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## Having Students Introduce Themselves

**M**y third year of teaching, I was transferred to Del Vallejo Middle School as a Language Arts/Reading Teacher. It was my first experience with middle school students, but I was excited at the prospect of working on a team: a group of teachers who all share the same student population. After meeting the other members of my team and sharing ideas about beginning the school year, it became apparent that everyone was going to do the same thing: hand out rules, go over procedures, and distribute books. I thought about how boring the first day of school must be for a student, doing the same thing all day. I decided I would try something different. Although procedures, rules, and books are all important, I wanted to ensure that my students would still be listening to me by the third period.

I came up with an activity that required minimal class control, having not established any yet, and allowed me time to get to know my students. I assigned an acrostic poem. Students were to use each letter of their names to find an adjective that described themselves. I handed out dictionaries, did an example using my last name, explained expectations for behavior during the activity, and then let the students begin. Once a student had completed the assignment on notebook paper, he received construction paper and markers to make a poster of the poem for the back wall.

It turned out to be a wonderful day. Students were on-task. I had my classroom wall ready for Back-to-School Night. In addition, I was already able to tell the difference between Jon and John in my second period class because we had a discussion about using the same adjectives. Since both students had the same letters in their names, could they both use the same adjectives. Was that cheating? By the end of the day, I was energized when I went to the staff room for a quick debriefing meeting with my team.

One of the first topics that came up was a student named Freddy. Everyone was commenting on how he was already belligerent in class and

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would need our complete support if he was to be successful on our team. I was a bit concerned that I didn't even remember Freddy. I found his name in my roll book and noted that he had been in my class. (Someone suggested he might have ditched my class because I *would have remembered him.*) The meeting continued with some other business and then we all dispersed, heading back to our classrooms to get ready for the next day.

As soon as I returned to my classroom, I found Freddy's poem. It read:

Fatherless

Reckless

Energetic

Daring

Dumb

Young

I grabbed the poem and went to the counselor's office and asked her what she could tell me about Freddy. She shared with me that Freddy's father had been murdered over the summer break. The father was approached at a supermarket and shot for no apparent reason. I wandered to each of my teammates' classrooms and shared this information. Each teacher was astonished and then sympathetic. We all had a new perception of who Freddy was and what Freddy needed from us as his teachers.

The poem activity shed light on a part of Freddy's life that I, as his teacher, might never have known, or I might have found out after I had established a relationship with Freddy that was confrontational or authoritarian in an attempt to establish myself as the leader of the classroom. As it was, Freddy had willingly shared this private matter with me, allowing the rest of his teachers and I to approach him as an individual with individual needs.

Since this first experience, I have always begun my year with an activity that enables students to share with me who they are. Usually the results are not so dramatic, but I have found that it is a great opportunity to connect with students as individuals the very first time you meet them.

The following year every teacher on my team did an activity similar to mine, but adjusted it to their curriculum, available supplies, or needs. They all found it rewarding to have incorporated such an activity into their teaching.

### **Getting to Know Your Students**

The first step in connecting with your students is getting to know them. You have a class list of names. Who better to tell you about your students than your students themselves? Plan an activity that gives students the opportunity to not only show you what they know but also who they are.

Many teachers have students introduce themselves to the class by standing up and stating their name. Some teachers have students complete a whole class activity in which they meet other students. These are great, but I like to have students complete an activity that will result in a document, the first to go on the wall for Back-to-School Night, and the first to place in their portfolios.

Having students complete an assignment allows the students to show you many things: what they know, how they are able to show what they know, and who they are. The assignment also is unthreatening. If you begin the class with “stand up and introduce yourself,” you may alienate students who are shy or afraid to stand up in front of strangers. If you begin class with a “mixer” in which students are able to mix with other students you create a precedent of chaos before you have established classroom control. An individual activity allows for you to establish that classroom time will be spent on productive, student-directed activities with teacher guidance. It also sends the message to students that you are interested in who they are as individuals, how they see themselves, and the type of contribution they will make in class.

## Preparing For Introduction Activities

It is important to make the directions very clear when introducing this beginning-of-the-year activity. It is also essential to confirm that you have all the necessary supplies and that the activity is appropriate for your grade level and discipline if you teach upper grades. Having all these things in place sets a tone for your class: You are indicating that you are in charge and prepared as the teacher. You are also enabling your students to successfully fulfill your expectations.

It is also very important during this time to be available for students during their work time. Once students have begun the activity, you need to be circulating through the room, commenting on progress, clarifying directions, managing supplies, and speaking with students about how you might already know them. Your students will get a clear message that you are a hands-on, approachable teacher. If students need clarification about the assignment, your availability to answer questions and give further instructions demonstrates to students that you expect each of them to be successful—with your help if necessary.

Finally, the most important element of the activity is that it is engaging while also being appropriate. Notice that my acrostic poem is an activity that many students have been exposed to before: Every child at my grade level has been introduced to the concept of adjectives and also should be familiar with how to use a dictionary. Despite all this background experience and information, I still need to support students through the activity to ensure that they are all successful.

When planning to use an activity at the beginning of the year, be sure you have chosen one that all of your students can accomplish. If you are

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teaching kindergarten or first grade, this may be more difficult. You may want to simply have students draw a picture of their families or something they like to do. If you teach older students, then there are many possibilities. The following is a list of activities I have seen used successfully, organized by subject matter.

### **English**

- Acrostic poem using name

### **History**

- Timeline of child's summer

### **Math**

- Describe which number you are most like and why

### **Science**

- Describe how to make you happy in the form of an experiment listing supplies and procedures

Obviously, there are many other activities you could use, but these examples introduce an important concept within a curricular area, rely on previous knowledge, are easily modeled, and allow students flexibility in introducing themselves through the assignment.

Allowing students the opportunity to make a first impression on you with an assignment gives them the opportunity to immediately connect with you on a personal level. In addition, you are able to get to know students in a nonthreatening manner.

### **Things to Remember**

- Make the assignment appropriate for your students
- Provide clear instructions and an example for students
- Provide all supplies needed for this assignment
- Rely on students' previous knowledge and experiences to help them feel capable
- Circulate the room, making yourself available to students during the activity
- Post all assignments on the wall (not just the best) for Back-to-School Night