Getting Started

Creating an Inclusive Online Space

Regardless of where and how young people are educated, they do best when they feel they belong, valued and connected to their teachers and peers. For the 2020- 2021 school year it's essential that we acknowledge this has been an incredibly stressful time and there is a strong possibility that more than one student, or yourself, has experienced trauma on some scale. Creating connections right now is more important than content.

Wherever you teach, your responsibility is to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment where young people feel seen and therefore are much more likely to meaningfully participate. Now, a safe learning environment also necessitates that you are responsive to the students' needs in their online education. Feel free to follow this lesson plan's script or make it your own but always be willing to respond to your students' questions, concerns, and views.

OBJECTIVES

- To create an online learning environment where students have a sense of belonging
- To develop skills to feel comfortable being uncomfortable
- To establish agreements for educators and students
- To begin building the foundation for mutual trust where students will want to be self-reflective, share their opinion, and engage with the group

MATERIALS

- Online platform that supports screen sharing
- Access to YouTube if sharing video
- Sample Dad Jokes

Session Outline
What Are We Doing Today?

I am so excited to welcome you into this new school year! Since last spring, we have all had to adjust to what feels like constant uncertainty. One of the hardest parts is having to change all the time: change how we feel, change our routine, change learning platforms, change expectations. It can be really hard. However, we have the opportunity to create the online learning community that works best for us. It just means we have to think a little differently, be willing to try new things, and have an open mind. Today, we are going to work together to create a safe, comfortable classroom environment.

ACTIVITY: Cross Your Arms

Time: 5 minutes
Purpose: To connect feeling uncomfortable with the feeling of learning

1.   *Ask students to cross their arms.*
2.   *Ask students to uncross their arms and let their hands hang free for a moment.*
3.   *Ask students to cross their arms in the opposite direction.*
4.   *Once they figure out how to do that, ask them to drop their hands again.*

Debrief

Ask your students the following questions. They can type their answers in the chat feature or share them audibly with the group.

- Why do you think you always cross your arms in the same way?
- How did it feel to cross your arms the way you usually do?
- How did it feel to cross your arms the other way? It probably feels a lot less "normal" or comfortable that way.
- With having school so different, does it feel similar to trying to cross your arms the opposite way?

Takeaways

You cross your arms in the same way most of the time, but that doesn't make it "right;" it just makes it what you're used to. Starting a new school year online is a lot like this exercise: it feels weird because it is not how we are used to starting school and it doesn't feel "normal" or comfortable. It feels just as weird for teachers. We are all trying to figure this out, and all I ask is that we try to work together.

Teacher note: Feel free to expand because young people know what's going on. Not naming the issues can increase their anxiety and feel like they can't be honest in the classroom. Here's a script you can use: *This is new for all of us. We are all trying to figure out how to manage day to day safely during a global pandemic and we can feel strongly about social justice issues all around us. This is confusing, frustrating and stressful for you and for your teachers. It is also difficult for your parents and the communities we live in. I am hoping we can work together and make the best of a tough situation.*

ACTIVITY: Creating Group Agreements

Time: 20 minutes
Purpose: To establish session guidelines and signal to students that this is a collaborative learning environment

Creating community is being clear about what we need to feel comfortable, and this is especially important in virtual classrooms. You have now had the opportunity to do some learning online and have a good idea of what works for you and what doesn't. We are going to collaborate to create agreements, so this digital learning space feels inclusive, accessible, and productive for all of us. Your opinions and ideas matter and will help this be a better experience for everyone.

Teacher Note: *Displaying lists digitally can be hard because you want to be able to interact with your students while they are sharing. It is probably best for you to take notes and then screen share once students are done offering ideas. Then you can stop screen share to gather the next set of ideas. Only doing screen share feels alienating, so switch back and forth.*

What **don't** you want me to act like, be like, or do online when I am teaching you? *Write students' responses down, place students in breakout groups to generate ideas.*

Examples you can suggest if students are stuck:
- Don't lecture all the time and only screen share a presentation
- Don't call on us if we don't want to be called on
- Don't go over our class time
- Don't embarrass me if I am out of uniform or not following the rules about where I am supposed to be while in the class

What does it sound like or look like when a teacher does something online that you do like? What **do** you want me to act like, be like, and do when I am teaching you?

Examples you can suggest if students are stuck:
- Use all the features the platform offers, like breakout rooms, chat, screen capture, etc.
- Record classes so we can go back to them if we need to
- Listen to us and give us the benefit of the doubt
- Let us participate in class in different ways. Chat can be just as good as verbal sharing
- Connect content to things we can relate to
- Use different kinds of media to teach content
- Ask us for advice on platforms, apps, digital tools, etc. that could enhance the experience
- Let us take breaks or get up and move during class
- If I am out of uniform or not following the school's online learning rules, communicate with me privately and tell me what you want me to do instead

Now let's figure out what agreements and expectations do you want for **yourselves?**

Examples you can suggest if students are stuck:
- Create a learning environment that supports your online learning
- Listen to each other
- Don't troll in the chat
- Advocate to you if there's a specific reason we are not comfortable having our camera on all the time
- Do not take pictures or screenshots of class, it violates everyone's sense of safety

What agreements should I have for **you**?

Examples you can suggest if students are stuck:
- If you don't understand something during an online class and you don't feel comfortable saying that during the class, let me know by emailing me @ ____.
- The same thing goes if you are having a problem with another student or there are other dynamics, social or otherwise, in the classroom that I should be aware of.
- Please feel free to email me at any time, but know that I may not check my email after X PM.
- When you are listening, let me know if the topics we are covering make sense (or don't) to you.
- Participate! Participate in a way that feels comfortable for you and sometimes challenges you to participate in ways that don't feel so comfortable. Can someone give me an example of that?

Teacher note: Here's an agreement you can share with your students as well: *Because we are learning virtually, it can be easy to misread facial expressions. So, let's assume good intentions. If I have a facial expression or tone that doesn't make sense to you, please let me know. And I will do the same with you.*

ACTIVITY: The Dad Joke Game

Time: 10-15 minutes (or as long as feels right!)
Purpose: Playing this game, or another of your choosing, in the first few days of school is invaluable bonding and culture setting
Materials: List of *Dad Jokes collected onto one page*

Teacher Note: If students want to compete, they have to have their cameras on they can see each other's faces. This is a great, low stakes way to get students comfortable seeing each other and sharing on camera. Don't force students to participate. Though it does tend to be an infectious game and kids want to jump in. If no students participate, you should jump in.

The goal of the game is to have students "compete" by telling really lame Dad Jokes, but they cannot laugh. If you laugh, you lose. The winner takes on another student, and the cycle repeats. Choose a judge and score keeper (either you or a student).

- Here are a bunch of Dad Jokes collected onto one page. You can also have students write their own if they know some good ones. You can email this list to students or upload it to the class materials via whichever platform your school is using, so they can each see it and choose their jokes. You don't want to screen share this list because the objective is for them to see each other.
- Here is a Link to an example- starts at 33 seconds that you can screen share to model
- You only need to show a few minutes of it for them to get the idea. Stop this video at or before 3:30 (or 1:50 for 10 and younger) for appropriateness.
- Play for as long as time allows. This is a great one to come back to throughout the year if things are feeling stale, you have 10 extra minutes, or you and your kids just need a break.

Wrap It Up

Time: 5 minutes

- It is okay to feel uncomfortable as long as you feel safe
- This is a collaborative space and you matter as much as I do
- Laughter and lame jokes can be a great way to get to know each other
- Let's close our eyes for thirty seconds and think about one thing you want to remember from our time together.
- Now let's hear from three of us about what we can remember about our time together.

Carry It With You

Try and cross your arms the other way today a few times and see if it gets easier. Maybe ask an adult in your life to try it too and talk about it!