

# Flexible Grouping: It's More Than Just Moving Their Seats!

A presentation by  
Carolyn Coil

Pieces of Learning, 1990 Market Road, Marion, IL 62959  
Phone: 1-800-729-5137 Fax: 1-800-844-0455

Website: [www.piecesoflearning.com](http://www.piecesoflearning.com) E-mail: [piecesoflearning@verizon.net](mailto:piecesoflearning@verizon.net)  
Carolyn's website: [www.carolyncoil.com](http://www.carolyncoil.com) Carolyn's e-mail: [carolyncoil@comcast.net](mailto:carolyncoil@comcast.net)

*What are the learning outcomes, & how can I best group my students in order to accomplish them?*

## The Basics:

- If prior skills and knowledge in the content area are **not** needed, use heterogeneous grouping or whole class instruction.
- If **remedial** or **accelerated** instruction is needed, use homogeneous grouping or individualized instruction.
- Most students need to be taught how to move into and work in a group.

***Logistics and classroom management for flexible grouping must be carefully planned.  
Well functioning groups do not happen automatically!***

## Why Bother with Group Work?

Stefan Wuchty, Benjamin F. Jones and Brian Uzzi from Northwestern University write:

*We have used 19.9 million papers over 5 decades and 2.1 million patents to demonstrate that teams increasingly dominate solo authors in the production of knowledge. Research is increasingly done in teams across nearly all fields. Teams typically produce more frequently cited research than individuals do, and this advantage has been increasing over time. Teams now also produce the exceptionally high-impact research, even where that distinction was once the domain of solo authors. These results are detailed for sciences and engineering, social sciences, arts and humanities, and patents, suggesting that the process of knowledge creation has fundamentally changed. (Science 18 May 2007: Vol. 316, no. 5827, pp. 1036 – 1039)*

This is but one of many studies that emphasize the importance of working in groups. Learning this skill, therefore, is of utmost importance for gifted students. Gifted students struggle with group work for a number of reasons. Some are competitive and don't want to share their work or knowledge. Sometimes group members are mismatched and one or two students end up doing all the work. Sometimes students are grouped with their friends and want to socialize.

The key to facilitating productive group work is knowing which type of grouping is the most appropriate for your learning outcomes and then grouping students accordingly. Students must understand the expectations for group work and must be taught group work skills. Group work should be monitored regularly in order for students to understand its importance.

To schedule a workshop call  
Emily at 1-800-729-5137

Summarized from *Differentiation, RTI and Achievement: How They Work Together* ©2009  
by Carolyn Coil, Pieces of Learning, publisher. [www.piecesoflearning.com](http://www.piecesoflearning.com)

## **FLEXIBLE GROUPING PATTERNS FOR GIFTED STUDENTS**

*These groups should be thought of as flexible, not permanent*

### **Homogeneous/Ability/Cluster Grouping**

- Clusters students of similar ability, readiness, learning style or interest.
- Usually based on some type of pre-assessment.
- Use for vertical (acceleration) and horizontal (enrichment/extension)
- Can be used in multi-grade classes.
- Even in a theoretically more homogeneous class, such as an AP class, there are differing ability levels and sub-grouping into homogeneous groups may be needed.
- Gifted students need time to work together.

### **Heterogeneous Grouping**

- Groups students of differing abilities, level or interests.
- Use to help gifted students understand different points of view.
- Grouping gifted kids together may create a heterogeneous group.
- Works best when reading level or math proficiency is not involved.
- Good for group activities promoting creativity.
- Teaches skills in delegation, leadership and sharing.
- Be careful about monitoring each person's contribution to the group. Gifted students should not do all the work while everyone in the group gets the same grade or credit.

### **Individualized Instruction/Independent Study**

- Facilitates the management of many achievement levels.
- Self paced learning at each student's performance level.
- Good in exploring each student's interest areas.
- Teaches independent learning organizational skills, time management and the development of individual responsibility. (Don't assume gifted kids have these skills!)
- Must be monitored. Some gifted students love to procrastinate and waste time.

### **Whole Class Instruction**

- Efficient and effective when presenting new content to all
- Works well with many types of AV presentations.
- Use for initial instruction and some enrichment activities.
- Needed when doing a highly motivational activity that should include all students.
- Use for guest speakers and also for your favorite lecture topics.
- This grouping pattern is overused in most classrooms.

### **Pairs/Partners**

- Can be based on ability, skill or interest
- Works well with both homogeneous and heterogeneous pairs.
- Assures that a student isn't going to get "lost" in the group setting.
- More focused learning than in a larger grouping.
- Works well when two gifted students have the same passion area.
- Being a peer tutor for a struggling student may be inappropriate for a gifted student.

## Guidelines for Managing Flexible Groups

1. Before grouping students for any activity, ask yourself: *“What is the learning outcome of this activity and what is the best type of grouping to meet this learning outcome?”* Then group your students accordingly.
2. Use various types of assessment data to help you in forming groups.
3. Use some kind of record-keeper so you and your students will know at a glance who is in each group for a particular activity.
4. Give explicit instructions about the task each group is going to do before the groups begin to work.
5. Teach students how to listen to one another as they work in a group.
6. Classroom rules and procedures for group work should be written, posted, and understood by all.
7. Model and practice procedures and routines for getting into groups so that movement becomes easy and automatic.
8. Some more common procedures and routines usually involve distributing, collecting and storing materials, moving chairs and/or desks for group work, getting help from the teacher, and monitoring/dealing with the noise level in the classroom.
9. Don't give students too long at any given time to work in a group. The length of time partly depends on the ages of your students and grade level of your class. It also depends on the maturity and attention spans of your students. Use your own good judgment about this as you would with any classroom activity.
10. Have a specific procedure for stopping group work and returning to a whole class setting. The more your students practice and do this, the less confusion and disruption there will be.
11. Each student should keep an individual learning log during group work.
12. Have groups evaluate their own group process skills.
13. In some group situations, each student may have a specific role. In other cases, only a group leader needs to be designated. A **Group Leadership Checklist** can be used to focus the leader on his or her role.

## Group Leadership Checklist for Student Leaders

*As the leader of your group, you will be assessed on the following:*

- \_\_\_ 1. You delegated jobs so that everyone participated in doing the group project or assignment.
- \_\_\_ 2. You helped the group use time wisely and have good time management skills.
- \_\_\_ 3. You helped the group plan the project, breaking the big task into smaller parts.
- \_\_\_ 4. You led the group in making decisions in an orderly way.
- \_\_\_ 5. You listened to suggestions from everyone.
- \_\_\_ 6. You made sure the group stayed on task during discussions.
- \_\_\_ 7. You led the group in brainstorming ideas, making sure all ideas and points of view were considered.
- \_\_\_ 8. You did not allow put-downs for different thinking.
- \_\_\_ 9. You helped the group establish rules for dealing with conflicts or differences of opinion.
- \_\_\_ 10. You treated everyone fairly.

© 2007 Pieces of Learning CLC0335 Successful Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom  
[www.piecesoflearning.com](http://www.piecesoflearning.com)

### **Recommended Resources from Pieces of Learning – Visit our conference Exhibit Booth**

*Adventures in Team Building – Grades 1-2*

*Adventures in Team Building – Grades 3-4*

*Differentiation, RTI and Achievement: How They Work Together* by Carolyn Coil

*Independent Study* by Dodie Merritt

*Successful Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom* by Carolyn Coil

*Teaching Tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Carolyn Coil