

An Icebreaker from the University of Wisconsin Technical Instructor Institutes:

"What's your favorite TV show?"

INTRODUCTION:

Icebreakers are student exercises that are used to "loosen up the class", help students to begin to talk to each other and allow students to have some fun at the beginning of the class. In short, its purpose is get the class off to a enjoyable start.

They also can be used to give the instructor an early view of the instructional strategies that could be used with the class.

Designing an Icebreaker that can be used in technical training classes poses several particular problems. Technical students tend to be more "fact oriented" and some of the softer icebreakers are not appropriate for this audience.

At the University of Wisconsin Technical Instructor Institutes we have experimented using different types of icebreakers ranging from content course menus to hands-on lab type activities. We have discovered that technical audiences enjoy icebreakers that are oriented around projects, hobbies or other activities that will help them to make "contact" with their fellow students.

One of the more popular icebreakers that we have used is the "What's Your Favorite TV Show?" exercise. It never fails to produce some humor, relaxes the students prior to a training class and can give the trainer a good picture of their class.

PROCESS:

1. Tell the class that "we will start off with a short exercise so that we can get to know each other a little better." Ask if anyone in the class watches television. Generally there will be some laughter and a little discussion of the quality of television programming. Keep the class focused on the task and don't let them wander into a discussion of television programming.

2. Make sure that each student has a pencil and a piece of paper. Ask them to write down their favorite TV program. Because these are technical students there will be questions ranging from "Our favorite program or the one we watch the most?" to "I don't watch any television, what do I do?" Handle each of these questions the best you can, but manage to get each student to write down their favorite TV program.

3. Ask the students if they would share their favorite selections with the class. After you receive agreement go around the room and ask each student what their favorite program is. Use

a flip chart to record the answers. Be careful; do not make any value judgements on the programs selected, nor should you allow other students to make any value judgements. Let the students choose any program they wish, even if it is not an "acceptable" program for the training environment. From experience students will choose programs ranging from news and sports to wrestling and all types of movies.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN TECHNICAL INSTRUCTOR INSTITUTES

Founded over 26 years ago as part of the School of Business of the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, the institute is the oldest and largest training organization directed exclusively towards training technical instructors. During our on-campus and in-house seminars we have trained over 15,000 technical instructors in training techniques, instructional design, training management, and evaluation techniques. For information see the back page of this icebreaker or call Gus Gustafson, Technical Instructor Institute Director at:

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4. Arrange the programs on the flip chart in categories such as:

- Sitcoms
- News
- Sports
- Drama shows
- Movies
- Hobby shows (fishing, woodworking)
- Science fiction

The classification of the student responses is less important than the listing of each of the shows; you may not get a show in each category. We suggest that you do not write the categories first but that you write the shows in groups around the flip chart and then label the groups. If more than one student mentions a show simply put a tick or count mark next to the show.

5. Close the exercise with several comments about the student selections such as:

- "Star Trek is a good program- what is your favorite episode?"
- "What do you like best about 'This Old House' ?"
- "Who is the best wrestler in the WWF?"

Use any questions that will spark conversation and start students talking to each other. Again, be careful of any value judgements concerning the shows. It is important that you do not impose or appear to impose any of your show selection values on the students.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. As an alternative topic, other than television shows, you may use hobbies, music, or any other activity. However we have found that none of these activities have the universality of television viewing. Also, students seem to be able to discuss their viewing habits more easily than any of the other activities.

2. An alternative way of collecting the shows is to collect the pieces of paper and write them on the flip chart yourself. After finishing you can ask which students voted for which shows.

3. A second alternative method of collecting the information is to place several sheets of flip chart paper on the wall. Label each with the type of show, such as sitcoms, drama, science

fiction, etc. Ask all the students to stand up and go to a piece of paper and write their favorite show. Tell them that they will have only two minutes to do this and that they get only one vote, they can't write on more than one sheet of paper. This alternative is useful for very large classes or classes where you want the students to work off some energy by moving around.

4. A third alternative method of collecting the names of the shows is to dispense with the paper and pencil and simply go around the room and ask each student for their favorite show. This saves some time but allows the first several students to set the tone for the rest of the class. We have found that these first two or three students can severely influence the proceeding students selections and in some cases will make the entire exercise invalid.

ANALYSIS:

The instructor can gather much information about their class from this exercise. There are several specific things that the instructor should look for:

1. The amount of effort that it takes to do the exercise: In some classes of technical students, it will be very difficult to get the class to participate in this exercise. You will have to work hard at getting the students to respond, it will feel like you are "pulling teeth". Other classes will participate immediately, and you may have to control the class in order to end the exercise. Both of these are excellent clues as to the dynamics of the class and are a good indicator of the types of instructional exercises that should be used with the class.

2. The truthfulness of the selections: In each class there should be a wide selection of shows. Sometimes students change their selections in order to fit-in with the majority of the class. At times it is possible to detect this from side discussions in the class or from the look on the students' face. Some times it is appropriate to announce that you will collect the papers and use them to generate the list of shows. (See data collection alternative #2).

If truthfulness is a problem you may be working with a class that is under organizational pressure to conform to a single standard or with

a class that has a very powerful informal leader. As an instructor you must take this behavior into account when you perform labs or any type of evaluation.

3. The types of shows selected: It is dangerous to generalize and stereotype student behavior from a selection of TV shows. However, as an indicator of instructional techniques which should be used with the class this type of information can be priceless. We have not performed any statistical studies on selection of show vs. attitude or competency level of students, but we do have some antidotal feelings, several of which are explained below:

Classes that have a majority of students who choose favorite shows such as news, CNN and The Weather Channel seem to be very serious, "big picture" types of students. These students require tremendous amounts of information and will push an instructor to the limits of their knowledge.

Classes where a majority of students choose hobby programs, such as "This Old House", the Bass Channel, or cooking shows tend to be very active students and require large amounts of hands-on time in order to satisfy their needs. They are less tolerant of long periods of lecture, but will put up with it if they can see the direct connection with the lab assignments.

Classes where a majority of students choose sitcoms or other light shows tend to be quiet in the classroom but more boisterous, sometimes uncontrollable, in the lab. They are less anxious to experiment and are not self-starters in the lab. This type of student is more tolerant of lecture (sometimes sleeping) and needs more frequent breaks. They do not have the staying power to dig through heavy materials.

Classes where the majority of students choose heavy drama shows or movie mysteries tend to accept long periods of lecture providing that they are cognitively challenged during that time period. They also perform well in the lab and most importantly, have the staying power to dig through heavy cognitive materials.

We train Instructors at the Technical Instructors Institute to realize that every class is different

and a well prepared instructor has several versions of each piece of content ready to meet the instructional needs of any class. We have no guarantee that classes that choose types of television programs will act in a particular way, but at the beginning of a class the instructor needs some information on which to base their initial instructional decisions.

ATTENTION SPAN:

There has been some research done concerning the effects of television on the attention span of the viewers. It is not the purpose of this icebreaker to discuss that effect in depth, but in his article "Is Television Shortening our Attention Span", Robert MacNeil stated that television "*encourages serial...exposure...you consume not what you choose...but what they choose*" In terms of our training techniques, we have been drifting towards shorter "chunks" of information for fear that our students will not be able to keep up with us. It certainly can be inferred, but not guaranteed, that the thinking styles of your students will be influenced by their favorite television programming.

CONCLUSION:

Icebreakers can be a very important part of your training class. It can start the class off with the right attitude, a little laughter and some fun. The "What's Your Favorite Television Program" icebreaker has been tested over many years of use, and has always proved to be a useful exercise, from both the student and the instructor viewpoint.

With the caution that it is very dangerous to generalize students' behavior from a list of television shows, this icebreaker can be a useful asset in your instructional toolkit.

REFERENCES:

Robert MacNeil, "*Is Television Shortening Our Attention Span?*" in Fall 1987 International Forum, pp. 21-23
Irwin Ross, "*What Your Hobby Reveals*", in *Sky*, February 1979, pp 24-26