



Redefining Fair:

How to Plan, Assess, and Grade for Excellence in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Redefining Fair: How to Plan, Assess, and Grade for Excellence in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, by Damian Cooper. *Redefining Fair* anticipates and answers the questions teachers have about putting differentiation into action. Cooper bases the book on five imperatives: curriculum must be meaningful, instruction must be responsive, assessment must be informative, grading must blend consistency with professional judgment, and communication must be truthful and transparent, and outlines these concepts and their practical uses throughout. *Redefining Fair* provides instructional ideas that are clear, comprehensive, and effective in engaging the vast majority of diverse students.

This study guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It is designed to help you benefit from and apply the ideas presented by this author. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty.

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We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves to be a useful tool in your efforts to provide effective differentiated instruction to students.

Introduction

Why This Book Now?

1. What are some of the most common questions and concerns voiced by teachers about the major challenges they face in assessment and grading?
2. What are the five imperatives the author presents that should guide work with respect to curriculum, instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting in the mixed-ability class?

Chapter 1

Why Is Differentiation Essential Today?

1. What is the new mission of contemporary schools?
2. Most approaches to differentiated instruction identify what three broad reasons for adapting teaching to meet the differing needs of students? What does the author see happening in many schools?
3. Describe the concept map for differentiating instruction (figure 1.1) and the differentiated instruction continuum (table 1.2).
4. The author presents three case studies that highlight distinctly different needs for differentiating programs. The first focuses on an instructional problem, the second

on an assessment challenge, and the third on a grading and reporting issue. What kinds of challenges are reflected in these case studies?

Chapter 2

What Does “Fair” Mean in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. According to the author, what should a 21st century model of instruction, assessment, and grading look like? Describe the classroom example of the “guided bicycle tour” approach.
2. How can educators change the perception widely held among parents, the community, and the media that “retakes,” “redos,” and second and third attempts do not reflect high standards?
3. Describe how the teachers in the three case studies presented embrace the concept of fairness.
4. How must fairness in today’s mixed-ability classroom be redefined?

Chapter 3

How Should Curriculum and Assessment Connect in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. What is the overarching question that is challenging curriculum developers in the 21st century? Describe the three different 21st century curriculum frameworks presented.

2. Why is curriculum coverage by the teacher not only a misguided approach but also an impossible task, according to the author? How can teachers shift the focus from curriculum coverage by the teacher through essential learning?
3. What three questions should teachers continually ask when the curriculum is focused on conceptually complex material?
4. Why do teachers increasingly need to be coaches of essential skills, rather than providers of content?
5. Why is a backward design approach to curriculum not merely desirable, but essential, according to the author?

Chapter 4

How Should I Assess Students' Needs in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. Why is gathering preinstructional assessment data so important?
2. Describe the concepts “zone of proximal development” and “flow,” as they apply to education.
3. Tomlinson (2001) identifies what three variables to examine when making decisions about differentiation?
4. How did the author ensure that instruction was responsive to the needs of all students in his own grade 9 English class?
5. Why do teachers need to determine students' interests during instruction—a fundamental principle of differentiation?

6. Describe Tomlinson’s (2001) four broad categories for teachers to consider when making decisions about students’ learning preferences.
7. Explain the author’s statement, “Data-*less* decisions are bad decisions, just as are data-*driven* decisions.”

Chapter 5

What Does Excellence Look Like in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. What two factors contribute to the tension that teachers experience as they struggle to meet the changing and diverse needs of today’s students?
2. What does the author mean when he explains that teachers are trained as content specialists, not as skills coaches? What is the result of this?
3. Why does the author insist that excellence in learning and achievement must be defined far more broadly than high scores on standardized tests of knowledge?
4. Describe the four elements—classroom climate, program planning, understanding of the relationship between assessment *for* and *of* learning, and quality work—that teachers should focus on to create conditions for excellence in schools.

Chapter 6

How Should I Assess Learning in the Mixed-Ability Class?

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1. What process does the author suggest when teachers ask how to assess learning in a class with a wide range of needs? What is key to the success of this process?
2. Explain the difference between assessment designed to *improve* learning and assessment designed to *measure* it.
3. Why do so many middle and high school teachers lament that their students will not complete any work unless it “counts”? How can helpful, descriptive feedback change this?
4. Describe the classroom example of informative self- and peer assessment in grade 3 writing, and the primary grade writing continuum presented in table 6.1.
5. Why should the use of scaffolding be temporary?
6. How can assessment and grading policies be more supportive of learning? How can educators challenge the mythology of measurement?

Chapter 7

How Should Assessment and Instruction Connect in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. Why is the author increasingly using Tomlinson and McTighe’s (2006) term *responsive teaching* as an alternative to *differentiated instruction*?
2. What are the qualities of a teacher-centered classroom? How does it affect students?
3. What does the author mean by the statement, “If students are to learn deeply and sustainably, they must be empowered”? Why should classroom routines change to demand that all students are attending and are engaged at all times?

4. How does the author recommend students be grouped for instructional and assessment purposes?
5. What are some ways teachers can approach preparation time and manageability for differentiating instruction?
6. Scaffolding in the classroom—strategies and materials to support students’ learning and progressively lead them to independence—takes many forms. What are some examples? Describe Tomlinson’s (1999) tool “the equalizer.”
7. Teachers can dramatically increase the relevance of assigned work when they ask what two simple questions?
8. The author suggests that effective approaches to differentiation include what elements?

Chapter 8

How Should Assessment Be Matched to Students’ Needs?

1. What is a frequent response the author sees to Gardner’s concept of multiple intelligences and to Tomlinson’s work on differentiation? Why is this approach ineffective?
2. What are some guidelines provided in the chapter to help teachers as they differentiate the processes that students will engage in and the products they will create as evidence of essential learning?
3. Describe the common planning process called tiering that is responsive to the range of knowledge and skills demonstrated by students.

4. What is the benefit of creating a common rubric for all the tasks in a differentiated lesson?
5. Why is it important for students to be challenged to demonstrate learning outside of their preferred modality?
6. Why is a balance of written, performance, and oral assessment evidence necessary, according to the author?
7. How can checklists, designed for self- and peer assessment, be used to ensure that students are presented with performance goals they perceive as challenging but achievable?

Chapter 9

How Do I Grade Learning in the Mixed-Ability Class?

1. What are the differences between norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and self-referenced grading? Why is it important for teachers to understand the differences, and when should each type be used?
2. Ken O'Connor (Cooper & O'Connor, 2008) identifies what four essential attributes for quality grades?
3. How can teachers work collaboratively to ensure that the grades students receive are meaningful?
4. What are the author's recommendations for improving consistency in both assessment and grading?

5. When grading, why should teachers clearly distinguish between achievement and effort?
6. What is the purpose of students receiving an *incomplete* instead of a grade when they do not submit one or more major pieces of work?
7. What are the principles for sound and supportive grading presented in the chapter?

Chapter 10

How Can I Report Effectively to Students in the Mixed-Ability Class and to Their Parents?

1. The author suggests that report cards should be designed with what two characteristics in mind?
2. What kinds of questions do parents have when they receive a report card from their child's school? How can report cards and parent-teacher communication address these questions?
3. What should be clear to parents when the reporting format uses descriptors that contain the words *progress* and *progressing*? Why should growth, progress, and achievement terms be referenced to scales that appear on report cards?
4. What elements should appear in a standards-based report card?
5. How can a report card communicate information to students and their parents about achievement *and* progress?
6. Why is reporting progress as well as achievement vital for struggling students?

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7. The author stresses that simply asking who reads the report card and what purposes it must achieve would lead to improvements in what five areas?