1. This case teaches us that it is important to be aware of how others feel. This case is about a teacher who thinks that she is doing a great job by having her students interact with one another by asking them to get up and shake hands with various classmates. The teacher thought it was a success because handshaking is a norm in her culture. She did not consider other cultures and how handshaking may be viewed to them. So, when she reviewed her evaluation from the students, she was confused as to why they rated her so poorly. She was unaware that she was imposing her cultural norms onto her students without asking for their opinions. Once she reflected on her actions from a different perspective, she considered how students may have viewed her ice breaker activity. This makes me think back to Chapter 5 in the book Communicating Across Cultures, the culture-sensitive competence components. The chapters about acquiring the culture-sensitive and identity-sensitive knowledge and Developing the Flexible Mindset and Open-hearted attitudes fit this case study. Those chapters talked about understanding sociocultural membership, sociorelational intercultural communicators, and more. As far as what this teaches us, this teaches us to be open-minded and considerate of others. In the book, Communicating Across Cultures, the author says, “… what constitutes appropriate personal distance for one cultural group can be perceived as crowding by another group” (Dorjee). He also says that “for the Saudi, the ideal conversational distance is approximately 9-10 inches. On the one hand, when Arabs overstep the personal space boundary of European Americans, they are often considered ‘rude’ and ‘intrusive’. On the other hand, Arab negotiators frequently find European Americans to be “aloof”, ‘cold,’ and ‘standoffish’ (Dorjee). This is important in business because this can ruin relations between different cultures because of their different views on personal space. The book also mentions that “different cultures encode and interpret touch behavior in different ways” (Dorjee). In business, Americans are used to shaking hands because it is seen as professional, but it is critical that cultures like mine are aware of these differences and respect them. If both parties try to find a middle ground, they will have a better time working together as a team.
2. The students could have raised their hands to bring their concerns to the teacher’s attention before she started the activity. They could have also pulled her aside during the activity to express their discomfort. Students could have also suggested different ideas for ice breaker activities. Instead of the teacher picking one. A couple of ways the teacher could have changed her outcome could have been by asking if any students had ideas or alternatives they wanted to share. She could have also asked them if they liked her idea of shaking hands for the ice breaker game.
3. As suggested in the case study, the students did not have to not like handshaking for religious reasons, since many things could have caused their reactions. They could simply be germophobic, claustrophobic, skin sensitive, have different cultural norms, or have health-related issues. “For example, while Chinese view opposite-sex handshakes as acceptable, for Malays and Arabs they are taboo. Furthermore, different cultures uphold different gender norms for embracing and handholding” (Dorjee). This could explain why some students felt uncomfortable with touching their peers. If the teacher would have taken these factors into account, she could have incorporated her students more into the process of picking an activity. That way both she and her students would be happy.

Sources:

Dorjee, Tenzin. Communicating across Cultures. 2nd ed., The Guilford Press, 2019.