**How I Work with Ability Groups**

The detrimental impact of misused ability groups is widely reported, and I think it led to an overcorrection of never grouping students by ability, particularly after elementary school. Despite the obvious slots in middle and high schools based on ability – advanced and AP classes for example – teachers don’t always feel comfortable grouping by ability within their classrooms.

In many circles it isn’t politically correct to even acknowledge the wide range of abilities, but instead a horrible “teach to the middle mentality” has taken the place of differentiation.

The key to ability grouping is that it is not permanent, not announced, and each group is given a valuable and challenging task, suitable for the students at the particular table.

**Fluid ability grouping at tables**

The heterogeneous make-up used for the introductory and direct instruction phases of the unit does not make sense during this second phase of learning. If used correctly, ability groups allow students an opportunity to rehearse what they are learning.

This is the best time to give formative assessments, create interventions, and provide support. In order to “randomly” choose groups based on ability, I most often use tiered questions and Popsicle sticks. [The Fishbowl questions](http://www.middleweb.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Fishbowl-pres-rubric.docx), like most choices in my class, are organized by level of difficulty based on Bloom’s taxonomy.

* Table 1 tasks should be knowledge based, with an emphasis on remembering and understanding.
* Table 2 tasks should be application of some sort.
* Table 3 should be analyzing.
* Table 4 should be an evaluative task.
* Table 5 should require students to create.

Label the sticks Table 1–5, based on the number of seats you have at each table. In one hand I put Table 1–3 sticks, representing the more concrete tasks. In the other hand, I put the Table 4 and 5 sticks that correlate to the higher order thinking tasks. As students come in, I offer the student the hand that is best for that student, *at that time.*

It's important to note that each time groupings are done, the teacher should reassess which type of task is appropriate for that student *at that time* and remember to check for teacher bias. We all try to be open-minded about students; it is easy to assume that a straight “A” student gets everything immediately, but in reality, when we notice a blip in his/her usual performance, we need to allow him/her an opportunity at the Table 1–3 tasks.

The same is true for a struggling student. There should be times when we notice an uptick in performance, and we should “switch hands” to allow for that student to learn in a different environment. You might be reading along right now, thinking, “Well, that’s interesting, but surely this lady doesn’t presume to know the precise level of *all* her students *all* the time.”

It’s true. I have 127 students currently, so I’d be Wonder Woman if I knew precisely where my students are with a given topic all the time. I use formative data and my own observations and go with my gut. Luckily, in two of my classes I have Special Education teachers who are even more observant than I am, frequently recognizing a strength or weakness that I had missed.

*Think of it this way:* By grouping the tasks in Tables 1–3 and Tables 4–5, you generally won’t be so far off that it is detrimental to the student. And, there’s nothing wrong with eyeing the room when you start class and making a few switches.

I always frame this in a positive way. For example, if Steven is going to sink at Table 5, I might say, “Steven, would you mind moving to Table 2 as a favor? You are great at social studies, so I think you’ll add to that conversation.” Of course you have to know your students well enough to give a compliment to make the move, but it’s also perfectly OK to say, “Karen, you are in such a good mood today, spread the cheer with Table 1 please!”

I’ve never had students figure out what I’m doing in this great balancing act, but I also recalibrate constantly, so even a mismatched grouping is only temporary.

**What happens at the tables**

Students work together within their groups to answer the question they’ve been tasked with. They use books and devices, they sometimes call their social studies teacher or the librarian, and they ask me lots of questions. They are encouraged to talk to students in other classes who are working on the same question.

The goal in this acquisition stage is to make learning as authentic as possible for Digital Natives. Think about it: If you need to know something, you google it, post the question on Facebook, or run a hashtag search on Twitter. Why would we want to limit our students to finding the answers in a book?

This means students will spend time googling things, taking notes on their tablets, pulling up pictures to go with the questions, or watching a video, but most importantly, they are not limited to the resources I have in my room. By allowing a no-holds barred approach to gathering information, they are utilizing skills that will make them successful while also learning in a way that fits their normal, constantly connected lives, authenticating the task at hand as valuable.

When their table is called, students bring their notes with them to the discussion in the Fishbowl. The students on the outside are taking notes on a sheet I provide. They know that their final objective test will contain these five questions. I include a spot to write down a “friendly face,” who is a student whom the observers can follow up with later if there are gaps in the notes. Students are allowed to use these notes to help them during their final test. This practice encourages listening skills and rewards clarifying questions and good habits. This interdependence creates a collegiality that benefits all students.

Each discussion has a moderator as well. This person reads the background prompt information, asks the questions, and is tasked with keeping the conversation moving and making sure that all members can be heard. The moderator also tries to help the group by prompting them to do things they know are being assessed.

For example, if the conversation has taken a wild turn and is off on a tangent, the moderator might say, “Stephanie, can you bring us back to the text?” or “Jill, can you summarize what your group has said so far?” The reason I incorporate the moderator is that I am then freed up to provide quality feedback for each student and create an atmosphere where students talk to each other, not me.

From: Amber Chandler*, The Flexible ELA Classroom,* © Routledge, 2017

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