

WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED? FLEXIBLE INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING.WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATION?

Msc.Doc.YllkaMullai

Lecturer Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Department of Education and Teaching Methodology, University of Gjirokastra, Albania
E-mail:yllkamullai@yahoo.com

Abstract

Differentiating instruction means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to individual learners' needs, styles, or interests.

Differential instruction specifically responds to students' progress on the learning continuum – What they already know and what they need to learn. It responds to their best ways of learning and allows them to demonstrate what they need to learn. It responds to their best ways of learning and allows them to demonstrate what they've learned in ways that capitalize on their strengths and interests. You can differentiate instruction if your curriculum is district mandated, if it is directed by state standards, and even if learning is measured by state wide basic skills exams or performance assessments.

Differentiated instruction is:

Rigorous. We provide challenging instruction to motivate students to push themselves. You recognize individual differences and set goals for learning based on a student's particular capabilities.

Relevant. It focuses on essential learning, not on "side trips" or "fluff". Differentiating does not mean more of the same to fill time (for example, more problems instead of more challenging problems); Differentiating does not mean activities that are fun for students but don't focus on significant learning. These are side trips and fluff. Differentiating focuses on essential learning.

Flexible and varied. Where appropriate, students make choices about how they will learn and how they will show what they've learned. They may be given opportunities to select topics they wish to explore in greater depth. They may also choose whether they will work independently, with a partner, or in a group.

Complex. We don't surf over the top of concepts. Rather, you challenge students' thinking and actively engage them in content that conveys depth and breadth.

Personalizing Learning with

Flexible Grouping

Flexible instructional grouping is a critical management strategy in a differentiated classroom. It lets teachers personalize learning activities according to students' needs, and, in the process, gives time to provide additional instruction or extended learning experiences to particular students or groups. Flexible grouping does this without taking away from a classroom's sense of community. Teachers find, in fact, that students feel more involved, engaged, and confident when they're involved in activities tailored to their learning needs and preferences. Your instructional time is better used because you're able to address appropriate learning goals for all students.

Flexible grouping is not used daily, but as needed. It does not create permanent groups; needs and circumstances determine who students work with. Group size varies, depending on the number of students with similar learning needs. The group's activity time varies according to the complexity of the task. Groups may work together for one day or several, and they may work at different times and different days of the week.

Flexible Grouping at Exit Points

The optimum times for flexible grouping, might happen at two points. (1) When some students haven't yet mastered skills or content and others are ready to move on, or (2) when some students would benefit from an advanced task and others from a more basic activity. These are exit points in which you group students according to common instructional needs. For example:

Progress on the learning continuum. Which students need more time, practice, or instruction?

Which students are ready to move on or ready to pursue activities that extend their learning? In other words, which students are at a foundational level with this particular content or skill and which have advanced beyond the foundations?

Learning preferences or strengths. Which students have bodily/kinesthetic learning strengths?

Which are strong in intrapersonal thinking and doing? Which prefer verbal/linguistic learning?

Are they auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learners. How do individual students prefer to show what they've learned?

Flexible Grouping Compared with Other Grouping Strategies

Flexible grouping is just one of several techniques for responding to learner differences. Let's take a look at the differences between flexible grouping and four other ways of grouping students.

Tracking: Students are grouped learning abilities, rather than particular talents or limitations, for example, in math or language arts. Groups stay together for all or most subjects every day and students rarely move out of their groups—even from year to year.

Ability or aptitude grouping: Students are grouped according to scores on standardized tests of aptitude, intelligence, or ability. If the groups stay together for all or most subjects, this grouping method becomes tracking.

Performance grouping: Students are grouped according to grades or performance in a particular subjects area—for example, accelerated placement classes.

Cooperative grouping: Students are grouped for collaborative work, either by the teacher or by student choice.

Flexible instructional grouping: Students are grouped according to their learning needs, strengths, and preferences. Grouping is changed regularly to match student needs to the task at hand¹.

It is particularly important to understand the distinctions among ability/aptitude groups, cooperative groups, and flexible groups. (See the chart). Keep in mind, though, that even in a class of students grouped by aptitude or performance, you can still use flexible grouping techniques to good advantage. You'll have a narrower range of abilities and learning differences than in a heterogeneous class, but you'll still see variations in learning pace, preferences, and interests that are best addressed by flexible grouping.

Three Kinds of Groups²

Flexible Groups	Ability/Aptitude Groups	Cooperative Groups
Determined by teacher perceptions or evidence of learning needs.	Determined largely by scores on standardized tests of intelligence or aptitude.	Determined by the teacher or student choice.

¹Connections.smsd.org/nieman/tiered_assignments.htm

²www.freespirit.com.

Bsed on specific learning preferences. needs, strengths, or	Based on general performance or achievement.	Usually random as to student ability or learning preferences.
Fluid group membership.	Rigid group membership.	Fluid group membership.
Groups work on different activities based on needs, strengths, or preferences.	Groups all tend to work on the same or similar activities.	Each group works on the same task or on one facet of the same task
Students are grouped and regrouped as appropriate for particular activities.	Students may or may not be regrouped within the classroom based on instructional needs.	Students may be purposely mixed as to learning needs and academic strengths to provide peer instruction or leadership within groups.
Occurs as needed.	Occurs daily.	Occurs when a task seems appropriate.
Grouping based on individual students skill proficiency, content mastery, learning preferences or interests.	Grouping based on perceptions about innate ability.	Grouping for the purpose of developing collaborative skills.

Questions and answers about flexible grouping

Are flexible groups suitable for cooperative learning?

Yes. The activities you assign to students within a flexible group may be done with a partner or as an individual assignment. **All students in a flexible group are doing the same activity, but whether the task is done individually or with others is up to you³.**

If I use flexible instructional grouping, does that mean I don't use whole-group instruction anymore?

Flexible grouping is a key technique of differentiated instruction, but differentiating doesn't mean you no longer teach the whole class at once. Sometimes whole-group instruction is your most effective teaching method. For example, you'll want to instruct the whole class when you're:

³ 4teachers.org/projectbased

The 1st International Conference on Research and Education – Challenges Toward the Future (ICRAE2013), 24-25 May 2013,

University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Shkodra, Albania

Building community through common activities or experiences.

Introducing new units, topics, skills, or concepts.

Conducting discussions of important content.

How often should I use flexible groups?

You form flexible groups as needed. As mentioned, the most important times to use this strategy are at exit points in your curriculum, when students' learning needs vary significantly. Form flexible groups when some students need more time and instruction on a basic application activity and others need a more advanced activity or new content. In order to break the pattern for students who tend to be placed in either reteaching or advanced groups, form groups based on interests or learning preferences from time to time.

Does flexible grouping take the place of accelerated, enriched, or advanced placement classes?

No. Such classes are important ways to provide advanced learning opportunities to students who need them. Students are grouped by common instructional needs, as in flexible groups. However, unlike the changing composition of flexible groups, students in these classes meet on a regular basis. As mentioned earlier in connection with ability grouping, advanced students will still benefit from flexible grouping.

If I usually use flexible grouping to respond to students' learning needs, doesn't that mean that some students will always be doing advanced work while others will always be basic or reteaching activities?

We've noted the importance of making differentiation invisible to students to avoid hurt feelings or resentment. **The key to making differentiation invisible is varying your instructional strategies.** Sometimes students learn together as a class, other times they work in groups, with a partner, or independently. Sometimes they select their own group, partner, or task; sometimes you select for them. You use flexible groups to meet learning needs, but you're careful to group students by interests and learning preferences at other times. For example, if a student is usually placed in a reteaching group but knows a lot about popular music, you might place her in a cooperative group with students of varying academic abilities for a project on musical genres. If another student struggles with language but is a talented artist, you might group him with other artistic students for a particular project. "Flexible" means just that –you mix things up whenever possible to meet specific needs, including the need for a sense of community in your classroom.

Resources

Bacharach, Nancy, et al. 1995. Learning Together. A Manual for Multiage Grouping. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Corwin Press

Cohen, Elizabeth G. 1994. Designing Groupwork. Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom, 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press

Good, Thomas L., and Brophy Jere E. 2000. Looking in Classrooms. Needham Heights, Ma: Allyn & Bacon

Optiz, Michael F. 1999. Flexible Grouping in Reading: Practical Ways to Help All Students Become Better Readers. New York Cartwheel Books