



Creating Connection to Enable Deep Discussion

Steven Covey's cult classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* advises: "seek first to understand, then to be understood." To know and to be known are core to who we are as teachers, learners, and colleagues. These processes of understanding and being understood rely on a foundation of interpersonal connection.

While interpersonal connection comes easily to some and is facilitated in some situations more than others, it can be difficult for students to cultivate interpersonal connection--or closeness--in classroom settings that can feel both anonymous and transitory. In such cases, it can be near impossible to convince students to take the interpersonal risks of sharing diverse viewpoints, admitting the limits of their own knowledge, or expressing genuine curiosity about the experiences and perspectives of others.

Fear not. Social psychology can help. To ready students for the interpersonal tasks of knowing and being known, professors can dedicate an hour of class time to the goal of facilitating interpersonal connection among their students. The activity below, based on Arthur Aron and colleagues' experimental study, offers an effective approach.

Step 1.

Prepare copies of the attached handout for your class.

Step 2.

Randomly assign students into pairs. Or, provide students the opportunity to share via a questionnaire their attitudes and beliefs about social and political issues before this session. Then, pair students together who hold divergent views on potentially controversial topics.

Step 3.

Give the students roughly 45 minutes to complete the reciprocal self-disclosure activity described in the handout.

Step 4.

Reconvene the students for a short discussion about their experience. Suggested discussion questions include:

- What did you notice about the types of questions included here? How were these question sets organized? *Key insights: progressively riskier, ask about core aspects of the self*
- What types of things did you and/or your interaction partner say or do that made you feel close? *Key insights: eye contact, asked follow-up questions, nodded when I shared, shared about themselves, expressed concern*
- Did you learn something about this person you don't already know about your best friend? A close family member? *Fun fact: Aron et al (1997) found this short, experimental task resulted in participants feeling closer to their interaction partner—a total stranger-- than the typical closest relationship of 30% of similar students.*

- What do you think the question at the beginning and end of the handout intends to measure? *[Answer: This is the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale. It is a single item pictorial measure of closeness. Although simple, it correlates with much more complex scales of feeling and behaving close and also predicts behaviors associated with closeness, such as sharing resources and taking the other person's perspective.]*
- What features of this activity do you think might promote the interpersonal connection? *Key insights: reciprocal, escalating, self-revealing*
- What ideas do you have for exporting these features into your daily interactions? *Examples: Ask these questions of friends and family, try asking them of strangers instead of engaging in small talk, share aspects of yourself as a way of inviting others to do the same*

Citations

Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 596-612.

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997). The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 363-377.

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