

What Is Curriculum Compacting?

Curriculum compacting, developed by Dr. Joseph Renzulli and Linda Smith in 1978, is a differentiation strategy that is extremely beneficial to many gifted and high ability students. It is a process by which students are pre-assessed to determine what parts of the curriculum they have already mastered. When those areas of knowledge and skills are identified, these students are not required to complete the grade-level work. Instead, they work on alternate activities.

Curriculum compacting is a particularly important strategy for gifted and other high-ability students because they often come to school already knowing much of the grade level material. If these students are not challenged with new or different content, they waste time in school, do not learn important study skills, and do not grow as learners.

How Does Curriculum Compacting Work?

The first step in curriculum compacting is to identify the content, skill areas, standards, or benchmarks students have mastered. Compacting works particularly well in subjects or topics that are easily pre-tested such as math, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and map skills. Questions in these subjects generally require one right answer. It is easy, therefore, to determine who knows the information and who does not.

In order to use curriculum compacting successfully, it is important to learn exactly what students know and what they need to learn. Pre-assessment determines knowledge mastery. Often a pre-assessment is a pretest, but it can also be a classroom observation, a short discussion with the student, a checklist of what the student knows, or even a brainstorming session.

Prior to the pre-assessment, the teacher determines the requirement for mastery. For example, mastery might be 90% or higher on a pretest or no more than one mistake in a writing sample. In a discussion, the teacher might use his or her professional judgment to decide if the student has mastered a certain topic.

After mastery is determined and documented, the next step is to choose alternate activities. Many teachers are concerned that they do not have appropriate alternate activities for high ability students. However, there are a multitude of resources. The teacher's editions of many textbooks suggest activities for advanced learners. Supplemental books that focus on activities to develop higher level thinking skills are excellent sources for alternate activities. Independent study in an area of interest is another possibility. Finally, the students themselves often have ideas of what they would like to do, how they would like to do it, and what product will result and represent the learning.

Do the alternate activities need to be in the same subject in which the student has compacted out? This is the teacher's decision. It may be that a math teacher wants students to work only on math compacting activities. Another teacher may decide that an activity in any subject area is appropriate. Either approach is acceptable. An essential factor to remember is that compacting activities should never be drill and practice worksheets covering skills and content the student already knows.

What Does the Research Say?

Dr. Karen Rogers (2002) cites current studies that found 75-85% of average and above average elementary school students can pass subject pretests with 92-93% accuracy. The United States Department of Education's National Excellence Report (1993) found that gifted and talented elementary school students knew 35-50% of the entire curriculum in the five major subject areas at the very beginning of the school year. Renzulli and Reis (1992) directed a comprehensive national study that found elementary teachers could eliminate 40-50% of the regular curriculum for the top 10-15% of students with no negative effects on their achievement. Based on these studies, curriculum compacting is a viable strategy for the Education Plan.

'Nuts and Bolts' of Compacting

Most teachers and parents like the strategy of curriculum compacting, but they are often unaware of what exactly occurs when this method is used. Below are practical ideas and suggestions for implementation.

- * The teacher meets with compacting students to decide with them on which alternate activity or activities they will work.
- * Some type of a time line is established, including when the students will meet with the teacher again and when the alternate activity is due. Compacting students can work independently or together, but it is important that they touch base with their teacher often.
- * The score that determines mastery is also the score that goes in the grade book. Students may receive extra points, if necessary, for compacting activities, but they should not be penalized with a lower grade if they work on a more challenging activity and do not get a high score. Gifted students are sometimes reluctant to work on alternate activities because they think a possible lower score will negatively affect their grades. Steps must be taken to ensure that does not happen.
- * Sometimes compacting students from several classrooms are grouped together for an alternate activity and work with one of the grade level teachers while the rest of the students are working with other teachers at the same grade level. This functions well if all teachers at a grade level are targeting the same skills and content at the same time.
- * The most important rule for a compacting student is: "The one choice you never have is the choice to do nothing!" This is because learning time is so valuable. Therefore, it is important that it never be wasted.
- * Each student should be responsible for keeping his/her own compactor folder with the work in it. This is a good way for disorganized gifted students to learn skills in organization, and it gives them practice in taking responsibility for their own work and their own learning.
- * Parents need to discuss and show interest in their child's compactor activities. However, parents should not pressure their child to compact out of the grade-level work every time. Even gifted students have some academic weaknesses. Most gifted children compact out some of the time and usually in a specific subject. Very few compact out all of the time or in every subject.

Resources

Pieces of Learning is one of the leading publishers of enrichment materials for and about gifted and talented children. Student activities in many of the Pieces of Learning resources are excellent to use as alternate activities for curriculum compacting. Visit online at www.piecesoflearning.com or call 1-800-729-5137 to request a free catalog.

In Australia, Hawker Brownlow Education is your best resource for a wide range of educational materials. Visit their website at www.hbe.com.au or call (03) 9555 1344 for more information.

Coil, C. (2008). *Keys to Successful Districtwide Differentiation: Training, Time, Practice, and Sharing*. E-Zine, Vol. 2, 3. www.carolyncoil.com.