

## 10 Activities that Create a Positive Learning Environment

by [Christopher Roe](#)

Making connections to students at any level is a key factor in student success when it comes to the content they are learning, and in your enjoyment as a teacher. Changes come and go in education, this much we know. We have to keep our mindset clear as to *why* we do what we do.

When my student teachers began complaining about working with their master teachers, I took a semester sabbatical and became a substitute teacher to see why. It became clear to me that the student teachers, just beginning their careers, were watching their master teachers and seeing no joy in teaching. I also saw that the kids weren't having much fun, either. We had spent so much time on the changing curriculum and assessing the students on what they should have learned that we forgot to connect with them. We forgot that students need a reason to learn the content we are presenting to them. We also forgot that in order for kids to connect with the curriculum, they have to connect with one another and with you, their teacher.

I realized that many students don't know one another within their own classes, even far into the academic year. Class after class, students did not help one another with content, even after I asked those in command of the content to assist those struggling. In one class, where I was subbing for an award-winning teacher, a student was struggling with both language and content but refused to ask any other student for help. I was shocked. I couldn't believe that, in this classroom, students had no connection with one another, and there was no sense of community.

From that point forward, when I subbed, I made a point of doing connecting activities. This way, students could feel like they knew others in the room and make connections with other students outside of class, as well.

Here are 10 simple ways to build community within your classroom. These will help to break down barriers, make connections among students, and provide a bit of levity within the room when you just need a break to laugh together. These can be done weekly, before lessons, during lessons, or at the end of your period. They provide a more connected learning environment, and they involve listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

When trying out these activities, it is important to lay the groundwork first: Get all students comfortable talking together or working in small groups. Once you've established how to create groups, these strategies can become routine with your classes. Simply state the name of the strategy and students will know what is expected. All of these activities can be used for all levels of ELs, and sentence frames can be provided for lower-level ELs if necessary.

### Getting to Know You

#### 1. Keys Please

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Team building
<b>Activity</b>	In small groups, students take out their keys and share with others what the keys are used for.

	After all share, they discuss commonalities.
<b>Variations</b>	Writing about keys; drawing what keys open.

## 2. Cell Phones Allowed

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Team building
<b>Activity</b>	In small groups, students take out their cell phones (everyone’s got them!), and share what their last text or phone call was. After all share, they discuss commonalities.
<b>Variations</b>	Write out the text in abbreviated form and then in expanded form.

## Content Related (and Getting to Know You)

### 3. Busta Move!

<b>Risk Level</b>	High: Team building
<b>Activity</b>	Everyone moves to act out a particular concept, idea, or emotion. Students can do solo “in place” (sit or stand), or they can work together to make one “move.” Isolate one body part to start, to ease students into the activity. A “signature move” can be used at the end of a unit or lesson, and no language is necessary! This can be done before, during, or after a lesson.
<b>Content Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PE: SHOW me the motion to shoot a basket</li> <li>• English: SHOW me an expression from <i>Pride &amp; Prejudice</i></li> <li>• Social Studies: SHOW me how the French felt at end of WWII. How about the Germans?</li> <li>• Art/Music: SHOW me a pose from your favorite artist/composer</li> <li>• Bio. Sciences: SHOW me a pollywog transitioning to a frog</li> <li>• Earth Sciences: SHOW me a plateau</li> <li>• Math: SHOW me Pi</li> <li>• World Languages: SHOW me a food item</li> </ul>

### 4. FRAME It

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Content related and ice breaker
<b>Activity</b>	On board, provide a way to phrase a sentence necessary for lesson comprehension; the sentence should reveal something about the students.

	<p>Example:          “I feel (1)_____ when I am doing          (2)_____ because (3)_____.”          You can provide optional word banks to help students, and this can be done before, during, or after a lesson.          The word bank list for this example could include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. happy, sad, mad, glad, positive, uplifted</li> <li>2. sports, homework, my chores</li> <li>3. it makes me productive, I like the way I feel, I dislike doing it.</li> </ol>
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### 5. Move & Groove (You will be more embarrassed than your students)

<b>Risk Level</b>	Medium/High: Content related
<b>Activity</b>	Students (at your direction) have 20 seconds to connect with a classmate, then 1 minute to create a “move” or “groove” based on their interpretation of content: a rhyme, rap, or poem, or a move, such as showing parallel lines with their arms in math, or writing a poem with one reason for the start of WWII, that symbolizes content connection. Choose volunteers to share with the class.
<b>Variations</b>	Add words to the move/groove; connect pairs to build a group presentation act.

### 6. Musical Shares

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Ice breaker or content related
<b>Activity</b>	Similar to musical chairs, students pass around three or four share cards (share cards, or any device you choose, give students the right to speak if they are holding one). As music is played, cards are passed around until the music stops. Students holding the cards when music stops share one thing about their weekend, previous evening, or the content.
<b>Variations</b>	Students must connect their own comment to the previous comment.

### 7. Draw It, Tell It

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Content related
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<b>Activity</b>	This is a visual KWL (what I know, what I want to know, what I learned) chart. Students draw a concept of the lesson (their interpretation), and then explain it to a small group. This may be used as an informal assessment.
<b>Variations</b>	May give students parameters (must include...may include...); connect to part of lesson that comes before or after.

### 8. Picture Please!

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Content related
<b>Activity</b>	In groups, students take a picture that is meant to represent or symbolize one significant event. For example, when studying the Roman Empire, students depict one event under study to pose and share with the class. In science, students can “show” the process for photosynthesis. The group must first discuss the event, then choose how best to represent it to the class; the class guesses which event is depicted. This activity is to be done before or after a lesson.
<b>Variations</b>	Teacher can assign significant event; can be done using no language.

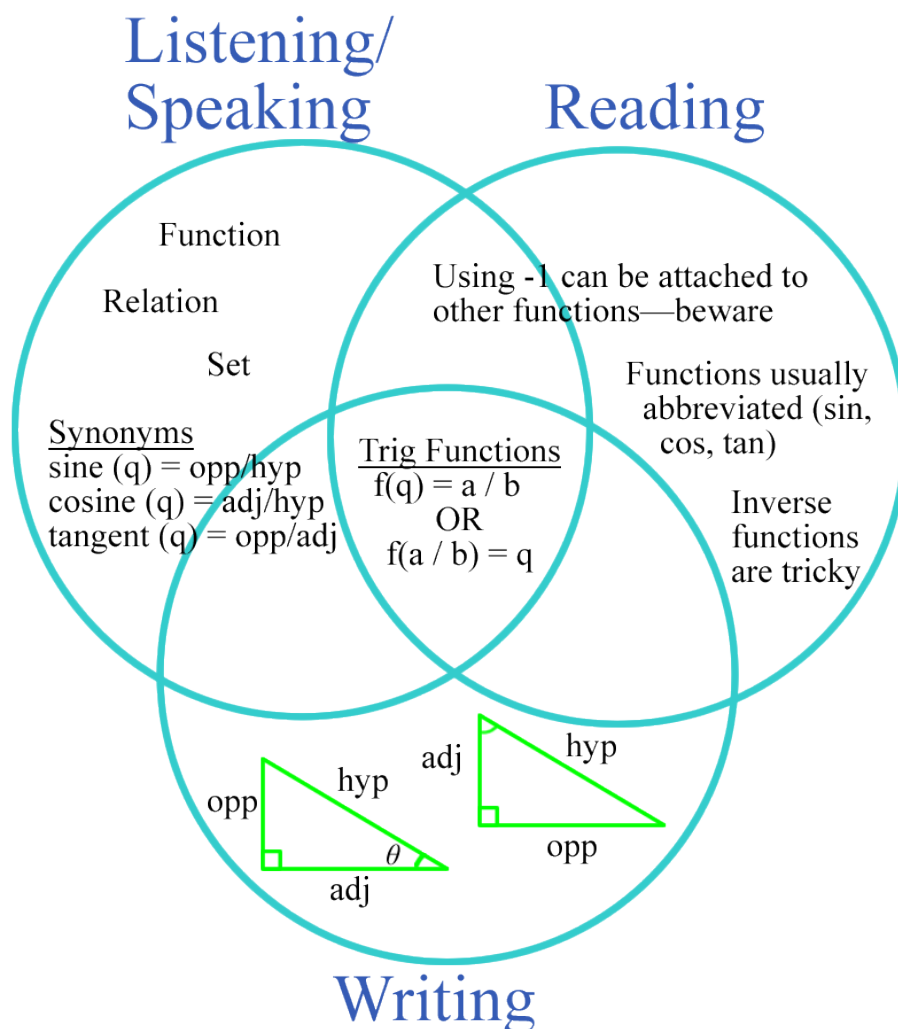
### 9. He Said, She Said

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: Ice breaker or content related
<b>Activity</b>	Students sit in groups of three. One student shares one concept learned from content and explains it to his or her partner. The partner turns and explains it to the third partner. After the third partner hears what has been told, it is then shared with the class.
<b>Variations</b>	All students write down what was said; teacher can assign what will be shared; could involve getting to know you topics rather than content.

### 10. VENN-afit

<b>Risk Level</b>	Low: content related
<b>Activity</b>	In pairs, students complete one large Venn diagram with three circles, and label the circles “listening/speaking,” “reading,” and “writing.” Students connect how they “got” the content of the lesson with common areas overlapping for

	multiple connections. See example in Figure 1.
<b>Variations</b>	Provide key words in vocabulary box.



**Figure 1. Trig Functions**

In this example for math, the Listening/Speaking circle would include what was discussed in the lecture and what questions were asked for clarification. Students write down what they heard in order to solve the problem using the formula. In the Reading circle, students write down what the book says or what was written on the board for instructions. In the Writing circle, students write down examples. Crossovers would include areas where information in a circle was received in more than one way. These can also be noted by using an arrow pointing to connections. (Mathematics information retrieved from <http://www.math.com/tables/algebra/functions/trig/functions.htm>)

Creating a positive learning environment in the classroom takes little effort, but makes a huge impact on student learning. Using these tools and others you discover along the way will make learning in your classroom creative and fun, and will keep the students focused on what is most

important—gaining content knowledge. See the Appendix for some ideas on how to make further connections with students, community, content, and culture.

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