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## Ice Breakers – PYE Third Thursday Live Chat

What ice breakers do you use in your work?

On Thursday, 21 February we invited facilitators from our network to join us for our [monthly live Facebook chat](#). This month the talk was facilitated by Nadia Chaney and we took a look at ice breakers – when to use them, which activities people find useful and how to respect people’s boundaries.

If you missed the chat you can see what was said here.

These live chats take place on the third Thursday of every month. Visit the [Facebook group](#) for more details and to find out when the next event will take place.

**Nadia Chaney:** Hi everyone! Nadia here. I’m a poet, rapper and musician. I do lots of facilitation for personal transformation, diversity and anti-oppression work, and lots of train-the-trainers, too.

I’m in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada right now...and it is COLD. So, it’s a nice day for me to think about ice-breakers...and warm ups! Maybe we can just start with hearing from people some of their favorite icebreakers, and why you love them?

**Billy Banyard:** Hello Nadia, my favourite ice breaker has to be getting everyone in the group into a circle and leading them into a nice song with a bit of dance. Its great to get people warmed up and makes them feel welcome into the group.

**Nadia:** Billy, do you do anything to get people ready to sing and dance, or do you find them pretty game to jump right in?

**Billy:** I find getting a group of people participating with a song and a dance helps to break the awkwardness, if you do it straight after introducing yourself with enough enthusiasm they will love it.

**Nadia:** One thing I’ve learned about icebreakers is that it’s important for me to really try to match the energy of the group I’m with, and then shift from there. So for instance, if they are very loud, then I start there, or if they are very quiet, I am careful not to be too “in your face...” This has helped me to make sure the group is with me in the early stages of the facilitation.

**Billy:** If you believe in what you are saying, doing and show this through the expression in your face, your movement, the tone in your voice it should pass onto other people, even if they don’t at first seem up for it.

**Sharon Trautwein:** Hello, I am writing to you from Pullman, Washington USA. It is snowing here as well. I love to begin with a “silly exercise”. No matter what their age, it’s always good to begin with silly. It opens their brains and bodies, as well as creates just enough chaos to inspire creativity. I have a number of exercises that do this.

**Nadia:** Sharon, what kind of silly do you do? I would love to hear some examples!

**Sharon:** I’m a theatre professional. I have directed many, many productions. I’m also an educator. I have taught ages 3 to Graduate level classes at a university. I love to do name games as well. My favorite and often my first, is the name wave. Say

your name, do a movement and then everyone in the groups one at a time repeats the name and movement in a ‘wave’. It plays with rhythm, improves skills, and allows me to see personalities.

**Ruth Elizabeth Yeo:** Hi all, I’m in Seattle! My favorite icebreakers are ones that get people up and moving. I do like using simple sociometric and spectrogram openers.

**David Kafambe:** At the beginning of any workshop, I like starting with name games. My favourite being walk in the circle. This activity at the very beginning relaxes participants and establishes a fun atmosphere. I also do the name game to four beat rhythm as well as the Zipp Zapp game. The Zipp Zapp is an activity where Zipp is saying a name of the person on the left and Zapp for one on the right. So, if you are told zipp zipp zipp, you say names of 3 people on the left.

**Ruth:** Another nice name game is where people stand in a circle with their hands outstretched. One person stands in the middle of the circle with a rolled up newspaper. The facilitator begins by calling out the name of someone in the circle, the person in the middle has to tap the hand of the person whose name was called with the newspaper before said person calls another’s name. If they get tapped before calling someone else’s name, they have to go in the center. It’s a great deal of fun and helps people warm up. It’s less threatening if people are wearing name tags too.

**Anji:** I like to start with something that deals with words- we recently started a meeting with a quote or song lyric of the students’ choice.

**Ruth:** Depending on the group, a simple paired share is also really nice. I have them share one thing they did that they were proud of in the past week. Nothing too personal. After sharing, they change partners (having taken on the identity and proud moment of the person who first introduced themselves). They then continue exchanging names and proud moments a few more times. End with a go-around introducing themselves as the last person who they exchanged with. It’s a great way to learn names, and create an atmosphere of trust and witnessing in the group from early on. Also promotes active listening.

**Anji:** I also like the bingo one- where you fill in all the squares with anything you want (has been to Disneyland, has a dog etc...) and the person has to go around and have people sign in a box if it’s true for them. That’s good when the group doesn’t know each other at all.

**Katie Jackson:** I’ve also seen a version of that one in which the facilitator found out some fun facts about people in the group and added them on. They seemed improbable when you first read them, such as ‘is an Elvis impersonator’ or ‘once appeared in a toilet roll commercial’, but it was great when you found the right person.

**Sharon:** If I’m working with adults and older teens I will do an exercise called “Shoot the Moon”. Does anyone here know it? It takes a bit of explaining.

**Nadia:** Sharon, it would be great to learn it, if you don’t mind the typing.

**Sharon:** Okay: The facilitator in cheerleader fashion, shouts “five, six seven eight! Let me see you shoot the moon!” the group answers with the question (loud and proud) “What’s that you say?” Leader “I say, let me see you shoot the moon! Group- “What’s that you say? all together (the group will follow the facilitators lead) “I say shoot the moon, shoot, shoot the moon”. Repeat. This is all done in a staccato rhythm, and the action is to use your hand to shoot at the moon, change hands between the “shoot the moon and the shoot, shoot the moon”. This is the opener. It goes on with the next verses all the same rhythm.

I will write the verses and the actions. It is hard to teach in writing. The next verse: Leader : “5,6,7,8, let me see you rub your balls!” group “What’s that you say?” etc.. The action and line is “rub your balls, rub, rub, our balls”, while using your hands to pantomime rubbing your EYES.

Next verse: 5,6,7,8 let me see you ‘jaculate! the action and end line is “Jack, your late. Jack, Jack, your late. While pointing out to an imaginary jack and then to your watch. Next verse: “5,6,7,8, let me see you jack it off! End line and action, is to say “jacket off, jack, jacket off. and pantomime with the rhythm to take the jacket off your shoulders.

It is great to break down walls/barriers and makes people a little uncomfortable while being innocent. I also use it in my gender studies class to discuss why this activity works. It works very well to break the ice and create a great deal of trust and relaxation once the activity is done. It’s really hard to visualize this unless you have done it. But it is one of my favorites.

**Nadia:** Wow, thanks Sharon! Do you ever find anyone is hesitant to play with such an edgy activity? Or, maybe my question is, how do you make sure that everyone feels safe during the activity?

**Sharon:** I’ve never had anyone complain. During the activity I get folks who are hesitant and nervous, but once they see the “innocent” end, they relax.

**Nadia:** I once facilitated a rhythm activity in a community where it was not correct for women to touch their chests except in mourning. They were quite visibly uncomfortable, and I couldn't understand why. After the workshop my host explained to me. Your activity seems like it MIGHT run some of the same risks, especially in different cultural environments. That said, I love how you use it to create comfort. Would you mind sharing a little about how you debrief it in your gender studies work?

**Sharon:** I have only used the Shoot the Moon exercise with my gender studies class after I have had them for a while and it is "on topic". We do the exercise and then we sit in a circle on the floor. This is a very informal way to communicate with each other and different from the way we usually sit as a class. Then, I ask them to show hands if they were uncomfortable. I ask those who said yes if they would like to share why. The discussion begins with honest answers and then I ask if, now that the exercise is over are they uncomfortable? Why? Why not? Then I veer the discussion to culture and language and why bring it around to our class topic (sexual harassment or misogyny, sexuality, etc...) We compare and contrast the experience of the exercise with the reading or class topic. It's very effective.

I've been doing this for so long that I take a leap. I can usually tell if this exercise is not right for the group and sometimes I know I need to shake them up just a bit. It is really interesting how people respond. The "innocent" end to the verses allows them to relax and actually get more comfortable with the group. It's kind of a fun way to make everyone tighten every muscle in their body and relax all at once, but with laughter. I usually mention before not to judge the activity until it's done, so I give a little warning, but it works.

**Nadia:** I think this is one of the key issues with icebreakers. From something as simple as someone with deep stage fright to cultural issues and sexual boundaries, we are always working the awareness of our groups and their sensitivity. The tough part is when people play along even if they are uncomfortable. The wonderful things is when they surprise themselves and open up! Does any one else have any "edgy" or challenging openers they like to use with groups?

**Anji:** I've been part of some cool ones: people to people where the facilitator makes you touch (elbow to elbow, foot to foot etc) until they say people to people and you change partners. anything that requires physical contact with a stranger can be awkward but works.

**Sharon:** I would never use the Shoot the Moon exercise with any group that I did not feel was at a safe place. But, I was just thinking that I find it easier to do that exercise without pause than I do any exercise that requires touching. I always ask if everyone is comfortable being touched and allow them the respect to remove themselves, or I find a new activity. Touching can be very tricky.

**Nadia:** Anji I think so too. That's why I like to start with very non-committal touching, like standing back-to-back. Even then, I don't go to touch until after doing agreements...because to me it's deeper than awkwardness. It can actually get into issues of safety and boundaries.

**Anji:** Yes, true. I also think the trick is knowing the level at which our participants are acquainted. Are they complete strangers? Often they aren't.

**Sharon:** A non-theatre icebreaker that I have used is my critical thinking exercise. I teach Globalization and Genders Studies, so we cover a lot of hot topics. I begin the first day of class by asking the student to fill out a questionnaire. There are about 40 questions ranging from "what is your name" to what size school did you graduate from" and to what religion you practice" These forms are never turned in nor shared with anyone else. But it makes my students focus on who they are so that they are more open to discussions as we go.

**Nadia:** Oh rats! Our time is up here. I have some family duties to take care of now. But this has been FANTASTIC. Thank you all for sharing so openly. This is a great tool, and it's inspiring to connect with such powerful leaders and change-makers. I hope to connect with you all again soon. Our next chat takes place on March 21<sup>st</sup> at 6pm GMT.

Image courtesy of [derekGarvey](#) on flickr.

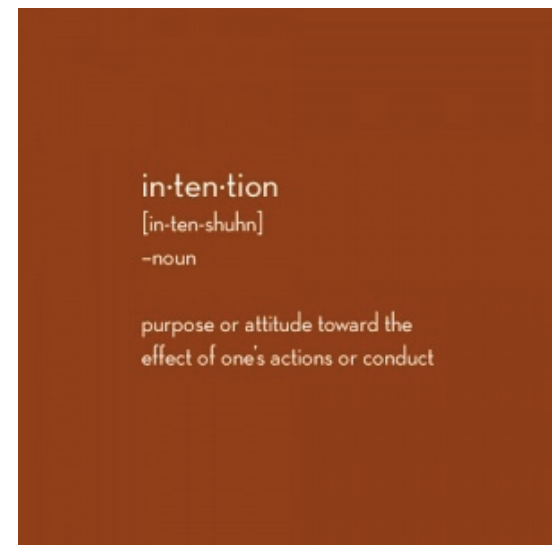
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