

## **Julia Lewis**

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*Julia Lewis was a new instructor teaching SSS 101, Student Success Seminar, for the first time at Northern University. Having lived her entire life in the South and having some difficulty adjusting to her new surroundings, she worried that she may not be able to relate well with her students who seemed so different. She decided to use the first day of class to build a sense of community among the students. Her first exercise was the name game where students could learn each other's names and an interesting fact about each other. The game began slowly as students were reluctant to get involved. Within minutes the game had turned into a fist fight between two male students. Julia dismissed the class. Julia wondered how this could have happened and what she would do when the class met again.*

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“Will my students ever want to come to class again? How could I have gotten myself into such a mess, and how will I ever make things right again.” Julia Lewis wondered.

Julia had recently completed her Master's degree and was excited to be in her first professional administrative position at Northern University. She was also excited to have an opportunity to teach the Student Success Seminar (SSS 101). Julia had spent countless hours preparing her course syllabus, and consulting with other more experienced instructors. While she had taught a similar class when she was in graduate school, she was worried that she wouldn't connect with her students at Northern because they were so different from her. She had spent most of her life in the South and was finding it difficult to adjust to a new area of the country, and to her students, many of whom were from the large city nearby.

As the first day of class approached, Julia considered how she could create a community among the students in her class and provide them with a comfortable forum to share their stories and experiences. She felt that establishing a connection between the students was an important way to begin the course, and after much consideration, she decided to begin the first class with the name game. Julia also decided to use a tennis ball during the exercise so students could pass it to one another, and only have to remember the name of the two people before them. Julia had used this activity in

other classes, and had great success with it.

On the first day of class Julia arrived early and arranged the seats in a circle, recalling some of the classroom management techniques she had learned as a graduate student. She felt confident that these students, like those she had taught before, would enjoy this alternative classroom arrangement. Julia also reviewed the course syllabus and considered how she would present the information to her class.

She welcomed her students as they entered the classroom. Julia had 24 students on her roster – a large number for this type of course – particularly for a new instructor. Although it was a larger section, she was excited to teach such a diverse group. From the class roll, Julia knew all of her students were freshmen with a variety of majors.

Julia watched as her students filled the chairs. Some students appeared to be flustered after walking across the large campus. She knew that teaching this class in such a remote classroom could be a challenge, but felt sure her enthusiasm and the course content would make them want to come to class.

Once all of the students arrived, Julia formally welcomed everyone.

“Welcome to the Student Success Seminar. This is section 102 and I am Julia Lewis, your instructor. I don’t want to tell you too much about the course yet; we will have time for that. Now, we will have an opportunity to get to know more about one another. We are going to begin with the name game. The object is for everyone in the room to have an opportunity to say their name, and an interesting fact they want the class to know about them. We will use this ball to indicate who is up next, and when you get the ball, you must repeat the names and facts for the two people before you. After you tell us about them, please introduce yourself and your interesting fact. Does anyone have any questions about this?”

Julia quickly scanned the room, saw some blank faces and noticed others staring at the floor, but decided to proceed with the exercise. “Good, let’s get started. Can I have everyone stand up and form a circle?”

The students stood reluctantly, with many of them looking at the floor or talking with others in the class. She had difficulty getting their attention and even more difficulty arranging them in a circle.

“Alright, let’s make room for everyone. I need everyone in the circle. Okay, it looks

like we are mostly in a circle, so I will go ahead and begin the activity...My name is Julia Lewis, and I work in the Student Life Office. Something you probably don't know about me is that I am originally from North Carolina."

Julia looked around at her students, they were again looking around, but only one student was looking at her. She quickly passed the tennis ball to that student who introduced herself. "Uh, my name is Tasha Smith, and I am from Portsmouth." Tasha stood in the circle looking at the ball, not knowing what to do or say next.

Julia quickly interjected, "Please remember to share an interesting fact with the group, and be sure to introduce the two people before you." Tasha then added, "Um, there's nothing interesting about me." The female student next to Tasha, said, "Hey, you have to introduce Ms. Lewis." Tasha reluctantly said "Yeah, this is Ms. Lewis, and she is from the South or something like that."

"Thank you, Tasha. I am sure there are many interesting things about you; perhaps you will want to share some of those with us later. For now, please go ahead and pass the ball." Tasha gently passed the tennis ball to a male student standing next to her.

The student reluctantly took the ball and began to clench the ball in frustration. It was obvious to Julia that he was anxious about talking in front of the group, so she decided to help him feel more comfortable.

"And what is your name?" Julia asked.

Her question was met with silence as the student looked at the group for help. Finally Tasha chimed in "You know, my name is Tasha and this is Ms. Lewis."

After several seconds of silence, the student finally responded "Yeah, um, I am um...Michael. I, um, there's nothing interesting about me."

"Michael, I am sure there is something interesting about you. Where are you from? What do you like to do?" Julia asked.

"Um, nothing." Michael responded.

Julia could feel herself becoming anxious. After just a few minutes of the activity, the group wasn't participating as she had hoped they would.

"Okay, let's pass the ball. Michael, can you pass it to someone else?" Julia asked.



Michael continued to clench the ball staring at it for what felt like an eternity, and during that time his face became flushed; he was obviously embarrassed. Other students had begun talking about him, mostly whispering, but loud enough for him to become aware that the entire class was focused on him. He finally looked up and noticed several students looking at him and laughing.

As soon as Michael became aware of the attention from the other students, he threw the ball across the middle of the circle, nearly hitting several other male students. One student reluctantly caught the ball. The student looked around the classroom, smiling when his eyes reached Michael.

After several seconds, the student smirked and said “Okay, so this is Tasha and she is from somewhere.” “This is Michael and he is a *faggot*, and I am Scott and I am better than everyone.”

The blood drained from Julia’s face and before she could say anything, Scott threw the ball across the circle toward Michael. Michael saw the ball but didn’t say anything, and when no one tried to catch it, he picked it up and dropped it to the ground again. Michael was visibly upset and in an instant, he kicked the tennis ball in Scott’s direction. As the ball came toward Scott, he lunged across the circle and landed on Michael. Quickly, the two began to fight with one another.

Julia couldn’t believe what was happening. How could such an innocent activity end up in a terrible fight?

“Alright, this is absolutely enough. You both need to leave this room immediately!” Julia exclaimed. Neither Scott nor Michael appeared to hear her directive and continued to fight.

The other students in the class began to cheer as Scott and Michael fought for several minutes. Julia tried to end the fight, but couldn’t get their attention. They continued to move around the classroom as the fight intensified.

The other students in the class began to cheer Michael and Scott on as they fought. Then, very suddenly and for a brief moment, the fight calmed down. Julia tried to compose herself and salvage the remainder of the class. “Now you both need to leave this class now.” Julia reminded them.

Much to her surprise, it appeared that Michael and Scott heard her and they made their way to the door, but as they got closer, they began to fight again.

Suddenly Julia realized that there was no way the class could continue and overcome with frustration she finally said, "I just can't take this. I've had enough...everyone out. This class is over."

#### **ADDITIONAL READINGS**

Davis, B. G. (1993). Tools for teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). The courage to teach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.