Lesson Starters: An outdated idea or a meaningful teaching tool?

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Abstract

Current Ofsted guidelines (2014b, p. 18) state that inspectors should ‘not give the impression that Ofsted favours a particular teaching style’; neither should inspectors ‘focus on the lesson structure at the expense of its content’. This paper proposes that starter activities can still be used to good effect with their function tailored to achieve specific outcomes. Based on a research project (Stephens, 2010) designed to generate training material to be used in starters and plenaries INSET training, with the specific aim of developing a model that would constitute the basis of future training, this article considers the impact that well selected starters can have on student behaviour, classroom collaboration and learning. Existing guidance and rationale for using lessons starters is explored through a review of guidance documents and pedagogic literature. Concepts and suggestions found in available guidance documents have been restated to add support to a 3-Part Starter Model (3-PS Model) which has been developed and used in the training of student teachers and newly qualified teachers.

Keywords: starters; behaviour; collaboration; learning; thinking; motivation.

1 The use of the term ‘tool’ is not meant to infer that learning is mechanistic, but alludes to the analogy of the teacher’s toolkit, being the repertoire of techniques and strategies deployed in the complex task of helping students to learn, as used by Brookfield (2011; 2012). The point of this paper is to argue that lesson starters can and should be more than an activity at the start of a lesson.
Introduction

Current Ofsted guidelines (2014b, p. 18) state that inspectors should ‘not give the impression that Ofsted favours a particular teaching style’; neither should inspectors ‘focus on the lesson structure at the expense of its content’. While this gives the impression that 3 or 4 part lessons are no longer a requirement, I propose that the initial activities in a lesson can still be used to good effect if their function is clearly understood. The subject of my Master’s dissertation (Stephens, 2010), from which this article will draw heavily, was the use and theory of starter activities in lessons. When conducting the literature review, I found little empirical research to explicitly support the use of starter activities in lessons. Combining this small body of literature with pedagogic theory, I sought to categorise and explore the usefulness of different types of starters. The insights gained have since been used in training sessions for student teachers and newly qualified teachers.

Developing a model

My interest in the use of starters began when I volunteered to run a staff training session on starters and plenaries. As my experience of starters was confined to their use in Religious Education, with ideas taken from a small selection of resources (Cheshire RE Teachers, undated; Mason, 2002; Beard & Wilson, 2006), I searched for available cross-curricular courses. Failure to find any led to a search of the internet and libraries which unearthed several documents describing the outcomes of a good starter, or giving hints on their administration (DfES, 2004a; 2004b; Lodge, 2008; Bristol City Council, undated; Dodds & Smith, undated; Magnan, 2005; Cheshire RE Teachers, undated; Sullivan, 2003; QCA, 2001). Tracking down theory or research supporting the stated outcomes proved more difficult.

From the initial literature search, which is explained in the methods section below, it appeared the humble starter was asked to fulfil a range of functions, including:
- Host/ hostess – introducing the learning menu;
- Reminder/ bridge – linking back to previous lessons;
- Motivator – getting students into the right frame of mind for learning;
- Brain coach – through the use of puzzles or activities calling for logical thinking;
- Crowd control – calming ‘hyper’ children;
- Learning Styles – including something visual, audible and kinaesthetic by means of a short, introductory activity.

The different sets of guidelines and advice appeared very disjointed. In an attempt to produce something visual and memorable for training sessions, I sought to develop a model or outline to pull the ideas together. The model described below (Diagram 1) emerged from many months of reflection and reading and incorporated the guidelines and theory as they pertained to the three possible focus points. The model is not meant to be definitive, but is offered as one way in which to think about how we use starter activities. Using the idea of ‘starting the lesson as we mean to continue’, a phrase I settled on after exploring different conceptions of the word ‘starter’, I wanted to explore ways of using these initial steps into the lesson as tools for establishing classroom expectations and a learning ethos within the classroom.

The guidelines emphasise the need to get students working through phrases such as, ‘quickly on task’, ‘sense of pace’, ‘essentially active’, ‘interactive’ (DfES, 2004a, p. 557). Although the new guidelines acknowledge that students can, on occasions, be ‘passive rather than active recipients of learning’ (Ofsted, 2014b, p. 18), it is still important that students need to be ‘engaged in learning’ (Ofsted, 2014a, p. 39). However, the original guidelines from 2004 acknowledged that many teachers avoid whole class, interactive scenarios due to fears over behaviour. They seemed to imply that if teachers could quickly elicit students’ engagement in activities, this would provide a cure for poor behaviour, avoidance or apathy. This assumption will be explored later through
Diagrams 2, 3 and 4. My research aimed to explore the following hypothesis: rather than avoiding activity, for fear of losing control of the classroom, structured activity can be used to highlight expectations for behaviour. This can include establishing routines and habits within the group by administering the starter activities in a structured manner. My first focus point, therefore, became one of teaching classroom rules and expectations at the same time as getting students involved and active. Although behaviour management must be honed through the whole of the lesson, a careful selection of starter activity can help ensure that students are hooked from the beginning. If engaged with activities that grab their attention, they might be less likely to be involved in poor behaviour (Cowley, 2010) because their attention and energies are focused on the task. Secondly, allowing students to engage with activities they can access facilitates the opportunity to ‘catch [them] being good’ (Cowley, 2010, p. 136) and build that all important relationship of trust and respect between the teacher and his or her students.
Diagram 1: 3-Part Starter Model (3-PS Model).

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The DfES’ (2004a) emphasis on engaging students seemed to correlate with the need to develop classrooms where behaviour was well managed, allowing for the DfES’s second focus of developing higher order thinking skills. However, there seemed to be a step missing. While attempting to track the origins of starters, I was struck by the importance of class dynamic between students and teacher and between students themselves. Petty’s version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (2009) describes progression from safety needs, through belongingness, toward esteem and self-actualisation. The use of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was considered appropriate because starters aim to spark motivation, enthusiasm and/or compliance, all of which have stronger links to the psychological rather than the cognitive element emphasised in other hierarchies. This led to the second point in my model of establishing an atmosphere or ethos that facilitated collaborative work.

A further, general focus of my model was to start with the student, using their lives, experiences and knowledge in order to progress into new areas of understanding (Hammond et al., 1990). Consequently, the aim at all stages was to begin with something the students could already do, grasp or understand. This need not clash with ideas of novelty or mystery, which are useful for catching students’ attention as they are drawn in by the need to discover an answer to a problem. In terms of what students are asked to do or produce, the activities should begin at an accessible level. For instance, in one of my classes where 70% of the students were heavily statement, I discovered that they not only enjoyed doing mazes and puzzles, but that the attention required to solve these calmed their behaviour and resulted in some students helping others. Activities that are accessible can inspire the confidence required for transitions to activities which call for interaction with others or risk-taking as ideas are stretched and challenged.
Methods

Gorard & Taylor (2004) argue that indirect, mixed methods of research can be better suited where a direct answer is not directly available. The researcher may need to imagine and calculate the implication of the answer, checking for evidence of that answer. Anderson & Arsenault (1998) use the analogy of a fisherman who has a feeling about what lies beneath unchartered water, but who cannot always be sure of what, if anything, he will find. My original research paper, utilising a mixed methods practitioner research approach, worked from the assumption that the pedagogic theory for the use of starters was already available in educational literature, but not explicitly applied to the concept of their use. Information was gathered from teachers across the curriculum through questionnaires on their use of starter activities. Within the RE department, the effect of using different starter activities in two Year 8 RE classes was assessed through classroom observations, analysis of student work and student questionnaires. The conclusions drawn constitute suggestions for improved practice, but these need exploration and adjustment within different settings. Although the original research project involved an iterative exploration of the use and development of starters, this article will focus on the theoretical findings used to develop the 3-part starter model.

All documents offering guidance and advice, ranging from government initiative documents to those created by schools, Local Education Authorities and practising teachers, were collated and analysed. An internet and library search produced three types of document. Firstly, several sites offer examples of starters, without any rationale. Other sites or books gave a bulleted list of reasons or guidelines for their use, often repeating the Ofsted guidelines. A few texts included brief discussions of starters (Sullivan, 2003; Phillips, 2001; PLS, undated; Robinson, 2009; Butt, 2008). All the statements from these sources were collated and analysed under the broad headings: ‘Behaviour, motivation, class dynamic’, ‘Cooperation and confidence within the group’
and ‘Starting with the Learner’. The focus was to explore why starter activities might assist student engagement, or how they differ from the rest of the lesson.

**Theoretical Development**

The theoretical development sought to explore pedagogic support for the proposed model. Using a ‘hook’ to snag the attention of an audience is as old as the art of storytelling (Straker, 2008) and Homer’s technique of *in medias res* (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2010). Lesson starters, likewise, are meant to draw the student into the experience (Ogunleye, 2007; Riley, 2005; Riley & Byrom, 2005), but are also related to ‘Ice Breakers’, which recognise that a group of strangers work and learn better together if relaxed (Magnan, 2005). The question is, ‘What types of activities are likely to fulfil this function’, or, ‘What factors prevent students from engaging in learning?’

In the training sessions that I led on the use of starters, one of the activities required participants to compare how young children, teens and further or higher education students learn. Feedback from the exercise consistently showed that toddlers and small children were thought to ‘experience’, ‘do’, ‘test’, ‘imitate’, ‘experiment’, ‘using their senses’ and ‘getting stuck in’, while teen learning was described using words such as ‘classroom’, ‘books’, ‘abstract’, ‘inhibitions’ and ‘teacher-led’. This showed that these teachers didn’t naturally think of teens learning through ‘play’ and ‘experience’. Education is ‘a basic human process’ where ‘all kinds of activities count as education’ (Shank & Brown, 2007, pp. 2-3). If the starter aims to start the learning process, it should perhaps capitalise more on how we learn naturally.
Many teachers worry that lively, interactive starters may lead to poor behaviour, so that phrases like ‘lots of pace’, ‘essentially active’, and ‘work without intervention’ (DfES, 2004a; 2004b) make them nervous. If good classroom management is required for lively and interactive learning, can the starters at the beginning of the academic year be used to establish routines and expectations?

Studies suggest that student satisfaction with the teacher corresponds with improvement in effort from students (Pounder, 2008; Krishnan, 2003; Burns, 1978). Leaders should model high performance expectations (Cooper, 2000), give continual feedback, include all members of the group and care about students’ concerns and developmental needs. A combination of success and failure can provide more motivation than continual success or continual failure (Child, 2007), but effort and motivation depend on the degree to which students expect to succeed, the value they place on the task and the extent to which they contribute to the process (Brophy, 2004; Dewey, 1991). Short, manageable yet challenging tasks involving everyone and providing feedback are more likely to produce a positive response (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011).

In order to select appropriate activities, it is important to understand the cause of poor behaviour. The emphasis of the DFES guidelines (2004a; 2004b) appears focused on the wrong part of the problem. As a reflection exercise I attempted to draw out the implied relationship between the starter activity and the desired outcome (Diagram 2). The top row of text describes the student’s experience, with the bottom row describing the implied objective of the lesson starter.
The starter gets the student working and learning quickly ... so that they will be too busy to misbehave.

Diagram 2: Applying the starter to poor behaviour.

It seemed to me that the assumption here was that if the lesson is more interesting than the punishment for non-compliance (being isolated or sent out of the room) students will be too busy and interested to have time to misbehave (Tauber, 2007). However, activity does not necessarily mean that learning or change is taking place (Barrow & Woods, 1993). This is transactional leadership (Wofford, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Tyssen et al., 2014), a leadership style based on barter, where one outcome (good behaviour) is traded for another (free time at lunch). Students work if they ‘feel like it’, which is only effective until they stop feeling like it, until the next distraction, lapse in concentration or pressure from peers. The guidelines acknowledge that students’ ‘ability to engage in learning is also influenced by their emotional state’ (DfES, 2004b, p. 4), but this is not fully explored. I then attempted to revise my previous model (Diagram 2) in order to focus the attention of the starter activity onto the reason for the poor behaviour (Diagram 3).

2 I have deliberately used the term poor behaviour to make a distinction between the student misbehaving or being disengaged. Here I am referring to students whose behaviour is disruptive or challenging as opposed to the student who can be amenable without being fully engaged with the learning process.
SOMETHING CAUSES

Poor self-esteem means that...

The starter aims to build self-esteem...

THE STUDENT

... the student hides their insecurity...

... with the result that the student’s self-image changes/develops...

TO EXHIBIT POOR BEHAVIOUR

...behind poor behaviour.

... and they are freed to engage with the work.

Diagram 3: Applying the starter to the reason for the poor behaviour.

Here the starter addresses poor self-esteem, rather than the child per se. Regular starters that address students’ needs have a greater chance of starting the lesson positively. If self-esteem is poor, then it is again important that starters should be accessible and create the opportunity for affirmation of students’ worth.

Problems stemming from all areas of the model can have a negative effect on behaviour.

Esteem needs, when not met, can produce fear of criticism, reluctance to take risks, frustration and anger. Belongingness and love needs can lead to dislike, hostility and flight-or-fight behaviour. Self-actualisation needs can lead to boredom, restlessness, avoidance (Petty, 2009).

To address these, starters could include time for discussion and setting up ground rules for the group. For instance, instead of starting the lesson with an activity that requires students to solve equations, activities could explore students’ attitudes towards, or difficulties with, equations. Or,
if the equation is disguised within everyday problems, making it relevant to students’ lives, it could include reflection on other situations where equations may be useful.

Individuals learn differently (Barrow & Woods, 1993), and have different needs, making a variety of starters essential to cater for all students. More challenging for teachers might be to structure starters that cater for different needs at the same time, allowing every student to feel confident in making a contribution. This could utilise choice and self expression, but be administered so as to create opportunities for success and reward, rather than disruption and punishment. Here links with collaborative starters begin to appear because the needs of the individual are often intertwined with the dynamics of the group. Expectations link to the headings ‘relationship with the teacher’ and ‘classroom atmosphere and management’ (Diagram 1). The regular use of starters can contribute to creating a space where students arrive knowing what is expected of them, and what they can expect from the lesson (Brown, 2009). Creating expectations of success, stretching without embarrassing, and clarifying the point of the learning can be done from the beginning of the lesson through a careful selection of the first activities on offer.

**Collaboration**

In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Petty, 2009; Forsyth, 2009), ‘belongingness’ precedes self-esteem and self-actualisation, and refers to the student’s need to feel part of the group. Fun, challenging activities can allow students to forget themselves as they concentrate on the task. Fulfilling the role of icebreakers (Magnan, 2005; Cheshire RE Teachers, undated), students are given the chance to participate and notice themselves being heard. However, making students work in groups and share resources does not necessarily address this need for belongingness. Outside the classroom, students can choose who will witness them at play through the selection of their peer groups and the activities in which they elect to involve themselves. Identity is the result of socialisation with others (Reeves, 2008), but if this sense of belonging is absent, hostility
towards ‘out-group’ members results, which could produce discord between students, or hostility and lack of cooperation towards the teacher. Students use coping mechanisms such as projection, displacement and acting out to avoid feelings of fear or inadequacy (Granström, 2006; Child, 2007). This could include blaming the teacher who is not explaining properly or who is picking on them, refusing to work with other students who are not involving or listening to them, or perhaps blaming the subject matter for being too boring, difficult or irrelevant. The real problem may be that the individual lacks confidence within the group, and so will not risk failure.

Alternately, the frequent experience of positive emotions improves both cognitive and behavioural coping strategies, which in turn affect engagement (Reschly et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2003). Students who feel they ‘fit in’ are more likely to engage in learning that produces academic success (Singh et al., 2008). Extending the thought experiment illustrated in Diagrams 2 and 3, I then attempted to extend the model further to explore how starter activities might be used in an attempt to address group and social needs (Diagram 4).

**Diagram 4: Applying the starter to group/social needs that might cause poor behaviour.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOMETHING WITHIN THIS GROUP CAUSES</th>
<th>THE STUDENT</th>
<th>TO EXHIBIT POOR BEHAVIOUR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of insecurity, lack of belongingness mean that...</td>
<td>... the student deals with the pain of perceived rejection...</td>
<td>... by acting out/attention seeking/not caring, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The starter addresses the group dynamic...</td>
<td>... so that the student feels safe/accepted...</td>
<td>... and is willing to try new things within the group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
O’Donnell (undated) recommends working in dyads rather than larger groups. Larger groups produce more resources in terms of ideas and ability, but they also allow the exclusion of some members or the shifting of effort onto others. Larger groups also require more relationship ties to connect members to each other and to the group as a whole (Forsyth, 2009). Dyads or triads allow students to find common ground. They can rehearse ideas and receive positive feedback before presenting to larger groups, giving the individual space and time to improve self-efficacy (Griffin & Griffin, 1995) with peer questioning used to scaffold subsequent discussions (Hebl et al., 2000). Building group dynamics may require teacher intervention or stimulus. Scripted cooperation, giving students a clear method of working through material, can ensure students take turns in describing and assessing different ideas (O’Donnell, undated). Snowballing can build on this, allowing skills and confidence acquired in small groups to be extended into the wider group.

However, good group dynamics do not necessarily mean that students are cooperating in order to learn. Granström (2006, pp. 1143-1145) describes two types of ‘projects’ in the classroom – ‘the teacher’s instructional projects and the students’ project concerning self-knowledge, self-esteem, group values, and belongingness’. Some types of disruption, including ‘chattering, inattentiveness, hindering other students, being noisy, and late arrival’, involve the students’ private interactions and their relation-creating projects. Where a group has cohesion, their social interaction itself can cause distractions from the learning tasks as they interact with each other, but where a group is divided, the resultant fear or lack of ‘group-esteem’ can trigger disruptions. In the first instance, starters should aim to utilise that natural social dynamic in order to focus the group, whereas the second scenario requires starters that build confidence, group language and vision. Regular starter activities that require cooperation and that build on knowledge of students’ interactions outside the classroom can help towards building an expectation for supportive group work. Activities seeking predetermined ideas mean some may reach the
answer before others, widening rather than narrowing the divide between abilities. Open-ended starters require discussion, persuasion and new ideas, demanding collaboration to reach a conclusion.

Learning

Hart et al. (2004, pp. 17-18) argue that some ‘young people undeniably do seem to grasp ideas much more rapidly than others’. They are more curious, display greater imagination and can better express their ideas, meaning that development is better measured against the student’s own formal reasoning (Adey & Shayer, 1990; Valanides, 1997), rather than measuring students against each other. The discussion in Hart et al. (2004) focuses more on allowing students to progress without being labelled than on the idea of all students being able to make limitless progress. If ‘ability’ means what we are born with, and ‘potential’ represents development of that ability, then starters should focus on encouraging students to work with and develop what they have or can already access (Knight & Benson, 2014). Their natural learning capabilities need to be trained and directed in order to develop and stimulate learning (Dewey, 1991). In one of the training sessions I ran, a teacher expressed concern at starting with the student’s ideas in case the student is mistaken in their view. This, however, focuses the starters on knowledge rather than their ability to think creatively within specific disciplines (Knight & Benson, 2014).

It should be remembered that there are many ways of knowing. The word ‘learn’ includes acquiring knowledge of, or skill in, something through study or experience (Compact Oxford Dictionary, 2008). ‘Acquire’ derives from the Latin word *acquirere*, meaning to ‘get in addition’, which in turns comes from ‘*quaerere*’, ‘to seek’. Seeking implies actively looking for, suggesting activities that seek answers to problems. To ‘get in addition’ defines knowledge as cumulative, which could mean knowing more quantitatively (I knew 3 facts but now know 5 facts), or
developing knowledge qualitatively (I know more about cats today and how to look after them and how this links to the way we look after other pets).

Mind maps encourage open-ended thinking, allowing words to link to further ideas, and creating room for free thinking which produces unexpected connections. Ideas that provide controversy can generate new issues to be explored (Dewey, 1991). Open-ended questions that seek reasons and justifications also extend thinking (Petty, 2009), as more links can always be added. Relating information to what students already know produces chunking or recognition (Dodds & Smith, undated). Grouping similar items together helps transfer held knowledge or beliefs onto the unfamiliar, which aids understanding and recall through association (Child, 2007).

In order to develop or challenge students’ beliefs and value systems, starters should also be creative, moving the student away from the familiar (White, 2002). Whole-brain learning (Curry, 1983; Eagleton & Muller, 2011), which recognises the complex interaction between personality, learning styles, environmental and instructional preferences, stimulates creativity and assists higher order thinking tasks such as seeing the whole picture, sorting, interpreting and feeding back (Buzan, 2007). Whole-brain activity is stimulated when a variety of techniques are incorporated (Petty, 2009), including:

- The five senses
- Exaggeration
- Rhythm and movement
- Colour
- Laughter
- Pictures and images
- Numbers
- Words
- Symbols
- Order
- Patterns

Using pictures, movement, role play and action can help some students engage with the material using different parts of their brains, which in turn stimulates learning (Fayolle, 2007).
In terms of ‘engagement’, a distinction is needed between students appearing busy and those actively learning. Students easily perfect the art of looking busy behind a book or task, requiring constant prompting and monitoring (Sanguras 2005, p. 17), or alternately can submissively work through the steps of an activity without fully engaging with it. It may be possible to settle students within a familiar routine (Robinson, 2009), but starters that promote learning are more difficult to judge or measure. Focal awareness means students are actively concentrating or focussing on a task while peripheral awareness refers to partial attention (White, 2002). A learning starter should seek to direct the student’s focal attention onto the object or experience that will provide the learning. Students need to know that they may be called on to respond, giving them ‘a reason to pay attention’ (PLS, undated; Butt, 2008).

In daily life, curiosity responds to something new, unusual or unexplained, while everyday occurrences are often experienced subconsciously. This means, again, that starters should be varied and aim to take students by surprise (Butt, 2008; Davies, 2008). The use of the curious in history lessons (Phillips, 2001) has been popularised through the ‘Horrible Histories’ series (Deary & Brown, various). Pictures that elicit questions (requiring students to make sense of the image), problems that need solving (asking students to take on the role of amateur detectives), and information that is deliberately oblique (requiring further investigation) generate curiosity (Davies, 2008). A good story includes a hook that requires the listener to gather bits of information in order to answer questions that have been posed at the start (Phillips, 2001; Robinson, 2009; Butt, 2008). The need to find the answer is what engages interest, and Sullivan (2003) again stresses the importance of fun,
competition and collaboration. Engaging activities stimulate curiosity, encourage creativity and help to build positive relationships between students and the teacher (Strong et al., 1995). If starters snag students’ focal attention, with the rest of the lesson reeling them into the learning experience (Phillips, 2001), then perhaps starters should avoid having an ‘answer’ or ‘end’.

**Conclusion**

The model described above has been used in training sessions, resulting in some adaptations as the ideas have been discussed and explored. When I started using it, my idea was that the types of starter would be used sequentially, beginning with those aimed at developing behaviour, moving through the building of classroom collaboration, and developing into activities that extend high order thinking. My view now is that these elements cannot be so neatly separated, and that a more complex relationship between them should not be ignored. Classrooms are dynamic and changing, and part of the teacher’s craft is to maintain awareness of students’ needs. I would suggest that the regular use of starter activities still has a place in learning, especially when focused on beginning the lesson in a positive manner, aimed at helping students engage with the learning in a meaningful way. However, a clearer understanding of the purpose of these introductory activities calls for a discriminative selection and application of activities that take account of students’ needs.
References


