

# File Systems to Support Effective Teaching

by Julie Bray

**W**hy start up a filing system at your school or department? Won't it just encourage everyone to hoard bits of paper that they might never use again?

That's exactly what happened in my previous school. When I arrived I noticed there was a cabinet full of bulging files and envelopes, but I had never taken the time to have a look through them until recently. They looked like they hadn't been touched for quite a while. That showed that the filing method used hadn't really worked—nobody was using it! The materials were mostly kept in large envelopes. They were not divided into sections, so to find something you would have had to go through the pile of papers, and then you would have had to take the trouble getting them back in the envelope! The files also had less than useful names like 'miscellaneous' and 'general', so they were not likely to be referred to at all when teachers were looking for material for a certain subject.

## Doesn't Your Teaching Deserve Better?

What we needed was a different filing system; one that would be easier to use. A good system should, among other things, enable us to do the following: share materials, find them easily and consistently, help us to remember good activities, and reduce our lesson planning time. And, we shouldn't have to spend the time we saved on lesson preparation filing papers!

It would be great to store all materials on a computer—it would save paper, preserve the best information, could be updated with dates, names and other words, and changed according to our needs. On the other hand, you would have to be sure to save the materials in file types that were easily printed. What's more an extra employee would probably be needed to type and scan all the paper material onto easily accessible storage media, so it wouldn't seem very time or cost-effective. So far, computers have not created a 'paperless' office; rather they and their printers have led to even more paper in offices. Also, computers tend to be isolating bottlenecks, since usually only one person uses them at a time and does not interact with anyone in the office when they do so.

Alternatively, there is at your local stationer or home center a vast choice of cheap paper, cardboard and plastic files available to keep your bits (or reams) of paper in. Larger ones are always better, as the material in them will build up fast. In the past I have

found lever arch files with plenty of plastic pockets to be the best for access that allows for easy viewing and flicking over the pages. Anything oversized can be kept in a box underneath or near the files with a reference in the relevant file saying where it is.

## What and How to Systematize

What should be filed? All the materials you want to save and use again and anything that would be useful for other teachers in the school. Include useful articles, photos, flashcards, pictures and games. Some people also file lesson plans.

The next and most important question is: How should you file all your material? There are so many different ways to do this, and you have to choose carefully so as not to end up with files that collect dust rather than material. The main possibilities for categorization are: textbook, level, class, and subject. Most material will fall into more than one category. You just have to decide which subject or level it is most useful for. Also, you might set up a system for cross-reference. In any filing system, duplication might take up more space but it can add to the overall organization and ease of access.

At first, in my experience, filing by textbook seemed like the most obvious solution because most of the material we make is based on the textbooks we use. But there are disadvantages. Firstly, if the books for the course are changed, then the file for the previous book might never be accessed again. Each textbook's file might be ignored in any search for material for other courses, even if that file contains something perfectly valid for use.

Almost all the schools I have taught in have filed their material by level of proficiency, such as Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper Intermediate and Advanced. Each file was usually then divided by subject or grammar point. This is very useful if your school doesn't depend on textbooks for a syllabus—you can put together a file that you can simply work your way through. However, some materials are useful for more than one level, so you might either end up photocopying a lot of material or missing out on having more activities to choose from.

Another similar method would be to file by class. If you have the same classes running year after year, this might be useful, especially if the same textbook (or a textbook covering much of the same syllabus) is used year after year. This is similar to filing by textbook or level, so the same advantages and disadvantages apply to filing by class.

If you file by subject, each file will have a category, for example; people, home, weather, animals, food and drink, writing, pronunciation, telephoning, eating out, past tenses, etc. The file will hold everything regarding that category, so the writing file might include learning to write as well as writing exercises for adults. It would be a good idea to divide the file between the levels you have in your school for easy reference. This method has the advantage of having access to easier activities to use as a warm up before introducing new vocabulary on the same subject. Separate files would be needed for grammar points, pronunciation activities, etc.

It's also a good idea to have a library of images as well—either at the front of your file or in a separate box. Finally you should take your own school's needs into account. If you teach kids, you will need a lot of space for boxes for large flashcards, toys and games.

### **Other Considerations and Conclusion**

The ideal place to put your newly organized material is in a sturdy cabinet or shelf unit, with boxes nearby or underneath for storing toys or oversized materials. It should be a dry secure place that is easily accessible to all teachers. Also, remember that a workaday filing system doesn't have to be ultra neat; it only has to be a stable and consistent system that ALL the people using it understand and can abide with. The neatest system in the world is absolutely no good if only one person understands how it works. As for using the files, each teacher can take copies and replace the material, putting any unused copies back with the original. Such a habit saves paper and copying costs. One more important point: no one should ever take the master copy, unless it is to make copies, and in that case, the master copy should be immediately replaced. Such a system isn't very time consuming—it just takes a little getting used to! So when you next want to plan a lesson, you just go to the relevant subject file, flick to the relevant level and you will find all the materials you have to use in that lesson. Easy!

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