

Role of the Ice Breaker in Adult Learning

Dr. Kirti Shivakumar

Professor , Coordinator – NBA , Student Affairs
KLS Institute of Management Education and
Research Belgaum
dr.kirti@klsimer.edu, + 91 - 9449007550

Abstract:

Teachers/trainers frequently look for those teaching methods which help them develop rapport with their learners, make the learners comfortable with each other and learning environments which remove the fear of learning. Thus teachers need various methods which help adults learn effectively and in a participative way. (Galbraith, 2004). It is this need that icebreakers and re-energizers help the learning process.

Any training session, would do well, if it begins on a good note . As they say well begun is half done. The pace, the climate and the camaraderie to conduct a good session is based on the introductory session. These sessions are called as ice-breakers. A training/workshop of one full day or more should have an "Ice Breaker" session, scheduled at the beginning of the workshop.

This paper aims to explain how to utilize the ice breaker as an effective instructional strategy for adult learning. It brings out the advantages and disadvantages of the ice breakers and highlights certain precautions to take while conducting an icebreaker.

Key Words: - Ice Breakers, Adult Learning, Instructional Strategies, Reenergizers

JEL Classification: - M1, M5, M53

Introduction:-

Adults approach learning, at the class room or a training session with several preconceived notions. Each one comes with a predefined notion, and a different learning approach, which makes it challenging for the instructor/trainer. Research has indicated that each learner has his own way and style of getting involved in the instructional process. (Dunn and Dunn :1978 , Gardner:1983, Kolb: 1984, Palmer :2007, Vella :2002).

Teachers/trainers frequently look for those teaching methods which help them develop rapport with their learners, make the learners comfortable with each other and learning environments which remove the fear of learning. Thus teachers need various methods which help adults learn effectively and in a participative way. (Galbraith, 2004). It is this need that icebreakers and re-energizers help the learning process.

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Research Design

Objectives:-

The objectives of this paper are as follows:-

- i. To understand the meaning of an icebreaker , the role it plays in a training programme

- ii. To explore how the ice breaker functions as an effective instructional method for adult learning.
- iii. To suggest how and when to conduct an icebreaker
- iv. To provide certain precautions to be observed when conducting an icebreaker.

Research Methodology :-

To fulfill the above mentioned objectives, data was collected based on the observation of the behavior of the participants of 46 training programmes conducted by the author. This exploratory research paper is based on the two decades of experience of the author as a trainer, conducting training programmes for a wide variety of individuals across varying levels of management.

What is an Icebreaker?

"Icebreakers are structured activities that are designed to relax learners, introduce them to each other, and energize them in what is normally a formal atmosphere or situation." (Clark D.R.: 2004) The term "icebreaker" comes from "break the ice," which in turn comes from special ships called "icebreakers" that are designed to break up ice in the Arctic regions. Just as these ships break the ice- opening up the passage for other ships to travel , the icebreaker opens up the route for better learning and easing the ground for participants o feel comfortable and get to know each other . Ice breakers, energizers, and activities can enhance the effectiveness of training sessions especially when they are designed keeping the need of the learner or the participant, as well as are suited to the topic that the training or facilitation aims to cover.

Review of Literature:

There has been extensive research carried out on adult learning, adult learning theories and principles. Adult education refers to a practice where adults involve themselves "in systematic and sustained self-educating activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values." (Merriam, Sharan, B. & Brockett, Ralph, G., 2007,). The Canadian Encyclopedia (2014) indicates that adult learning and teaching is based on the assumption "that adults can and want to learn, that they are able and willing to take responsibility for that learning, and that the learning itself should respond to their needs." Further what drives adults to learn, what he has to or wants to learn, what options are available, and how he learns are influenced by demographics, globalization and technology. (Caffarella et.al, 2007,). Sally S. Russell (2006) in her research on the health care sector has found that an effective trainer must understand how adults learn and understand that adult learners have individual approaches to learning, and this must be understood before conducting any training programme.

Most of the research on adult learning agree on certain basic principles to make learning effective:-

- They know why they have to know something,
- When they are given the autonomy to learn at their pace and manner,
- When they are allowed to learn experientially
- When they are motivated to learn.

According to Jill F. Kilanowski (2012), "Ice breakers" can be an effective method in research to begin a group intervention session and to engage participants in the objectives of the intervention." In her research she described the use of ice breakers in a research intervention involving mothers of migrant farmworker children. She found that icebreakers are effective ways "to encourage participants to bond, form a new team, get to know people from different backgrounds, and become involved with learning about new subject matter."

Chlup and Collins (2010) focused on the relationship of theories of adult learning and the practice of using icebreakers in adult learning. In their paper they gave several examples of how icebreakers and reenergizers can be used effectively by educators. They linked the activities to the principles of adult learning and perceived icebreakers as socially interactive methods of teaching where the teacher role was more of a facilitator.

However research purely on the use of icebreakers as adult learning strategies is almost nil. There is no evidence either in research or theory to indicate the correlation between the use of an icebreaker and the effectiveness of a training programme. Most researches have focused on the use of varied instructional strategies, rather than just icebreakers.

What is the “ice” that has to be broken?

The first task when designing the ice breaker is to identify what is the “ice” that needs to be broken. If the trainees are like minded people who have not yet met, then the ice which needs to be broken is the fact that these people don’t know each other. The ice breaker used here must be designed in such a way that the trainees get to know each other well enough to interact with them comfortably during the training programme. It creates a sense of camaraderie and reduces the awkwardness and shyness that one may feel when they interact with new contacts.

When the trainees/learners coming together are people from different grades and levels in an organization, the “ice” may come from the difference in status between participants. Such situations may require ice breakers which reduces the barriers one feels between them because they come from different levels and grades, making them feel comfortable with the group.

Similarly if the target group consists of people from different backgrounds, cultures and outlooks, then the “ice” may be the view people view each other, based on their earlier experiences, stereotypes, etc. In such situations, the activity must be designed to encourage all participants to relax and participate so that it enhances receptivity towards the substantive training to follow.

The trainer must be conscious of these differences and handle them sensitively. The key is to focus on what’s important to the event, to break some ice for the event, so that there is no underlying tension hindering the training programme. As we begin the icebreaker, the facilitator must focus on the similarities instead of the differences. One of the best ways to “create” similarities is to focus on the common objective or expectation from the programme.

What does the ice breaker do?

Most adults enjoy learning when they ‘learn by doing.’ The basic principle of adult learning is active participation, and active learning is often considered as the best form of learning. ((Edmunds, Lowe, Murray, & Seymour, 1999).The results of active learning extend far beyond the classroom, in problem solving skills, recall and application of learning to the workplace.

As an active learning technique, the ice breaker acts as an effective way of opening up the scope for better interaction between the trainer and the participant. It eases the atmosphere and allows the trainer/facilitator to strike a good rapport with the trainees.

The purposes of an ice-breaker are (Bartle Philip: 2011):

1. to encourage all participants in breaking down their inhibitions and discarding status, prestige, authority, structured attitudes and behavior habitually employed in day-to-day activities
2. to encourage all participants to relax and enjoy themselves and each other as persons and become more open-minded towards the training to follow;

3. to encourage participants to interact with each other and get to know each other in more informal manner , rather than a traditional or a conservative way;
4. to “soften” up participants before they face the core material of the training; and
5. to enhance the overall effectiveness of the training programme by stimulating a learning atmosphere

Most ice-breakers involve small group activities, which are creative and may involve some activities like drawing, cutting, pasting etc. Some may involve writing something witty and light; however the ice breaker must always be relevant to the expected outcome of the programme. Some ice-breakers involve physical activities, like a small race with balloons, or a three legged race, based on the age and physical fitness of the group. Icebreakers which involve such physical activities can generate a lot of laughter and lighten the situation; that is how it helps break the ice. When the larger group is constituted into smaller teams, such ice-breakers require co-operation, so that each individual has a contribution to make. When each individual has to perform a complementary task, it leads to the development of a “we-feeling” amongst the group. Some ice breakers which require negotiation amongst the groups instill a sense of confidence amongst the trainees.

Though these activities do not ensure that the participants develop a lifelong bond, it ensures that during the sessions they are comfortable with the people around them. It creates a healthy and interactive atmosphere which makes trainees open up, shrugging off their fears and discomfort. The best thing about ice breaker is that the trainer can whip up something which suits his/her needs, use a proven ice breaker with a new twist, so that trainees can warm up to the process of learning that will follow. All experienced trainers agree that a well-designed and effectively conducted ice breaker can ensure that the participants participate in the training process. Ideally the ice breaker must focus on the topic of the training session, so the trainer can decide the type of ice breaker that will have the desired impact in the training session.

The Icebreaker as an adult learning strategy.

According to Rogers (1969), an effective adult learning process depends on a) Complete participation of the learner in the learning process giving him/her ample control over it b) Directly linked to the social/practical and cultural challenges and environment that the learner lives and works in. c) The learner can assess his progress or success through Self-evaluation

Ice breakers are flexible and give freedom to the instructors to tune it to achieve the outcomes which have been planned. May instructional methods fall into the “one size fits all” category and thus become ineffective instructional strategies. Since the types of icebreakers are varied, they are flexible in nature, which eliminates the danger of the “one-size model”. “Information that goes into the learner’s memory will likely be remembered if the teacher provides opportunities in the session for activities such as application exercises and discussions.” (Zemke & Zemke, 1995)

The advantages of using an Icebreaker

- Allows participants’ to get acquainted with each other.
- Helps participants “warm-up” and feel at ease with each other.
- Gives the instructor/trainer understand the expectations of the participants.
- Helps the instructor to introduce the session and set the pace for the program.
- Adds “fizz’ into the program, particularly when the session has become monotonous or uninteresting.

How to Develop an Ice Breaker and use it effectively?

1. The most important factor to keep in mind is the duration of the training session. For a week long residential training programme, an ice breaker is crucial since the trainees have to interact for a longer while .So the length of the ice breaker must be decided, relative to the length of the training session. "Keep in mind that with adult learners, the facilitator should talk and present 60-70% of the time. Thus, your time for trainee participation, including the ice breaker, is 30-40% of the training time."(Ulrich and Smallwood:2012) Even if the training session is just for a day, an ice breaker for about 15 minutes will create the learning ambience. Ideally for a two day session an ice breaker lasting for about 25 minutes, would set the stage for the two days to come.
2. Understand the target group. Develop the ice breaker, depending on the age, interests, and preferences of the participants. For example a very mature audience who already are familiar with each other may not understand the relevance of a very simplistic ice breaker which includes some almost "juvenile" tasks.
3. Understand the purpose of the icebreaker. Is it because the group is not known to each other and therefore the icebreaker needs to create a sense of familiarity between them? If the participants already know each other well, then you can use those ice breakers where the participants can utilize such information about each other. When participants know each other and work together, an ice breaker could focus around a discussion related to the theme of the training programme and how it is related to or affects their work. Some ice breakers can give the trainer an idea of the expectation that the group has from the programme, then the ice breaker should be developed accordingly. Ice breakers can also be utilized as a prologue to the trainer as to how he /she may have to manage the trainees giving an insight of what they already know or have experienced. Or, is the goal to let the attendees participate in an activity that will demonstrate insights about the participants' functioning together? The ice breaker can combine any of these goals; it is up to the trainer to utilize the ice breaker to match the goals to the needs and preferences of the trainees.
4. Should it be a Physical Activity or a Classroom Session? This question obviously is related to the second question – the target group. In an Outward Bound Training Session, the Ice Breaker is definitely going to involve physical activity, where as a training programme of two or more days duration can involve an ice breaker having some sort of physical activity. Physical Movement in the class room too is appreciated by many participants, it could be as simple an activity as asking participants to take something out of a bag and find their table partners, those who drew the same object out of the bag. Younger the participants, more the action oriented the ice breaker can be.
5. Link the ice breaker to the main focus of the training programme. The trainer would gain enormously when he /she tries to reinforce your training with the Ice Breaker. The first step would be to identify a concept that is central to the training topic and develop the ice breaker around it. For example if the training session is about team building, then the ice breaker could focus on an activity or discussion which brings out their best and worst experiences with teams .This could also help the trainer to discuss with the trainees (later during the actual session), how to manage or come out of such tricky situations .A leadership seminar, participants can be asked to identify a leader/role model and why they were influenced by him or her.
6. Should the ice breaker be held only during the beginning of a training programme?

Though ideally and as the name suggests ice breakers are used at the beginning of a training programme, it can be used whenever the trainer feels for that for some reason , "the chill" has set in. Sometimes the training sessions get a bit too serious or monotonous. The icebreaker is an ideal way to pump some energy back into the participant's and liven them up. The post lunch session, usually referred to as the "graveyard shift" can begin with a short icebreaker. Icebreakers motivate all members to participate, generating a bond based on the shared objective. Icebreakers used in between the programme, especially when the programme is dull, uninteresting or going out of focus are called as "reenergizers". Such activities help getting the session back into focus, reinfusion of energy and enthusiasm. (Boatman, 1991). Icebreakers and Reenergizers can facilitate members to share information and communicate better with each other. (Zwaagstra, 1997).

Precautions to take when using an icebreaker:-

1. Duration – The duration of the icebreaker must be long enough to allow participants feel at ease but must not be stretched since there is a danger of the main objective of the programme being diverted.
2. Whatever the objective of the ice breaker may be (getting acquainted, giving information, completing a task given, gathering and giving information, discussing an issue), the trainer /facilitator must try to ensure active participation of all the individuals. The icebreaker may also be used as a reenergizer – bringing energy into a dull session or a bored learner.
3. Icebreakers cannot be effective if they are instructor centered. They have to be designed and used to be participant centered. No doubt it means that the trainer has to have the skills to draw everyone to participate.
4. Some individuals take longer to mingle and hesitate to get involved in activities. The trainer/instructor must be sensitive to such individuals, so that do not "mentally switch off" from the programme. One way to do this is to gently persuade them to participate, failing which the trainer can give them a task like an "observer" or reporter. Ideally ice breakers must be designed in such a way that all participants get involved and feel comfortable with the group.

Conclusion

Interaction is a vital constituent of learning. A trainer who is more interactive with his participants tends to understand his group more and enables him to be more effective. This happens because the participants feel more comfortable with an interactive trainer. The icebreaker is the perfect stage for the interaction to take off. The trainer has to prepare for the icebreaker, how he is going to conduct it and be ready for deviations if any. Conducted effectively, the ice breaker has the potential to lay the foundation for a highly effective training programme.

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