Scholarly Teacher Corner

Implementing the Fast Friends Procedure to Build Camaraderie in a Remote Synchronous Teaching Setting

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Abstract

Introduction: Improving students' experiences in courses has always been important; one important method for facilitating discussions is an effective icebreaker activity.

Statement of the Problem: The move to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges for fostering connections among students. Given the constraints in remote learning, teachers need effective and feasible ways to improve student experiences.

Literature Review: We reviewed traditional icebreaker activities and highlighted the potential for implementing the Fast Friends procedure in a remotely delivered synchronous class. This procedure involves a discussion guided by a series of increasingly intimate questions meant to enhance connection between unacquainted people.

Teaching Implications: Undergraduate and graduate students reported having a positive experience and building connections from the procedure, including enhanced classroom motivation. We share materials so interested readers and teachers can easily implement this.

Conclusion: The Fast Friends procedure is a promising icebreaker activity to include at the start of the semester that can help students have a positive experience and build connection with classmates.

Keywords

icebreaker, close relationships, fast friends procedure, student connection, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in several pedagogical changes. These changes included a large migration of traditionally in-person classes to remote settings. Of course, many courses will likely revert back to in-person following the pandemic. Although emergency-related remote learning is very different than traditional online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2021), colleges and universities have noticed the benefits of providing flexible options and the delivery of remote courses resulting from the pandemic. For example, there are ongoing discussions about the degree to which future courses will be offered remotely—for financial reasons, accessibility reasons, future health crises, or other reasons entirely (Chronicle contributors, 2020; Paykamian, 2021). In this new landscape of higher education, instructors are left with a unique challenge—how can instructors foster connections with and between students when teaching remotely. This paper discusses how we adapted a hallmark experimental paradigm from the close relationships literature—the Fast Friends procedure (Aron et al., 1997; Sprecher, 2021b)—as an icebreaker to generate closeness between students in a remote course. We focused primarily on administering this icebreaker in a remote synchronous setting and examined its effectiveness as an icebreaker.

Traditional Icebreakers and the Fast Friends Procedure

Several resources are dedicated to best practices for remote synchronous teaching, moderating class activities, and

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developing in-person icebreakers (Johnson, 2012; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Magnan, 2005; Meyers, 1997; West, 1999). Although student reception to icebreakers and opening activities are mixed, both students and instructors agree on the importance of a first-class period and starting class off on the right foot (Johnson, 2012; Perlman & McCann, 1999; Zulkifli & Idris, 2021). An effective icebreaker can build camaraderie within a class that can enhance discussions and student engagement (Moon et al., 2013; Sciutto, 1995). Icebreakers differ dramatically in their scope and content—some involve sharing personal or superficial details about oneself (e.g., hobbies, deep thoughts, and likes/dislikes); some involve generating thoughts (e.g., brainstorming funny situations); yet others involve cooperative teambuilding (e.g., completing a shared task; Meyers, 1997). Many icebreakers have also drawn on principles from close relationships research. For example, Ellis and Kelley's (1999) Pairing Game introduced students to mate selection processes by placing randomly assigned numerical values on their foreheads (so they could see others' but not their own number) and were instructed to try to match with someone with the highest possible value.

In the last 10–20 years, researchers have begun to identify the most important qualities of *remote* icebreaker activities. Although many taxonomies and core features of effective icebreakers vary from researcher to researcher, all of them involve the general recommendation to make remote icebreakers that are relatively easy to navigate/implement, are enjoyable, and have some socialization experience (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; McGrath et al., 2014; Salmon, 2002). However, many icebreakers may be more impractical to conduct in a remote setting, such as those that involve physical movement or other types of in-person coordination (Dressel, 2020). Luckily, some icebreakers can be easily migrated to remote synchronous education settings. For example, Dixon and colleagues (2006) were successful in using two different types of icebreakers delivered remotely—an activity where students provide an actor/character and movie with which they identify and their classmates guess why they relate to them (i.e., an activity called "Hollywood Stars") and an activity where students post three hyperlinks that provide clues about their profession (or something they are interested in) and answer probing questions (i.e., called "What Do You Do?").

Remote synchronous icebreakers should be aligned with the technological expertise of both students and instructors (McGrath et al., 2014). In a review of best practices and examples of icebreakers, Chlup and Collins (2010) recommend some basic get-to-know-each-other icebreakers that are easily amenable to remote settings, including those that can be moderated in a Learning Management System or discussion board. Their framework around effective icebreakers included elements of engagement, teamwork, socialization, cohesiveness, and interdependence, among others. Altogether, the literature on icebreakers—regardless of whether administered in-person, online, or via chat/discussion boards—suggests that meaningful engagement and enjoyable conversations between students can make for a successful introduction to a course.

Existing icebreakers have primarily served specific functions and have successfully encouraged students to get to know one another and encourage discussion (often around course material but not exclusively). But taking a class entirely remotely is a fundamentally different experience that makes some icebreakers cumbersome; further, their effectiveness in remote synchronous settings is unknown and rarely tested or evaluated. These concerns, paired with the loneliness induced by taking exclusively remote classes (Arslan, 2021; Daly et al., 2020; Horigian et al., 2021), need to be addressed using creative and empirically grounded techniques for encouraging social connections. One particular technique—the Fast Friends procedure—has been successful in past research and anecdotal administration but has not been formally examined as a way to build connections between classmates and increase student engagement. Below we provide a brief overview of research using the Fast Friends procedure and describe how we integrated the procedure into a remote (i.e., online-synchronous) class (and how it went).

The Fast Friends Procedure

The Fast Friends procedure constitutes a series of increasingly intimate questions meant to enhance connection between unacquainted people (Aron et al., 1997; Sprecher, 2021a, 2021c). The primary mechanism that helps build connection is reciprocal self-disclosure—that individuals reveal things about themselves and that partners respond in a responsive way (Hampton et al., 2019; Sprecher, 2021b). The original procedure contained 36 questions ranging from relatively superficial questions (e.g., "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?" and "Would you like to be famous? In what way?") to more personal questions (e.g., "What is your most treasured memory?" and "When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?") increasing in intimacy and disclosure (p. 374–375; Aron et al., 1997). Upon completing these series of questions, respondents report high feelings of closeness and a high degree of overlap between them and their partner relative to a more superficial activity (e.g., small talk) that might resemble some of the icebreakers discussed above (Sprecher, 2021a). Although many historical and contemporary experimental paradigms have been developed for generating closeness between people (Collins & Miller, 1994; Sedikides et al., 1999; Worthy et al., 1969; Wright & Sinclair, 2012), the Fast Friends procedure has emerged as one of the most visible and popular ways of doing so among researchers (see Sprecher, 2021b).

The outcomes of the Fast Friends procedure are not limited to merely feeling closer to the partner you complete the task with (Sprecher, 2021b). Although not the focus of the current icebreaker evaluation effort, there is evidence that the closeness induced from this and other procedures has positive

effects on reducing interpersonal prejudice (Page-Gould et al., 2008; Wright et al., 1997), less reliance on cognitive biases (Sedikides et al., 1998), more ethical decision making (Nikolova et al., 2017), and—relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic—greater productivity and reduced stress (Oztop et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017). Importantly, the benefits of the Fast Friends procedure are seen regardless of the communication medium. Specifically, participants rate similar levels of closeness with their partner whether the task is completed in person or through a video call (e.g., Zoom and Skype), although doing so via a chat/text with no visual communication only confers some of the benefits (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004; Sprecher, 2021b, 2021c). This makes the Fast Friends procedure a type of icebreaker that could have benefits for increasing student connection and engagement and is a type of icebreaker that could be administered in person or remotely with similar effectiveness.

However, many of the benefits of the Fast Friends procedure have only been examined in lab settings. And, although there are anecdotal accounts provided by teachers that their classes have enjoyed completing the procedure together, it has not been formally tested in the classroom context. We attempted to do so in the Spring and Fall 2021 with three undergraduate courses and one graduate course. Specifically, we randomly paired unacquainted students, had them complete the Fast Friends procedure, and then assessed their perceptions of the task, closeness to their peers, and engagement in the course. Below, we detail the practical steps for administering the procedure and provide curated materials so that educators and practitioners can use it for their course if they think it is appropriate.

Implementing the Fast Friends Exercise in a Remote Synchronous Teaching Setting

Virtual teaching does produce some challenges in trying to coordinate a large class activity. Luckily, many modern video conferencing services (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangouts) provide solutions to many of these challenges. Our particular exercise was administered via Zoom videoconferencing software. Before the class period, the instructor randomly paired students using an adjusted random number generator. They then entered pre-assigned breakout rooms for the Fast Friends exercise to ensure privacy. Using breakout rooms was particularly important. The goal of the exercise is to build rapport and intimacy between strangers. Because of this goal and the sensitivity of some of the questions, having the watchful eye of an instructor would likely compromise the activity. Students were also provided with a slide deck that contained all of the discussion questions and instructions of the exercise.

Because the class period lasted 80 min, an abbreviated list of 24 of the original 36 items was used and presented for 3 min each (i.e., 72 min total). Students were instructed to take turns discussing their responses to the questions and prompts. We

understand that this duration may be unrealistic for many instructors. We view the potential benefits (e.g., a strong sense of closeness and camaraderie between students) to be worth it. As the icebreaker was administered in psychology courses, it was amenable to being integrated into course material later in the semester.

Nevertheless, it may not be possible to administer an icebreaker that long. Worth noting, instructors can further reduce the number of questions to shorten the task. For example, removing four questions from the deck (to 20 questions) would reduce the estimated completion time to 60 min (removing nine questions, resulting in 15 questions, would take approximately 45 min). Although longer durations of the exercise are thought to be more effective, previous research has found that durations as short as 6, 12, and 30 min are sufficient to generate closeness between people (Sprecher, 2021b). This evidence provides additional flexibility for instructors to modify the task to serve their purposes. Further, we programmed the slide deck to notify students how much time was remaining to discuss a particular question (i.e., notifications of 3 min, 2 min, 1 min, and 30 sec remaining). The slide deck would automatically advance to the next question after these 3 min, and the timer would start over. Having this timer installed ensured that students would not spend too long on a particular question and move at an appropriate pace. One student in each pair was instructed to share their screen so they and their partner could read the questions and observe the timer. An introductory slide provided information about the task and the overall goals of the exercise. We have provided this programmed slide deck for the benefit of readers and instructors via Open Science Framework Materials (https://osf.io/rvcmy/).

Did the Exercise Affect Students' Perceptions of Others and the Course?

We administered this class exercise in three undergraduate courses (of 69 students; M_{age} = 20.30, SD = 1.35; 79.9% women; 77.9% White) and one graduate course (of 10 students; 8 responding to the survey; demographic characteristics not collected for identifiability reasons); a copy of the survey materials (in a Qualtrics-importable.qsf file) and data are available on the OSF site for this project (https://osf.io/rvcmy/). Following the exercise, a short survey was sent to the students to assess their evaluation of the exercise, their feelings of closeness to their classmate, and their attitudes toward the course more generally on a scale from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5(*strongly agree*).[1] We constructed this survey based on previous dependent variables from other Fast Friends studies (Sprecher, 2021b) and from generating belongingness questions among a broader research group that studies close relationships. The activity and post-activity survey were completed online during class. For a portion of the undergrad students (*n* = 39 out of 69), pre-activity ratings (collected just prior to the activity) were available on how close they felt to

Table 1. Evaluations of the Fast Friends Class Activity.

Item	Undergraduate (n = 69)			Graduate (n = 8)			Change in evaluations from before-to-after activity (n = 39)
	% At least somewhat agreeing	M	SD	% At least somewhat agreeing	M	SD	d
Was a positive experience, on the whole	100.0	4.80	0.41	100.0	4.88	0.35	—
Made for a better experience given that course activities are all online	91.3	4.57	0.74	100.0	4.75	0.46	—
Made me like my classmate more after completing the exercise with them	98.6	4.78	0.45	87.5	4.63	0.74	—
Made me feel closer to my classmate	97.1	4.67	0.53	75.0	4.50	0.93	5.65**
Made me feel a sense of belonging	89.9	4.38	0.67	75.0	4.13	1.13	1.41**
Made me excited about the course	92.7	4.48	0.78	87.5	4.38	0.74	0.00
Made me feel uncomfortable	25.0	2.31	1.28	12.5	2.13	0.99	−0.38*
Motivated me to invest more in the class	81.2	4.19	0.75	37.5	3.38	0.92	0.16
Made me feel a spirit of community with other students in my class	80.0	4.20	0.78	50.0	3.63	1.30	1.80**
Made me feel I can rely on my classmate for their support	82.6	4.35	0.76	50.0	3.63	1.30	2.34**

Note. Items were asked on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale with a midpoint of 3 (neither agree nor disagree). Percentages represent the frequency of students selecting anchors "4″ or "5″ on the scale. Positive effect sizes for change represent increases; negative effect sizes for change represent decreases. *p < .05, **p < .001.

their classmate, if they felt a sense of belonging, if they were excited about the course, if they felt uncomfortable, if they were invested in the class, if they felt a spirit of community with other students, and if they felt they could rely on their classmates for support. Surveys were administered via Qualtrics and were anonymous. Following the evaluation of the activity, as part of the same survey, students were asked if each of the items should be removed from future iterations of the survey because they were too personal or inappropriate.

The results of this brief survey and exact item wordings can be found in Table 1. Across both undergraduate and graduate levels, students were unanimous in their ratings that the icebreaker was a positive experience, and they reported high scores on the exercise providing a better experience given that course activities were online/remote. Students liked and felt close to their classmate, felt a sense of belonging, felt a sense of community, made them feel like they could rely on their classmate, and were motivated to invest in the course (although this last point was not true among graduate students, who might have already been highly invested). One-sample t-tests confirm that student ratings were all above the midpoint (i.e., 3) of the scale (all ds > |0.40|, ps < 0.001). Among the students who provided pre-activity data, they experienced large changes in how close they felt to their classmate, their sense of belonging, feeling a spirit of community with other students in the class, feeling like they could rely on their classmate and declines in feels of discomfort (ds > |0.38|). There were no significant changes in how excited they were about the course and how willing

they were to invest in the course. These non-significant results could have emerged because of the already high levels of excitement about the course and motivation prior to the activity (see Supplementary Materials for full means from pre- and post-activity participants and paired samples t-tests). Importantly, given the nature of the questions, there was some concern that the questions might be too personal or inappropriate: 25.0% of undergraduates and 12.5% of graduates reported that the exercise made them uncomfortable.

When asked about whether specific questions should be removed (for being inappropriate or too personal) from further iterations of the activity, the vast majority of the questions were deemed non-problematic. The two exceptions were primarily concerned with heavier topics: 26.0% of the students thought a question about a death of a family member ("Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find the most disturbing? Why?"), and 22.1% of the students thought a question about regretting saying something to someone if they were to pass away ("If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with another person, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?") were inappropriate or too personal. The high endorsement of the activity being a positive experience, the lack of comments in an anonymous open-ended form about the task, and informal feedback provided to the instructor also suggested that the exercise likely did not create many feelings of discomfort. It is uncertain if these questions might engender discomfort or negative emotions in all cases. Nevertheless, one may consider 22–26% of students finding a question

mildly uncomfortable to be too many students to warrant its inclusion in the icebreaker activity. Thus, to reduce any potential harm among those who might have an adverse reaction, and to shorten the task, we recommend removing these two items in implementing the exercise in any classes. We have no reason to expect that excluding these items would have a deleterious effect on the icebreaker activity.

We also want to highlight that we did not formally test the power of the Fast Friends exercise relative to merely having students talk to each other for the same period of time (e.g., a regular conversation). Randomly assigning student pairs to either complete the Fast Friends exercise or a more traditional conversational task would have been ideal. We ultimately decided against including a control because, in using real students in the context of a college classroom, we did not want to deny them the opportunity of completing the exercise. Worth noting, previous research using the Fast Friends exercise has randomly assigned participants to the exercise or various forms of conversational or get-to-know-you activities, small talk, and unstructured self-disclosure activities (Sprecher, 2021a, 2021b). These studies consistently find that the Fast Friends exercise builds closeness and intimacy between unacquainted people relative to various control conditions. Our pre- and post-activity questions suggest that the Fast Friends exercise built this closeness between people as well. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that control conditions are necessary moving forward to establish this exercise as useful in the classroom, and we merely provided some preliminary evidence that it might be worth trying. We also only examined the short-term effects of this ice breaker. In other words, does enthusiasm for the course persist throughout the entire semester? Do people continue to feel close to or supported by their classmates and a sense of belonging/community beyond the first few weeks? Future efforts should quantify any long-lasting effects that the activity might have on students.

Conclusion

Developing Creative Ways of Engaging with Students in Remote Synchronous Settings

The preliminary evidence suggests that the Fast Friends procedure can be an effective and feasible class activity to use as an icebreaker to increase student connection and engagement in a remote synchronous setting. The COVID-19 pandemic and the possible migration to having a larger share of remote courses moving forward present many challenges for instructors. In a purely virtual environment, students often feel disconnected from their class and their classmates. Luckily, there is an entire body of research advocating for best practices in teaching remotely. However, addressing the specific social deficits of online education can be a particularly difficult hurdle to overcome. The Fast Friends procedure provides one possible way to alleviate this at the start of the semester. An honest assessment is that educators will likely have to develop an entire suite of new techniques and approaches to provide a quality educational and social experience in remote settings. In the upcoming semesters and years, we will add additional resources and materials to the OSF site to help teachers build connections in remote learning environments.

Open Practices

This article has received badge for Open Materials and Open Data. More information about the Open Materials and Open Data badges can be found at http://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/badges

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Although we analyzed these items in isolation of one another, collectively, they had high reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

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