

Breaking through the Screen: Activities to Build Community in Remote Classes

Teaching Week - Portland Community College

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"Icebreakers and silly games that get students engaged and feeling comfortable with each other are not wasted time. Students will perform better on the hard stuff if they feel invested in an online community." ([The New York Times](#))

 webcams required

 advance preparation by the instructor required

Demonstration activities

Treasure hunt

During the Zoom meeting, plant a hidden emoji medallion in someone's display name by using the "rename" function. Or include it among material posted to chat. It could also be something in your virtual background. Perhaps it is a special emoji. Give students a clue what to look for during class.

Example: Today's treasure medallion is 🐸. When you find the frog, shout out to claim your prize! 🏆

Rationale: Keeps students paying attention to the meeting; rewards engagement; keeps the energy up.

Name change

This is a short, individual activity. The teacher asks students to update their name as it's displayed in Zoom to include some form of descriptive alliteration. The teacher can direct this activity, or the teacher can provide a welcome slide with instructions and examples, and then students can do this independently as they enter.

Examples: Tremendous Tim, Daring Davida; Tim the Talented; Davida the Dancer, etc.

Rationale: Helps students (and teachers!) learn and remember names; gives each other something to talk about when students meet for the first time.

Caveat: Students need to know how to change their name in Zoom. Therefore, this activity may be better suited for later in the term after students become comfortable using Zoom.

Teaching Tip: For students who cannot do this independently, the teacher (as host) can change their names for them. For late arrivals, the teacher could send a private chat message with instructions.

Virtual vacation

This is a short to medium, individual or group activity to share information, especially in a visual form. The teacher asks students to change their background picture, such as a dream vacation destination. The teacher can direct this activity, or

the teacher can provide a welcome slide with instructions and examples, and students can do this independently as they enter. Students can then take turns describing/explaining their choice.

- **Example:** Tim often uses an image of Barcelona as his dream vacation destination.
- **Rationale:** Uses images to share information in a visual form; element of surprise piques interest; virtual backgrounds can help all students focus on the classroom, not what's happening in a classmate's home; it can also help to protect a student's privacy.
- **Caveat:** The students need to know how to change their Zoom background. If students don't have the virtual background feature or sufficient internet to support it, then they can respond in chat.
- **Options:** Change your background picture to another country; the place you wish you could be right now; your favorite scent; a still from a movie or cartoon you love; your favorite food/dessert; something that makes you happy; your favorite city.
- **Teaching Tip:** At the end, take a screenshot to save the memory of everyone's contribution.

Common ramen

This is a longer activity for partners, groups, and the whole class. There are many possible variations, but the basic activity is a competition in which students meet classmates in a breakout room and try to find as many things in common as possible in a specific amount of time.

Rationale: Identifies how classmates are the same and how they are different.

Caveat: If some students cannot use breakout rooms, they can be a group that works in the main room.

Options: 1) The breakout room with the longest list wins; this keeps it simple and easily allows re-play the same day or over the course of the whole term. 2) After a short time, rooms with 2 people are merged to form rooms of 4 people, then 8 people, etc. until there are only two rooms remaining, and the winner is the group with the most things in common among all students in that room.

Teaching Tip: If you want to award a "prize", try giving out special emoji (such as the 🏆) by pasting it into their Zoom display name using the host's "rename" function.

"Remember when ..."

This is a longer activity for the whole class. Together, students make a story chain about a fake shared memory. The teacher sets the scene with the opening line. The discussion keeps going until everyone has had a turn.

Example: "Remember when we all took a field trip to the coast? Do you remember that [name of next student]?" --
""Yeah, and then ..." (for example, "Yeah, and we saw the whale jump over the boat! Do you remember that, [name of next person]?"

Rationale: Promotes active listening and connects students through a (fake) shared experience.

Caveat: Some students may talk too much or too little, so the teacher may need to moderate.

Options: Tell students that if they get stuck, just say "I don't remember that!" And then ask the next person for help. 🕒 If you have a shy class, prepare a collage of images to help spur "memories."

Teaching Tip: If students find it difficult to choose the next person, then the teacher can type a prepared list of names in the chat window to indicate the speaking order.

Zoom-bah! Dance break! 🕒

This is a short activity. The instructor teaches a short routine of movements to a short piece of music (think "macarena").

Rationale: Uses physical movement and music to break up the focus on the screen and keyboard; gets blood flowing again; silly movements can lower affective filter by laughing together.

Caveat: There may be cultural concerns about music and dancing, so there should be some option for them.

🕒 The instructor will have to prepare the music and routine ahead of time.

Teaching Tip: Keep it short and repeat. If you have students who are unable to participate, ask them to be judges in a dance contest. If you want to award a “prize”, try giving out special emoji (such as the 🏆) by pasting it into their Zoom display name using the host’s “rename” function.

Five-Minute Missions 🗣️

This is a medium to long activity, depending on the number of tasks and the number of students. The teacher explains the task to the whole class and then randomly assigns students to breakout rooms to complete the task in five minutes.

Groups of 2-3 are probably best for this activity.

1. Tell each other about where you are from; then together create a “secret handshake” (set of air gestures or ASL “sign” over Zoom) somehow inspired by that information.
2. Tell each other of a childhood memory; then together create nicknames for each other, inspired by that information.
3. Tell each other about one recent failure (big or small); then together create a life motto, inspired by that information.
4. Tell each other about one recent success (big or small); then together create a touchdown dance (or maybe cheer), inspired by that information.
5. Imagine you are business partners on *Shark Tank*. Think of a new product and prepare a pitch for investors: Give it a name. Explain the problem it solves. Describe three features.
6. Imagine that aliens from another planet have landed on Earth. Create five simple drawings to explain what this class is all about so the aliens will understand. Share the images and look for common themes.

Rationale: Working together for a common goal builds trust; students learn about each other in the process; connections made in a task like this can carry over into content-based tasks.

Options: Teachers can give one task, or a series of tasks with the same or different groups. All groups can work on the same task, or each group could have a different task.

Caveat: This activity requires breakout rooms and webcams. The show-and-tell aspect after each task could be long if the class is large. The teacher should caution students not to use any rude gestures (and keep in mind that this varies significantly from culture to culture!)

Teaching Tip: This is another activity that may work better later in the term, after students have gotten to know each other. Also, if your Zoom allows extra time before closing a breakout room, factor that into the time allowed to complete the task.

Stretch (or yoga) break!

This is a very short and simple physical activity. The teacher demonstrates a short sequence of simple stretches that students repeat.

Rationale: Gets the blood flowing and breaks up any monotony of the class; builds camaraderie

Caveat: If someone is unable to participate, ask them to give each name a funny movement and/or illustrate the movement on a whiteboard drawing area, etc.

Options: Invite a student to lead.

30-second Jeopardy

Each student thinks of a one-word answer to a question about themselves. One at a time, they share their word with the class, and the class must guess the right question within 30 seconds.

Example: Tim’s answer: “Minnesota.” Correct question: “Where did you grow up?”

Rationale: Students can choose what to share about themselves. The short time keeps everyone’s attention and gamifies the task. The question format makes people think about familiar information in a new way.

Additional activities

“Where I am from ...” poems

This is a very creative way to get to know each other in a very personal and symbolic way. Students are asked to complete a Mad Libs style form that results in a short poem similar to what you can find on many websites, including the original by [George Ella Lyon](#). You could adapt your own form from [an online template](#), or even use an [online fillable form](#).

Find something ____ 🕒

The instructor asks students to find an object that matches the description. Students show in camera and describe it.

Example: Find a pair of sunglasses! Find a hat and scarf! Find something blue! Find a plant! Etc.

Obsession 🕒

This is a short to medium activity that uses a single shared whiteboard or Google Jamboard, etc. The teacher asks the students “What are you obsessed with today?” Then students vote (perhaps using a poll) and that becomes the shared topic. Then everyone works together on the one shared whiteboard or Jamboard to illustrate this obsession.

Six-word memoir 🕒

This is a short- to medium individual activity. The teacher asks students to share the perfect summary of themselves in exactly six words – no more, no less. The teacher should give an example in chat or on a slide. Students can share their responses in chat or in a shared Google Doc. This gives shy students an opportunity to share something in written form. However, sometimes a word limit makes it actually more difficult, so be prepared for this to take longer than you think (maybe assign it as homework to share in the next class).

Examples: Tim always chose his dessert first. I came, I saw, I conquered! A reader longing for the stars. I never believed this would happen. What she didn't expect changed her. It took longer than I thought. Wait, where did the weekend go?

Most likely to ... 🕒

This is an activity that is best suited for later in the term, after students have gotten to know each other a little. Students are asked a series of “Who is most likely to ...” questions; on the teacher’s signal, students type their answers in the chat window. Whoever has the majority answer earns a point. Tip: Be sure to ask the winner of each question to respond; otherwise the activity is less engaging.

Examples: Who is most likely to become a teacher? Who is most likely to move to California? Etc.

Speaker sketch 🕒

If you have a guest speaker, ask your students to sketch a portrait of them on paper during the presentation. At the end, everyone shows their results to their camera. If you’re worried about unflattering portraits, invite students to illustrate the ideas of the presentation or just to simply doodle. This is a good way to keep eyes focused on the speaker, while also giving a “fidget” to students who need something to help them stay focused.

“Have you ever ...” in the dark 🕒

Prepare a set of “Have you ever...” questions. Ask all students to turn their cameras off. Ask the question. If they can say yes, they have done the thing in question, then they turn their cameras on. Students who don’t use cameras can respond in the chat. Tip: Always end with a question that everyone can say “yes” to so that all cameras end up on.

Examples: Have you ever sung in the shower? Have you ever played chess? Have you ever taken an online class at PCC before? Have you ever come to class/worked all day in your pajamas? Have you ever accidentally left a Zoom class early?

Shape shift

The teacher asks all students to turn off their cameras. The teacher then asks students to find something specific for a disguise (suggestions below). When the time is up, the teacher counts down 3-2-1 and then instructs all students to turn on their cameras all at the same time to reveal their disguises.

Examples: Historical figure; rock star; holiday; electronic device; food; etc.

What's going on in this picture?

The teacher puts students in small groups in breakout rooms. The teacher gives each group a different picture (or the same picture) from <https://www.nytimes.com/column/learning-whats-going-on-in-this-picture>. Students work together in their small group to come up with a description. Then, as a whole class, each small group presents their picture and explains their idea. The teacher can reveal the real situation.

Zoom bingo

Ask participants a question that can be answered in one word or a short phrase. Each participant writes their response and holds it up to the camera. Anyone whose screen has a row, column, or diagonal with all the same responses wins.

Examples: What is your favorite food? What city are you in now? What type of animal was your first pet?

What's your secret? (a variation of Taboo)

Either before class or secretly during class, send each person an individual photo of a themed object (e.g., office supplies; beach party things) or a "secret fact." Or, teachers can send them a private message in chat with their item to describe. Then put students in breakout rooms to try to guess each other's object or secret. Mix up the breakout rooms or put students in larger and larger groups.

True/false (advance preparation is required only if the teacher uses Zoom's polling feature)

This is a medium to long full-class activity. It's a streamlined version of "Two Truths and a Lie" that many students already know. In this version, the teacher asks the students to present just one statement to describe themselves. The rest of the class decides if it's true or false. The teacher can use Zoom's polling feature that allows students to anonymously vote true or false; then the teacher displays the results and asks the student to confirm the true answer and say something about it.

Example: Tim says: "I can read braille with my eyes." Students guess. Tim reveals true or false.

Rationale: Shares information in a fun way; can be used to dispel common assumptions; lowers affective filter because the answers are usually funny.

Caveat: If the polling feature is used but students can't see it, they can type their answers in chat or say their guesses aloud.

Options: The teacher invites the student to say their statement aloud or write it in the chat window; the rest of the class prepares a response in the chat window by typing "true" or "false" but they don't press enter until the teacher says "go" in order to share all answers at once; the teacher then asks the student to confirm the true answer and say something about it.

Teaching Tips; If students observe an attribute they share, they can type "That's me, too!" in the chat. If the class is large, demonstrate to the whole class how to play and then divide the class into small groups using breakout rooms.

Make your own emoji (or find a meme)

This is a short to medium individual activity using a website like this: <https://emoji-maker.com/designer> The teacher invites students to create an emoji and share it with the class.

Rationale: This activity allows students to express their emotions in a creative way. If emojis are used more than once, it could also be a way of getting to know classmates in a fun and visual way.

Caveat: This activity requires students to use an external website. While the site is easy to use and requires no payment or account creation or passwords, students might take longer than expected, especially if their digital literacy skills are low. Teachers might offer students the choice to either create an emoji or find an existing meme to share in the chat.

Options: Students can change their Zoom picture to be their emoji. Alternatively, students can share their emoji in a shared Google Doc and then guess who created which emoji.

Teaching Tip: Set a time limit on this one, or invite students to work together in a group (one will need to be able to share their screen with the others in their group). Better yet, assign this as homework, and use the “reveal” as your icebreaker/warm-up at the start of the following class.

Funny found fotos 🕒

This is a short individual activity, but it requires some advance preparation. Before class, the teacher prepares a slideshow of silly photos, enough for one per student. In class, the teacher shares the slideshow of images. For each image, the instructor calls out a student’s name and says, “We found your phone and this was the last picture taken. What is going on here?” The teacher reveals the photo, and the student has a minute to explain the picture.

Rationale: Humor lowers the affective filter; the picture gives students neutral information to share; what they choose to say can also share their personality.

Options: A slide show has the excitement of the reveal of each new photo; however, if you want to lower any stress that may cause and give your students a choice, then prepare a collage of images ahead of time (a few more photos than the number of students), share your screen, and allow students to choose which photos is “theirs” to describe/explain.

Teaching Tip: Give students only 60 seconds to respond -- and time them. The added pressure is part of the fun, and the quick pace will keep the activity from dragging on too long.

“So long” screenshot

This is a short activity that works well to conclude a class. It’s simply a screenshot of everyone by the instructor.

Rationale: Everyone enjoys a memento of the group, especially if it’s a close cohort.

Caveat: Teachers (and perhaps students) need to be aware of privacy issues and they may need to know how to take a screenshot. Screenshots should not be shared without classmates’ permission.

Options: If you’ve had teams working together all term, send them to a breakout room to take a team photo. If a student doesn’t want or can’t use their cam, ask them to add a photo to their display name, if they can (a photo of anything that is meaningful to them); if a student. For additional fun, the teacher can call out something everyone should find and use in the photo, such as sunglasses.

Quick questions for a chat, poll, or a breakout room discussion

- What's one thing on your bucket list?
- If you could have a superpower, what would it be?
- Which historical figure would you want to meet?
- What's the most interesting place you've ever visited?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What has been the best day of your life so far?
- What do you want people to remember you for?
- What or who has been most influential in your life so far?
- What's the worst travel experience you've ever had?
- What's one important quality of a great boss?
- What's your biggest personal goal?
- What's the best TV show you're watching?
- What has been your biggest accomplishment?
- What do you like most about studying online?
- What were you most afraid of as a kid?
- What is your #1 personal productivity tip?
- What's the most interesting thing you've read lately?
- What is your favorite junk food or snack?