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Getting to Know One Another

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The first class meeting, like **all new situations**, is often associated with a **lack of relationships** (see First Class Meeting (/en/start-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/first-class-meeting/#c299097)).^[1] Teachers are frequently disorientated or insecure, because they cannot figure out their students' motivations or prior knowledge. There is a sense of anonymity particular to study programmes with large lectures and lots of students that may result in students neither getting to know the teacher nor their fellow classmates.

Introductions and familiarisation methods can help in this regard. What concrete method to use largely depends on your primary **objective** and the **size of the group** (see below).

1. Significance and Benefits

At the start of the semester, familiarisation methods primarily fulfil **three main purposes**:

a) Building relationships between teachers and students: Successful teaching and learning processes require positive working environments and relationships of trust between teachers and students (e.g. when giving and receiving feedback). Just like the welcoming, introductions are a sign of acknowledging and taking an interest in one another.^[2] Ideally, teachers create a welcoming environment and help students to fit in. Part of establishing a relationship consists of determining how to address each other, which is often established during introductions

b) Teachers receive important information (for further course planning): When planning courses, teachers work with assumptions about students they do not yet know. In the first class meeting, familiarisation methods help to confirm or dispel these assumptions and to incorporate what you learned in further planning the course.

c) Encouraging team building among students: There is a correlation between the quality of student relationships and successful learning.^[3] However, students are often unfamiliar with each other in the first class meeting, and might benefit from structured support when they establish contact with each other. Familiarisation methods promote social awareness, dismantle apprehensions, and can help to foster empathy among students.

2. Student Introductions

The **central questions** regarding the structure of student introductions are:

- Is the teacher concerned primarily with **finding out information about his/her new students** or
- is the teacher's primary concern that the **students get to know each other** and engage in a dialog?

The **weight of these two concerns** influences what methodological approach is better suited.

2.1 Teachers Getting to Know Their Students

Teachers often aim to find out more information about their new students at the beginning of the semester. This knowledge can be useful for further course development. The following information could be of interest to you:

- your students' prior knowledge and previous experiences;
- their expectations, interests and motivations for taking the class;
- their individual needs and their personal backgrounds.

Upon finding out the above-mentioned information, **the teacher may want to take one of the following steps:**

- In cases where students lack sufficient prior knowledge: let them know that they must catch up on specific topics on their own (supply necessary readings and other materials).
- Reconcile the students' expectations with realistic goals and explain what topics won't be treated in the course.
- Agree on alternative examination methods with specific students (see Teaching Manual (https://intra.univie.ac.at/en/topicals-a-z/initiale/h/kapitel/handbuch-fuer-lehrende/aktion/show/ctrl/tp/?no_cache=1&cHash=37923fac6289070a4a60a43575b1dfe4), chapter 6.3) if they request them.

The following segment will introduce you to concrete methods for small and large groups.

2.1.1 Small Groups

- **Classic introduction:** Students introduce themselves. Typically, you would establish and visualise a few points (e.g. on a flipchart, PowerPoint slide, board). We recommend using a question to transition to discussing the course content. Possible questions may include:
 - What is your personal connection to the course topic? Where have you encountered it before?
 - What can you contribute to the course topic?
 - What expectations do you have for the course?

The following question promotes a respectful and inclusive working environment:

- What do I need in order to learn and participate well in this course? (In response, students can bring up a number of requests that might otherwise go unmentioned. For example, a student must keep his or her mobile phone switched on because of an ill child. A vision impaired student needs to use accessible working materials (<https://barrierefreielehre.univie.ac.at/unterlagen/>).)

- **Images and other things that stimulate imagination:** The teacher brings in photographs that are broadly related to the course topic. The number of photographs should exceed the number of students in the classroom. Each student should choose one picture during introductions and explain why he/she felt drawn to it. Alternatively, you may also use other sources (e.g. short texts, quotes, calendar years, objects) to inspire students.

Memorising Students' Names

In classes with small numbers of students, many teachers try to memorise all of their students' names. Reasons for this often include:

- demonstrated **interest** in your students as people;
- to correctly attribute course participation grades to individual students for **oral** or other types of **participation**;
- It helps teachers to **facilitate discussions**: teachers can ask individual students for their opinions or refer back to their previous comments (*"What are your thoughts on Ms. Svoboda's opinion?"*);
- Teachers are better equipped to handle **interruptions or conflict situations** when they can call on or address individual students by name.

How does it work?

- Ask your students to use **name cards**. Remember to bring enough thick pens (flipchart pens) with you. Names written in ballpoint pen are hard to read from a distance.
- Ask your students to **upload pictures** of themselves onto their **Moodle** accounts so that you can better match their names with their faces.
- Instead of passing around the **attendance list**, read off the names and take attendance yourself (this approach is only suitable for small groups).
- The more you know about a person, the better you will be at retaining his/her name. All information you receive in the introductory session and during the course can help you memorise your students' names.

2.1.2 Medium to Large Groups

In groups that exceed 25 to 30 students, the simple method of letting the students introduce themselves reaches its limits. If you want to learn more about your students in large groups, you can use one of the **following approaches**:

- **Survey in class or at home:** Short surveys are a suitable option if you want to ask simple questions about your students' backgrounds. You can simply ask your students to raise their hands or use Student Response Systems. For instance, you can use the "Feedback Tool" on Moodle (for technical support see: Cheat Sheet "Feedback Modul verwenden (https://www.academic-moodle-cooperation.org/fileadmin/user_upload/p_aec/Cheat_Sheets/Feedback_Modul_verwenden-DE.pdf)" (in German)). Possible questions might include:
- What study programme are you in? Not using Moodle: Name two or three different study programmes and ask your students to raise their hands. Using Moodle: Set up your questions and supply popular answer choices (as well as provide a space where students might write in their own answers).
 - Do you have any prior knowledge of the course's contents/methods (or a specific method)? (Possible choices for answer in Moodle: much, some, hardly any, none)
 - How would you gauge your knowledge/skill of ... field? (Possible choices for answer in Moodle: good, rather well, average, rather low, low)

Quiz to determine prior knowledge: A short quiz is a quick way to obtain insight into your students' knowledge and skill levels. Depending on how you present the quiz, students can perceive it as a way to evaluate themselves, rather than as a high stakes assessment: "If I answer most of the questions incorrectly, I then know that I must catch up in order to keep up with this course." See Cheat Sheet "Feedback Modul verwenden (https://www.academic-moodle-cooperation.org/fileadmin/user_upload/p_aec/Cheat_Sheets/Feedback_Modul_verwenden-DE.pdf)" (in German) for how to set up a quiz in Moodle.

Short reflexive text as homework: If you want to find out more about your students' previous experiences, interests or expectations, you can ask them to write a short reflection paper as a first assignment. By setting the due date shortly before the start of the second session, you will already have a better idea of your students during the next meeting. Teachers like to use this method when their course touches on sensitive topics (such as an interreligious dialog). Reading all your students reflection paper at the beginning of the semester will give you an idea of where they are in terms of their approaches, as well as in which direction class discussions could potentially go.

Note: Since some of the information students supply may be personal, it is important to protect this information so that your **students can maintain their integrity**. Ways to do this can include:

- formulating questions in a way that allows students to decide how detailed they wish to answer;
- letting students answer in private settings rather than in the classroom. You can, for example, invite students to visit you during office hours to discuss alternative examination methods. Another option is asking students to write a reflection paper that only you will read (see above);
- avoiding some questions all together.

Students often do not identify these tasks as "introduction methods." We therefore recommend making your **intentions known explicitly** and explaining that your primary objective is learning more about your students who will be sitting across from you each week.

In order to show interest in your students as individuals, you can express your **regret** that an **introductory round is not possible in large lecture halls**, and that you hope to get to know them as the course progresses. Some teachers use the time leading up to the start of class to **talk informally** to a few students in order to get a general impression of their students.

2.2 Students Getting to Know Each Other

There are many ways of breaking the ice among students at the start of a class, as well as supporting the group building process.^[4]

- **Classic introduction** (see above) **with a variation:** Classic introductions also give students a glimpse into the class. If you want to encourage your students to get to know each other, you can suggest that they address the entire class when introducing themselves. For example, ask students if they heard a student's comment clearly – and/or request that students address the entire group and not only the instructor. Your own position in the classroom as well as the general seating arrangement can either encourage or discourage students from addressing the group.
 - *Variation:* Two students get to know each other and subsequently introduce each other to the class. This approach is especially suitable if you prefer enjoyable introductions and wish to encourage first conversations. Introduction by some else may lead to less reliable information about expectations and prior experiences of the student being introduced.

■ Students introduce themselves to a limited number of classmates:

- Pairs of two get together and introduce themselves to each other.
- After a few minutes, individuals in pairs are reassigned to new pair partners and the introduction process is repeated. The teacher uses an acoustic signal to indicate the change.
- There are usually 2 to 5 repeats so that each person has the opportunity to get to know a certain number of classmates.

This method works independent of group size. The teacher may also participate in the introductions. One limitation of the method is that you can never follow all conversations between your students – and consequently only find out a little about the group as a whole. If it is important to you to find out more about the group, you may use a **combination** of different methods to fulfil this purpose (surveys, quizzes or reflective essay assignments, see above).

- The "speed dating" variation:* Some seating arrangements encourage pair formation (e.g. all student in the first row turn around and speak to students in the second row. They then switch conversation partners by moving to the right or left.)
- The "cocktail party" variation:* A less structured method can encourage more casual introductions. In this method the students move around the classroom like at a party – each student speaks to one another.

- All types of group activities (two or more people):**
- Students can also find out a lot about each other in group activities. If they work on small tasks during the first or second session, you can take the opportunity to
- reorganise groups**
- in a way that no one is in a group with each other twice.

3. Introducing Yourself as the Teacher

At the beginning of the first session, the teacher usually introduces her/himself. The **objectives** of this might **vary**, depending on the situation and person.

- Some teachers' primary objective is **encouraging** their students' **confidence**, which conveys a positive tone to introductions and topic discussions.
- Other teachers' primary concern is presenting themselves as researchers (with a focus on research interests and career path), which **reinforces their authority as course instructor**.
- And others focus on **inspiring excitement for the course topic**, and reveal why they find it interesting and relevant.
- You can mention whether this is the first time you are offering the course in this form, or whether it **further develops the topic and methodology** of a **previous course** (e.g. after taking into account student feedback).
- Additional topics of self-introduction might include **your personal relationship to the subject and to the university**.
- Be aware that the personal introduction you chose may influence what information your students want to share with the group.

Sources

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[2] Kotthoff, Helga. „Aspekte der Höflichkeit im Vergleich der Kulturen“. In: *Muttersprache* 4 (2003), 289-307.

[3] Johnson, David W., Geoffrey Maruyama, Roger Johnson, Deborah Nelson, und Linda Skon. „The effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures on achievement: A meta-analysis“. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 89 Nr. 1 (1981): 47-62.

[4] Geißler. *Anfangssituationen*. [1]

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