

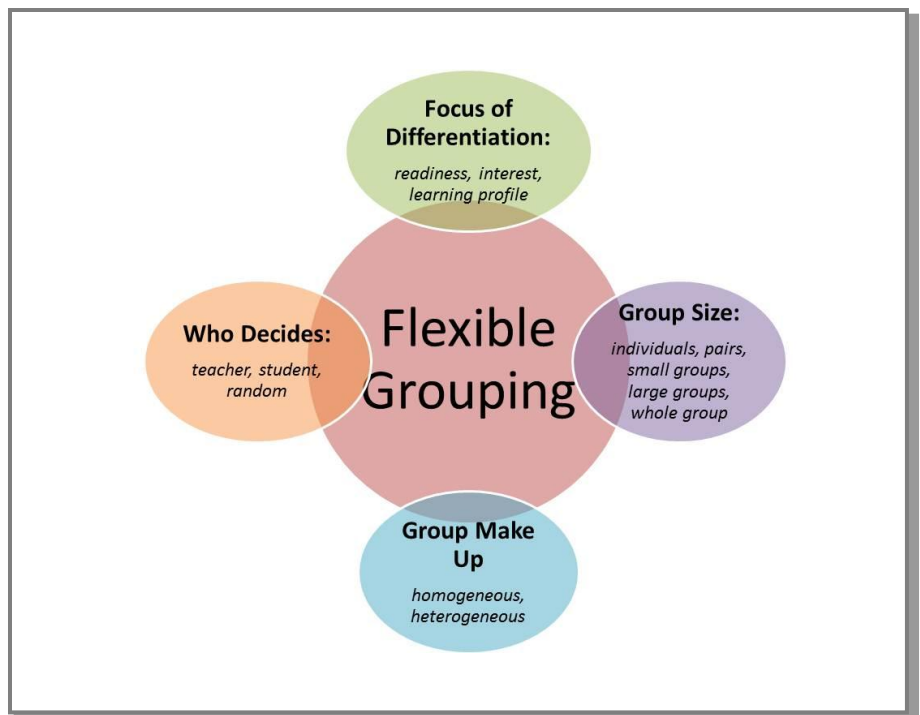
## The Role of Flexible Grouping in Respectful Differentiation

It is said that variety is the spice of life. Flexible grouping is all about variety. It increases the likelihood that via multiple learning activities and grouping configurations, more students' needs will be met more of the time. When students see themselves working in different configurations, it helps build a sense of community in the classroom.

Moreover, when students see that they work in all sorts of ways with all sorts of people over time, they are less likely to feel labeled. Flexible grouping can lead to faster, better, and deeper learning—without the danger of tracking or pigeonholing students.

Classrooms that practice flexible grouping experience the following:

- Sometimes differentiation is based on differences in readiness, sometimes in interest, and sometimes in learning profile.



- Sometimes the students make the choice of which task to complete, sometimes the teacher makes that decision, and sometimes the assignment of students to tasks might even be random.
- Sometimes students work together as a whole class; sometimes as individuals; and sometimes in pairs, triads, and small groups of other sizes. Sometimes students may even have a choice about the size of group in which they work.
- When working in groups, sometimes the students decide the group make-up, sometimes the teacher decides, and sometimes the grouping is random. In some cases, students are placed together homogeneously on the basis of some commonality of interest, learning profile, or readiness. Other times they are purposefully placed together heterogeneously—based on their *differences* in interest, learning profile, or readiness.

### ***Why Use Flexible Grouping?***

*It ensures that all students learn to work independently, cooperatively and collaboratively in a variety of settings and working with a variety of peers.*

*It increases the chance that learning activities will match more students' needs more of the time, leading to faster, better, and deeper learning without tracking.*

## **Making Good Decisions**

How does a teacher in a differentiated classroom make decisions concerning criteria for grouping students? In general, there should be a good variety of grouping configurations over time, but the decision of what and how to differentiate really should depend on thoughtful consideration of the following question:

- What are the goals of this task, and what type of grouping would best facilitate the meeting of these goals with these students?

Teachers in a differentiated classroom believe in balance. They balance opportunities for students to

- Explore their current interests with opportunities to add to their interests.
- Work in their preferred modes of learning, but also provide opportunities to improve in less-preferred ways of working.
- Experience differentiation for readiness, interest, and learning profile.
- Work with others who are like them in certain ways, with opportunities to enjoy the multiple perspectives that can come from working with others who are very different from them.
- Make choices about what they do with times when the choice is made for them.

Overall, that's a lot of balancing! So how do teachers make decisions considering all the variables with which they have to work? Most tend to make decisions based on the following:

- The goals for the lesson or task.
- The students for whom the task is designed.
- The resources at hand.
- Their own comfort level with a variety of instructional strategies.

Let's take a closer look at these factors.

## Goals

The KUDs must remain central in decision making. While making decisions about what, when, and how to differentiate, the teacher must ensure that no matter which

version of a task that students do, they still have the opportunity to meet or exceed the KUDs.

For example, if one of the goals is for students to debate the merits of the universal health care, they will likely need to work with a partner rather than debating alone. If the goals include writing an essay, students can't draw a picture instead. If they must learn all the parts of a cell, they can't focus on only one. If students have to be able to do three-digit multiplication, they can't stop at two-digit. In other words, the options teachers provide must not get in the way of the goals for the task.

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Differentiation is the thinking teacher's game. Two teachers working with the same curriculum may make very different decisions about what and how—or even whether—to differentiate. The important thing is that they have thought about what to do and made the best decision possible given their interpretation of the KUDs, their students' needs, available resources, and their own comfort level with differentiation strategies.

## Students

Once teachers have the KUDs set, they think about the ways in which their students are most likely to vary the most. Remember: Students and teachers will gain the most from differentiation that responds to the greatest differences in the students with respect to the KUDs.

For example, if teachers have evidence to suggest that the biggest difference among students will be **readiness**—in particular with regard to background knowledge—then differentiation will make the most sense for introductory activities or preteaching strategies. If the greatest variance is likely to be student **interest** across a variety of

topics, then differentiation for interest may be in order. Or if students vary widely in how they like to work, then it would make sense to provide some **learning profile** options.

Because teachers cannot—and probably shouldn’t—differentiate everything, they should focus their efforts on those aspects of the curriculum where differentiation will make the greatest impact. If students are essentially quite similar in interest, learning profile, or readiness, it would probably be OK to have everyone do the same thing at the same time or in the same way. But that is a very rare situation in today’s classrooms.

*The goal is to build up a repertoire of differentiation resources and strategies over time.*

## Resources

Sometimes teachers realize that they do not have access to the materials or resources that they would need to differentiate in the time they have to prepare unit activities. They probably won’t differentiate that part of the KUDs then, at least not immediately.

Savvy differentiators will begin by considering where and when they have access to a variety of resources, begin their differentiation journey in those areas, and make plans to add resources for other areas over time. They can collect resources on their own or by working with colleagues to share resources and ideas. The goal is to build up a repertoire of differentiation resources over time.

## Strategies

A teacher does not have to learn new strategies in order to differentiate. Just about any strategy that a teacher currently uses can be adapted to the philosophy of differentiation. But many teachers enjoy adding to their repertoire. The more strategies a teacher knows, the more flexibility they have in finding a match between the KUDs and students and in planning differentiation for a variety of student needs.

Some strategies—such as RAFTs or contracts—work well for all types of differentiation. Others, such as tiering, target just one kind. There is no sense in force-fitting a strategy to a lesson just to say we have done so. For example, if a teacher is having a hard time coming up with a version of a task to match all three Sternberg intelligences, he might stop at two this time. More students will get what they need, and the teacher will avoid designing a task that doesn't fit or doesn't make sense given the content or goals.