Getting to Know your Students

“Well the first days are the hardest days, don’t you worry anymore.”

- Robert Hunter

The start of the school year can bring about feelings of exhaustion, apprehension, confusion, and difficulty for teachers and their students. I know my first two weeks of school always prove to be the hardest to get through. I have recently taken on a new position after 15 years in the classroom; I feel as if I am starting over again. Apart from not knowing the names of the students sitting before me, I’m unaware of what their interests are, how they like to learn, what their work ethic is, or the knowledge they already possess. Curricular responsibilities, faculty meetings, and a host of other back-to-school tasks can often cloud the first and most important order of business in any educational environment: getting to know the students.

In past years I have issued interest analyzers or brief questionnaires for students to reflect upon their passions and interests, which in turn allows me to learn about them in an informal manner. You can read about this helpful method of questioning by visiting the Student Interest webpage on University of Connecticut’s gifted website.
Even though interest surveys have always worked very well, I decided to do something different to start the year. I call the assignment “The NPR Interview,” as it presents a simulated interview conducted by a show host from National Public Radio. I have been using podcast recordings and associated transcripts for years in my science classes, mainly as a vehicle for assessing student progress on long-term projects, so it was easy to adapt into an introductory assignment. The basics:

- I like to preface the lesson with time spent listening to a NPR podcast. There is a great variety of programs to listen to. Click on the link to download an interview transcript, which comes in handy when students begin to answer the mock questions.
- Once the students have listened to a podcast and viewed a transcript they are ready to fill out their own interest interview form. For the form, I include a series of open-ended and follow-up questions asked by the host of the program. This is a great opportunity to introduce the concept of different types of questioning. On the bottom of the form I usually include the disclaimer from the transcript of an NPR interview.
- You can view my example of a mock “Science Friday” interview with host Ira Flato. Another example uses the show Fresh Air.
- Once completed, finished forms are collected and read, with suggestions and feedback offered individually. The transcript could also be used for students to conduct interviews with one another.
- Using this method gave me insight into my students’ progress. I didn’t need to sit and conduct a lengthy interview with each student and was still able to infuse some instruction about the skills related to interviewing during the lesson.

I have found that by using interest forms such as the mock interview, which provide students the chance to express themselves, I can help ensure a great start to the school year, with an enthusiastic outlook for both the teacher and the students.