

Community Building Through “About Me” Introductory PowerPoint Slides

Establishing a sense of community in larger, introductory courses (such as Material and Energy Balances) can be a challenge. Students come from many backgrounds and likely do not know one another. Cultivating this classroom community is vitally important to help students feel included and give them a sense of belonging in the engineering curriculum.^[1] In-class “icebreaker” activities are beneficial, but coaxing participation from students is often taxing. These activities can be logistically difficult and time-consuming for larger (>30 students), shorter (50-minute) classes. The information exchanged is seldom recorded and prone to being forgotten. A creative alternative to the traditional “icebreaker” activity is presented here.

For the first homework assignment, each student creates a single “about me” introductory Microsoft PowerPoint® slide, containing (1) an appropriate photo clearly showing the student’s face, (2) the student’s preferred first and last names with a phonetic pronunciation guide, and (3) at least one interesting fact or hobby. Students may include additional information, such as hometown, personal interests, and pronouns. The author’s example slide is shown in Figure 1. This activity promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by encouraging students to impart aspects of their identity and background to the classroom community. Instructors may use the assignment as an opportunity to directly address the expectations and importance of DEI.

The slide format permits compilation of a virtual “yearbook” for the class, which is posted in PDF format on the course Canvas® page. Such aggregation is an implicit reminder that every student belongs in our community. (Students with privacy concerns may request omission from the distributed version but must complete the assignment).

The assignment and finished yearbook are useful in several contexts. First, students are given a platform to introduce themselves that does not require on-the-spot thinking or public speaking. They may take their time to craft their slide, alleviating some of the stress associated with meeting new people. The yearbook’s documentation and dissemination means that information may be referenced by others instead of potentially forgotten. Students might browse for fellow students with similar backgrounds or shared hobbies. These are potential conversation starters for those who are uncomfortable or nervous when approaching new people. The class yearbook is also quite handy for instructors when learning students’ names. It is easy to study quickly, like a set of flash cards. It far outperforms the registrar-provided class roster, which likely contains only legal names, sans pronunciations or pronouns. Some universities may only provide poor quality or outdated photographs (if included at all). Sometimes the personal details can act as mnemonic devices for remembering others’ names.

Since 2018 this activity has been incorporated into every offering of Material and Energy Balances and Separation and Mass Transfer Operations courses taught by the author, spanning fourteen courses/semesters and a variety of modalities (in-person only, online only, and hybrid). It has been especially handy for hybrid courses, in which students might sporadically attend class in person and may attend virtual classes without a webcam.

Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many students surprised when called on by name early in the semester. Such actions demonstrate that the faculty member cares for the students, improving the likelihood of student success and positive teaching evaluations.^[2,3] Some representative comments from the author’s teaching evaluations and student feedback intimate that students recognize and appreciate this effort:

“... [Dr. Tocco] has shown genuine care to the class by putting much effort into learning by heart all his students’ names.”

“[Dr. Tocco] made sure to learn all of our names which made it very easy to come talk to him.”

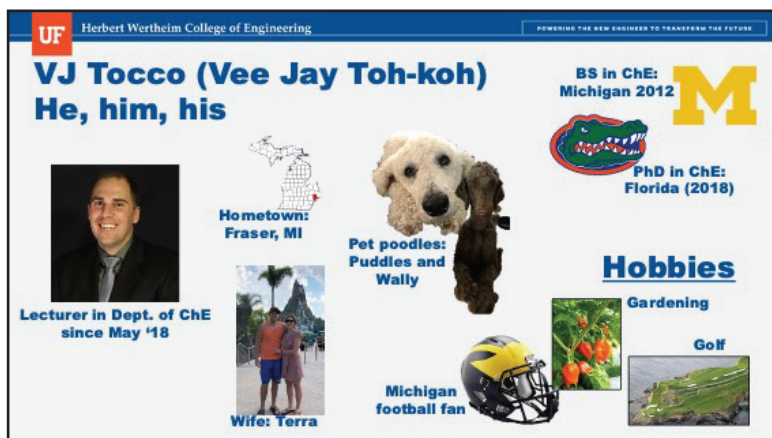


Figure 1. An example “about me” slide by the author.

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