



The Nearest Next Step:
Classroom Activities for Connection and Productive Conversation
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This resource was compiled by Rachel Piontak (C&S) and is the result of Faculty Institute completion reports, one-on-one conversations with Faculty Fellows, and pedagogical expertise from Janett Cordovés (C&S), Samantha Godbey (Fairmont State), Lori Britt (James Madison University) and Lisa Rafanelli (Manhattanville University).

Introduction

This resource offers crowd-sourced, practical, low-preparation strategies to foster productive conversations, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. Activities are designed for immediate use and integrate easily into existing courses without a full redesign.

Quick-Reference Activity Matrix

Activity	Key Purpose	Class Size	Best For	Preparation Needed	Core Outcomes
1- Word Check In	Inclusive engagement, relationship building	Small/Med	Warm-ups, connection	Questions list	All voices heard, peer connections
Anonymous Polling	Opinion diversity	Any	Sensitive topics, warm-ups	Poll software	Openness, data for discussion
Connection Games	Peer connection, rapport building	Any	Warm-ups, connection	Varies	Empathy, insight
Dialogue Circles/Scenarios	Deep discussion, listening	Small/Med	Discussion days	Circle set-up	Peer learning, perspective
Double Sound Clip	Listening self-awareness	Any	Active learning	Audio clip	Intentional listening
Dream Exercise	Listening, creative thinking	Any	Pairs, intros, exploration	None	Perspective, empathy, insight



Activity	Key Purpose	Class Size	Best For	Preparation Needed	Core Outcomes
Empathy Maps	Perspective expansion, empathy	Small/Med	Connection, reflection	Empathy map	Perspective, empathy
Everyone Participates	Inclusive engagement	Any	Lecture-heavy days	Names list	All voices heard, presence
Least Favorite Subject	Difficult discourse, perspective building	Any	Out-of-class assignment	Interview template	Growth mindset, connection
Loud Brain	Listening self-awareness	Small/Med.	Skill-building, check-ins	Instructions slide	Focus, metacognition
Self-Awareness Check-Ins	Reflection	Varies	Connection, reflection	Varies	Self/other awareness
Talkers & Listeners	Role reflection	Small/Med	Active learning, groupwork	Space arrangement	Self/other awareness
Ways of Operating	Set group agreements	Any	Establishing space for productive dialogue	None	Collective understanding

1-Word Check In

Overview: Much like “Everybody Participates,” this exercise ensures that all voices are heard. The primary difference is that 1-word check-ins occur at the very beginning of class (think of it like a vocal warm-up) with questions that can be answered quickly with a single word. Students not only speak but connect with their peers through shared experiences and interests. Questions can be directly related to course content or entirely random.

Example Questions:

- “What’s the name you go by?” (Great first day question.)



- “What do you want to be when you grow up?” (Teacher, Chemist, Successful, Happy, etc.)
- “What’s your favorite season?”
- “Would you prefer to live life in sneakers, boots, or sandals?”
- What one word would describe how you are showing up today?

Preparation: A list of questions or students willing to volunteer creative question ideas

Anonymous Polling

Overview: Use polls to surface opinions on sensitive subjects (e.g., social issues), visually demonstrating class diversity without requiring on-the-spot disclosure. You can use: <https://www.mentimeter.com/>

Preparation: Set up polls

Connection Games

Overview: Games and/or simple ice-breaker exercises can help build comfort and trust among students and with the professor, particularly at the beginning of the semester/quarter.

Game	Instructions	Engagement Goal
Social Bingo (Examples 1 , 2 , 3)	“Find someone who...” cards encourage mingling and shared discovery.	Initial connection
Human Scavenger Hunt	Put students into groups of three and ask them to find something unusual that they have in common (avoid obvious answers like majors, favorite color, etc.). Then mix groups again – usually takes three rounds. Some examples: students have found they all went to the same amusement park when they were 11, they have a sibling who plays basketball, and they were all allergic to the skin of apples!	Deeper rapport, surprise
Classmate Interview (Examples 1 , 2)	This can be modified in many ways—one interesting variation asks students to choose just three words about their partner when introducing them to the class.	Connection



Game	Instructions	Engagement Goal
The Story of Your Name	Instructions available here .	Recognize individuality and cultural difference

Preparation: Varies

Dialogue Circles and Applied Scenarios

Overview: Once the ground rules and expectations are clear, you can ask students to form dialogue circles that will allow them to practice. Students should be paired off and given a question to discuss. The goal is not just to have fun, but to listen actively. One student speaks about the topic for a few minutes (you can decide—say 3-5 minutes), and the second student listens actively. Then the students switch roles.

Possible Topics and Questions:

- What is a cause that you are passionate about?
- Draw randomly from [Thirty-Six Questions for Build Better Connections](#) (but be warned that some questions may be too loaded for this exercise!)
- A controversial speaker has been invited to campus and students must decide what to do—allow speaker/free speech, or worry about campus safety, etc. Students can be broken into groups representing various stakeholders (students, faculty, president of college, campus safety, etc.) and they must try to understand the issue from that point of view. (Examples listed in “[Whose Campus, Whose Voice](#)” exercise.)

Preparation: Ground rules, circle setup, discussion questions.

Double Sound Clip

Overview: Listen to a short audio clip (Ted Talks, NPR Short Wave, etc.) without any prompts. After the first listen, prompt students to identify who, what, when, and where. Ask them to identify any feeling shift after the second listen.

Preparation: Identify and cue audio clip



Dream Exercise

Overview: In pairs, students are designated as either the speaker or the listener. The speaker talks for 60 seconds about their dream vacation (or dream city, job, meal, etc.). Instead of naming specific locations, they should focus on elements like the climate, activities they enjoy, and their favorite types of food. After the speaker finishes, the listener summarizes key details and recommends a travel destination that aligns with the description. Switch and repeat.

Preparation: None

Empathy Maps/Perspective-Taking

Overview: This exercise can be used when discussing the “hidden curriculum” and helps students to recognize how different groups might feel about the transition to college. The aim is to explore how different groups may think/feel, say, do, see, and hear related to the college transition. Use this [empathy map](#) to start discussions about differences, challenges, and strengths across campus populations. Additional instructions are available [here](#).

Considerations:

Role/Identity	“Empathy Map” Questions: What do they...
Commuter Student	<p>Think & Feel: Stressed about the commute, worried about missing classes due to traffic, concerned about balancing school, work, and social life.</p> <p>Say: "The traffic is always so bad!" or "I wish I could spend more time on campus."</p> <p>Do: Rushes to class, relies on quick and easy meals, spends a lot of time on the road.</p> <p>See: Congested highways, busy campus, students rushing to and from classes.</p> <p>Hear: Traffic noise, announcements on the train, conversations about on-campus events.</p>
International Student	<p>Think & Feel: Homesick, overwhelmed by a new environment, uncertain about academic expectations.</p> <p>Say: "I miss my family." or "I don't understand the cultural norms here."</p> <p>Do: Video calls with family, tries to adapt to new customs, seeks out support from other international students.</p> <p>See: Signs in a foreign language, unfamiliar campus buildings, diverse student population.</p> <p>Hear: New accents, different languages, conversations about American culture.</p>
Adult Learner	<p>Think & Feel: Worried about balancing family, work, and school, concerned about keeping up with younger students.</p>



Role/Identity	“Empathy Map” Questions: What do they...
	<p>Say: "I have a family to support." or "I'm not as tech-savvy as the other students."</p> <p>Do: Attends classes after work, juggles multiple responsibilities, seeks support from other mature students.</p> <p>See: Younger students, classrooms, online learning platforms.</p> <p>Hear: Discussions about technology, conversations about career goals, lectures.</p>

Preparation: Empathy map

Everyone Participates

Overview: This exercise ensures that all voices are heard throughout the class period (or multiple class periods, if a large class).

Instructions: List all student names visibly and call on each person to contribute. This can be in form of responding to a question, adding feedback or additional thoughts, etc. You may also opt for prompts* to get the students talking, such as:

- “What book are you reading?”
- “Describe your dream vacation.”
- “Today is like __; your life is like __; this course is like __.” (See Lori Britt’s [“Expanding Thinking with Metaphors”](#) for more information.)
- For deeper connection, create small groups to discuss “The story of your name”—how they got it, what it means, and whether it resonates. This can be a useful starting prompt for small groups who will meet multiple times throughout the semester/quarter.

Preparation: A list of students’ names in the order that you will call on them; make the list visible for the class to see

Least Favorite Subject

Overview: In a twist on an old assignment, students interview their professor. The original assignment is for them to learn why the teacher chose their profession, why they believe their subject is important, and what they enjoy most about their job. The twist is that in this assignment the students must interview the professor of their least favorite class—not necessarily a professor they dislike, but one whose subject they find uninteresting.

Preparation: Interview template (optional)



Loud Brain

Overview: In pairs, students take turns discussing a prompt for 60 seconds. Throughout this time, the listener raises their hand when they are distracted. In the debrief, reflect on the challenges of active listening.

Detailed Instructions:

- Break up the class into pairs and have one partner close their eyes. Show a message on a screen visible only to the partner with open eyes: *"In a moment, your partner will begin speaking. While they talk, raise your hand each time you notice your own thoughts or inner voice. (Do not explain why you are raising your hand.)"* After giving the partner with open eyes time to read, remove the instructions.
- Have the other partner open their eyes and explain that for the next 60 seconds, they will share something they've recently been successful at. (Any prompt can be used.)
- As the speaker shares, the listener raises their hand each time they notice their own internal thoughts. This will likely confuse the speaker—intentionally so.
- After 60 seconds, ask the speaker to guess why their partner kept raising their hand. (Common guesses might include reactions to speech patterns, body language, or agreement with the content.)
- Explain that the hands went up each time the listener's own thoughts distracted them from fully listening. This highlights how often our inner voice pulls us away from true, active listening.

Preparation: None

Self-Awareness Check-Ins

Overview: There are several ways to incorporate self-awareness check-ins.

Options:

1. In one exercise, students are asked to name three ways they are feeling now. This can be done while standing in a circle; each student takes a turn, and the others simply listen. The point is not to put anyone on the spot, but to build up trust, put them in touch with their own feelings, and allow them to see that other students might share similar feelings.
2. In two rounds:
 - a. 1st: Give each student three (3) Post-its and a Sharpie; ask them to write three challenges they have faced during the first few weeks at university. Have the students post their notes on one wall of the classroom. Instructor then groups the Post-its into categories and arranges them by most mentioned to least. Have some discussion and discuss resources.



- b. 2nd: Choose the top one or two challenges listed (almost always, Time Management is at the top).
 - Ask the students to identify three (3) strategies for addressing the challenge(s) under discussion. (You can invite them to do some online research looking at resources you've posted on Brightspace if you like.)
 - Have them post their strategies on the wall.
 - Instructor then organizes responses and identifies any "trends" for discussion.
3. Tell students to imagine they have 5 minutes to leave their houses, and they can only take 5 possessions with them (excluding electronics and pets, brothers, and sisters – those can be a given). What do they choose?
4. Invoking minimalism/reductionism of Piet Mondrian, ask students to write a paragraph about everything they did between the time they woke up to the time they came to class. Have them read over and circle the 12 most important words. They then rewrite those 12 words and circle the 6 most important. Rewrite the 6, and circle 3. Rewrite the 3 and circle the most important word. What is the immutable/most important word?

Preparation: Emotions Week (optional for #1), Post-it notes/pens (for #2)

Talkers & Listeners

Overview: Begin by having students position themselves on one side of the room or the other based on whether they see themselves more as a "talker" or a "listener" during classroom discussions. Give each group approximately 10 minutes to discuss the ways they engage in their chosen role, noting both similarities and differences among members.

Reflection: Afterward, ask each group to develop a set of questions for the other group to gain deeper insight into their perspective, justifying the importance of talking and listening, but also encouraging those who self-identify as one- to practice the skills of the other.

Preparation: Space to gather on two sides of the room

Ways of Operating/Group Agreements/Norms/Ground Rules

Overview: Begin your course by co-creating ground rules for more respectful and inclusive engagement. Combine instructor non-negotiables (e.g., electronics use) with student-generated values for greater buy-in. Templates and strategies from Carnegie Mellon can be found [here](#).

Preparation: None



Overall Tips for Implementation

- **Frame these as “micro-moves”:** Small steps yield significant gains in trust and dialogue.
- **Leverage multimedia:** Use audio clips, polling, and visual diagrams where relevant.
- **Rotate modalities:** Alternate between individual, small group, and whole class approaches to maintain engagement and variety.

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