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THE FLEXIBLY GROUPED CLASSROOM

How to Organize Learning for Equity and Growth

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Preface

On a bitter cold day in Chicago, my colleague, Jessica Hockett, and I met to finalize the outline of this book. Although the idea for the book had been rattling around in our minds and hearts for some time, it wasn't until that day, in January 2020, that we finally made concrete plans for its construction. We parted, excited to bring it to life.

And then, the world began to unravel.

The arrival of COVID-19 upended so much of everyone's "normal," and pandemic-related complications led Jessica to the difficult decision to bow out of our book project. I found myself a solo author wondering if her topic was relevant anymore. After all, with schools shut down, students couldn't even sit in the same classroom, let alone work in an instructional group. Like many educators, the initial move to online learning had sapped me of energy and passion, and I considered bowing out, too. In light of such upheaval and sorrow, how could I focus on writing a book about classroom grouping? What difference could it possibly make?

Then spring 2020 brought the murder of Ahmaud Abery in a "citizen's arrest," the slaying of Breonna Taylor by police in her home, and the horror of George Floyd's life being drained from him, deliberately and methodically, by a police officer's knee to his neck. The eruption of outrage and despair that followed may have been triggered by these three murders, but it was a long-brewing response to years and years of systemic racial oppression enacted through the institutions of U.S. society. School has been, and remains, one of those institutions. For decades, decisions about how to group students for instruction have been the means of denying equitable learning opportunities to students with low socioeconomic status—especially those who are Black or brown. In light of this disparity, this injustice, how could I NOT write a book about classroom grouping—a concrete way that I really might make a difference?

In truth, the process of desegregating school is ongoing. When *Brown vs. Board of Education* overturned *Plessy vs. Ferguson*'s "separate but equal" public education policy, schools themselves *may* have become desegregated, but separation remained.

Black and white students *may* have attended the same schools, but they rarely attended the same classes. In many cases, higher-level and accelerated courses were reserved for white students, while students of color were relegated to remedial classes. Further, teachers' expectations for their students generally mirrored the label or "level" of the class. Thus, while white students rose to the expectations of both their curriculum and their te vachers, Black and brown students, denied meaningful learning experiences and the expectation of growth, languished (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2000).

Once these realizations took hold in me, writing this book became an imperative—my opportunity to join the chorus of antiracist teaching voices by speaking to what I know best: the classroom as an ecosystem in which the health and viability all students depends heavily on how the teacher decides to leverage grouping practices. It is my hope that the guidance outlined in this book shines a spotlight on what needs to be dismantled and equips teachers with a new set of norms, strategies, and systems to do so. And, as students and teachers unite once again in face-to-face classrooms, I also hope that this book will help teachers see with fresh eyes the promise and possibility of authentic student collaboration.

Introduction: How Traditional Models of Grouping Fall Short

Everyone has real-world experiences with being grouped. Sometimes a group is chosen for us, such as a table assignment at a wedding reception, a project team at work, or college roommates. Other times, we choose our group, like when we join a book club or Facebook group, signup for a conference session or exercise class, or go on a guided tour. How we feel about each "grouping" depends on innumerable factors, including who else is in the group, how long it lasts, and what the group accomplishes.

For all the groups we flow in and out of over a lifetime, school might be the place where our earliest, most formative grouping memories are etched. With little effort, most of us can conjure the joys, pressures, and pains of being in—or not in—certain school-set or school-adjacent social, academic, and extracurricular groups: feeling included when invited to a lunch table or excluded when relegated to an open seat alone; being a part of the Blue math group working cooperatively on complex problems or sitting apart in the Red math group to complete another set of rote drills; having an affiliation with others cast in the school play or experiencing alienation when we do not make the cut.

These experiences in and with various groups shape how people see themselves and their peers. This holds especially true of instructional grouping within classrooms; the decisions districts, schools, and teachers make about who should be learning together and why they should be learning can really impact student performance (see Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2010, 2012; Schoffield, 2010). We know grouping matters. But how does it matter? And how much? And why? And what, exactly, does "grouping" mean?

These portraits illustrate how teachers[1] tend to think about and use instructional grouping; they also reflect students' potential experiences with and feelings about the grouping configurations the teacher uses. Each is followed by a few

"glows" (positives to celebrate) and "grows" (areas for improvement).

[1]These teachers are composites. Throughout the book, I have used different naming conventions to distinguish real teachers who have graciously shared their experience with me (first and last names on first mention, and first names thereafter) from these composites ("Ms," or "Mr.").

1

The Purpose of Flexible Grouping

Flexibly grouped classrooms are necessary both because the world is changing, and because it is not changing enough.

Adapting to the Modern Workplace

As dependence on technology grows, more and more routine jobs (such as factory work) have become automated. Remaining and emerging occupations require employees to have social and collaborative skills that cannot be replicated by technology (Deming, 2018; The National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2018).

Collaborative group work has indeed become ubiquitous in the modern workplace, both in face-to-face and online environments. In fact, "the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50 percent or more" since the mid-1990s (Cross et al., 2016, p. 74). This changing world of work is driven in part by studies showing that "groups tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly and find better solutions to problems" than individuals do (Duhigg, 2016, para. 12).

Recognizing this increase in collaboration, Google (2016) conducted an internal study to determine the defining qualities of an ideal team— one whose members planned, made decisions, and reviewed progress in a highly collaborative, interdependent manner. Codenamed "Project Aristotle," the study concluded that successful teams share the following characteristics:

1. **Psychological safety**. Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of one another.
2. **Dependability**. Team members get things done on time and meet a high bar for excellence.

3. **Structure and clarity**. Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.
4. **Meaning**. Team members find the work they are doing personally meaningful.
5. **Impact.** Team members think the work they are doing matters and creates change.

Note that these characteristics reflect principles rather than logistics. In other words, they reflect the health of team relationships and the nature of their work—not the traits of individual group members.

Other studies of the emerging workplace reinforce the value of employees being socially nimble—that is, being able to effectively communicate and collaborate with a variety of people (NACE, 2018). Deming (2017) notes that "the fastest growing cognitive occupations—managers, teachers, nurses and therapists, physicians, lawyers, even economists—all require significant interpersonal interaction" with a diverse range of individuals (p. 1595).

On Day 1, let students know that they will be switching groups frequently. Your explanation of flexible grouping might sound something like this:

> In this class, you'll get the chance to work with many of your classmates in a variety of groups—from partnerships to groups of six or more. You might work with me, talk with one another, or collaborate on a task or project that requires each of you to contribute your skills and ideas. Sometimes, I'll choose the groups, and sometimes you will. And sometimes we'll let "chance" decide. My job is to switch these groups a lot so that you interact and learn from different people for different reasons, and so that they learn from you, too.

If school is to meet the changing demands of the workplace, it must help students learn to effectively exercise social skills and to grow in their collaborative capacities. Fortunately, such a shift aligns with what we know about how people learn. Echoing Project Aristotle's findings, educational research reveals that student growth depends in large part on two principles: (1) a healthy classroom environment (Hattie, 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018), and (2) meaningful, relevant, and engaging curriculum and instruction (McTighe & Willis, 2019; NASEM, 2018). Research also affirms the belief that students should have the opportunity to interact with a wide range of

classmates, in both low- and high-stakes settings. Fluid movement in and out of instructional groups provides this opportunity and helps to build "intellectual camaraderie," a hallmark of healthy classroom community (Bransford et al., 2000; NASEM, 2018).

What Is Flexible Grouping?

Essentially, flexible grouping is a system of organizing students intentionally and fluidly for different learning experiences within a classroom over a relatively short period of time. The groupings are flexible because they align with specific, changing goals, and because decisions about group size, membership, and longevity are guided by recent classroom assessment results or other student or class characteristics that are relevant to a specific instructional purpose.

Flexible grouping is not a formula or set of steps, but there are several "hallmarks" of flexibly grouped classrooms. These are principles that, when applied together, make and keep flexible grouping "flexible".

Hallmark 1: Groupings change based on goals and student characteristics that matter for the task

When grouping is flexible, the teacher employs a range of grouping configurations that depend on and change with instructional goals and tasks. Too often, when a teacher claims to use flexible grouping, it means that groups change only if and when the teacher sees they need to change. In practice, this might mean students need to "prove themselves" to the teacher in order to be "released' from a static grouping, or that the teacher is letting intuition and personal comfort—or even the manageability of group size—guide the decision to change a grouping (Jean, 2016).

Flexible grouping assumes that groupings will and must change, because students' readiness needs, motivations, and learning preferences routinely change.

Hallmark 2: Groupings vary in composition, duration, and size

Just as a hand mixer won't fry an egg and a pair of tongs can't ladle soup, no single grouping system can meet all instructional needs. The Introduction's example scenarios included several established kinds of groups, including standing reading groups, project-based learning, cooperative learning, lab partners, whole-

group instruction, and Socratic seminar circles. While there is a time and a place for each of these valuable grouping configurations, none of them can serve every instructional purpose.

There are times when groups of three or four work best (e.g., to facilitate creative brainstorming) and other times when partner work is more efficient (e.g., to provide direct one-on-one feedback). Heterogeneous groups may be optimal for test-preparation, but homogenous groups are preferable for targeted instruction, especially when they are composed based on recent classroom-level assessment evidence. Project-based learning groups may engage in sustained inquiry together, but teachers can form smaller, more temporary groups of students (pulled from each project group) to "catch up" students who have been absent, to coach individuals to be technology "experts," or to peer edit and rehearse interview questions.

As the examples in the preceding paragraph illustrate, the "corner choice" need not have anything to do with the task students will undertake: it can simply be a mechanism for forming random groups. However, it is possible to correlate the corner choices with the actual work to be completed. For example, the corners could represent four topics of high interest to students (e.g., sports, fashion, video games, and phones). When students arrive at their corner, they might find advertisements related to their chosen topic to analyze for persuasive techniques or story problems (featuring the same data set, numbers, operations, etc.) written to relate to their topic. Linking corner choice to content takes slightly more planning (i.e., finding different ads, adjusting context of story problems) than using the technique purely as a randomization mechanism. It's fair to say that the content-linked application of four corners dips a toe into Stage 4.

The goal of the strategies in Stage 3 is to help students connect with a wide variety of classmates over shared interests that are easy and fun to talk about. Although they are well suited to beginning-of-the-year community building, Stage 3 grouping can be used whenever teachers want to infuse variety, movement, and interaction into their lessons. In addition, because Stage 3 strategies direct students to *general locations* (sides of the room, table numbers, corners), they prepare students for movement into more *task-specific locations* in Stages 4 and 5.

Concerns about Equity and Fairness

Aren't mixed-readiness groups always better? Don't like-readiness groups spotlight who is in the "high" and "low" groups?

In short, no. As discussed in Chapter 3's discussion of Stage 4 (Formative Formations), within a flexibly-grouped classroom, like-readiness groups are actually like-pattern groups created to reflect students' most recent assessment results. The composition of these groups changes from skill to skill, topic area to topic area, and—depending on the frequency of formative assessment—even from day to day.

Used in combination with groupings from the other four stages, like-pattern groups don't relegate some students to the "low" group and some to the "high" group. Further, since the teacher is seeing students in a variety of grouping combinations, students' strengths tend to surface more readily than in a classroom with static grouping, whether it's statically homogeneous or statically heterogeneous. A teacher in a flexibly grouped classroom soon learns to hold high expectations for all students.

Four Corners

In the tried-and-true four corners cooperative learning strategy, each classroom's corners is designated with one of four interest-oriented choices—anything from favorite movie genre (comedy, romance, action, sci-fi), favorite milkshake from McDonald's (vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, or shamrock), or best thing about the weekend (sleeping in, catching up on shows, spending time with friends/family, playing sports). Students head to the corner that represents their choice and gather in pairs, trios, or quads to discuss their answers. After that initial greeting, they find a place to sit and begin the posted collaborative task.

For this system to operate as efficiently as possible, it's important to have procedures and routines in place for

- Setting the tone and expectations for flexible grouping.
- Laying the social foundation for flexible grouping and building upon it.
- Transitioning into and out of group arrangements.
- Structuring and launching tasks with flexible grouping.
- Assigning and allowing choice of roles within groups.
- Monitoring progress, noise and time.

In the chapters ahead, we will examine practical strategies for both planning and implementing flexible grouping, and discuss how to anticipate and avoid potential grouping pitfalls. We will also explore frequently asked questions about flexible grouping and return to the classroom scenarios from the Introduction to see how "upgraded" grouping practices play out in a variety of grade levels and subject areas.

A final note of emphasis: While flexible grouping is ideal for highly diverse classrooms, it can be used in *any* classroom to accomplish the aims described in this chapter. Even in classes where it seems that all students are the same due to ascribed level, shared linguistic needs, advanced placement, or choice of elective, differences do exist. Flexible grouping makes it possible to capitalize on the excite-

Figure 2.2:

Grouping Configurations in Justin Minkel's 1st Grade Classroom

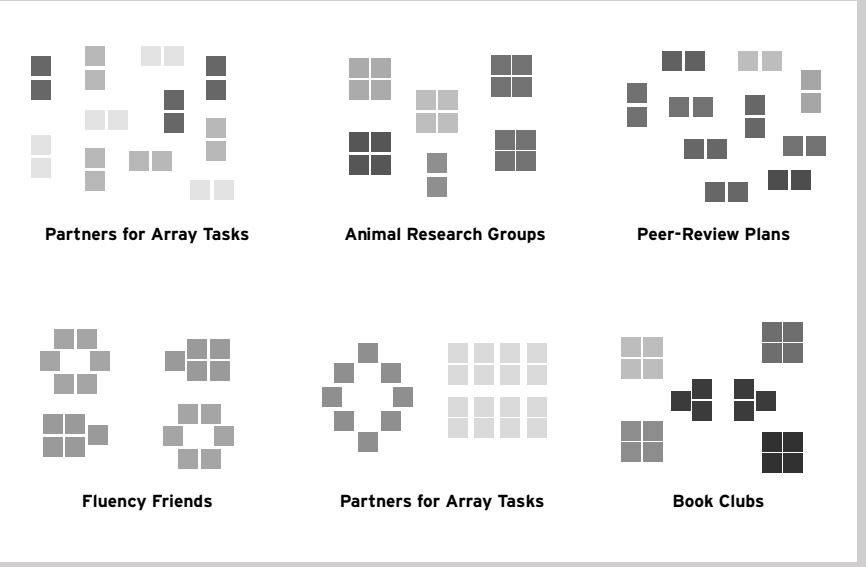

Figure 3.16:

The Progression of Flexible Grouping

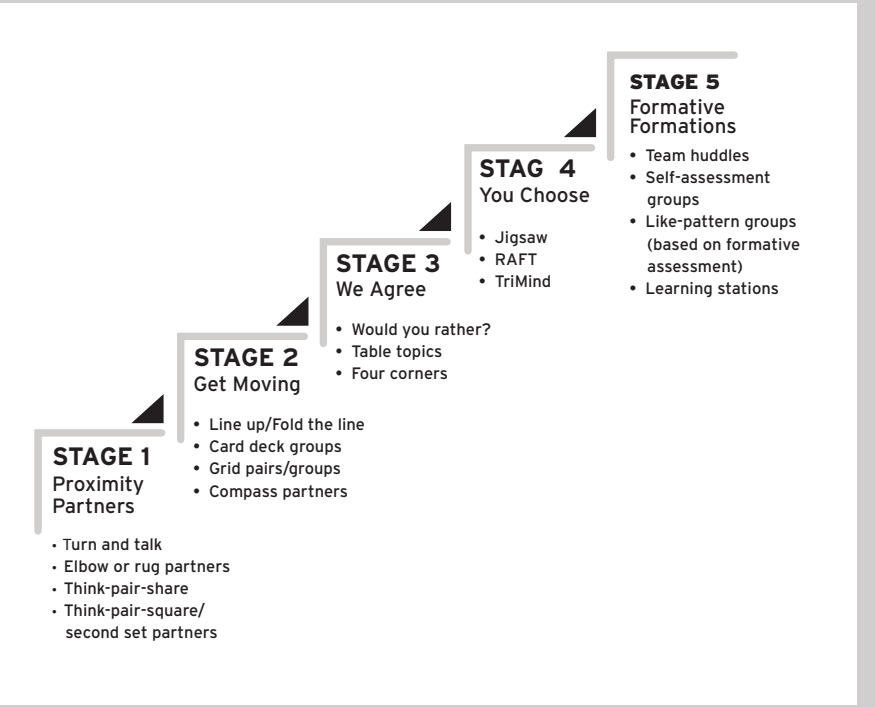

Figure 3.16:

The Progression of Flexible Grouping

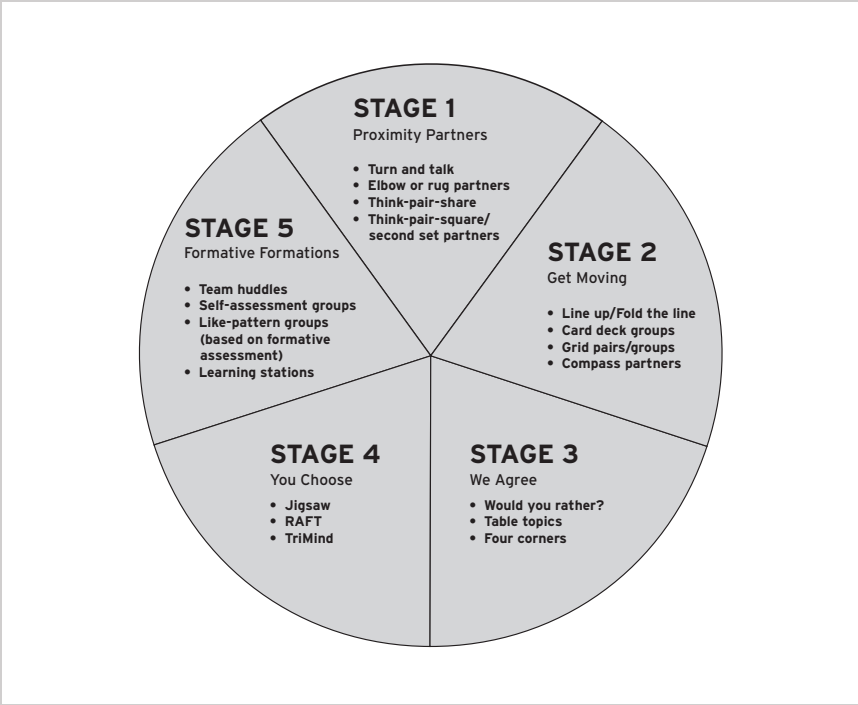

Figure 3.3:

Compass Partners Sheet

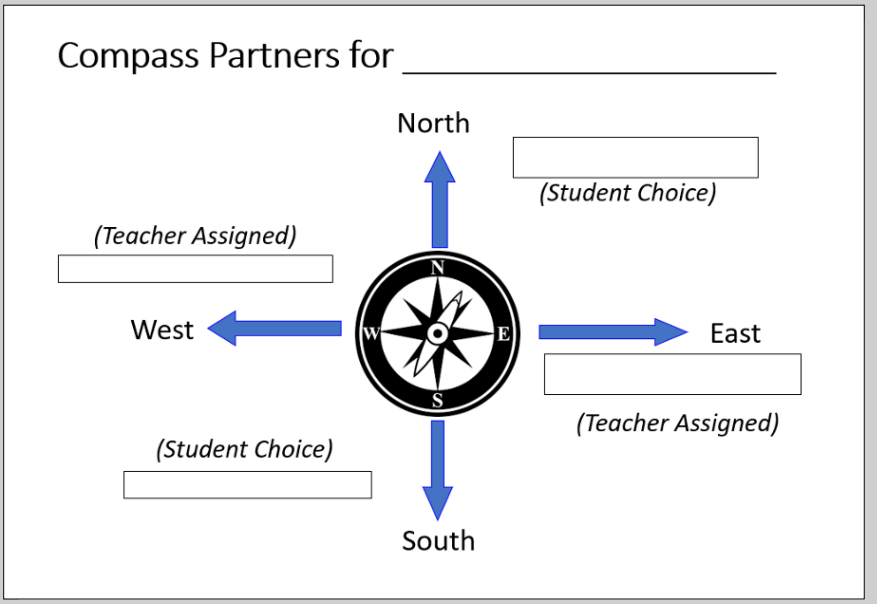

Figure 3.6

Fourth Grade Science RAFT

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
Heat energy	3rd grade students	Poster or infographic	Watch my "moves" with water . . . and how I heat the cold and cool the heat!
Light energy	Planet Earth	Video	You should be grateful for me and my relationship with the sun! Here's why. . . .
Electrical energy	The wind and a wind turbine	Letter or email	I know you two are friends, but did you know you create me? Here's how. . . .
Aligned to NGSS 4-PS3-2			

APPENDIX

ment of diversity that occurs in *any* setting where more than one person is present.

Appendix B: Sample Flexible Grouping Plan—Elementary

Time Period: February–March			**Grade Level: 1st**
Task	**Purpose and Duration**	**Size and How Formed**	**Summary of Learning Experience**
#1 Math	**Purpose:** Applying new skills in making arrays Duration: **Extended math block**	**Size:** Partners **How Formed:** Teacher Choice	• **Preview the task by asking student volunteers to "fishbowl" model a version of the task (with teacher direction).** • Like-readiness pairs build arrays using the number of tiles assigned (smaller or larger of tiles; number adjusted to provide appropriate support or challenge). • Reconvene for partners to share work and discuss what they learned
#2 Science	**Purpose:** Working on a project **Duration:** Several weeks (2–3 research days during science each week)	**Size:** Quads for research **How Formed:** Interest Inventory; rank animals to show first, second, and third choice of "favorites".	• Work with peers who have chosen the same animal (e.g., alligator, elephant, cheetah) as one of their Top 3 favorites • Conduct structured research with tailored texts (tiered books, bookmarked websites, audio recordings of informational texts) and shared resources (videos, guest speaker). • Each group meets with teacher each workday to report progress and ask questions

#3 Science& ELA	**Purpose:** Practicing writing skills **Duration:** One week	**Size:** Varied **How Formed:** Teacher forms based on recent formative assessment/ writing sample)	• Individually, each student creates their own "All About _____ [Animal]" book. • Call small groups of students together (from all animal interest groups) with like-need for workshops on • using evidence from research, and • writing sentences • Provide appropriate support and challenge.
#4 ELA	**Purpose:** Practicing reading skills (fluency, decoding, vocabulary) **Duration**: Ongoing; a few times a week; changes frequently	**Size:** 5-6 students **How Formed**: Teacher created groups based on ongoing formative assessment	Begin with targeted instruction designed to improve fluency. Similar groups will form to target instruction in decoding and vocabulary. Pull "strategy circles" of varied sizes and compositions to deliver more targeted instruction around smaller skills like making inferences or sequencing. All groups formed according to recent, classroom-based formative assessment.
Other Potential Tasks			
Task	**Purpose and Duration**	**Size and How Formed**	**Summary of Learning Experience**

To Precede **#1** (Math)	**Purpose:** Investigating new content; building community **Duration:** One math period	**Size:** Partners or trios **How Formed:** Student choice	• Label three corners of the room with words and pictures representing "Food," "Art," and "Toys." Students report to the corner they prefer. • Divide large interest groups into smaller pairs/trios. • Using tablet devices, present pairs and trios with digital images of arrays in the real world (in their chosen context). Students will discuss and describe each array and reproduce their favorites on graph paper.
To Follow **#3** (Science & ELA)	**Purpose:** Peer-Review of writing **Duration:** Less than one class	**Size:** Whole Class; Pairs **How Formed:** Random partner from interest groups used in Task #3	As a full class, students use established "Look Fors" (success criteria) to evaluate one another's work (Note: Two to three writing "success criteria" are introduced to students early in the year, with others added as the year progresses). After peers provide feedback as a class, students move into pairs to revise each partner's writing according to the class's suggestions.
Any Time – (ELA)	**Purpose:** Examining a text **Duration:** Several weeks, meeting several times a week	**Size:** 3-4 students **How Formed:** Student choice of book for "book clubs"	"Book clubs" are formed when students choose the book they want to read and form groups with classmates who chose the same book. Books are united around a common author (e.g., Mo Willems), theme (e.g., friendship), or topic (e.g., dinosaurs). For this month's book club, students are reading their chosen Don't Let the Pigeon . . . book (by Mo Willems) and discussing both argument and design.

Source: Based on the work of Justin Minkel. Adapted with permission.

Appendix D: Resources

Planning (Chapter 2)		
Tool	**Link**	**QR code**
Flexible Grouping Planning Template	https://docs.google.com/document/d/17zr2cMWDM9dbFoT64wSBLuU4zSQeVnyjW1D6GdqzaOg/edit?usp=sharing	
Structured Academic Controversy How-To's	https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21731	
Planning (Chapter 3)		
Tool	**Link**	**QR code**
Second-Set Partners	https://learn.teachingchannel.com/video/second-set-partners-sfusd	
"Would You Rather...?" Questions	https://conversationstartersworld.com/would-you-rather-questions/	
Self-Assessment/ Guided Groups in Action	https://www.teachingchannel.org/video/guided-groups-formative-assessment	

Station Rotations Example (Elementary)	https://www.edutopia.org/video/station-rotation-differentiating-instruction-reach-all-students	
Station Rotations Example (Secondary)	**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY5iXxqe_WU**	
Planning (Chapter 4)		
Tool	**Link**	**QR code**
Cooperative Learning Roles	https://www.edutopia.org/video/60-second-strategy-cooperative-learning-roles	
Respond, Reflect, and Review	**https://www.youtube.com/**	
Tool for Monitoring Progress	Trello.com	

Teacher Queue	https://www.edutopia.org/video/60-second-strategy-teacher-queue	
Bouncy Balls (Must use Chrome)	bouncyballs.org	
Classroom Timers	**https://www.weareteachers.com/online-timers-classroom/**	
Planning (Chapter 5)		
Tool	**Link**	**QR code**
"Self-Check" for Bias	**https://www.edutopia.org/article/simple-way-self-monitor-bias**	
Anti-Bias Teaching Activities	**https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/antibias-teaching-just-got-easier**	

Flexible Grouping Seating Arrangements	https://www.teachstarter.com/us/blog/inspiration-for-classroom-seating-arrangements-2-2/	
Break-Out Room Choices Template	https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1cnJeIJ755sYvEDTMmN5uQenDUsJtsIv3xpSAGJH89BQ/edit?usp=sharing	
Virtual Stations Template	https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1aDqYwwHZs4U-ZoNJ-1rdhSVZ11o2D-EMtoueJ-NX6UQ/edit?usp=sharing	
Jigsaw Method Online Adaptation Google Slides Template	https://alicekeeler.com/2016/03/09/google-slides-jigsaw-activity-template/	
Online Teaching Adaptation: Jigsaw Video	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKXY8DjtMHM	
Comprehensive Guide to Digital Learning	**https://shop.ascd.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Store/Product-Details/productId/264442667**	

Planning (Chapter 6)		
Tool	**Link**	**QR code**
Fishbowl Discussion Strategy in Action	https://www.edutopia.org/video/60-second-strategy-fishbowl-discussion	
Discussion Mapping in Action	https://www.edutopia.org/video/60-second-strategy-discussion-mapping	
5 Keys to Rigorous Project-Based Learning	https://www.edutopia.org/video/5-keys-rigorous-project-based-learning	
Comprehensive Guide to Project-Based Learning	https://shop.ascd.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Store/ProductDetails/productId/264220909	

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Kristina J. Doubet is a professor in the College of Education at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where she has received the Distinguished Teacher Award, the Madison Scholar Award, and the Sarah Miller Luck Endowed Professorship for Excellence in Education. As an independent consultant and ASCD Faculty member, Kristina has partnered with hundreds of schools, districts, and organizations around initiatives related to differentiated instruction, curriculum design using the Understanding by Design framework, performance assessment and project-based learning, formative assessment and feedback, digital learning, and classroom management and grouping.

In addition to authoring numerous articles in journals including *Kappan* and *Educational Leadership*, she is the coauthor (with Jessica Hockett) of *Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* and *Differentiation in the Elementary Grades: Strategies to Engage and Equip All Learners*. She also co-authored *The Differentiated Flipped Classroom: A Practical Guide to Digital Learning* (with Eric Carbaugh), *Designing Authentic Performance Tasks and Projects: Tools for Meaningful Learning and Assessment* (with Jay McTighe and Eric Carbaugh), the ASCD Quick Reference Guide *Principles and Practices for Effective Blended Learning* (with Eric Carbaugh) and *Smart in the Middle Grades: Classrooms That Work for Bright Middle Schoolers* (with Carol Ann Tomlinson). Kristina's current research focuses on standards-based grading, integrated ELA instruction, and innovative instruction for English learners. She taught middle and high school language arts for 10 years

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