

Tips on Managing Flexible Groups

When you're just beginning to differentiate instruction, it may seem overwhelming to think of managing multiple learning tasks simultaneously in your classroom—particularly if you've relied on whole-group instruction or have mainly formed cooperative groups in which students do the same task. You need to decide how to move students into the appropriate learning task; how to provide instructions, clarification, and support; and how to give yourself adequate time with each group.

Even teachers who have done flexible grouping for some time, and whose students are used to this way of learning can be caught by the unforeseen. Here are some ideas to help you think through and plan what you want students to do and how you want them to do it:

1. If students are to do an activity collaboratively, consider dividing a larger instructional group into smaller teams of four or five. Smaller groups can be easier to manage and more effective for learning, since students have a greater opportunity to contribute.
2. Be flexible about how much time you spend with each group. Don't feel you need to spend the same amount of time with each. Allocate time based on a group's need for direct instruction and teacher feedback.
3. As necessary, allow yourself more time with groups you suspect will require additional attention by planning activities for other groups who need only minimal direction.
4. Create tasks that students can manage by themselves after you give directions. Provide a checklist of procedures or steps for students to follow as they complete an activity.
5. Provide checklists or rubrics to convey your expectations about the quality of students work. As appropriate, provide samples or examples to guide them.
6. Establish behavior guidelines for flexible group time. How much noise is appropriate for today's activities? Teach students the

difference between productive and disruptive noise. Who are students to talk to and work with? How much freedom do they have to move about the classroom? Where in the room can each group work most productively? How are they to get and return any materials they need?

7. Provide guidance for when and how students can get assistance from you. Establish a method for letting them know when you're free to answer questions or provide feedback.
8. Convey your expectations about students' individual accountability for using time effectively. What evidence is needed to show their accomplishments during a class period? If an activity is to take more than one period or day, will they have a work-in-progress folder that you can review?
9. Establish procedures for what to do when students are finished, Where should they put their completed work? What do they do if they finish early? What about work that's still unfinished at the end of class?
10. To bring everyone together, consider a whole-group activity, reflection, or sharing of work at the beginning or end of class time. Providing opportunities for all students to share what they're doing shows that you value everyone's work.

Flexible Grouping Across Classrooms

Many teachers find that forming flexible groups with another teacher and class solves many management problems. For example, Jack Evans and Estelle Carter are moving through their fifth-grade math curriculum at a fairly even pace.

During lunch on Monday, they discuss their students' progress in division. Both have students who need further instruction and practice and others who are ready for more advanced work. They decide they'll group for instruction on Wednesday. Jack will plan a lesson for students in both classes who need more instruction and practice. Estelle will plan an extension or enrichment lesson for students who are ready to

move on. On Wednesday, both teachers present a list of students assigned to each of the classrooms. Students moving to the other classroom gather the materials they need and take their seats in the other room. Next time they flexibly group, Estelle and Jack rotate their roles: she may take the reteaching group and he may take the advanced learners.

Student Independence and Flexible Groups

Some students have had little experience with small groups doing different activities. Some may have difficulty adjusting to higher levels of responsibility and independence. In planning for flexible instructional grouping, you need to think about the learners in your classroom. They will vary in the amount of direction and degree of structure they need in order to learn and perform successfully in groups. If you are aware of and plan for such differences your flexible grouping will run more smoothly. Keep these thoughts in mind as you plan:*

1. All students need new content and skills presented to them. It may be most effective for you to provide this through whole-group instruction.
2. Students who learn quickly and easily tend to need less information about how to go about their work and less teacher feedback about their progress. Provide clear directions and then expect them to get to work.
3. Some students need more direction about what to do and how to do it. They need specific, easy-to-understand directions and precise procedures for completing an activity. Provide a checklist of procedures, or if you have time, put the directions on an audiotape that they can replay as needed.
4. Students with a strong preference for working independently may resist being placed in groups. You may want to offer these students the option of working independently or choosing a partner from within the flexible group.
5. Some students and some age groups need more supervision than others. Some may have a difficult time staying with an activity unless you're there to encourage them. Structure your activities so these students are very clear about what to do and when to do it.

Organize your time so you can provide clarification, encouragement, and feedback.

6. Some students love to socialize and may be easily sidetracked into conversations that are unrelated to the task at hand. Set up clear behavior guidelines so they'll know if and when they can talk with others and what they should be talking about.

Now that you've explored flexible grouping and the different ways you can arrange your classroom to accommodate different learning needs, the next question is: How do you tailor activities to your flexible groups? The answer is tiered assignments. Tiered assignments are the instructional components of flexible grouping and the subject of the next chapter.

Resources

Bacharach, Nancy, et al. *Learning Together: A Manual for Multiage Grouping*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press, 1995. This book provides techniques for the purposeful grouping of children who are more than one year apart in age and offers practical methods on specialized instruction for diverse student populations.

Cohen, Elizabeth G. *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*, 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994. The author combines easy-to-follow theory with examples and strategies designed to engage all students and focuses on skill-building for more advanced students, the development of roles for older and younger students, and how to reach multiple ability students.

Good, Thomas L. and Brophy, Jere E. *Looking in Classrooms*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. This book provides easily understood research-based summaries about effective classroom practices, information, guidelines, and observational tools that help teachers reflect on their work and seek feedback from colleagues and students.

Opitz, Michael F. *Flexible Grouping in Reading. Practical Ways to Help All Students Become Better Readers*. New York: Cartwheel Books, 1999. Grouping by skills and special teaching strategies, teachers can customize reading groups to improve ability at all levels. Students can be grouped by interest, ability, student choice, genre, and other factors.

*As suggested by Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy in *Looking in Classrooms* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000)