front of their workspace at home. In a synchronous class, have students upload their photos in your live chat or display the object directly on the screen. They can also add a brief description for context. In an asynchronous environment, split learners into discussion groups and have students upload their photos in their respective groups.

12. STORY OF YOUR NAME

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

This activity allows students to better understand their peers' unique backgrounds and family histories. Go around the room (or use a discussion board if you're teaching synchronously or asynchronously online) and have students share their name and its relevance or meaning. This activity allows students with similar backgrounds or cultures to identify with one another.

13. PIPELINE

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–5 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Teams are given the task of carrying a marble or ball from a start line to a finish line, without it ever touching the floor—or students' hands. Here's how it works: Each team member is given a PVC pipe (though they could also use paper and tape, or paper towel rolls). Allow five minutes of planning time, so teams can strategize how they will transport the marble as a group; if it falls to the floor, they must start over. This helps to promote problem-solving, communication and cooperation.

14. GOODIE BAG SKITS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

This might take some students out of their comfort zone but it encourages teamwork and collaboration. Divide the class into teams of up to ten people and provide each team with a 'goodie bag' filled with random items. Set a time limit (five-to-ten minutes) for each group to create a short skit tied to course content, based on the items in the bag. Teams then present their skits, and a group vote can be held to declare the winner. Winners can get bonus points for their grade on this activity or their in-class participation grade.

15. DESERTED ISLAND

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–5 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

In this icebreaker, small groups of students imagine they're stranded on a deserted island. After dividing students into teams, provide them with a list of items for survival. Students must prioritize and rank those items—first on their own, and then as a group. Not only does this test their problem-solving skills, but it also helps them differentiate between the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective.

16. THINK-PAIR-REPAIR

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (minimum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Change up your usual think-pair-share activities by posing an open-ended question to your class and asking students to come up with their best answer. Next, pair peers up and encourage them to agree on a response. Combine two pairs and have a group of four accomplish the same task. Continue until half the class goes head-to-head with the other half, defending their stance. This way, students benefit from hearing their peers' perspectives, as well as getting to practice their debate skills. If your students are online, breakout rooms on Zoom or Microsoft Teams allow you to replicate this experience virtually.

17. WHY AM I HERE?

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Have students draw a picture that represents why they enrolled in your course. Encourage them to think beyond the fact that they may need your course credit to graduate. They could think about wanting to learn more about your field or simply that their friends were enrolled in your class, too. After five minutes, have students share their picture with the larger group if they're comfortable—helping students feel like part of one interconnected community.

18. IMPROV GAMES

GROUP SIZE: 20 students minimum

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Improviseational (improv) games encourage students to think quickly and step outside their comfort zone to connect with their peers. Here are a few examples: Pair up students and ask them to figure out the most unexpected things they share in common (this can also be done online in breakout rooms). Or challenge your students to count to 20 as a group with one person saying each number—but no one is assigned a number, and if two people talk at the same time, everyone starts again at one.

ACTIVITIES TO ENCOURAGE DISCUSSIONS

These interactive activities are designed to energize your classroom and inspire more dynamic discussions. They allow students to approach course concepts in new ways and ensure that students can connect their in-class learnings to the world outside the classroom.

19. BRAINWRITING

GROUP SIZE: 10 students (minimum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This activity helps build rapport and respect in your classroom. After you tackle a complex lecture topic, give students time to individually reflect on their learnings. This can be accomplished through guided prompts or left as an open-ended exercise. Once students have gathered their thoughts, encourage them to share their views either through an online discussion thread or a conversation with peers during class time.

20. SYLLABUS QUESTIONNAIRE

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Before sharing your syllabus with students, place them into groups and have them generate a list of questions they have about the course. After each group has their list prepared, distribute the syllabus and have students find answers to their questions using this document. Reconvene as a group (or in a Zoom breakout room) and give students an opportunity to ask any further questions that couldn't be answered from the syllabus.

21. WHO AM I

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ask each student to write down the name of a fictional character, celebrity or politician on a sticky note, and place it on a peer's forehead. None of the students should know what is written on their own forehead. Each student asks a few questions about his character and other students answer them. The goal is to guess your character faster than other players. This way, college students can get a better understanding of the key figures in their discipline while getting to interact with one another.

22. CONCEPT MAPPING

GROUP SIZE: 10 students (minimum)

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Collaborative concept mapping is the process of visually organizing concepts and ideas and understanding how they relate to each other. This exercise is a great way for students to look outside of their individual experiences and perspectives. Groups can use this tactic to review previous work or to help them map ideas for projects and assignments. For in-person classes, you can ask students to cover classroom walls with sticky notes and chart paper. For online classes, there are many online tools that make it simple to map out connections between ideas, like Google Docs or the digital whiteboard feature in Zoom.

23. DEBATE

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Propose a topic or issue to your class. Group students together (or in breakout rooms if you're teaching remotely) according to the position they take on the specific issue. Ask the groups to come up with a few arguments or examples to support their position. Write each group's statements on the virtual whiteboard and use these as a starting point for discussion. A natural next step is to debate the strengths and weaknesses of each argument, helping students improve their critical thinking and analysis skills.

24. COMPARE AND CONTRAST

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Ask your students to focus on a specific chapter in your textbook. Then, place them in groups and ask them to make connections and identify differences between ideas that can be found in course readings and other articles and videos they may find. This way, they can compare their ideas in small groups and learn from one another's perspectives. In online classes, instructors can use Zoom breakout rooms to put students in small groups.

25. ASSESS/DIAGNOSE/ACT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This activity will improve students' problem-solving skills and can help engage them in more dynamic discussions. Start by proposing a topic or controversial statement. Then follow these steps to get conversations going. In online classes, students can either raise their hands virtually or use an online discussion forum to engage with their peers.

- Assessment: What is the issue or problem at hand?
- Diagnosis: What is the root cause of this issue or problem?
- Action: How can we solve the issue?

26. MORAL DILEMMAS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–7 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Provide students with a moral or ethical dilemma, using a hypothetical situation or a real-world situation. Then ask them to explore potential solutions as a group. This activity encourages students to think outside the box to develop creative solutions to the problem. In online learning environments, students can use discussion threads or Zoom breakout rooms.

27. CONVERSATION STATIONS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 4–6 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

This activity exposes students' ideas in a controlled way, prompting discussions that flow naturally. To start, share a list of discussion questions pertaining to a course reading, video or case study. Put students into groups and give them five-to-ten minutes to discuss, then have two students rotate to another group. The students who have just joined a group have an opportunity to share findings from their last discussion, before answering the second question with their new group. After another five to ten minutes, the students who haven't rotated yet will join a new group.

28. THIS OR THAT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

This activity allows students to see where their peers stand on a variety of different topics and issues. Instructors should distribute a list of provocative statements before class, allowing students to read ahead. Then, they can ask students to indicate whether they agree, disagree or are neutral on the topic in advance, using an online discussion thread or Google Doc. In class, use another discussion thread or live chat to have students of differing opinions share their views. After a few minutes, encourage one or two members in each group to defend their position amongst a new group of students. Ask students to repeat this process for several rounds to help familiarize themselves with a variety of standpoints.

29. SNOWBALL DISCUSSIONS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 2–4 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Assign students a case study or reading to discuss with a partner, then have them share their thoughts with the larger group. Use breakout rooms in Zoom and randomly assign students in pairs with a discussion question. After a few minutes, combine rooms to form groups of four. After another five minutes, combine groups of four to become a larger group of eight—and so on until the whole class is back together again.

30. MAKE IT PERSONAL

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 2–8 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

After you've covered a topic or concept in your lecture, divide students into small discussion groups (or breakout rooms online). Ask the groups questions like “How did this impact your prior knowledge of the topic?” or “What was your initial reaction to this source/article/fact?” to encourage students to reflect on their personal connections to the course concepts they are learning.

31. SYNTHESIS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This discussion activity can help students connect course concepts by leaning on prior knowledge and other learning experiences. Consider asking questions such as “How can this idea be combined with _____ to create a more complete or comprehensive understanding of _____?” Then, students can discuss these questions in their small group (or online breakout room) in order to learn more about one another's experiences inside and outside the classroom.

32. GALLERY WALK

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Start by setting up stations or posters in a few locations around the classroom (like on the walls or on tables). For online classes, students can complete this activity in breakout rooms. Divide students into small groups and have them rotate between each station together, performing some kind of task like sorting their observations into categories, writing down a list of questions they have about the source material they are viewing or responding to a discussion prompt related to the course material to generate conversation.

33. PINWHEEL DISCUSSION

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 10–12 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide students into four groups and inform three of these groups that they are assigned to represent a specific point of view. Members of the fourth group are ‘provocateurs,’ whose role is to ensure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One student from each group (the ‘speaker’) sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the middle of the classroom. Give students five-to-ten minutes to prepare. The four speakers then introduce and discuss a variety of questions. After ten minutes, new students from each group replace their groups’ speakers and continue the conversation.

34. PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

GROUP SIZE: 20–25 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. After everyone has chosen a side, ask one or two students on each side to take turns defending their positions. This allows students to visualize where their peers’ opinions come from, relative to their own.

35. AFFINITY MAPPING

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–8 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous)

Place students in small groups (or virtual breakout rooms) and pose a broad question or problem to them that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as “What was the greatest innovation of the 21st century?” or “How would society be different if _____ never occurred?” Ask students to generate responses by writing ideas on sticky notes (one idea per note) or in a discussion thread (if you’re teaching online). Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping their ideas into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another and so on. This allows students to engage in higher-level thinking by analyzing ideas and organizing them in relation to one another.

36. SOCRATIC SEMINAR

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (minimum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ask students to prepare for a discussion by reviewing a course reading or group of texts and coming up with a few higher-order discussion questions about the text. In class, pose an introductory, open-ended question. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with evidence from previous course concepts or texts. There doesn't need to be a particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with their peers.

37. CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Students form two circles: an inner circle and an outer circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. Pose a question to the whole group and have pairs discuss their responses with each other. After three-to-five minutes, have students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person. Pose a new question, and the process is repeated, exposing students to the different perspectives of their peers.

38. ABSURD QUESTIONS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Pose a fantastical, outrageous or fictitious statement to each group. Statements can be tailored to your discipline such as "what if everyone lived to 150" for a developmental class or "what if there was no such thing as evolution" for a biology class. Students are asked to develop as many answers to the question as they can by considering all political, social, economic and psychological angles. They can then share the answers out loud or, if you're teaching remotely, on a discussion board.

ACTIVITIES TO HELP STUDENTS THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

These activities provide students with the opportunity to express themselves and what they've learned in more creative ways. This encourages a cycle of reflection and expression, leading to a deeper and more complex understanding of what they've learned.

39. CONNECT THIS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Provide each group with four different images and ask them to come up with a short story that connects all the photos together. This requires some pre-work from instructors, as the activity runs best when you think through the images—for example, a person, object, location, etc. that stimulates their creative thinking. On the day, separate the students into groups of five to ten (or in breakout rooms if teaching remotely) and assign each of them the photos. You can give them 20 minutes and can also use word limits so that they condense the idea down into something that can be easily presented back to the whole class.

40. SHARK TANK

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Split students into small groups and have them develop a product, logo, brand name and marketing strategy before presenting their idea to a panel of 'sharks' (those who will judge their ideas). Once each group has presented, the 'sharks' all vote on their favorite project with the winner getting a special certificate or an extension on their latest assignment. This activity gives students the opportunity to get creative and work on presentation and public speaking skills.

41. CRAZY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

In this activity, give every student two index cards and ask them to write a course-specific question on one card and the answer on the other card. Have students form a circle and put the question cards in one pile in the circle, while placing the answer cards in a second pile. Have one student read a question card aloud. The next student reads aloud an answer card, which of course, doesn't match the question—only creating humor. This activity can lighten the mood and help prime students' curiosity around certain topics in advance of an assignment.

42. QUECUSSION

GROUP SIZE: 5–10 students per group

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person, blended

Ever played 'Jeopardy!?' Then you're ready for quesdiscussion. It's like a standard class discussion but only questions are allowed (students call 'Statement!' if someone slips up). The instructor provides the topics, then students pose their questions, building on one another's contributions as the questions become more complex. If you play this game around the first day of class, the questions can help shape your course and allow you to gain deeper insights into student learning. If you have students both in the room and calling in from a distance, make sure the remote learners get equal airtime and that your audio system is picking up student voices clearly.

43. SKETCHNOTING

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person, blended

Instead of taking traditional lecture notes, students try their hand at sketching a picture that represents what they've learned during class. Remember, it's not about the quality of the art—it's about how drawing prompts students to visualize their understanding and look at their learning from a different perspective. In online learning environments, students can upload photos of their drawings to the LMS or to an online discussion board.

44. BLIND CONTOUR

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students

COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This exercise is designed for visual arts students. Split students into groups of five and have each student choose an object to sketch—without looking at their paper. Give students five minutes to complete their sketch, then have them share it with their group members and ask the remaining students to guess what they drew. Repeat the process with another item or object, until time runs out. This game helps hone students' observational skills while making sure students are mentally present.

45. THE LIVING LIKERT SCALE

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Before class, write numbers '1' through '7' on pieces of paper and place them across the room. The sheet with '1' on it could refer to 'strongly disagree' while '7' might refer to 'strongly agree.' Pose a series of statements related to your discipline—such as "I think television can make children act aggressive" in a social psychology class—and have students move to the side of the wall according to their stance. Students who are comfortable sharing their opinions pertaining to the topic may do so.

46. NEWSPAPER FASHION SHOW

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 6–8 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

While this team-building game is ideal for art and design students, it can be used in any classroom to get students out of their comfort zones and exercise creativity. Divide students into teams of six to eight, and supply them with newspaper, tape and scissors. Participants are given a time limit to design and create an item of clothing out of a newspaper, which requires group brainstorming and delegation of tasks. Bonus points if their article somehow relates to your course material. One person in the group could 'model' the finished product when their time is up.

47. CLASSIFY THIS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–5 students

COURSE TYPE: In-person

Arrange random objects on your desk—anything from paper clips to an umbrella to jewelry (aim for about 25 objects in total). Teams of students must then categorize these objects on a piece of paper, even when no obvious connections exist. You can decide on the number of categories they must fit the object into or let each team decide. When their time is up, a participant from each group presents their list and explains the logic behind it. This team-building exercise helps students think outside the box.

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