

Getting Started: A Thinking Process for Teachers

These questions were designed by Margaret Burke in 2001 to help teachers think about getting started in a new classroom, a new position, or a new school. You might, from your own experience, find other questions to add to the list.

Purpose

- What am I *going* to teach?
- What do I *have* to teach?
- What do I *want* to teach?
- What do I *need* to teach to this class at this time? (Social skills? Curriculum expectations? Subject skills?)

Questions for Me to Ask Myself

- What exactly do I know about *this* class?
- What will I *need* to know before I begin?
- How will I get that information?
- What do I want *these* students at *this* time to know about the topic?
- What might they already know about this topic before we start?
- How can I find out where they are in relation to the topic?
- What do they need to know before the unit gets going?
- What exactly do I know about the topic?
- What can I handle? Are there things about this topic that I would rather not deal with?

Learning Outcomes

- What do I see to be the important themes?
- How can I frame them as key questions or statements to guide my planning?
- What are the most important learning outcomes of this curriculum unit for my students?
- What other hidden curriculum learning outcomes are possible?
- How well do these outcomes match?
- What could be the culminating task?

Relevance

- How is this topic relevant to my students as individuals and as a class?
- How can I make it relevant to them?

Strategies for Action

- What questions or statements will really grab the students' interest right from the start?
- How can I best turn the learning into "doing something"?
- Who are my teaching neighbors at this time of day? What is their noise level tolerance?

Focus

- What is my focus for the overall unit?
- Keeping that focus in mind, what is my focus for the introductory lesson? (Interest? Content? Reflective questions?)
- What will be my reflective questions so that the students are reminded of what they have been working on or learning?
- What may be my focus for the next lesson? And possibly the next? And the next? (These cannot be decided too much ahead of time, but you should have some sense of where your lessons are or might be going.)
- How many lessons can I assign this topic given the aspects of the curriculum that must be covered?
- How can I best sum up what we have learned?

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Assessment

- How will I assess this material? (Personal work? Group work? How? When? More than once?)
- What assessment structures will be best? (How many different kinds?)
- How will the criteria be set? (Will it be by me? by the students? together?)
- Realistically, are the students able to do this? (Have I given them the tools for assessing?)
- Where might I look for assessment help or ideas? (Which books? Whom could I ask?)

Other things to consider:

Materials

- Do I have enough back-up material?
- Is it the right kind of material for the job?
- Are these available? Where?
- Are they available to me when I want them?
- What arrangements do I have to make to ensure that they are available?
- Can I get my hands on more (material, information) if or when I need it? How quickly?

Note: It is helpful to know where things are stored and how to access them. Where are such things as books, CD player, tape deck, overhead or slide projector, video equipment, PowerPoint, paper, pens, pencils, flow pens, glue, scissors, chairs, table, boxes?

- How do I access the copier and how do I unlock and lock up?

Really Important Questions

- Does the technical stuff all work?
- What are its idiosyncrasies?
- Do I have the necessary keys?
- Do I need to practise using the equipment before class?

Availability

- Can I rely on the material being available, or do I have to book it?
- If I am booking it, how long are the teaching periods so that I may have the equipment for as long as I need it?

Space

- What kind of working space do I have?
- Do I have to share it? With whom?
- Do they teach in the same subject area, or are they teaching different subjects?
- Are there areas in the space that might be dangerous?

Note: Who shares your space will have an impact on the ways you make your classroom welcoming, post student work, and so on.

Interference

- How much interference is there likely to be from the bell/buzzer intercom system or phone?
- What rules apply to cellphone use in class?
- What interference may I expect from staff or other students?
- What is the protocol for class interruptions?

Names

- What are the names of the custodians, secretaries, my peers, and the students I teach?

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School Policies

In order to prevent possible difficulties that might arise from the material you choose or the references you use, these questions may be helpful:

What is the nature of the district I serve?

What are the policies of the school with regard to the neighborhood in relation to culture, ethnicities, religious inclinations, established behavioral policies, and languages?

Is there anything special I should know about the school or its environs? Who could I ask?

Support

What are the phone numbers of my own particular support system (personal and professional)?

Personal Attributes

What personal skills and attributes do I bring to my teaching?

What personal as well as professional goals have I set myself?

How will I present myself to my students? (In style of speech? In what I wear?)

What sort of role model do I intend to be?

What is my attitude towards homework? Towards getting it done (students' responsibility)? Towards getting it marked and returned promptly to students (my responsibility)?

Relating to Other Staff and Administration

What are the special skills and attributes of my peers?

Do I feel able to ask for help when I need it?

Do I believe I should be self-sufficient?

How do I react to unsolicited advice?

Am I a good listener?

Do I talk too much?

Am I ready to give a hand when asked?