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Introduction

Active Learning

I teach chemistry, and I want my students to feel comfortable enough to ask questions of me or of anyone else in the class. Chemistry is a tough subject. If you are afraid to reach out for help, you can have a pretty rough time. That is why I build in experiential, or active, learning experiences, through which group members learn by taking part in games, role playing, problem solving, debates, competitions, and communications. Icebreakers help people get to know one another, relax, laugh, and feel part of a team. This process of getting acquainted and team building is important in school groups, church groups, corporate meetings – and chemistry classes. It is necessary for all age groups.

Active Learning – in a non-threatening way – has a number of advantages:

- The time spent together in a group helps form relationships or make established relationships stronger. That's the priority.
- Students enjoy being involved. It's not "sit down, be quiet, and listen."
- It encourages creativity, and promotes thought and ideas. Group members aren't told the answers. They find the answers.
- It provides a safe place to make mistakes and learn from them.

How to Use This Book

The activities in this book are pretty straightforward. Most need no supplies, and the rest need very few. All activities have been tested, and they work. Of course, you are the best judge for deciding if a particular activity is appropriate for your class. The activities are great for a variety of group sizes, so they are perfect for clubs, extracurricular activities, retreats and youth groups, as well as for general classroom use.

The activities are arranged alphabetically by title. If there is any worksheet needed for an activity, it is provided immediately after the activity.

Read the rules of each activity more than once before using it so that you feel comfortable with it. Some activities are done just for fun, but many can be processed or discussed at the end, which is often the best part of the whole exercise. I'm continually amazed at what each group gets out of the various activities, and how the same activity can spark different reactions from different groups.

I did not set an age range for each activity. With a few adaptations, I believe they work with any age. From my own use of these activities, I know that your groups will benefit from them and I also know that you will as well. Just don't forget to bring your own enthusiasm, openness, and energy to every group gathering. Now jump in and enjoy!

Back to Back/People to People

Purpose: Gives students a high-energy game in which they interact with a large number of people

Group Size: 25 or more

Time: 15 minutes

Supplies: None

Directions:

1. Everyone must have a partner except the person who is "It." If the partners don't know each other, they should introduce themselves.
2. "It" calls out directions such as "back to back," "shoulder to shoulder," "foot to knee," "hand to head," "head to head," and so on.
3. Partners must position their bodies in the manner directed by "It."
4. When "It" calls out "People to People," everyone – including "It" – must find a new partner.
5. The one person left without a partner is the new "It," who then calls out a new set of directions.
6. Make sure "It" keeps the directions flowing in order to give the game a high-energy pace.
7. When partners change, remind them to introduce themselves if they don't know each other.

Balloon Questions

Purpose: An interactive getting-to-know-you activity

Group Size: 10 to 30

Time: 15 – 30 minutes

Supplies: One balloon for each person; questions written on small strips of paper, one tucked inside each balloon (for starters, see suggested *Boundary-Breaking Questions* on pages 11 and 12)

Directions:

1. Give each person a non-inflated balloon with a question rolled up and tucked inside. Balloons need not be inflated to save you time, but if you want to inflate them beforehand, that's ok, too.
2. Have students blow up their balloons and tie them shut.
3. On the count of three, everyone tosses the balloons into the air. The group has to keep all balloons in the air for one minute in order to mix up the balloons. This also gives the group something active to do before they sit down to answer the questions.
4. When you say "Stop," everyone should grab a balloon and hold onto it.
5. Ask for a volunteer. Instruct the volunteer to pick someone to help pop his or her balloon.
6. After the balloon is popped, the person reads the question and answers it aloud. The person who helped pop the balloon goes next, choosing someone else to assist him or her.
7. Having someone help pop the balloon keeps a flow to the order of the activity. Another advantage to having a helper is that some people don't like popping balloons, and it's nice to have moral support.

Famous People

Purpose: Gives students a fun, relaxed way of mixing without having to reveal personal information

Group Size: 10 to 50

Time: 10 minutes

Supplies: Adhesive nametag for each student, or make nametags from slips of paper with a loop of tape on one side

Directions:

1. On each nametag or slip of paper, write the name of a famous person (living or dead).
2. Attach a nametag to each person's back.
3. Each group member has to figure out whose name is on his or her back by asking other students only questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." ("Is this person a female/male?" "Is she in the entertainment business?" "Was he famous in the 90s?" "Did she ever do voices with cartoon characters?")
4. Play until everyone has figured out the name of the famous person on their backs.

Find Your Mate

Purpose: Helps form pairs out of a large group; provides practice in solving problems

Group Size: Unlimited

Time: 10 minutes

Supplies: An index card or small sheet of paper for each student containing the name of half of a famous pair (see examples below); strips of adhesive or masking tape

Directions:

1. Tape a card or paper to each person's back.
2. Explain that everyone must first figure out what or who is written on their back, and that they must then find the other half of the pair.
3. Students must limit their questions to those that can be answered "yes" or "no," and they can ask only three questions of the same person. After three questions are asked, they must move on to other people.
4. Continue with the game until everyone is paired up.
5. At this point, you can conclude the activity or begin another activity that requires paired students.

Variation: A quick change in this activity is to have everyone wear their index cards on their front sides. This way they know what or who they are and can just look for their partners. This works faster and is especially good for younger people or very large groups.

Sample Pairs

peanut butter/jelly

macaroni/cheese

chocolate/vanilla

pen/pencil

police officer/criminal

teacher/student

peas/carrots

black/white

chair/table

How Many in Your Party?

Purpose: A good mixer that helps students learn more about their fellow group members

Group Size: 10 to 50

Time: 15 – 30 minutes

Supplies: None

Directions:

1. Explain that you are the maître d' at a fine restaurant and will be calling out seating arrangements for the group. Let the group mingle around the room a bit before you call out "Table for two (or three, or whatever number you choose)."
2. If you call out "table for two," group members pair off and introduce themselves. You will then give them a question to discuss at their "table." The first question could be "What are your favorite foods to eat?"
3. Give the groups a minute to discuss the question and then call out the next seating arrangement.
4. Each time, after the groups have formed, have them introduce themselves and discuss the question you give them.
5. Possible questions are:
 - What is something you really want to do in the next year?
 - What do you hope to get out of this class (workshop, meeting)?
 - Who can you always go to for good advice or a listening ear? Why?
 - What is your favorite thing to do outdoors?
 - What is your favorite season or holiday and why?
 - What talent would you really like to have?
 - What is/was your favorite Halloween costume?
 - When you have time to just sit and think, what do you think about?
 - Who should you write a letter or email to and why?
 - What is your favorite ride at an amusement park?

How Many Squares?

Purpose: Shows how working together can help achieve greater success and more accuracy; shows the difficulty of perceiving adequately

Group Size: Unlimited

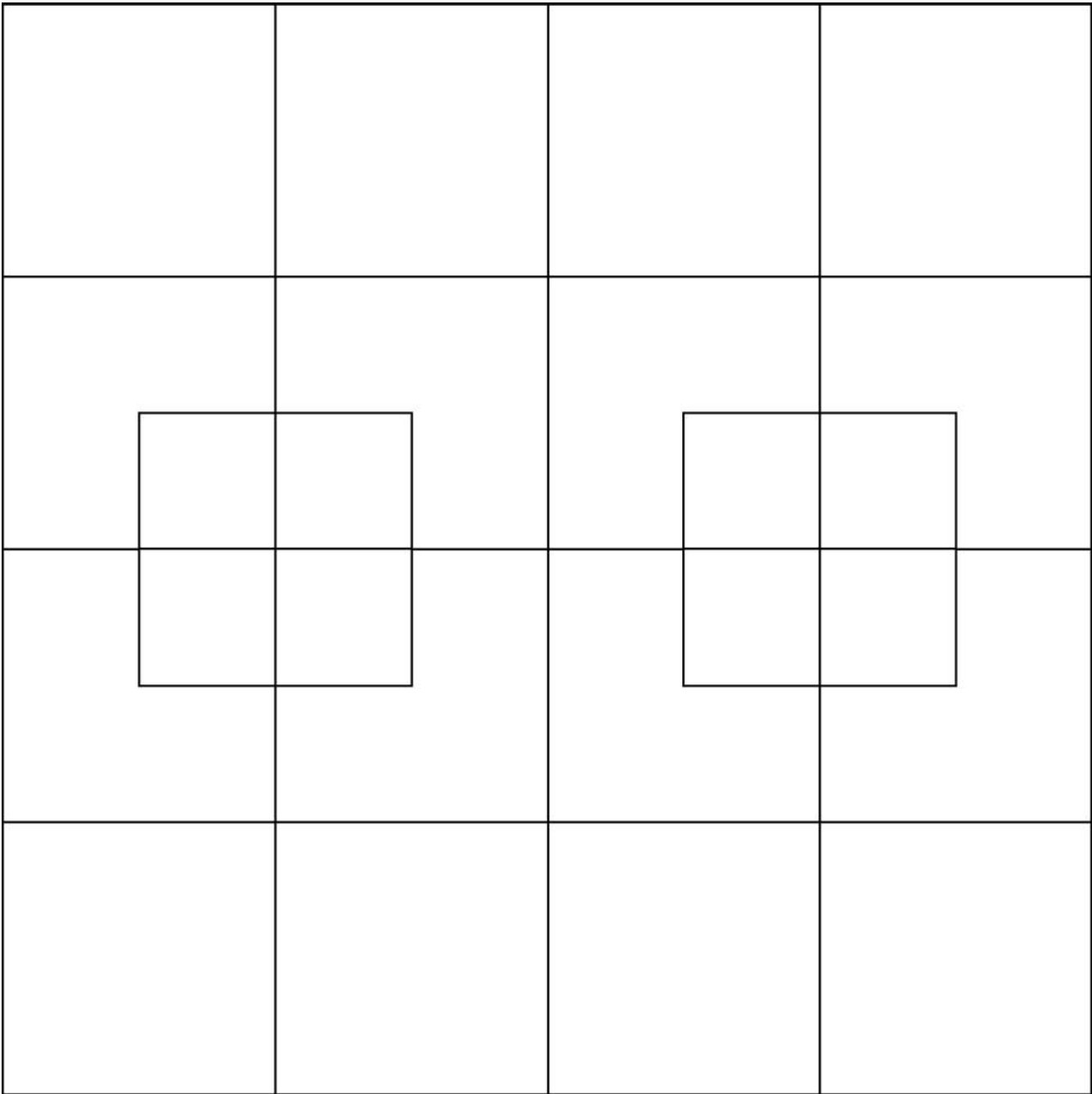
Time: 10 minutes

Supplies: One copy of the How Many Squares? Worksheet and a pen or pencil per student

Directions:

1. Have each person count the squares on the worksheet (page 30) and write the answer on the page.
2. Break up the groups into threes, and have each group reach a consensus on how many squares they can find. (You should find 40 squares.)
3. Process the activity with the group:
 - How many squares did you count on your own?
 - How many squares did you count with your group?
 - Which count was more accurate? Why?
 - What advantages/disadvantages are there to working in a group?
 - In which way do you work best – in a group or alone? Why is that a good thing to know about yourself and to know about other people you may have to work with?

How Many Squares? Worksheet



Uniquely Me

Purpose: To think about and then share traits about oneself

Group Size: Unlimited

Supplies: Sheet of paper and a pen or pencil for each student

Directions:

1. Have each student trace one of his or her hands on a piece of paper.
2. In each finger (and thumb), list the following:
 - a. something I'm proud of
 - b. two of my good friends
 - c. something I like about myself
 - d. a person I want to be like and why
 - e. what I most vividly see in my future
3. On the palm of the hand, have each student write two things he or she enjoys doing.
4. After everyone has finished writing, ask each person to share at least one response.

Up in the Air

Purpose: Provides a very lively activity that serves as a good springboard for discussion about juggling responsibilities in life

Group Size: 10 to 30

Time: 15 minutes

Supplies: One balloon for each person, plus 10 additional balloons

Directions:

1. Distribute one balloon to each person, and have everyone blow up their balloons.
2. Explain that the goal of the game is to keep all balloons in the air for as long as possible.
3. Point out that a penalty occurs when a balloon touches the floor, or if a balloon is left on the floor more than five seconds after it falls. You will call out a penalty as it happens. The group is disqualified after accruing five penalties.
4. Start the activity by saying, "Go."
5. Every ten seconds, add a balloon to those already in the air.
6. When the five penalties are reached, stop the activity, tell the group how long they kept the balloons in the air, and ask them to discuss how they could break their record. After a short discussion, have them try it again.
7. Process the activity.
 - What was your goal? Did you accomplish it?
 - Did you break your record with the second try? Why?
 - How did you feel when more balloons were being added to those already in the air?
 - Did you come up with a strategy to deal with the extras?
 - What are some responsibilities in your life?
 - What are some ways to juggle all of the responsibilities in your life?