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INTRODUCTION



Why This Book Now?

Most teachers I work with now acknowledge the need to differentiate instruction and scaffold assessments to suit the differing strengths and needs of students, but in only a small number of the classes I visit do teachers say that they feel competent or confident in undertaking this work.

In schools, at conferences and in workshops, teachers constantly tell me that they need help managing the wide range of students they have in their classes. And while the challenges of instruction and assessment are significant, marking and reporting achievement in the mixed-ability classroom often confound even the most experienced professionals. Here are some of the most common questions and concerns voiced when I ask teachers what major challenges they face in assessment and marking:

- How do I differentiate my program for struggling learners when they are all expected to know the same material?
- How should I modify my rubrics for my struggling learners?
- How do I manage my secondary school classes if I have students moving at different speeds? I have so much to cover.
- I can't insist on all of my students mastering essential learning. At the end of a unit, don't we have to move on?
- How can my report marks be fair and accurate when I have such a wide range of students in my class?
- How is it fair to those students who are successful the first time if others get to do assignments and tests over again?
- If students know they can do rewrites on major assignments, why should they try the first time?

- If students get to redo tests, won't I have to have lots of tests for every unit?

These are all important, challenging questions. Some involve curriculum, some focus on instruction, some address assessment and some concern marking. We will explore answers to each of these concerns in the pages of this resource.

Because teaching is such demanding work, requiring the constant integration of wide-ranging knowledge and diverse skills, it frequently overwhelms us. Speaking metaphorically, there are so many individual “trees” demanding our attention—new curriculum to study, lessons to prepare, resources to examine, new skills to learn, school events to organise, teams to coach, and most importantly, individual student needs to meet—that we often lose sight of the “forest”—our overall mission: to teach and assess in ways that maximise learning for *all* students.

The Five Imperatives

Here are five imperatives that should guide our work with respect to curriculum, instruction, assessment, marking and reporting in the mixed-ability class:

1. Curriculum must be meaningful, coherent and relevant.
2. Instruction must be responsive to students' needs.
3. Assessment must be informative.
4. Marking must blend consistency with professional judgment.
5. Communication about learning must be truthful and transparent.

The purpose of these imperatives is to present, in as few words as possible, the most important principles for teachers to remember as they undertake the major functions of their role. Each imperative must be unpacked to discover what it looks like in terms of practice. And this “unpacking” comprises the content of this book. For now, let's remove just the first layer of packing material.

1. **Curriculum must be meaningful, coherent and relevant.** What should students be learning in school? This is such a basic question, yet such a difficult one to answer in today's information-saturated world. Given the rate at which knowledge is increasing, educators are wrestling with the question, “What *content* is essential for students to know and understand?” Meanwhile, curriculum

CHAPTER 2

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

“Is it fair to students who are successful the first time if others get to do assignments and tests over again?” “If students know they can do rewrites on major assignments, why would they try the first time, knowing they can just do it again?” “If students get to redo tests, won’t I have to create lots of tests for every unit?”

Heard these questions before? I hear them constantly! Clearly, we must re-examine our notions of fairness, given that despite an ever-widening range of prior learning in today’s classrooms, teachers are expected to ensure that all students acquire essential learning.

Debunking the Bell Curve

I draw on my love of cycling to illustrate for educators, students and parents what instruction, assessment and marking must look like to ensure high-quality learning from all students. Traditional models of schooling can be compared to a stage in the Tour de France. Simply put, the Tour de France is a one-size-fits-all model in which riders compete against each other, against the clock, over the exact same distance, taking the exact same route. There is only one place on the podium at the end of each stage. The majority of riders finish in the peloton. They don’t reach the podium, but they complete the course, and they all receive the same time for that day’s stage. Typically, in each stage of the three-week race, some riders fail to finish in the required time and are out of the race.

Sound familiar? This is analogous to covering the curriculum once, in the same way, for all students, periodically stopping to test what has been

learned. Students compete for a fixed and limited number of “A” marks. Only a few make the podium. The majority of students master some of the material covered and receive average marks—the peloton. Some students fail the test, and while they may continue in the course or year, they fall progressively further behind and eventually find themselves out of the race. The point of this exercise? To sift and sort students into high, average and low achievers for the purpose of determining placement in one of three program levels, with the ultimate purpose being to determine postsecondary destinations.

In this model, time constraints permit only superficial, one-time coverage of the curriculum. And the teacher is unlikely to provide performance standards for assessment tasks, because to do so would likely result in too many students achieving “A” marks. Similarly, the teacher does not differentiate instruction or assessment based on differing student needs, because, again, to do so, would likely alter the desired normal distribution of marks. But today’s information-rich, digital world demands high levels of literacy, numeracy and problem solving from *all* students.

So what should a 21st century model of instruction, assessment and marking look like? Instead of the Tour de France, it needs to resemble a guided bicycle tour. On a bicycle tour, the guide has the route for the day’s ride and starts out by leading the way. But the riders don’t necessarily stay together, so throughout the ride, the guide doubles back to check on all the riders. She ensures that no-one is riding alone, that everyone is cycling at his or her own comfort level, and that no-one gets lost or overwhelmed by the terrain. When the guide discovers that some riders have dismounted from their bikes and are looking skeptically at a particularly steep hill, she says, “You don’t have to climb it. Let me show you an alternate route.” Of course, all riders make it to the picturesque country inn by the end of the day, where each celebrates his or her accomplishment over a fine meal! Some have taken a different route; some have taken longer than others to arrive at their destination; but all riders have participated in a ride that is appropriate to their skill and fitness levels.

This is today’s differentiated classroom. As educators, we must learn to run our classrooms and schools according to the guided bicycle tour model, rather than the Tour de France model.

The following classroom is an exemplar of the “guided bicycle tour” approach.

Holly’s Year 8 English

Holly has a class of thirty-one students who demonstrate a wide range of interests, skills and motivation to learn, but the learning targets for her English lesson are the same for all:

- Making Inferences/Interpreting Texts
Develop and explain interpretations of oral texts using the language of the text and oral and visual cues to support their interpretations. (p. 141)
- Metacognition
Identify what strategies they found most helpful before, during and after listening and speaking and what steps they can take to improve their oral communication skills. (p. 140)

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A short play about sibling rivalry called *Sibling Secrets* (Hume & Ledgerwood, 2008) provides the focus for Holly’s English lesson. At the beginning of the term, she used a variety of diagnostic assessment strategies to determine the skill levels of her students. Because today’s task involves reading, she has relied upon data from a developmental reading assessment (DRA) to group students strategically. Her lesson plan follows a simple yet effective format:

1. Activation of prior knowledge—whole class
2. Pre-reading activities to stimulate interest and alert students to text features—whole class
3. Oral reading of text—heterogeneous groups
4. Debriefing of text—whole class
5. Analysis of text and making inferences—homogeneous groups

Each of the heterogeneous groups for task 3 comprises three students of differing reading skill levels. The intent is that the more skilled readers will assist the less skilled as they read the text aloud together. Holly moves from group to group to monitor their reading and to provide assistance as necessary.

The homogeneous groups for task 5 comprise students of approximately the same reading skill levels. Holly provides each group with a differentiated task related to inferencing.

Holly's lesson and assessment rubric may be found in reproducible form in the appendix (pages 162–168).

Much like the bicycle tour guide leader, Holly has a clear sense of the destination of all of her students. Also like the tour guide, she has taken the time to assess their differing levels of skill and experience, and she uses this information to make critical decisions that will ensure that every student is appropriately challenged and, therefore, learning.



Retries: Lowering or Raising Standards?

Rick Wormeli (2006) reminds us that “fair isn’t always equal”. The greatest obstacles to treating students differently on the basis of differing needs are habit and tradition. In no other professional endeavour involving practitioners and human beings would we condone treating everyone in the same way. Imagine the doctor who prescribed the same medicine to all patients, regardless of their symptoms, or the physiotherapist who utilised the same treatment for every injury! We would consider such practitioners unworthy of the term *professional*. Yet in education, we have come to equate the concept of rigour in teaching with sameness. Hence, we hear comments such as, “It’s not fair to those students who are successful the first time if others get to do assignments and tests over again.” The problem with this argument is that it is focused on the teacher. Instead, we must hold *students* accountable to rigorous standards. Instead of *allowing* retakes, we must *demand* retakes by students if their first attempt does not meet prescribed performance standards.

This is a radical shift in perspective, in which student, teacher and parent come to see the insistence on quality work from all as a reflection of *higher*, not lower standards.

Unfortunately, we face a massive public relations challenge to convince parents, postsecondary institutions and the media that requiring students to improve and resubmit substandard work does *not* equate to “being soft on students” or offering them a “no-consequences education” (Wente, 2009). On the contrary, these practices represent a significant raising of the bar. But most parents, postsecondary institutions and the media embrace a norm-referenced or “sift and sort” model of assessment and marking. They either are unfamiliar with or do not understand why the 21st century demands criterion-referenced assessment and marking practices—practices that