

Top 5 Ways to Get to Know Your Students

Help your students get to know each other, too!

Here are several great ways to build connections with and among your new students! These icebreakers and community-building activities double as assessment opportunities, skill-building lessons, or projects that result in a unique, inspiring classroom decoration.

Getting Acquainted: Create a Class Slideshow

On the first day of school, I begin by reading *Miss Malarkey Doesn't Live in Room 10*. We discuss the fact that teachers are "real people" and have normal lives. Next, I share a PowerPoint slideshow with my students. I include pictures of my family, my home (and all of the rooms in it), pets, what I did over the summer, things I do for fun, etc. After I share, the students are to write an introduction of themselves. When they finish writing their draft and editing, they type what they have written. I make a slideshow of their introductions and include their picture on the slide. On parent orientation night, I have their PowerPoint showing on my television. The images of each student and their writing rotate automatically as I am giving my orientation "speech." It's a relief to look at 22 sets of parents and not have their eyes fixed on me. Instead, they are reading what my students have written. I also leave the slideshow opened on all of my computers for the first couple of weeks of school so that students can read what their peers have written. --Angie Kelly, Grade 3 teacher, Main Street Elementary, Shelbyville, IL

Everyone Is Unique: Spin a Classroom Web

At the beginning of the year, I focus on the idea of everyone being unique. On the first day of school, we get in a circle on the reading carpet. I begin by saying that I am going to say something about myself that is unique or something that is special and no one else in the room shares that quality with me (I tell them that it is ok if some people have the same ideas, but that we want to try to find ideas that make us different). I tell them that unique is another word for different. I ask them, what do you think about when you hear the word different? Often, they name things with a negative connotation. I tell them that I like the word unique, because it means the same thing, but that negative connotation hasn't ruined the word.

I grab a ball of yarn and I tell them one thing I think is unique about me. I will say, "I competed in a tennis tournament this summer and won the whole tournament!" I will then hold my end of the ball and throw the ball to someone else in the circle. That person will say something unique, hold a part of the string and throw the ball to another person. By the time the ball of yarn has made its way around the circle, everyone will be holding a part and it will look like a web. When we finish, I will ask the kids, "What did we make?" They will of course say that we made a web. I will then ask them to tell me about the web. Through discussion, I will eventually have them discover that, even though we are all unique and special, we are all connected to each other like a web, because we are a class.

The kids end up loving the activity once they see the connection and ask me several times

throughout the year if we can do it again to see how they have changed. Throughout the year, I will reference that activity when I feel like they aren't valuing each other's unique qualities. I will tell them that being unique connects us as a family just like the web did and that each of them bring something special to our classroom web to make it connect. It ends up being a powerful first-day getting-to-know-you activity! --*Melissa Walker, grade 5, Wilson Elementary, Graham, NC*

Bookmark Greeting: Get to Know Your Readers

I teach 3rd grade and before the students come the first day of school, I send a letter to their home with a special bookmark enclosed. I introduce myself and put some of the things I like to do outside of school. One thing, of course is reading! I invite my students (and I do the same) to bring in a book the first week of school; I ask them to mark their favorite part. It can be any book — one they are reading now or one that has always been a favorite. They mark the part they enjoy with their bookmark and we take turns telling about the book and why we like it.

The students LOVE this. We even make a list on chart paper of books we recommend to refer back to throughout the year. I get to know my new students as readers, they get excited about reading first thing, and they find out that their new classmates enjoy the same kinds of books they do! --*Susan Heath, Grade 3, Shepard Elementary, Columbia, MO*

Human Analogy Game: Build a Community With Older Students

I have several activities I use to help my students get to know me and my expectations and many that allow the students to work well together and appreciate one another's unique personalities and skills, and I use these activities, games, and lessons throughout the year (not just at the beginning).

In the picture, students are playing a learning game: the human analogy game. I use this to teach analogies to prepare them for college testing such as the SAT), I will say the hand is to arm as the foot is to _____. Then they have to match their bodies to the correct part. (This was a very mature class; it wouldn't work with all classes or grades, but they loved it and always wanted to play it.) --*Sherry Roland, grades 11-12, Valley View Senior High, Jonesboro, AR*

"What's In a Name?": Get to Know Students and Parents

This get-to-know-you activity is called "What's In a Name?" It is a fun and easy way for kids to learn each other's names and a little bit about each other. Just give each student a "What's In a Name?" form at the beginning of the year. The form is simple — just a few questions for them to answer OR ask their parents/guardians to help them answer. Without fail, parents enjoy this beginning-of-the-year task. They often write lengthy responses about how special their child's name is to them. I've found it is a great way to get to know the parents as well!

Here are the questions for "What's In a Name?":

- What's your full name?
- Were you named after someone?
- What does your name mean?
- What names did your parents consider before deciding on the one you have?

- Why did they choose your name?
- What is your name's country of origin? (ex. "Ivan" has Russian origins)
- What is your nickname? How did you get that nickname?
- If you could change your name, what would you name yourself?
- Now.... on the bottom of this paper, please write your name in a creative way. Can you use color? Fancy writing? Swirls? Block letters? A pattern? Design something as special as YOU are!
- If possible, please attach a small picture of yourself to this form. (photo will be returned.)

The kids bring back their forms, and everyone gets to share about their name in a Community Circle. I usually have kids tell us their name and then they can choose up to two other pieces of information from their form to share with the class. If a child is shy or nervous, I always allow them to simply share their name without the pressure of sharing the additional information. For some kids, it is stressful enough just to speak their name in front of a new class.

It's fun to post their "What's In a Name?" papers on a bulletin board in the classroom or hall. That way, lots of people in the school can get to know them, too! I'm sure you'll find — there's a lot in a name! Enjoy this AWESOME activity! --*Tressa Decker, grades 1-6, Concord West Elementary, Elkhart, IN*

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