Prepare for learning

Effective teachers create safe, inclusive, purposeful, inquiring and motivating environments in which students are essential, valued members of the learning community. Students must feel comfortable and safe to learn effectively – that is free to discover, make mistakes and consider ways to move forward.

This involves considering the physical and emotional environment right at the beginning of the year, and setting firm expectations and clear boundaries for the students. Teachers need to engage students by contextualising learning and helping to see the bigger picture of what they are doing.

Learning will be connected with students’ lives, prior lessons, their preconceptions and misconceptions as well as guiding them through units and modules step by step, so that all the time they know where they have come from in their learning and how far they have left to go. Providing ‘hooks’ is a great way to prepare learners at the beginning of lessons. Some ideas are provided on this card.
Building on prior understanding

It is important to build on students’ prior understanding when planning lessons. In order to do this, you must have a clear understanding of what your students currently understand and the extent of their knowledge on the topics. This can be challenging, especially in large classes. Possible ways of finding out how much students already know at the beginning or end of a lesson are:

- get students to work in pairs or small groups, and ask them to feedback their starting point
- use whole class response systems such as thumbs up/down or a traffic light system to make different students’ level of understanding visible
- use mini white boards for students to respond to quick fire questions and hold up their answers
- use flexible ability groupings, so that students exercise choices about challenge
- question a learner from each ability group to examine their level of understanding (Bell et al, 2008).

Connecting the learning

Research has shown that learning and achievement are enhanced when they involve (CURIE, 2009):

- contextualising activities so that ideas and concepts are meaningful to students
- connecting the curriculum with student’s experiences outside of school
- collaborative work to expand students’ sense of what is possible and force them to express and explain beliefs and assumptions
- work that builds on students’ existing understanding
- flexibility that enables depth though connecting different ideas, topics and subjects
- excellent teacher professional development and subject knowledge.

On any journey we usually want to know where we are going, how far we have travelled, and how long we have left. Just like travellers on a physical journey, learners want to know where they are, what are they going to be learning about, and how long it’s likely to take. (How will we get there is another matter and this will be discussed in Agree Learning Outcomes). Teachers can easily share this information with their classes in the form of a unit, module or course map. These will be digested on a lesson-by-lesson basis, of course, but it is good to know about what you are studying fits in with a whole topic. We can provide outline module mats, which contain key information, and to which the students can add as the module progresses. This will become a highly personalised record of learning and valuable revision tool in the future.

A key question for a teacher every lesson should be, ‘How can I make this lesson relevant and stimulating for my students?’ Some activity at the beginning of the lesson should engage students at the outset. This might be a stimulus from a previous lesson. It is worth considering how many experiences the students who walk through your door have had since the last time they saw you. If you work in a secondary or high school it is quite feasible that an entire week, or thirty lessons and seven days of life, passes between your meetings. Some kind of reconnecting activity or input is essential to a successful lesson in which good progression will be achieved.

In large schools there will be a time lapse between the first students arriving and the last. It is reasonable that the early comers can expect something to do when they get there, so they should be able to commence the ‘bellwork’ or starter activity, as they enter. The conscientious should not have to wait to begin learning for the tardy. Thus the starter activity must be ready and available.

Some examples:

- Hand the students a couple of open or fertile questions as you greet them at the door. Each student need not receive the same questions. They might be differentiated or random. If they are not the same they will want to check out each other’s questions too!
- Play music to set the scene. It can provide a powerful memory stimulus. Try playing a track during the review part of one lesson, and start the following lesson with the same music!
- Give the first student to arrive the whiteboard pen getting her to answer one of the drag and drop/annotation problems on the board. She then passes it on when she has done, and so on, until the problems are completed.
- Create a simple crossword based on the last lesson, which requires them to look back through their notes to complete. (Use Discovery’s puzzlemaker website – the crisscross tool will let you create a fine crossword in the time it takes you to think of the questions: puzzlemaker.schoo.discovery.com)
- Turn your room into a gallery. Around the walls stick up a selection of images pertinent to the lesson. Ask students what they think the lesson will be about. Can they see links between the images? Tell them stand next to the image they think best represents… the most nutritious food, an atom, the most stable bridge, a method actor… and be prepared to justify your choice.
- Create a rolling slide show of images to engage emotions and provide students with a simple graphic organiser/writing frame which prompts them to guess the topic, make links or ask questions. The fruits of this activity can be shared when agreeing the learning outcomes in the next stage of the cycle.
- Make a simple card sorting activity that prompts pupils to place things in chronological order, or to group things and explain why they have chosen the groups they have. It should be made clear at this point in the lesson that there is no right or wrong answer.
- The answer is... Give the answer and students have to produce as many questions as they can in 5 minutes. This links to prior knowledge and is an assessment for learning opportunity for the teacher.

The starter should be achievable, relevant, fun and might yield success right at the start of the lesson. It’s ultimate purpose is to create a positive, purposeful start to the lesson’.
Celebration of success is key to the TEEP classroom. Putting up students’ work is one effective way to do this (and attain quick coverage of bare walls). All too often, though, we tend to leave these displays up for far too long, well into the next topic, even for the rest of the year. Like wallpaper, the impact will quickly fade after the novelty has worn off. Wall space is a premium resource available to teachers and we should use it cleverly. With often-limited budgets, and not enough books to go around, the displays you create can cut through the lack of resources – one high quality poster can be shared and accessed by everyone!

One property of effective displays is that they are transient. They should be directly relevant to the current learning and therefore rotated frequently. This will clearly take a little extra time, but students will really appreciate their evolving environment – especially if they are encouraged to interact with it regularly. Displays might be part of a learning activity with which students must interact. They can provide information not available elsewhere. They can explain what a successful product might be like or even be exemplary models of success for a particular activity. Students can then see what a high quality product might look like.

This being said there is a case for some space being dedicated to resources, which are relevant throughout the teaching year. Thinking material such as graphic organiser templates, the TEEP thinking spiders – based on Bloom’s/Anderson’s taxonomy, De Bono’s six thinking hats, and perhaps a question wall are all resources that might be employed frequently. These will be used by students and teachers to help plan, solve problems, and debrief the thinking process. Key words, definitions and images might also warrant a permanent home.

Motivational and learning skills displays also deserve a place. These provide a great impact in the classroom, especially if they are changed on a regular basis so that the students notice the difference and learn to look out for the new posters. Discussion can revolve around specific posters especially if they refer to thinking, achieving, aspiration and learner skills. If you do not have your own room bring one poster for a week at a time as this can really create interest and anticipation with a class – ‘what will this week’s poster say’ and ‘how does it relate to us?’

Use De Bono’s hats to help structure thinking

- Use to promote the dispositions required for effective learners

- Use the spiders to discuss the level of thinking that students will be going/have been through

- If you become stuck ‘see three other resources before me’ – this could be a poster, peer, internet, textbook, previous notes

Examples of graphic organisers that might be displayed. Complete examples in your subject area so that when you ask them to use a graphic organiser they know how to do so - this gives students a point of reference when they are asked to use them.
**What good learners do...**

- Listen to the teacher and each other
- Look at the person who is talking
- Write in detail
- Talk to each other, use teamwork and cooperate
- Ask questions of friends and the teacher
- Behave well
- Take part

- Think
- Guess/try out their ideas
- Aim to complete the success criteria
- Organise themselves with equipment, books and in their work
- Learn from mistakes
- Enjoy learning

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**The classroom environment – layout, teacher positioning, routines**

We also have control, though perhaps to a lesser extent, depending on our subject, on the physical space in which students will be learning. Students will be working individually and in a variety of group sizes at times. Consideration must be given as to how furniture is arranged. If your room is highly flexible then you can train your students to set the room up for several different situations. Circle time, exam style, small groups, clear floor space, debate time horseshoe, speed dating. A class of thirty students who know exactly how their room is supposed to look for different tasks can have it rearranged in no time at all.

You might have the flexibility in your room to set up specialised zones. Turn the computer into a research station that can be accessed at all times. Next to this you might have a mini-library of specialist books that can be dipped in to – put a dictionary and thesaurus in there as well. Provide space for students who want a little time out from the rest of the group so they can work in peace for a little while, a desk and chair out of the way – this should never be doubled up as a punishment location. A junk box and scrap paper pile is always worth having for students to select resources from. Kinaesthetic learners may appreciate being able to work with a variety of material when they can.

Rooms with fixed furniture and fittings are the norm for many teachers, so where the teacher stands and moves in a lesson is crucial. At the beginning of the year, when relationships between students and teachers are forged, effective teachers reserve a certain space in which they will stand when requiring the attention of the full class. The students will be aware that when in that position the teacher expects a quality audience and minimal verbal input will be required from the teacher to achieve this. This is just one of the many effective teacher behaviours modelled through TEEP.

Another is considering where the teacher is at different parts of a lesson. Is he seated behind his desk? Most likely not! He will be perambulating amongst the students, listening, asking questions, prompting and challenging. Every student will be visited and have some direct interaction with the teacher every learning cycle.

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**Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference, how’s yours?**

Whether you think you can or you think you can’t... you’re probably right!
Creative learning environments, where both the physical and pedagogical aspects are flexible, have been found to impact on students’ (Jindal-Snape et al, 2013):

- Attainment
- Confidence
- Resilience
- Motivation
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills

Further examples of create a creative learning environment in your classroom are to get your students to:

- complete practical work e.g. for science
- create memory boxes e.g. for history
- use creative activities such as expressive paint, role playing and drama
- work in an outdoor environment e.g. through the use of forest schools, or trips into the local community
- have more control over their learning and the tasks they choose to do.

The emotional environment

A really quality learning community will be one in which every person in it, including the teacher in the role of lead learner, knows the names of everyone else. The sort of community builders with which TEEP delegates are familiar are every bit as pertinent to the school classroom. Use getting-to-know-you name games, make brightly coloured name cards on which the students must include some personal information (likes, dislikes, ambitions) – these are really good for providing a conversation starter with new faces. Simple ice-breakers can be employed through the year to keep spirits high. Tug of war for example. Or team paper-scissors-stone. In this community builder/energiser students must adapt articles to something more amusing, then decide the actions, sound effects and ranking and battle against the other half of the class (wizards pets from Harry Potter goes down a treat – how about Trevor (toad), Mr Paws (cat) and Hermes (owl). Many more are suggested in Paul Ginnis’ ‘The Teacher’s Toolkit’.

A discussion with the students to agree the rules by which they can learn effectively, and agree a contract of behaviour and dispositions, will usually yield the sorts of things a teacher will be looking for in a class.

For example, they will want to have a no put-down zone, everyone treated with respect, the teacher to be fair and consistent, nobody laughing if you make a mistake. It is well worth investing the time to do this as it gives the students ownership of the rules by which they will abide. If they have come up with the ideas and created the poster which displays them, it has far more credence than if you lay these rules down for them. In classrooms where this approach is taken, and the agreed ‘code of conduct’ is displayed, students will actively refer to it if they feel the rules are not being adhered to. It is the first step of students taking a more active role in their learning.

Students will feel secure when the classroom rituals are habitual and consistent. The teacher will have introduced the term ‘quality audience’ and will have spent time with the students discussing what this looks like, sounds like, etc. Then when the teacher returns to the same position in the classroom he always uses for this purpose, gives the same hand signal he always does and counts down from five, this visual and auditory signal provides warning, and more than enough time to disengage from a conversation or activity – and stress levels (teacher and student) remain low.

Similarly, when possible greet your learners at the door. Welcome them in with a smile. Take an interest in them as individuals. A little enthusiasm at the beginning of a lesson goes a long way. ‘You’re in a good mood today sir!’ Students will pick up on this. Your own mood is very infectious and can have a big influence on the mood of the class.

An inclusive atmosphere in which it is safe to fail (and therefore learn) can be nurtured with a no-hands-up policy. All students then are required to be ready to contribute to discussions and answer questions. To support the students, wait-time should be used effectively to give them a chance to internalise, process and consider their responses. Waiting five seconds or more gives a much better chance of a higher quality answer. If they cannot answer then refer them to the ‘what good learners do when they are stuck’ poster and promise to return to them shortly to check for understanding. It is okay to get things wrong, for it is by attempting to solve these problems that deep learning occurs. This wisdom should be shared with students and any attempt on their part that forwards their learning should be encouraged.

The emotional environment in the classroom is fundamental. One of the ways of securing an effective emotional infrastructure is to focus on the quality of teacher-student relationships. When teachers are highly facilitative and are more empathic with their students, the students have been found to have (CUREE, 2008):

- greater academic gains
- higher self-esteem
- improved attendance
- fewer behaviour problems
- enhanced creativity
- higher levels of thinking.

To create this environment in your classroom, you can:

- have more discussions with your students
- use student ideas more in teaching interactions
- encourage self-assessment
- be enthusiastic during the lesson
- increase your eye contact with your students
- smile more at your students, and take an interest in them.
Learning profiles

Students like to be given responsibility and control for their own progress and learning. One way we can help them to do this is to help them think about factors that enable them to learn effectively. Responses they might generate are shown on the passport (above).

Although this list will not be comprehensive, it will provide real insight into how individuals like to learn. If you take a photograph of the students and list their own observations next to it you can produce a motivational display tailored to your class.

Children of all ages like to see themselves on their learning profile and enjoy having their ideas and requirements acknowledged. These ‘passports’ should be developed over time. The skills that have been developed and the ways in which students have learned successfully can be ‘stamped’ as they progress. Students should not only be given opportunities to learn in ways they have identified work for them, but also be encouraged to try new ideas and develop new skills – skills that will become essential as they grow into life-long learners.

References and further reading


