

## Chapter 2

### Relationships with Fellow Students

#### Factoids

- ❖ Students at the University of York in England drink more alcohol than any other university in the UK - the equivalent of nearly five liters of lager per week.
- ❖ In the US, the average college student attends 62 parties per year.
- ❖ Brigham Young University in Provo (Utah, USA) holds the record for being the US university where you are most likely to meet your future spouse.
- ❖ Students in the USA of Asian origin tend to be considered to be more studious than other students, while 'American' students tend to ask more questions in class.
- ❖ Undergraduates in the USA often form fraternities and sororities, which are single-sex organizations for male and female students, respectively. The names of these groups are often taken from Greek letters (alpha, beta etc) and their members are sometimes known as 'Greeks'.
- ❖ The University of Cambridge in England has over 400 registered clubs and societies for students.
- ❖ The Indira Gandhi National Open University located in Delhi India has the highest number of enrolled students - nearly 3.5 million. The top 10 universities by student numbers are located in India, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nepal.
- ❖ Estonia holds the record for the highest proportion of female graduates - more than two thirds are women.
- ❖ It costs a minimum of \$300-400 per month to cover living expenses while studying in Russia.
- ❖ The Japanese word *ronin* means a 'masterless samurai' and refers to those students who fail the entrance examination to their university of their choice, and then spend an entire year or longer, studying for a second attempt to gain entrance.
- ❖ Michael Kearney is the US's youngest ever college student. At the age of 10 he was awarded a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of South Alabama.

## 2.1 What's the buzz?

1) An icebreaker is a question or statement designed to 'break the ice', i.e. to start a conversation. Look at the icebreakers below, decide which ones you might use yourself when talking to a fellow student who you haven't met before and who is sitting near you in class for a course whose first lesson is today.

1. Do you know what time we're supposed to finish today?
2. It's so cold here don't you think?
3. Did you see the match last night?
4. Were you at the freshmen's party?
5. Where's everybody else?
6. Do you know anything about the prof who's taking this course?

2) Imagine you wanted to find out information from a fellow student about the following:

- where to get a good pizza
- an inexpensive vegetarian restaurant
- cheap places to buy food
- cafès
- music venues
- bookstores
- sports halls

Think of a question you could ask about each place, excluding asking for details about their location and how to get there.

3) Imagine you are just about to start a new course with a professor (instructor) you know nothing about. Who and what would you ask to find out:

- what the instructor is like
- how much help the instructor gives participants
- how difficult the course will be

- how much preparation is required
- what attendees need to bring with them to class
- what kind of assignments the instructor gives
- how interactive the class is
- who will be on the course
- when the exams are
- what grades students normally get
- what happens if you miss class

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This chapter deals with how to establish a relationship with other students. It covers

- how to introduce yourself and break the ice
- typical areas of conversation and areas to avoid
- establishing a sense of solidarity with other students
- being curious about where people come from
- understanding what is and is not acceptable to talk about

More details on the mechanics of having a conversation can be found in Chapter 7.

This chapter does not cover: relationships that become more personal, the norms for how close to stand to someone when talking to them (personal space), the norms for touching/hugging and kissing/greeting other people. These aspects are outside the scope of this book, but are nevertheless key aspects of life on campus.

To learn more see Chapters 5 and 6 in the *International Students' Survival Guide* published by HarperCollins and available online.

## 2.2 How should I introduce myself?

You can introduce yourself in various ways.

Hi.

Hi. Richard.

Hi, I'm Richard.

Hi, I'm Richard Jones.

Hello I'm Richard Jones.

Good morning I am Richard Jones.

Anglos say their first name (*Richard*) followed, in more formal situations, by their family name (*Jones*).

If someone from the academic staff asks *What is your name?* you would normally reply with both first and family name, but with a fellow student you can just say your first / given name.

Anglos often give their own name rather than directly asking the interlocutor for his/her name. This may take place several minutes into the conversation, particularly if the conversation appears to be worth continuing. A typical introduction is:

By the way, I'm Kalinda.

By the way, my name is Kalinda Abbas.

Sorry, I have not introduced myself - I'm Kalinda Abbas from Pakistan.

At this point you would be expected to reply with your name.

Pleased to meet you. I'm Zahra Rahman. I'm from Iran.

If you didn't hear the name of the person you have just been introduced to you can say:

Sorry, I didn't catch your name.

Sorry, I didn't get your name clearly. Can you spell it for me?

Sorry, how do you pronounce your name?

Don't be reluctant to ask for a repetition of the name. We all like it when people remember and use our name, we feel important and consequently we are more responsive to people who remember it.

## 2.3 What questions do students typically ask each other when they have just met?

Three typical question areas are: i) where you are from, ii) where you are living on campus or in town, iii) which courses you have signed up for. It is important not just to ask the question, but also to comment on the answer or ask a follow-up question (to learn more about this see Chapter 7.5).

Here are three example conversations - they should read vertically not horizontally.

So where are you from?	So are you living on campus?	So what other courses have you signed up for?
From Estonia.	No, actually I am sharing a flat with some friends.	Statistical analysis, IPR, sustainability economics ...
Estonia. Pardon my ignorance but where is that exactly?	Oh really, so you're living in the town?	Wow I am doing exactly the same ones. We'll be seeing a lot of each other!
Eastern Europe near Russia. And you?	Yes, what about you?	

Note how the initial question begins with *so*, which is used to signal that you want to introduce a new topic. Note also how in the first two examples, the person who was initially answering the questions, ends by saying *and you?* - the idea is to have a balanced conversation rather than a police interrogation!

Be careful not to ask questions such as:

What are your hobbies?

What plans do you have for the future?

Which football club do you support?

The problem is not the questions are impolite - they are not. But if you ask such questions you are making the implicit assumption that your interlocutor has specific hobbies and specific plans, or is interested in football. Such questions are not very appropriate as conversation starters and are better rephrased as:

What do you like doing in your spare time? Do you have any particular hobbies?

So, do you have any particular plans for the future?

Are you interested in football? Do you support any particular team?

However, if a topic such as football has already been introduced into the conversation then you could ask a more direct question:

So which football club do you support?

Again, the use of *so* at the beginning of a question helps to make the question less direct.

Such exchanges enable you and your interlocutor to:

- get used to each other's accents and style of speaking. You are not giving each other essential information, so it does not matter at this point if you do not understand everything you say to each other
- find your voice in English
- make a connection with each other
- learn a little personal information that you might be able to refer to in future conversations
- make some positive comments about each other

To learn more useful phrases when first meeting someone see Chapter [14.11](#).

## 2.4 How can I find out more about my fellow students?

One way of making friends and learning new things at the same time is to find out what students study who are outside your own research group.

You can develop a relationship by finding out more about what someone does and what they are interested in and passionate about. It helps if you can think of good questions to ask them that will help you to understand the person better and at the same time strengthen a relationship.

Let's imagine that you met a student at a party and you found him/her very friendly. You later discover that he/she is learning sign language (i.e. the system of communication using gestures and signs by deaf people).

Think of five questions that you could ask him / her.

Now look at the conversation below between someone who is studying sign language (what they say is in *italics*) and another person (in normal script). As you read note:

1. which of your questions were asked
2. how the questioner shows interest
3. how the questioner uses the other person's answers to take the conversation forwards

You will need to read the piece at least twice in order to analyse the three points above.

So you're learning to sign. How are you getting on?

*It's hard because signing is not based on the spoken language, so they say things in a completely different order. I think that when you have been used to doing things the same way all your life and you have to start thinking in a completely different way it's a real challenge.*

I think people usually perceive deafness as being very limiting.

*Yes, well I went in there expecting sign language to be quite primitive and discovered that there is an entire literature, poetry, plays, a whole culture in fact.*

Presumably sign language is very visual.

*Yes, you've got a lot of signs that paint a picture. The sign for a biscuit is bashing my elbow onto my left hand.*

So how's that got anything to do with a biscuit?

*A hundred years or so ago when a lot of deaf people were in institutions they used to give them such hard biscuits that they used to have to break them with their elbows.*

So these signs have their own history?

*Right.*

Wow. And is sign language international?

*No it isn't. We are used to thinking of American and British English as being pretty much the same thing so you can imagine it came as some surprise to me to discover that American sign language is actually much closer to French sign language than it is to British sign language.*

To French? That's weird. And is there an equivalent to slang?

*Yes, both slang and swear words. For example, you've got your thumbs up which is good, but if you put your little finger up that is bad, you know, vulgar.*

So you can shock people using sign language?

*Definitely, and I never thought that deaf people would be able to shout or sing. To shout they make much larger signs and more pronounced facial expressions. And I've watched choirs singing in church, and the signs, the movements change, they really become like song.*

So can they even do other types of music, you know like rap?

*Yeah, with rap they have a much punchier use of their signs. It takes a while for a hearing audience to get used to not focusing on the sound, but the movements are so fluid and full of meaning that in the end it kind of exists in its own right.*

To learn more about conducting effective conversations see Chapter 7.

## **2.5 How can I establish a feeling of solidarity with my fellow students? i) coursework and exams**

One way that people create strong relationships with each other is to share some experience of hardship or suffering, or by meeting a difficult challenge. When trying to create a new work group, businesses, sports clubs and schools often arrange team-building activities. Such activities can involve potentially dangerous situations such as climbing and sailing, where all members have to work together to ensure the safety of everyone and the success of the task.

In the world of academia such bonding (i.e. creating close ties with other people) is often unconsciously conducted by sharing the various difficulties of academic life - impossible assignments, impossibly difficult tests and impossible professors:

1. We had to answer 15 questions in less than 20 minutes.
2. What about that last question? How were we expected to know the answer?
3. It's almost like she wants to torture us.
4. Professor Mengel can be really mean in class, don't you think?

You also need to be able to answer such questions or comments. This shows that you are empathizing with the other person. Here are some possible answers to 1-4 above.

1. You've got to be kidding. / You've joking.
2. Exactly. / I didn't even bother trying to answer it.
3. Yes, torture us. It's either that, or this is her way to get us to study.
4. Well at least he's not as mean as that calculus lecturer.

Note the different answering / commenting strategies used: 1) reacting to something that you didn't share but which you can imagine; 2) agreeing, then saying what you did; 3) agreeing, then offering an alternative explanation; 4) mildly disagreeing and adding your own perspective.

You can also share in other people's difficulties (as in 1) above where you are not directly involved yourself. So if someone says *I have got to hand in the assignment tomorrow and I've still got 30 pages to write*, you can offer various reactions:

5. How are you going to manage?
6. That does sound a lot of work.
7. Can you not ask the prof for an extension to the deadline?
8. I had a similar problem last month, I went to speak to the prof in person, I think that's better than sending an email - it makes you seem that you are taking the problem seriously. In the end, she gave me an extra week.

In 5) and 6) you are just showing empathy. In 7) you make a suggestion, and in 8) you not only provide a solution but you also prove that your solution has worked (at least for you). In any case, in all four cases you show that you are a sympathetic listener and thus increase your chances of cementing the relationship.

You can establish better relationships if you ensure that the focus is not always on you. So if you have explained a difficulty and your fellow student has made his / her comment, then you can try and make him / her the focus by saying:

What about you, how are you getting on with the assignment?

I remember that you had the same professor last semester, how did you manage him?

## 2.6 How can I establish a feeling of solidarity with my fellow students? ii) everyday life on campus

You can use the strategies outlined in the previous subsection to bond with fellow students in non-academic situations as well.

Possible difficulties that students have on campus are:

- financial (the cost of accommodation, courses, food, alcohol, etc)
- difficulties with room mates (too noisy, too intrusive, poor hygiene habits, etc)
- health issues (allergies, intolerances, headaches) etc.

You can react by showing sympathy:

Yeah, that must be really hard / tough / difficult.

I can imagine how hard that must be.

Really? I am sorry to hear that.

That's too bad / really unlucky.

So how do you manage / cope?

So what happens when ...?

## 2.7 Are there some topics of conversation that are not acceptable for particular nationalities?

What is appropriate varies from nation to nation. A Japanese woman told me:

In Japan we are hesitant to talk about personal matters. For instance, many British people I have met like to talk about their families and show photographs, but the Japanese don't do that, at least not in depth. We would say "I have a husband. I have a son and I have two daughters". Japanese men like talking about hobbies, golf, for example. We talk about food. Women even like to talk about what blood type they are.

Sometimes you may think that your interlocutor is asking too many questions, which may be also too personal. Most Anglos would not consider questions such as *Where do you work? What did you study? What did you major in? What seminars are you planning to go to? Did you take your vacation yet?* to be too personal. Such questions are merely a friendly exploration in a search to find things that you may

have in common. The purpose of the questions is merely trying to find some common ground on which to continue the conversation.

Some questions would not be considered appropriate by most Anglos. For example:

How old are you?

What is your religion?

Are you married?

Do you plan to get married?

Do you plan to have children?

How much do you weigh?

Have you put on weight?

How much did you pay for your car?

If you want to ask a question that you think might be potentially difficult or embarrassing for your interlocutor, then you can precede the question or statement by saying:

Is it OK to ask about ... ?

Do you mind me mentioning ... ?

Can I ask you what you think about ... ?

It seems that some people in your country think that ... What do you think might be the reason for that?

See also [7.15](#).

## **2.8 What comments do I need to avoid that might offend students/professors from my host country?**

Universities in Anglo countries tend to promote equality, tolerance and free speech. This means you will hear people (even in lectures) freely expressing their opinions for example about:

- women's rights
- gay marriages
- atheism
- birth control and abortion
- racism
- sexual orientation and practices
- politics

You may or may not have strong views about the above topics, and these views may or may not be conditioned by the cultural and moral values of the country where you grew up. However controversial or offensive you might find these subjects to be, it is a good idea not to express yourself too strongly as this may have a negative impact on your relationships with other students and with your professors. You can simply say:

In my country most people have a very different perspective on this.

The above sentence is quite neutral as you are not revealing whether you agree with the perspective or not.

Most of your fellow students and professors will appreciate it if you do not make racist or sexist statements, and if you at least appear willing to hear another side to the story. It is generally a good idea to avoid trying to 'convert' someone to your views.

And of course, you may find that your fellow students make racist comments about people from your country or are very critical of your government. In this case, again try to be diplomatic and polite.

## 2.9 What do I do if someone says something I don't agree with? How can I be diplomatic in my response?

If your aim is to build up a relationship in a harmonious environment then it is worth bearing the following factors in mind.

- If someone says something that you don't agree with, but the point they are making is not really important, then there is probably no benefit in contesting it
- If someone says something that is not true (but which they themselves clearly believe to be true), e.g. some erroneous data, they will probably not appreciate being confronted directly with the true facts - you will simply undermine their self-esteem
- Most people do not appreciate someone casting doubt on their opinions and beliefs, and are more likely to be even more convinced of their beliefs if these beliefs are attacked

If you decide to disagree, then try to find some aspect of what your interlocutor has said that you can agree with. State this agreement and then mention the area where you disagree. This shows that you are at least trying to understand their point of view, and that your intentions are not hostile.

Speaker A: Your government seems to be in a complete mess at the moment.

Speaker B: I know what you mean, and there are a lot of people in my country who think so too. Some progress is being made in any case. I don't know if you've heard that ...

Note how Speaker B avoids using words like *but*, *nevertheless*, and *however* (*Some progress is being made* rather than *But some progress is being made*). Frequent use of words such as *but* may put your interlocutors on the defensive and they will simply come up with more evidence to support their initial statement. This could then lead to an embarrassing argument.

If someone says something that you believe is not true, then a good tactic is to be diplomatic and say something like:

Oh really? I may be wrong, but I'd always thought that ...

I didn't know that. What I heard / read was that ...

## 2.10 How can I avoid sounding rude?

In your own language you are generally aware of when you are being impolite. You know what little phrases you can use to sound polite. The problem of not knowing such courtesy forms in English is that you might appear abrupt or rude to your interlocutors. A native speaker may be surprised by your tone because in other contexts, for example, when you are describing technical details or in writing papers / letters, you may appear to them to have a strong command of English.

The secret is to try and show some agreement with what your interlocutor is saying before you introduce your own point of view. Let's imagine two people are discussing the relative advantages and disadvantages of nuclear power. Below are some phrases that they could use in order to express their opinions without being too forceful.

I agree with you when you say ... but nevertheless I do think that ...

You have an interesting point there, however ...

I quite understand what you're saying, but have you thought about ...

Water power definitely has an important role, but did you know that it actually pollutes more than nuclear power?

I agree with you, but I also believe that ...

The sun is certainly a safe source of energy, but ...

I know exactly what you mean, but another viewpoint / interpretation could be ...

For more phrases on giving opinions see [14.8](#).

It is not easy to be diplomatic in a foreign language, so if you do inadvertently say something that produces a bad reaction, you can say:

I am sorry, it is very difficult for me to say these things in English.

Sorry, I tend to be too direct when I speak in English.

I'm so sorry I didn't mean to sound rude.

Sometimes you need to find a way out of a discussion or at least time to pause and think.

Sorry, I just need to make a phone call.

Sorry, I just need to go to the bathroom.

Can I just think about that a second?

Just a moment. I need to think.

Sorry, I'll have to check up on that.

For more phrases on this topic see [2.14](#).

## **2.11 How can I invite someone who I have just met to do something together?**

If you feel that you would like to see a person again, at some point in the conversation you can say:

Do you fancy a coffee?

Shall we go get some lunch?

You must come over to my place some time, you can meet my flat mates.

Why don't you come round after the lecture this afternoon?

We're all going to a party tonight, do you want to come?

Possible replies to the above questions:

Thank you, I'd love to.

That sounds great, what time should I come?

Brilliant. See you later then.

Thanks but I'm already doing something tonight.

To learn how to refuse invitations see [2.12](#).

## 2.12 What excuses can I use for turning down invitations for social activities?

If you feel that you do not wish to participate in some social events, such as parties or dinners, then it helps if you can say something that will prevent your fellow students from convincing you to do something against your will. If you say something like *actually, I am really tired and would like to get to bed early*, the others can simply say *well none of us are planning to be late back or you can sleep during tomorrow's lessons*. It is much simpler to say something like *I am sorry but I need to stay in tonight*, without giving them any further explanation. If they insist, then just repeat the same phrase: *As I said, I need to stay in*.

However, if they do manage to persuade you, and you do decide to go, then you can say:

OK, then, I'll come.

OK you've convinced me—where are we meeting?

OK, but as long as we are not too late.

## 2.13 How can I avoid becoming socially isolated?

Before turning down an invitation (see 2.12) remember that being a PhD student can occasionally be a lonely experience in which you spend a lot of time working by yourself (either at your computer or in the lab). If you become socially isolated, this may end up making you less productive. If you don't like the idea of going to parties (maybe you don't dance or don't drink alcohol), there are plenty of clubs and associations you can join. Alternatively, you could get involved in community work.

## 2.14 What excuses can I use for ending a conversation?

If you find that your interlocutor is failing to interact with you and that the situation is becoming awkward, then you might decide to end the conversation by making an excuse:

Sorry, I have just seen someone I need to talk to. I'll catch you later.

Sorry, I've just received an sms—do you mind if I just take a look?

Do you know where the bathroom is?

I just need to get a bottle of water. Maybe I'll see you at the lecture?

Even if you have not had a long conversation, try to end on a positive note and thus leave a good impression with your interlocutor:

Well, it was nice talking to you.

Well, I hope to see you at the party tonight.

I'll try and make sure I come to your workshop.

I'll catch up with you later.



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