

Introduction

Getting to know students

All students are different. The best teaching takes account of relevant differences to meet the individual learning needs of students.

The aim of this section is to enable teachers to learn more about their students, including their interests, aptitudes, experiences, prior learning, learning preferences, personal circumstances, and levels of motivation.

Section 1

Getting to know students

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Ice breaker: Teachers' notes

Rationale Ice breakers are activities which encourage students to get to know each other and to feel relaxed and confident in the classroom. These can be fun activities designed to mix students up and get them talking. Fogarty (2002) uses what she calls 'people searches' to reinforce the intended learning at the same time as getting students to learn more about each other. This involves asking questions that are relevant to the subject, but not in an obvious way, or in a way which resembles a test or quiz.

How to use The teacher could use the categories provided or decide on their own questions. Students are given copies and mix with each other to find the answers. A suitable time limit needs to be set. Students write the names of the relevant people on the sheet. Bear in mind that there may be a question which does not apply to anyone in the class.

Example

This example shows that you can adapt this activity to act as an introduction to a subject or topic.

Has a French name Marie	Has been to France Nicky	Likes quiche lorraine
Has eaten a baguette Jack	Has been to Eurodisney	Knows the name of a French footballer Toby
Knows about a famous French artist Gareth	Has seen <i>Les Miserables</i>	Can say <i>hello</i> and <i>goodbye</i> in French Ellen
Can count to ten in French Michael	Knows the colours of the French flag Karen	Knows a famous French cartoon character
Is wearing an item of clothing made in France	Has a French friend or family Rhianna	Likes to eat crepes
Knows what currency is used in France Sajid	Can name a country that borders France	Knows the name of a French clothing company
Knows the capital of France Tom	Has eaten a croissant Sally	Has been to a French market Craig

Ice breaker

Find one or more members of the class for each category in the table. Write their name(s) in the spaces provided.

Time limit

Has lived in another country	Hates chocolate	Is in a band
Can yodel	Has visited Eurodisney	Likes dancing
Can ride a bike with no hands	Can speak three languages	Plays football for a team
Has a younger sister	Plays the guitar	Is an aunt or uncle
Has a first name with more than eight letters	Is a vegetarian	Has visited Australia
Is interested in politics	Has a teddy bear	Can juggle
Is left handed	Can wiggle their ears	Likes vegetables
Likes Thai food	Has a pet reptile	Can remember a dream
Can swim ten lengths	Has eaten snails	Smiles a lot
Has the letter z in their name	Can touch their nose with their tongue	Has performed in front of a large crowd

Interests and experiences: Teachers' notes

Rationale Just like teachers, students have a life outside the classroom. Many are engaged in activities and hobbies about which they are passionate and which can take up significant amounts of their time. Similarly, students bring a wide variety of experiences to the classroom, some enriching their education and some not. Teachers need to be aware of their students' interests and experiences in order to offer appropriate combinations of support and challenge.

How to use Teachers can use the form to capture information about students. The results could be used to inform the choice of topics or contexts for learning, to select students for group work or teams - matching students with similar or complementary interests - or to take advantage of the individual expertise of certain students. There is limited space for students to write so it may be worth adjusting the form to A3 size or to two A4 sides.

Interests and experiences

Name

Of all the people who have ever lived, who would you most like to meet, and why?	
If you could do any job in the world, which would you choose?	
What is your favourite subject in school? Why?	
What is your least favourite subject in school? Why?	
In which subject do you work the hardest? Why?	
What are your favourite sports or games, if any?	
Are you a member of any clubs, groups or societies? If so, which ones?	
In a quiz, what would you choose as your 'specialist subject'?	
How much do you like using a computer for learning?	
In your opinion, what makes a good teacher?	
What would you say is your greatest achievement in life so far?	
If the next lesson could be about any topic you wanted, what topic would you choose?	
Do you have any career ideas at the moment? If so, what?	
What is the most interesting place you've ever been to? Why was it so interesting?	
What do you do in your spare time?	
What would you say is the most interesting thing about you?	
Is there anything else about you that you think your teacher should know?	

Ready to learn? Teachers' notes

Rationale

Professor Carole Dweck (1999) has developed a highly influential theory of student motivation based on the ideas of attribution theory. She asks how we attribute success or failure. Dweck categorises students into three types:

1. Fixed IQ theorists

Just over 40% of students believe that success is determined by 'ability', which is fixed (and therefore not much can be done about it).

2. Untapped potential theorists

A further 40% of students believe that success is due to learning which requires effort and practice.

3. The remaining 20% are **undecided**.

These differences become most pronounced when students are facing a difficulty or challenge, at which point the 'untapped potential theorists' perform much better than the others (Petty, 2006).

The aim of this questionnaire is to enable the teacher to find out students' state of readiness for learning. It takes account of the individual circumstances of the student, their views about learning and their level of motivation.

Questions 11 and 13 are based on Dweck's questionnaire. If these questions are given low scores it is a good indication that the student is a 'fixed IQ theorist' and is therefore likely to consider giving up when significant difficulties or challenges are encountered. Changing their minds about the nature of intelligence and learning may have significant effects on their achievement.

Hughes (2001) describes three keys to effective learning: an appropriate physical and emotional state (including self-confidence and self-esteem), appropriate learning styles, and structures (such as lessons) which are suitable for learning.

How to use

The template can be used at the start of a course or programme of study to find out about students' readiness for learning, attitudes to study, physical and emotional state and obstacles to study (such as home environment). The teacher could then use the results as a focus for discussion to make some important points (for example, the educational value of drinking fresh water and the benefits of eating breakfast before school or college). The questionnaire may also raise issues which will need to be discussed sensitively such as how to manage homework when there is no suitable space or time at home.

In the top half of the table, the lower scores are the ideal. In the bottom half, the higher scores.

Ready to learn?

Name

Tick the box that is closest to your view.

	1 <i>Strongly agree</i>	2 <i>Agree</i>	3 <i>Not sure</i>	4 <i>Disagree</i>	5 <i>Strongly disagree</i>
1. Eating breakfast improves learning					
2. Drinking fresh water improves learning					
3. I have a good reason for studying this subject					
4. I enjoy learning					
5. I believe I can succeed if I study					
6. All of my teachers are friendly to me					
7. I feel relaxed but alert in lessons					
8. My family wants me to do well in education					
9. I feel safe in school/college					
10. I have a suitable space at home for doing homework					

My score for questions 1-10

11. Intelligence is fixed and you can't change it					
12. Sometimes I feel I need fresh air during lessons					
13. You can learn new things but can't change your ability					
14. I feel stressed and nervous in lessons					
15. There are some subjects I'll never be good at					
16. I don't have time to do homework out of school					

My score for questions 11-16

Feedback/notes/comments

Learning styles: Teachers' notes

Rationale

It is now commonplace for students to be told that they have a preference for a particular learning style and should make use of this to maximise their learning. However, recent reviews of the evidence (for example, Coffield *et al.*, 2004) have found little evidence for all but a handful of these theories. This lack of evidence includes perhaps the best-known typology of recent years: the visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learner.

However, this does not mean that all such ideas should be rejected. Coffield *et al.* found that a student's learning style is adaptable to context and is partly learned and modifiable. Therefore everyone benefits from using a wide variety of styles (sometimes referred to as 'whole brain learning') and students should be shown how to use the full range of learning styles so they can become more effective learners.

Petty (2006) suggests that there are two well-supported models of learning styles. Herrmann's (1996) whole brain model (left brain/right brain) divides preferred styles of learning into theorist or organiser (both left brain) or innovator or humanitarian (both right brain), with each person preferring two of these but capable of using them all. Allinson and Hayes' (1988) intuitive/analytical model holds that each learner has a preference for either intuition (making judgements based on feeling and the global perspective - right brain) or analysis (making judgements based on reasoning and the detailed view - left brain).

Teachers need to use a range of activities which suit the different learning styles suggested by these models, and students should be helped to develop their skills in the areas in which they are initially less comfortable.

Finding out students' preferred approaches to learning remains a valuable exercise.

How to use

Use the questionnaire to find out students' preferred approaches to learning. It is based on Herrmann's left brain/right brain model. The outcomes could be used as the basis for a discussion of the benefits of developing a wider range of learning techniques.

The results could be used by teachers to assess the balance of their teaching. If the teaching is biased in a particular direction it could explain why some students are not progressing as well as might be expected.

Interpreting the sheet

Herrmann's model:

- A: characteristic of theorists (left brain)
- B: characteristic of innovators (right brain)
- C: characteristic of organisers (left brain)
- D: characteristic of humanitarians (right brain)

Most people favour A and C (theorist-organisers) or B and D (innovator-humanitarians). About one third of people favour A and B (theorist-innovators) or C and D (organiser-humanitarians). Few people favour A and D (theorist-humanitarians) or B and C (innovator-organisers).

Learning styles

Tick any **14** boxes which describe how you like to learn or what kinds of learning activities you find most useful.

Section A		Section B	
	Tick		Tick
Learning facts		Exploring new ideas	
Applying logic		Relying on intuition or guesswork	
Forming theories		Constructing my own ideas	
Lectures		Experimentation	
Building cases/arguments		Going wherever my ideas take me	
Studying data		Speculating on the future	
Studying financial and technical information		Creating displays	
Section C		Section D	
Organising information		Listening and sharing ideas	
Putting information into sequence		Moving and feeling	
Discussing case studies		Getting involved	
Evaluating and testing theories		Experiencing things	
Practising skills		Learning by music	
Planning		Group discussions	
Using textbooks		Role play	

Summary/comments

Is there anything else we ought to know about how you learn best?

Study skills audit: Teachers' notes

Rationale Enabling students to reflect on their approaches to learning is crucial in their development as independent learners. Effective self-evaluation generates pride in success, and modification and improvement become a natural part of the learning process.

How to use The study skills audit asks students to assess their abilities in generic study skills. Using the Word files on the CD-ROM, teachers can insert extra lines to add subject specific skills if these are relevant, or they can change the list of study skills.

The student assesses their own performance, chooses one of the skills for improvement and devises a plan on how to achieve this. It is important that such targets and actions are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-specific) – otherwise they may prove ineffective. Students (and teachers) may benefit from some guidance on the setting of SMART targets.

Example

Here are examples of how the boxes on the audit might be used.

Action: What will I do to meet my target?

Work through some of the practice exercises in my booklet
Work through the examples on the Maths website
Attend homework club next Tuesday to go through my answers with a teacher

Evidence: How will I know that I have met my target?

I will understand percentages better
I will get a better mark in my next test

Teacher comment/feedback

This looks like a sound strategy for improvement. If at any point you feel like you are getting stuck, let me know and we can go through it again together.
I think you have underrated your understanding of percentages.

Study skills audit

Name

Rate yourself at the following study skills. Tick the scores that you think apply to you.

	Poor 1	2	3	4	Excellent 5
Listening to teachers and presentations					
Working out problems					
Revising for tests and exams					
Making my own notes					
Long pieces of writing such as essays					
Organising my time					
Concentrating in lessons					
Discussing ideas					
Presenting to others					
Doing my own research					
Doing homework					
Using computers					

Choose one of these skills to improve

By when?

Action: What will I do to meet my target?

Evidence: How will I know that I have met my target?

Teacher comment/feedback

Existing knowledge

Rationale Students bring knowledge with them when they enter the classroom. Some may be entirely new to the material. Others may have covered the subject or topic before or they may have an interest which they pursue outside formal education. Teachers need to be aware of this pre-existing knowledge in order to offer appropriate levels of challenge and support.

How to use Teachers can use the form to capture information about students. The teacher can input the relevant topics, subjects, or sections of the specification onto the form and students can score themselves against each part.

Interpretation of the results may require some care, as students are making their own assessment and may under- or over-estimate their knowledge.

This form could be used for a whole course or for part of a course.

The results can be used to inform the choice of topics or contexts for learning and/or to select students for group work or teams: students can be matched with those who have similar or complementary levels of prior knowledge. The information can also help teachers take advantage of the individual expertise of certain students.

Example

Subject or topic *Astronomy*

Have you studied this subject before? *Yes*

If yes, please give details *I think I've done bits in Science GCSE*

Rate your knowledge of the following topics (tick the relevant column)

Topic/issue	1 Know nothing	2 Know a little	3 Not sure	4 Know quite a lot	5 Know lots
The origins of the universe			✓		
The solar system				✓	
The speed of light	✓				
Telescopes	✓				
Space exploration				✓	
Satellites			✓		
The history of astronomy	✓				
Space in the media and film					✓

Comments or questions

*I know a lot about space in the media because I watch a lot of science fiction films.
I know something about space exploration and the solar system because I watched the news about the Mars explorer space mission.*

Existing knowledge

Name

Subject or topic

Have you studied this subject before?.....

If yes, please give details

.....

.....

.....

Rate your knowledge of the following topics (tick the relevant column)

Topic/issue	1 Know nothing	2 Know a little	3 Not sure	4 Know quite a lot	5 Know lots

Comments or questions