

Start Out Interesting: Ideas for Beginning Lessons

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Abstract: This paper is based on a workshop held at a recent conference in which teachers explored ways to provide challenging and stimulating mental sets at the start of lessons.

INTRODUCTION

The need to engage students' attention at the start of a lesson has long been considered an important aspect of successful learning strategies. For example, Kyriacou (1991: 51) suggests that the way into a successful lesson is to generate 'a sense of curiosity and excitement and a sense of purposefulness about what is to follow'. This paper presents a variety of strategies which can be used to do this. These suggestions were originally presented at the 2003 AGTI Central Branch Conference.

PMI [Plus, Minus and Interesting]

(one of the CoRT Thinking Skills)

When teaching younger students it is often hard to avoid presenting them with very simplistic interpretations of ideas - many real world problems are very complicated, without a single, simple solution. Too often, therefore, students may only have a very simple understanding of issues. Consider what understanding students have of clearance of the tropical rain forests for example. Often they only know that chopping down trees is bad for the environment, but have very little understanding of the complex issues around the need for money of the poor people who are involved in the lumber trade. Text books do not tend to stress the 'grey' aspects of topics, and teachers are concerned that students will become confused. This approach can be particularly helpful in encouraging students to think around ideas. It is recommended by the CoRT team for new ideas (de Bono, undated), but I have found that a bit of background knowledge makes the exercise much more rewarding. another problem with student learning is that of transfer from one situation to other contexts. How often have you taught a topic and found that the students can not related that work to what appears to you to be a very similar situation? This starter again is useful in this context - they have to think through various aspects of a given situation and encourages them to get beyond an initial superficial judgement. It is also a useful starter to help students to plan written work when they are asked to reach a decision about something, a skill which is often requested in exam. answers.

How to use this starter

1. Students may work initially as individuals, or you can start with groups - four is probably a good number and six the maximum.

2. Present the groups with the same proposition - for example, 'An incinerator for rubbish should be built in this area'.
3. Students then consider all aspects of the proposal focussing on:

P = Plus	the good things about an idea, why they like it.
M = Minus	the bad things about an idea, why they do not like it.
I = Interesting	what they find interesting about an idea (observations, comments, questions, e.g. would it lead to...?).
4. If the students are working individually, they should then come together in groups and agree a set of responses.
5. The whole class should come together and a spokesperson for each group should report their ideas. These can be summarised on the board.

It is important to encourage students to believe that it is quite possible to make negative [minus] points and that interesting points are just that - they do not have to be amazingly scientific or 'clever'. This may not work terribly well at first - our students too often are reluctant to accept that there is not actually any correct answer and that their own thoughts are valid contributions to the class. The use of a spokesperson for the group rather than requiring contributions to be identified with individuals can be a great help in creating the correct atmosphere as any 'off the wall' ideas are not attributable to one person so no individual need feel embarrassed when the rest of the class comments on these.

Going further

1. This agreed set of points can be used to enable students to carry out a writing task - possibly using a writing frame - or with a question which involves a reasoned report on the proposal. If students are inexperienced in considering alternative viewpoints the use of a writing frame to structure their answer should be considered. An example of a suitable one for this question is shown in Fig. 1.
2. The PMI method can be used with photographs, places, locations, newspaper articles, web sites,

television documentaries as well as with a simple propositions such as this one

Figure 1.

<p>A writing frame for a PMI exercise</p> <p>The question which I have been thinking about is:</p> <p>The first thing I like about this idea is because.....</p> <p>Another good thing is because..... etc.</p> <p>One reason I do not like this idea is..... because.....</p> <p>A bad thing about this idea is..... because....., etc.</p> <p>One thing I found interesting about idea was..... because..... etc.</p> <p>In conclusion I think this idea is.....</p>

ODD ONE OUT

When new concepts are taught it is sometimes hard to be sure that students have actually grasped the basic idea. This idea for reviewing material at the start of a lesson uses a basic technique for the development of understanding in which examples are presented, some of which are actually examples of the concept and some are not. It is similar to the approach used in maths when sets are used.

How to use this starter

1. Provide each student/ pair of students with a set of the terms to be reviewed written on numbered cards (one term per card). Examples are shown in Fig. 2.
2. Call out the numbers for a suitable group of terms, e.g. kame, meander, esker and moraine. Students then work in pairs (or alone) to identify the odd one out.
3. They should also be required to identify a reason for their selection. In this example meander is the odd one out because it is not related to glaciation.
4. Students can then be asked to report on their selection and their reasoning. Of course, it may be necessary to ask more than one student and also to reinforce the reasoning behind the correct answer.

The technique can be simplified for less able students by using simpler vocabulary or by making the 'odd' items

more obvious. It can be made more demanding by having more subtle discrimination required, for example, using three types of weathering process plus one erosional process as the 'odd' one.

Alternative ways to use the starter

1. Students can also work in teams to produce their own cards for use by another class
2. Each team can select its own groups of terms and ask the rest of the class to come up with the 'odd' one. In this case the 'selecting' team must be able to explain their rationale.

Figure 2.

1	flood plain	9	levee
2	cliff	10	esker
3	spit	11	arch
4	terminal moraine	12	drumlin
5	meander	13	U-shaped valley
6	tombolo	14	corrie
7	beach	15	arete
8	stack		

TABOO

Every teacher is aware that their students need to review their work at regular intervals or much is forgotten. Sadly it has been the author's experience that students often see this as doing it again! This starter is a useful way to revise without students realising it (or at least they are likely to find it sufficiently interesting to be willing to do it again. This exercise is based on Nichols and Kinninment (2001).

How to use this starter

1. Divide the class into groups. This exercise will work with pairs but if each pair is to have a turn, this will take quite a long time and also you will need to provide a large number of subject cards.
2. Provide each group with a card containing a different term, e.g. precipitation.
3. Also on the card are words which can not be used in that definition, i.e. they are taboo, e.g. rain, snow, hail, water. Other examples are shown in Fig. 3.
4. Each group should be allowed a short time to write down their definition and to choose a spokesperson for the group.

Figure 3.

PRECIPITATION	CONDENSATION	TRANSPIRATION
hail	water	water
snow	liquid	plants
water	gas	leaves
clouds	bath	sweat
gas	kettle	breathe
condensation	steam	trees
liquid	transfer	roots
	cold	heat

5. Taking turns, the spokespeople read the definitions aloud to the class twice, slowly and clearly.
6. The rest of the students guess what is being defined.

Alternative ways to use this starter

1. This can easily be run as a quiz – with points awarded to the first group to give the correct answer. Nichols and Kinniment (2001, 74) recommends that both the teams identifying the term and the team who gave the definition get a point for a correct answer.
2. Definitions can be written down and students can each be given a number to identify (useful if group work/ competitions are likely to get out of hand!).

MYSTERY OBJECT

A good way to start a lesson is by introducing an object (or photograph) which is unlikely to be familiar to students. This will (hopefully) engage the students' interest in thinking about something relevant to the lesson at an early stage.

How to use this starter

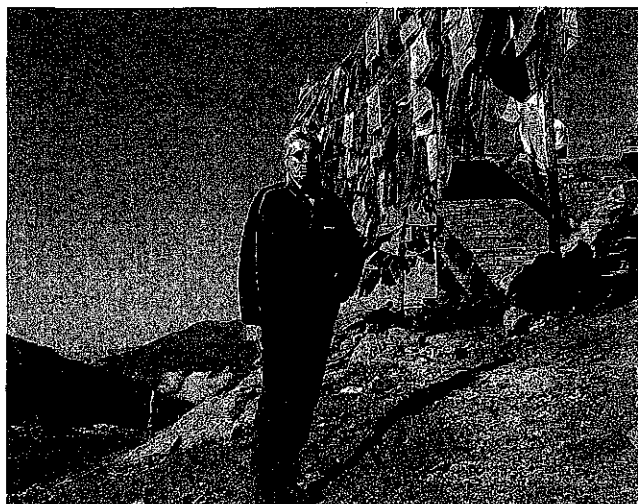
1. Show a mystery object/ photograph to the class (an example is shown in Fig.4).
2. The students should work either individually or, preferably in groups, to suggest five questions which, if answered might tell them what the mystery object is or what the photograph shows.

It is probably advisable to give them a question frame until they are used to this approach. The most usual one would be:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?

This should, of course be varied to suit particular resources.

Figure 4.



Some of the questions which were asked about Fig. 4 when it was used in a class which was looking at effects of altitude on climate (with a passing reference to undesirable impacts of tourism in vulnerable environments)

- Who is the man in the picture? [my brother]
- What are the 'flags'/ 'washing' behind him for? [prayer flags]
- Where is he? [Ladakh, Himalayas]
- When was he there? What time of year was it? [mid-summer]
- Why was he there? [Because he was on a walking holiday, he was raising funds for a charity as it was a sponsored walk]
- Why is he wearing sunglasses and thick clothes? [High altitude means that the sun is very bright, but it is fairly cold]

CARD SEQUENCING

This is a way for students to help students to become aware of their preconceptions about different issues and is particularly useful for development studies, although it can be used elsewhere.

How to use this starter

1. Divide the class in to groups (again this can be done by individuals, but it is helpful for students to be able to compare ideas and work together).
2. Provide each group with a set of small cards with the names of the countries (or other subjects) written on them (You can get the students to write the names on themselves, which saves your time beforehand, but does use up valuable class time).
3. The students place the cards in sequence according to their assessment of rank. For example they could be asked to rank the countries shown in Fig. 5 in terms of wealth or life expectancy.

Fig. 5

CHINA
IRELAND
BRAZIL
U.S.A.
SWEDEN
BANGLADESH
SOUTH AFRICA
SAUDI ARABIA
RUSSIA
SPAIN

READY STEADY... TEACH

This starter is based on the same idea as the T.V. programme 'Ready, Steady, Cook'. Students are provided with a small number of 'ingredients' and required to create something which they will use to teach a geographical idea or process.

How to use this starter

1. Divide the students into small groups – three to four is probably the best number, but it can be done in pairs.
2. Provide each small group of students with a bag of ingredients. I generally provide string, 'Play dough' or modelling clay, a piece of card [A4 size], a

cardboard tube [from cooking foil or similar], a handful of pebbles, a pair of scissors [blunt ended if in doubt], a couple of sheets of paper, a marker and possibly cocktail sticks [with the points removed if I am feeling cautious].

3. Provide each group with a card [in an envelope to increase the 'surprise' element] on which is written a geographical idea or process, e.g. population density, formation of a sea stack.
4. All the groups open their envelopes at the same time and they are then allowed a short time to decide how they are going to teach their topic using the material provided.
5. At the end of the time, groups are selected to present their idea to the rest of the class.

BEFORE AND AFTER CHARTS

[The before bit is relevant to the title, anyway!] [Based on an idea by Jennifer Magowan]

Many times students are not aware of how much they actually know already about something which they are required to study in class. It is a common finding that students do not bring their learning from other classes into new situations and often they regard their 'outside' knowledge as irrelevant (or unvalued) in classroom situations. This starter can help them to gain confidence (as they realise how much they already know about a topic) and also to help them to start to understand the cross curricular links which exist in their school work (and maybe start to transfer their learning).

How to use this starter

1. Students should draw up a table similar to Fig. 6 in their copies (or it can be copied for use).

Figure 6: A Before and After Chart

Before I start I know	I now know
I still need to find out about....	

2. A topic should then be introduced to the students, e.g. volcanoes.

3. A short time is allowed for them to write down all they know about the topic in the 'Before' column.

This could be done for homework, and the follow-up would then form the starter for the class.

4. A summary is produced of all the suggestions which students have made – preferably on an acetate or poster rather than the blackboard, so it can be kept for the 'after' session
5. After work on the topic, the students complete the 'After' column.
6. They then compare the two lists and write down any questions which they still need to answer/ areas about which they need more information in the 'other things' section.

This starter is not only useful for students to find out what they know already, it also provides guidance for the teacher who may not be sure how much s/he can assume about the prior knowledge of the class.

Conclusion

All of these starters have been tried in classroom situations and have been adapted to suit different teaching conditions. It must be acknowledged that some are actually rather long starts, but they all work in the classroom and, do appear to lead to students actually taking an interest in their own learning. Many would benefit from follow-up work and debriefing to ensure that students are made fully aware of what they are

supposed to be gaining from the experience, but that is beyond the immediate scope of this paper.

Most teachers have interesting ideas for starting lessons (or about other aspects of work in the classroom). It would be of benefit if those ideas could be made available to the rest of the profession and I would encourage others to contribute their ideas to the journal, possibly leading to a series of articles with similar themes to this one.

References

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Acknowledgement

Most of the ideas presented in this paper are not the original inspirations of the author. They have been collected from a variety of sources over a number of years and, often amended by the author. Unfortunately, the exact origins were not recorded for most of them, so if anyone recognises their idea, please contact either the author or the editor and appropriate credit will be given in a subsequent edition of the journal.