



Implementing Flexible Grouping

Earners implement flexible, small group instruction to create a more inclusive classroom environment and improve academic outcomes for students.

Key Method

Earners use data to create small homogeneous flexible groups and small heterogeneous groups of students and implement cooperative learning structures within the groups to improve academic outcomes for students.

Method Components

Flexible grouping is a teaching strategy educators use to meet the individual needs, abilities, and interests of the students within their classes. As the term “flexible” implies, group structures change frequently, and new groups are formed in response to students' academic performance and level of readiness for meeting learning targets. The implementation of flexible grouping means students have frequent opportunities to respond to questions, practice interpersonal skills, and interact with all students in the class, resulting in a more inclusive classroom environment that values all learners.

Teachers and administrators sometimes mistake flexible seating for flexible grouping. In many classrooms, tables that seat 4-6 students have replaced rows of desks. While classroom tables might physically create small groups of students, flexible groups are based on students' knowledge and skills related to academic content. Another misconception is that utilizing stations or learning centers is the same as flexible grouping. When students rotate between stations and learning centers, all students are often practicing the same activity or skill—just at different times. Flexible groups are designed to differentiate for specific learners or groups of learners based on students' learning needs. This means flexible groups are not a stand alone strategy, but must be paired with other high leverage practices or instructional strategies. For the purpose of this micro-credential, homogeneous

grouping will be paired with explicit instruction (HLP 16) and heterogeneous grouping will be paired with cooperative learning strategies.

Mixed-Ability or Similar-Ability Groups

To effectively plan for flexible grouping, educators must be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of heterogeneous (mixed-ability) groups and homogeneous (similar-ability) groups. Table 1 and Table 2 outline grouping considerations to help determine the best fit for students' learning needs.

Advantages of Mixed-Ability Groups		
Low-ability students	Average-ability students	High-ability students
- gain exposure to academic skills and habits from their more capable peers. - less likely to feel class stigmatization which may increase motivation to learn.	gain exposure to different perspectives or methods.	- reinforce their learning and communication skills by helping other students. - assume and practice leadership roles.
Disadvantages of Mixed-Ability Groups for . . .		
Low-ability students	Average-ability students	High-ability students
- often allow high-ability students to dominate the group dynamics. - intragroup stigmatization may still occur.	show no significant academic gains.	- may resent being asked to assume the teacher role. - may feel frustrated by the pace of instruction and feel they are held back by struggling learners.

Advantages of Similar-Ability Groups for . . .		
Low-ability students	Average-ability students	High-ability students
may receive intensive support and practice for a	have new opportunities to assume leadership	are able to work at a faster pace.

specific skill or process. • may work at a slower pace.	roles • participate more actively in academic discourse and questioning when grouped with students of similar ability.	• gain deeper conceptual knowledge and skills through a more challenging curriculum. • experience positive effects on learning outcomes.
Disadvantages of Similar-Ability Groups for . . .		
Low-ability students	Average-ability students	High-ability students
• Teacher may lower performance expectations and pace of delivery • Students may be less motivated due to lower-self efficacy	• receive limited exposure to diverse perspectives • reduced peer learning opportunities	• might experience unwanted social stigma (e.g., the smart kids)

After considering the advantages and disadvantages of grouping options, teachers may decide to place students with similar academic strengths or needs in homogeneous groups to provide students additional practice toward mastery, intensive intervention, or opportunities to accelerate; teachers may opt to place students in heterogeneous groups of differing academic knowledge and skills to ensure all students have the opportunity to engage in academic discussions, give and receive positive and corrective feedback, and practice interpersonal skills. In both types of small groups, students will have more opportunities to respond and more opportunities to receive immediate feedback. Implementing both types of groups into classroom practice and frequently regrouping students in response to assessment data is essential to maximizing students' academic growth.

Implementation of Flexible Grouping

Teachers prepare for small group instruction based on the desired instructional outcome. When implementing flexible groups, the teacher may circulate through the room monitoring multiple small groups in which students are working simultaneously toward different learning goals, or the teacher may provide direct instruction to one small group while the rest of the class works independently (whole group or small group). Following

small-group instruction, the teacher monitors students' progress and reflects on the effectiveness of the instruction and the group dynamic.

One challenge teachers often face with small group implementation is keeping all students actively engaged in learning by having cooperative learning structures in place. Without these structures, small groups are often off-task and may not reach instructional goals. Research by Dr. Spencer Kagan, an educational psychologist, indicates that cooperative learning produces the best results when teachers create *positive interdependence* within the group as well as *individual accountability*. To encourage positive interdependence, teachers need to incorporate cooperative learning strategies: each student in the group has a separate task to complete or concept to explain to the rest of the group so the entire group benefits, creating positive interdependence. Some of the best strategies for cooperative learning in small groups are the jigsaw method, numbered heads together, and reciprocal teaching. To encourage individual accountability, teachers need to include both individual and collective assessment methods. One way to do this is to record a student's individual score on the assessment for the skill or content. All individual scores are then averaged to provide a group score. The group with the highest score might be rewarded with a form of extrinsic motivation. In theory, this encourages all members of the group to support one another in learning the material to be successful on the assessment.

As teachers work with homogeneous groups of students, the goal is often to remediate or reinforce a new skill, so typically teachers use small group time to provide students with explicit instruction for that skill. The most widely used methods of explicit instruction are gradual release and modeling. While explicit instruction can include other elements, some critical key elements are included below:

- Focus on critical content.
- Deliver the lesson logically at an appropriate pace—not too fast, not too slow.
- State the lesson goal for the students.
- Review relevant information or prior learning, if appropriate.
- Model proficiency and think aloud for students.
- Plan for teacher-student interactions.
- Provide immediate affirmative and/or corrective feedback.

Several resources are included in the resource section of the micro-credential to assist teachers with both cooperative learning and explicit instruction strategies.

Research

Brame, C.J. & Biel, R. (2015). Group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved August 20, 2026 from <https://derekbruff.org/vanderbilt-cft-teaching-guides-archive/group-work-using-cooperative-learning-groups-effectively/>.

Vaughn, Sharon. *Grouping students who struggle with reading* / *Reading Rockets*. (n.d.). Reading Rockets. Retrieved August 22, 2024 from <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/differentiated-instruction/articles/grouping-students-who-struggle-reading>

Heltemes, Lynzee, “Social and Academic Advantages and Disadvantages of Within-class Heterogeneous and Homogeneous Ability Grouping” (2009). https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=mathcs_etd_masters

McLeskey, J., Maheady, L., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M. T., & Lewis, T. J. (Eds.). (2019). High leverage practices for inclusive classrooms. New York, NY: Routledge. Abstract: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315176093-21/using-flexible-grouping-lawrence-maheady-tim-zgliczynski-glisset-col%C3%B3n?context=ubx>

Resources

The HLP 17 [Leadership](#) and [Faculty](#) Guides provide tips and strategies that support the implementation of flexible groups.

HLP 17 Introductory Video. This video from CEEDAR (<https://highleveragepractices.org/hlp-17-use-flexible-grouping>) provides a definition, background, rationale for flexible grouping.

This article presents considerations for **heterogeneous vs. homogeneous** grouping. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-grouping-homogeneous-heterogeneous-ben-johnson>

This article provides considerations for heterogeneous grouping for **math content**:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/advantages-heterogeneous-student-groups-math/>

This resource defines various **roles to assign students** in cooperative learning groups:

<https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/using-roles-in-group-work/>

This short video demonstrates cooperative learning through **assigned roles** within the group: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR6rTKPkjgQ>

This article provides 16 key elements for teachers to consider when providing students with **explicit instruction**: <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/curriculum-and-instruction/articles/16-elements-explicit-instruction>

In this video, Anita Archer discusses **explicit instruction** vs. discovery.

<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/curriculum-and-instruction/articles/16-elements-explicit-instruction>

This video explains how to structure a successful cooperative learning activity using the **Jigsaw** method. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euhtXUgBEts>

This video demonstrates the Kagen strategy **Numbered Heads**:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkV2k4j0-74>

This Reading Rockets article discusses **Reciprocal Teaching** as a cooperative learning strategy: <https://www.readingrockets.org/classroom/classroom-strategies/reciprocal-teaching>

This YouTube video shows third grade students applying the strategy of **Reciprocal Teaching**. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tC032EkLC3A>

Submission Guidelines and Evaluation Criteria

This micro-credential has three areas: Overview, Work Examples and Artifacts, and Reflection. To earn this micro-credential, you must receive “Passing” on Part 1 and Part 3, and “Yes” on all criteria in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview: In a written response:

- Explain your teaching context and role within your school (position, grade level, content area).
- Describe the class dynamics that might impact the implementation of flexible grouping.
- Describe any positive or negative experiences you have had with small group instruction in your classroom.
- Briefly explain your reason for selecting this micro-credential.

Please label this document with “Overview_Your Last Name.”

This submission is scored either “passing” or “not passing.”

Passing: Earner includes a response to each part of the prompt; total response should be at least 250 words and provide the assessor with the context for your submission, your prior experience using small group instruction, and your reason for pursuing this micro-credential.

Part 2. Evidence and Artifacts

Read the Artifacts and Evidence Submission requirements carefully to ensure a thorough understanding of the expectations for a “Yes” on each task.

Task 1: Mixed-ability Group

Create one or more small heterogeneous groups of mixed-ability students that you have intentionally selected based on assessment data for a specific learning goal. Video one small group of students participating in one of the following cooperative learning strategies to solve a problem or complete an assignment:

- The Jigsaw Method
- Reciprocal Teaching
- Numbered Heads Together
- Cooperative Learning Roles

In a written response specific to the flexible group in your video,

- describe the students in the small group (please use fictitious names).

- explain your rationale for grouping these students together, including data sources.
- explain why you selected the specific cooperative learning strategy for this group.
- describe how the selected strategy impacted the specific learning outcome.
- discuss how the strategy encouraged both interdependence and individual accountability.

As evidence of this task, submit the written response, a video recording (15-20 minutes) of students working collaboratively in their group(s), student work samples, and the assessment method used to monitor each student's progress.

Note: Please remove any personally identifiable information from data sources.

Please label artifacts “Task 1 Written Response Last Name,” “Task 1 Video Last Name,” “Task 1 Student Work Samples Last Name” .

Task 2: Similar-ability Group

Create one homogeneous group of similar-ability students based on assessment data for a specific learning goal. Provide a video of you providing an explicit instruction lesson to the small group that incorporates key elements of explicit instruction from the list in the Method Components section and the resource [16 Elements of Explicit Instruction](#) included in this micro-credential. The video should include, but is not limited to the following:

- a clear statement of the learning outcome for students
- the teacher modeling the skill, steps, or process
- guided and independent practice
- active participation between teacher and students
- checks for understanding
- immediate affirmative or corrective feedback

In a written response,

- describe the students in the small group (please use fictitious names).
- explain your rationale for grouping these students together, including data sources.
- identify the specific elements of explicit instruction you incorporated into the lesson and how each of the elements supported this small group of learners in achieving the desired learner outcome.
- provide video markers the assessor can use to identify the elements identified in your written response.

As evidence of this task, submit the written response, a video recording (10-15 minutes) of the teacher providing explicit instruction to the group, student work samples, and the assessment method used to monitor each student's progress.

Note: Please remove any personally identifiable information from data sources.

Please label artifacts “Task 2 Written Response Last Name,” “Task 2 Video Last Name,” “Task 2 Student Work Samples Last Name”.

Part 2. Evidence and Artifacts Scoring Guide

For each task or subset of each task, describe how reviewers will rate the earner as demonstrating their competence in this area. Yes is fully demonstrated and means the earner has fulfilled all requirements. Almost means an earner is showing some progress and has met some requirements, but not all. Not yet means the earner has not demonstrated the competency for this micro-credential and has not met the requirements.

Task	Not Yet	Almost	Yes
Task 1: Create Heterogeneous Flexible Group	The written response is missing, incomplete, or generated using AI. The video is missing or lacks sufficient evidence of implementing the strategy.	The written response <i>partially explains</i> • who the students are • rationale and data sources • why you selected the strategy. • how it impacted the learning outcome • how the strategy encouraged interdependence and individual accountability The video partially demonstrates • student collaboration • students accurately applying the strategy • minimal ,if any, teacher intervention • additional student work samples/assessments	The written response <i>thoroughly explains</i> • who the students are • rationale and data sources • why you selected the strategy. • how it impacted the learning outcome • how the strategy encouraged interdependence and individual accountability The video clearly demonstrates • student collaboration • students accurately applying the strategy • minimal ,if any, teacher intervention • additional student work samples/assessments

Task 2: Create Homogeneous Flexible Group	The written response is missing, incomplete, or generated using AI. The video is missing or lacks sufficient evidence of implementing elements of explicit instruction.	The written response <i>partially explains</i> • who the students are • rationale for grouping specific students • data sources • elements of explicit instruction included in the lesson and how they supported learners. The video partially demonstrates the teacher and students engaged in elements of explicit instruction listed in Task 2.	The written response <i>thoroughly explains</i> • who the students are • rationale for grouping specific students • data sources • elements of explicit instruction included in the lesson and how they supported learners. The video clearly demonstrates the teacher and students engaged in elements of explicit instruction listed in Task 2.
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Part 3. Reflection

In a written response, reflect on your learning from this micro-credential to answer the following questions. Be sure to include a thorough explanation for each question.

- In what ways did the implementation of flexible grouping positively impact learner outcomes for specific students in both groups?
- What challenges did you or your students encounter as you implemented the flexible groups?
- As you reflect on using both types of flexible groups, what changes might you make as you implement flexible grouping in the future?

Please label this document with “Reflection_Your Last Name.”

This submission is scored either “passing” or “not passing.”

Passing: The response includes a discussion of each bulleted prompt; total response should be a minimum of 250-words and provide a detailed explanation of the positive impact resulting from flexible grouping, the challenges you encountered, and changes you will make when implementing flexible grouping in the future.