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Flexible Grouping A Basic Strategy in Differentiating

Flexible grouping is essential in the differentiated classroom. It is one of the basic teaching strategies for differentiating instruction. When teachers have a variety of learners in one classroom, the challenge is how to provide for all of their differing needs, interests, and abilities.

Individualizing for every student, in every learning area, every day is simply not possible or feasible. Therefore, one of the best and most practical ways to differentiate is through flexibly grouping students in a variety of ways, changing groupings as learning needs dictate. Even if you have a class designated as advanced, honors, or basic, you still have differing abilities and need to use the flexible grouping strategy.

When using this strategy, you should think of any instructional group as variable and temporary, not permanent. Flexible grouping means arranging for students to work together in a variety of ways and con-

figurations depending on the classroom activity and desired learning outcomes.

One key to flexible grouping is to make sure students aren't in the same group for every classroom activity. When this happens, students can easily become categorized into the 'smart group,' the 'dumb kids,' the 'nerds,' etc. The danger in grouping without much flexibility is that students get into one group and stay there, even when the group is inappropriate for their needs.

An important question to ask as you plan learning activities for your students is:

What are the learning outcomes, and how can I best group my students in order to accomplish them?

Basic guidelines for flexible grouping

- If prior skills and knowledge in the content area are not needed, use heterogeneous grouping or whole class instruction.
- If remedial or accelerated instruction is needed, use homogeneous grouping or individualized instruction.
- The logistics and classroom management for flexible grouping must be carefully planned. Well-functioning groups do not happen automatically! See pages 20-21 for specific details.

**“Just moving their seats is
not flexible grouping!”**

Guidelines for Managing Flexible Groups

1. Before grouping students for any activity, ask yourself: *“What is the learning outcome of this activity, and what is the best type of grouping to meet this learning outcome?”* Then group your students accordingly. See the **Flexible Group Planning Form** on page 25. Use this form as you plan various flexible groupings for a unit of work.
2. Use various types of assessment data to help you in forming groups.
3. Use some kind of record-keeper so you and your students will know at a glance who is in each group for a particular activity. Use color coding, numbers, clothespins, index cards, checklists, charts, or any other system that works for you.
4. Give explicit instructions about the task each group is going to do before the groups begin to work.
5. Teach students how to listen to one another as they work in a group. Distribute and go over **Guidelines for Listening When Working in a Group** on page 26.
6. Classroom rules and procedures for group work should be written, posted, and understood by all.
7. Model and practice procedures and routines for getting into groups so that movement becomes easy and automatic.
8. Common procedures and routines usually involve distributing, collecting and storing materials, moving chairs and/or desks for group work, getting help from the teacher, and monitoring/dealing with the noise level in the classroom.
9. Don't allow students to work in a group for too long a period. The length of time partly depends on the ages of your students and grade level of your class. It also depends on the maturity and attention spans of your students. Use your own good judgment as you would with any classroom activity.
10. Have a specific procedure for stopping group work and returning to a whole class setting. The more your students practice and do this, the less confusion and disruption there will be.
11. Each student should keep an individual learning log during group work. See a sample **Individual Learning Log for Group Work** form on page 27.
12. Have groups evaluate their own group process skills. One way to do this is by using a **Group Self-Assessment Checklist**. See page 28 for a checklist.
13. In some group situations, each student may have a specific role. In other cases, only a group leader needs to be designated. A **Group Leadership Checklist** can be found on page 29.

Student Individual Learning Log for Group Work

Name _____

Date _____

Group tasks and accomplishments today:

What I did:

What the group did well together:

Ways to improve:

Date _____

Group tasks and accomplishments today:

What I did:

What the group did well together:

Ways to improve: