PLC/Book Study Guide for *A Teacher's Guide to Flexible Grouping and Collaborative Learning*

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This study guide is designed as a professional development resource that can be used to facilitate a book study, to guide teacher workshops, or to support a professional learning community (PLC). Facilitator notes are provided for additional support and explanation in planning and facilitating your school or group's study sessions or workshops. We recommend that the training facilitator read the entire guide and the book before beginning the study.

For each session, participants will be asked to read chapters of the book. They may also be asked to bring materials or create or implement something *prior* to attending a session. Each chapter description includes guiding questions and suggested tasks that can be used as group activities during the group session.

Please note that the preparation work is noted at the beginning for each session. Before you dismiss participants from each session, look ahead to the next chapter to review and clarify what must be done before the next meeting. Reach agreements if suggests tasks are going to be adjusted or modified.

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Introduction

Facilitator Note: Keep lists handy as you conduct the book study. Keep referring participants back to their concerns and questions to guide group conversation and to encourage individual professional growth. The group may wish to prioritize chapters and possibly reorder the sequence of the book study based on their learning needs.

1. Individually, reflect on the terms *equity* and *equality*. Write down how these two terms differ in a school environment. Share your thoughts within your group discussion.

2. As a group, discuss the myths described in the book's introduction.

3. As a group:

  - List the major concerns about how to implement flexible grouping and collaborative learning strategies in your classroom.

  - List some questions you hope to have answered by the end of this book study.

4. Consider how grouping methods can impact each of the following elements: ongoing formative assessment, targeted instruction, focus on specific objectives, and learner confidence.

Chapter 1:
Why Flexibly Group
Your Students?

To be completed before the chapter 1 session:

- Read chapter 1.

- Study the **Chart of Common Grouping Practices** on pages 13–15 of this study guide.

- Identify the ways that you see these groups being utilized in your classroom and at your site. For example, you might recognize homogeneous grouping in a pullout resource class, an honors class, or an ELL class.

Facilitator Note: Examining our belief systems prior to new learning is helpful in getting participants to recognize their own barriers to learning. Make sure this conversation remains open and accepting. Flexible grouping and collaborative learning is a philosophy that some may disagree with. Make room during the conversation for opposing ideas to be heard and explored. Remember, no one is totally right nor totally wrong.

1. Why should you flexibly group?

2. What are the various types of grouping methods and their benefits?

3. What are some examples of effective ability grouping models that employ flexible learning groups?

Chapter 2: Establishing Structure in Classrooms that Group

To be completed before the chapter 2 session:

- Read chapter 2.

- Study the chart titled **Common Grouping Frameworks** on page 16 of this study guide. In the right-hand column, individually make notes of when you may use the various grouping frameworks. Prepare to discuss with the whole group.

- Prepare to discuss how these group norms impact classroom management when using flexible grouping and collaborative learning:
  - **G**ive thoughtful feedback
  - **R**espect others and their input
  - **O**n task, all of the time
  - **U**se quiet voices
  - **P**articipate fully and actively
  - **S**tay with your group

- Individually, complete the chart **Is Your Classroom Ready to Group?** (see the reproducible form on page 52 of the book or in the digital content). In each category, identify your strengths and challenges. Do these help or hinder your ability to work effectively using grouping strategies?

Facilitator Note: Everyone has a different tolerance level for student movement, noise, and so on. In the discussion, recognize that these concerns are valid and must be addressed to help a participant move forward in using grouping strategies.

1. What is the teacher's role when students are working in flexible learning groups?

2. How do you form learning groups? What do you do once students are grouped? How do you know grouping is working?

3. Why should you routinely regroup your students?

Chapter 3: Assessment and Flexible Grouping

To be completed before the chapter 3 session:

- Read chapter 3.

- Using the **Chart of Assessment Strategies** on page 17 of this study guide, identify strategies that could be used in each of the categories. Note that some strategies can be used in more than one way. How does looking at the strategies in this manner support your teaching?

- Select one of the classroom scenarios in the chapter that interests you. How can this scenario relate to your classroom? Prepare to discuss the scenarios within the group.

- Performance narratives can be used to share a student's depth of understanding beyond the standards. Select a content area in which you routinely have students working above grade level and write a sample narrative that would inform parents of their learner's progress.

- Using the **Steps to Deconstructing a Rubric** on page 68 of the book, select a rubric that you currently use with your students. Design a lesson to show how you would deconstruct it with your students.

Facilitator Note: Grading and assessments are two different things. In your discussion it is vital to recognize the similarities as well as the differences between these two concepts. A discussion of how assessment informs the teaching process will support participants in understanding the significance of the varied assessment strategies. Grading is the representation of a student's level of mastery of a given set of standards. These two concepts must be kept separate to fully support the learning process.

1. How do you know which assessments to use before, during, and after group instruction? How do you use the results of those assessments?

2. How do you grade students who are working at different levels and in different groups?

3. How do you communicate progress to parents when students are learning at different grade levels?

Chapter 4: Grouping Support for Administrators, Coordinators, and Teachers

To be completed before the chapter 4 session:

- Read chapter 4.

- How can the different departments within a school district contribute to the success of flexible grouping models? Consider the following departments and directors when answering the question and prepare to discuss in the group:
  - Language Acquisition
  - Special Education
  - Curriculum
  - Grants
  - Professional Development
  - Assessment
  - Fine Arts

- Professional development is key when seeking to improve instructional practices. How might the information in this book best be shared with your staff? Create a set of staff meeting "Ten-Minute Tips," a workshop, or an online class that could be used to support teachers in the practice of flexible grouping and collaborative learning. Prepare to discuss in the group.

Facilitator Note: Teachers' level of expertise and prior knowledge should be considered when developing support structures for teachers. As an administrator, being cognizant of the level of teacher expertise can help the development of mentoring partnerships and PLC development.

1. How can you embed grouping strategies into our school initiatives?

2. What type of support can school administrators and coordinators provide to teachers who use grouping strategies?

3. How can you create resources and training to support those teaching different levels of student groups in the same class?

Chapter 5: Strategies for Extending Learning Processes in Groups

To be completed before the chapter 5 session:

- Read chapter 5.

- Use the chart **Complicated or Complex** on page 18 of this study guide to:
  - Identify activities that you use in your classroom that fall into the complicated and complex categories.
  - Prepare to discuss with your group what elements you feel make the activities complicated and/or complex.
  - Determine how the complicated activities could be modified to move them into the complex category.

- Use the **Continuum of Complexity** found on pages 104–105 of the book to:
  - Select a lesson or group of lessons that you would like to differentiate.
  - Choose one or two areas of the continuum as your focus point.
  - Design a set of activities in a tiered lesson format to increase the complexity for your learners.
  - Prepare to discuss in the group.

- Depth of Knowledge (DOK)
  - Select a lesson or group of lessons that you would like to differentiate.
  - Individually complete the "**Level It" Activity** on page 19 of this study guide. Prepare to discuss with your group your responses and then look at the answer key. (It is not unusual for teachers to feel a task is a higher DOK level than it really is.)
  - Design a DOK-leveled set of activities in an extension menu or tiered lesson format to increase the complexity for your learners. Include at least two activities at each DOK level. Prepare to discuss with the group.

- Project-Based Learning (PBL)
  - Review the PBL structure and Key Points chart on pages 120–125 of the book.
  - Create a statement describing how flexible grouping can enhance efficacy of a PBL activity or unit.
  - Prepare to share your statements with group members.

- Questioning Activity
  - Study figure 5.13 Nine Question Types on pages 127–128 of the book.
  - Identify a lesson you plan to teach.
  - Select one of the questioning strategies included on the chart.
  - Embed this strategy into the lesson plan to increase engagement and enhance the lesson's complexity.
  - Prepare to discuss in the group.

Facilitator Note: *Each of the activities provided here are designed to encourage teachers to reflect on their understandings. For example, in the Complicated or Complex activity, supporting teachers in recognizing what makes an activity complex vs. complicated is critical for developing rigorous lessons rich in depth and complexity. The activities for this chapter are designed to move participants from individual to group, and then in many cases back to the individual, as they design lessons and tasks specific to their classrooms. In the DOK activity, the discussion that follows the Level It activity is instrumental in helping participants understand how the DOK levels impact the complexity of tasks.*

1. How do you create structures in your classroom wherein groups of students are working on projects that challenge them at their learning levels?

2. What role can questioning strategies play in a classroom where students are working at varying levels?

3. How can you facilitate learning in a way that all your students think critically and embrace rigor?

Chapter 6: Differentiating Daily with Flexible Groups

To be completed before the chapter 6 session:

- Read chapter 6.

- Review the section in the chapter on curriculum compacting. Prepare to discuss the importance of compacting when incorporating flexible grouping structures, listing benefits to both teachers and students.

- Read through the **Strategies for Differentiating Daily**. Select one strategy and create a lesson to discuss in the group.

- Select one classroom scenario in the chapter that interests you and create a draft lesson plan using that strategy with material you plan to teach. Prepare to discuss the scenarios and plans within the group.

Facilitator Note: In your discussion of curriculum compacting, the topic of grading is sure to come up. This is a topic that many teachers feel very strongly about. When compacting a learner out of content, appropriate documentation is critical. When students demonstrate mastery of the content by compacting out, they have already earned their A. Grading extension work may also represent an issue that requires discussion. Reinforce that providing learners with descriptive feedback aids them in achieving their learning goals.

1. What are some ways you can differentiate daily for all students?

2. What does it mean to compact curriculum and why is it important when differentiating with groups?

3. What are some instructional strategies to use with learning groups?

Chapter 7: Differentiating Digitally in Groups

To be completed before the chapter 7 session:

- Read chapter 7.

- Review the list of the elements for digital citizenship found on page 156 of the book. Prepare to discuss how these elements could be embedded into your classroom curriculum. How can these be explicitly taught in the classroom? Design a set of quick ten-minute lessons to provide learners with key digital citizenship behaviors.

- Choose one of the two options below:
  - Select a section of the Padagogy Wheel (page 156 of the book). Identify a lesson or set of lessons that you wish to enhance using technology. Using the action verbs, activities, and apps identified in the wheel section, develop a plan to purposefully integrate the technology into the lesson structures. Prepare to discuss in the group.
  - Bloom's Digital Taxonomy offers ways to connect technology tools at each level of the thinking process. Design a lesson with multiple entry points for learners that uses technology in purposeful ways. Prepare to discuss in the group.

- Google Classroom provides teachers and students with a wealth of tools. If you are currently a Google Classroom user, team with another user to look at an additional way you might use technology options more fully. Not a Google Classroom user? Set up a classroom and let the fun begin! Start small by creating one or two assignments for your learners. Prepare to discuss your experience in the group.

Facilitator Note: Digital citizenship is a hot topic in today's learning environment. Discuss with teachers ways to embed the elements of digital citizenship into their curriculum. A key word throughout this chapter is purposeful. *Purposeful planning of lessons that integrate purposefully chosen technology is our goal.*

1. How can you support your students in becoming good digital citizens?

2. How can you design group learning activities that both differentiate and use technology appropriately and successfully with students?

3. How do you and your students evaluate a digital resource to determine if it is valid?

Prevailing Myths About Grouping

1. Groups are usually permanent.

2. All grouping, including flexible grouping, is tracking.

3. Groupings are based only on achievement levels.

4. Groupings only benefit high-ability and high-achieving students.

5. Grouping students eliminates the need to differentiate instruction.

6. Grouping discriminates against minority populations.

Chart of Common Grouping Practices

Directions: In the right column, list some of the ways your school has used these methods.

Ability grouping	A generic umbrella term used to describe various methods for grouping students, such as those described in this chart. *Note*: Ability grouping includes groupings based on interest, achievement level, learning style, and other factors in addition to ability level.	
Flexible grouping (or flexible learning groups)	Students are grouped and regrouped in a variety of formats for specific instructional purposes.	
Fixed groups	Students remain in static assigned groups for the entire school year. Examples include both homogenous and heterogeneous groupings described below.	
Homogeneous grouping	Students of similar ability are grouped together for instruction; typically used in self-contained gifted classes, content replacement or honors classes, enrichment groups, and tracking models.	
Heterogeneous grouping	Students of mixed ability are grouped together for instruction; used in typical classes and in gifted-cluster classes.	

Cluster grouping	Gifted students are grouped together in one class at every grade level. The cluster group is a homogeneous grouping within a heterogeneous classroom.	
Whole-class groups	Students are intentionally grouped, as in the homogenous grouping of a self-contained gifted class or in a tracking model. Students may also be grouped heterogeneously, as in a typical classroom, or intentionally, as in a gifted-cluster model.	
Small groups	Students are grouped together in a variety of formats, such as a gifted cluster within a classroom, a pullout group for gifted instruction or for content replacement, within-class grouping, and regrouping for specific instruction or interventions. Small groups may be formed in one grade level or across grade levels.	
Within-class grouping	Similar to small groups (described above) but only within the same class. An example is a gifted student group within a gifted-cluster classroom.	
Regrouping for specific instruction	Method emphasizes the specific instruction for each group, which is usually dependent upon the group's needs.	

Cooperative learning groups	A small-group setting where students are grouped intentionally for instruction. Typically include flexible groups that *may* be homogenous (like ability) or heterogeneous (varied ability) depending on the instructional purpose.	
Cross-grade grouping	Students in different grade levels are grouped for specific subjects, typically math and/or reading. Students are placed based on expressed academic need to learn that subject at a different level than their own grade level.	
Tracking	Students are typically grouped by achievement levels. Groups remain fixed throughout the school year (and typically beyond the school year).	
Combo or multiage classes	Classes containing two grade levels within one classroom. For example, a grade 1/2 class.	
Pullout groups	Students pull out of the regular classroom for focused instruction. Examples include daily content replacement, where students receive instruction in accelerated content in core academic subjects, and intermittent pullout for enrichment.	

Common Grouping Frameworks

Directions: In the right column, list some of the ways you could use these grouping frameworks.

GROUPING FRAMEWORK	DESCRIPTION	
Ability-Based (More rigid)	Group students based on scores on standardized assessments of intelligence. Students with like abilities are grouped together to allow like-minded peers the opportunity to work together.	
Interest-Based (Fluid)	Group students based on their interests. Tasks are created and aligned to foster and build upon student interest.	
Performance-Based (Fluid)	Group students based on performance on given tasks or assessments. Placement is based on preassessment data.	
Readiness-Based (Fluid)	Group students based on their readiness to engage in specific skills or activities.	
Preference-Based (Fluid)	Group students based on their preferred learning modality. This encourages learners to extend their thinking and build off the ideas of others. Offer varied modes through which understanding can be demonstrated.	
Objective-Based (Fluid)	Group students based on specific units of study or assignments. Grouping students based on learning objectives, as in a tier lesson format, ensures that learners are challenged appropriately.	

Chart of Assessment Strategies

PREASSESSMENT	FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT	SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Complicated or Complex

COMPLICATED TASK	COMPLEX TASK

"Level It" Activity

LEVEL 1–4	TASKS
	1. Identify and summarize the major events in the narrative.
	2. Given a map of the state, label the locations listed on the board.
	3. Identify a central theme in the text. Support your selection with details and examples.
	4. Describe and illustrate how two of the common themes discussed in class are found across texts in different cultures.
	5. Demonstrate three ways to solve the following problem without the use of the standard algorithm. Explain why this knowledge is important. $356 - 2(45/9) + 27$
	6. Identify four cause/effect relationships in the story.
	7. Complete the following problems using the standard algorithm. 24 x 16 = 24 x 1.6 = 24 x .16 =
	8. What was the author's purpose in the text? How does it affect the way the text should be interpreted?
	9. Analyze and synthesize the information presented on the court case from the four sources. Evaluate the validity of the claim that justice was not served.
	10. Solve the following problem: This week Tim earned $26.50 mowing lawns and $35.00 babysitting the neighbor boys. If he continues earning money at this rate, how long will it take him to earn enough to purchase a new bike for $135.00?
	11. Sequence the events of the short story.
	12. Develop a model to represent the relationship between friction and motion.

Answer Key:

(1) Level 2, (2) Level 1, (3) Level 3, (4) Level 4, (5) Level 4, (6) Level 2,
(7) Level 1, (8) Level 3, (9) Level 4, (10) Level 2, (11) Level 1, (12) Level 3

About the Authors

Dina Brulles, Ph.D., is a school administrator and the gifted education director for Arizona's Paradise Valley Unified School District. Recognized for her expertise in creating and supervising schoolwide cluster grouping, she also assists districts throughout the United States in developing gifted education programs and serves on the faculty of the Graduate College of Education at Arizona State University. Prior to becoming an administrator, Dina was an elementary classroom teacher, a bilingual teacher, an ESL teacher, and a gifted-cluster teacher. She is coauthor with Susan Winebrenner of *The Cluster Grouping Handbook* and *Teaching Gifted Kids in Today's Classroom*. She lives in Peoria, Arizona.

Karen L. Brown, M.Ed., is the gifted program mentor for Arizona's Paradise Valley Unified School District. She supports administrators, teachers, parents, and students in both academics and social-emotional areas. Karen also teaches and facilitates classes in the gifted education master's program at Arizona State University and consults with districts throughout the country on flexible grouping, inclusion, curriculum mapping, curriculum implementation, differentiation strategies, schoolwide cluster grouping, and depth and complexity. Karen is the co-recipient of the 2013 NAGC Professional Development Award and coauthor with Dina Brulles and Susan Winebrenner of *Differentiated Lessons for Every Learner*. Karen lives in Phoenix, Arizona.

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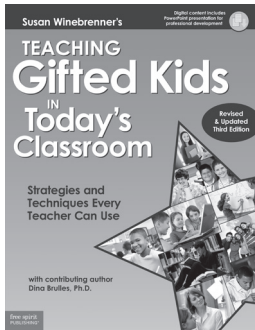
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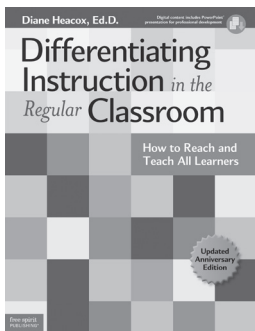*256 pp.; paperback; 8½" x 11"; includes digital content*
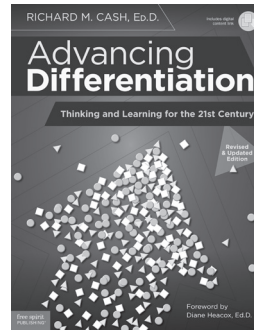
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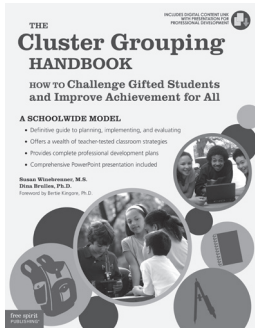
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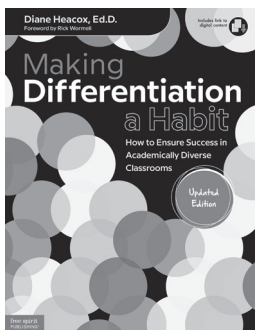*224 pp.; paperback; 8½" x 11"; includes digital content*
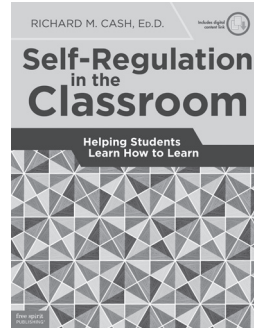
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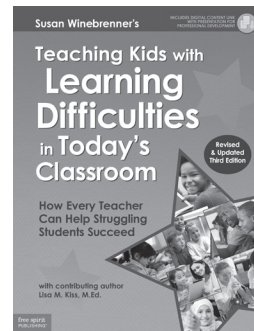
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