In these times of changing demographics and new insight into how students learn, differentiated instruction and assessment are widely acknowledged as necessary. Outdated beliefs about fairness often stand in the way of effective classroom implementation, however. Damian Cooper looks closely at the assumptions and realities, and provides solutions that are clear, comprehensive, engaging—and fair.

Redefining Fair also shows K-12 teachers and administrators how to:

- Respond to resistance to the new assessment methods
- Handle curriculum overload and plan a curriculum that focuses on essential skills
- Ensure that report cards convey essential information clearly to parents and students

“Damian Cooper writes about differentiated teaching from three important qualifications: he has done what he asks his readers to do; he has studied the classrooms of many other teachers, so that his sense of classroom reality is broad and deep; and he understands that excellent teaching is not a set of strategies but the determination to do what it takes to make the classroom work for those who have little choice but to spend their days in its boundaries.”

—Carol Anne Tomlinson, William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor, University of Virginia, and author of The Differentiated Classroom.

“This is a great book! It will be useful for anyone struggling with the question of what is fair in instruction and assessment. . . . Cooper’s advice is broadly applicable, because all classrooms are mixed-ability classrooms.”

—Susan M. Brookhart, Senior Associate, Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning, Duquesne University

“Damian challenges traditional thinking on all the difficult instruction, assessment, and grading issues. . . . A rich array of case studies provides opportunities for teachers to be reflective about teaching and learning—and maybe best of all, it contains a wealth of practical materials teachers can use or adapt.”

—Ken O’Connor, Consultant, Assess for Success Consulting, Ontario, Canada
REDEFINING FAIR

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

DAMIAN COOPER

Solution Tree Press
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While I wish to acknowledge the recommendations of all those who reviewed the manuscript, I must express particular gratitude to Ron Ballentine, Carol Ann Tomlinson, and Rick Wormeli for their suggestions.

I continue to draw wisdom and understanding from the work of Tom Guskey, Ken O’Connor, Jay McTighe, Douglas Reeves, Rick Stiggins, Grant Wiggins, and Dylan Wiliam. Thank you!

This is my first publication with Solution Tree, and I would like to thank Jeff Jones, Robb Clouse, Stubby McLean, and everyone at this excellent organization for their encouragement and responsiveness.

My access to wonderful schools and stimulating classrooms during this project was made possible through the support of the following leaders and administrators: Jennifer Adams, Lisa Coffey, Heather Gataveckas, Mary Inksster, Steven Massey, Stuart Miller, Jackie Newton, John Stieva, Sandra Sineszirtes, and Donna Taylor.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the exemplary work of the many fine teachers who have contributed, either directly or through example, to this resource. These include Shawn Godin and his mathematics colleagues, Kristin Riddell, Julia Bilenkis, Mary Saunders, Heather Kirk, Adam Lecuyer, C. J. Farmer, Chris Kesner, Sherry Lee, Rosemary Dawson, Karen Ault, Rose McCulloch, Michelle McCutcheon, Kathryn Patterson, Jennifer Brown, Cheryl Clarke, Jodi Cross, Howard Harper, Sheena McGuigan, Nathan Thompson, Andrew Bigham, Ron Marsh, Kate St. Onge, Jennifer Westlake, Rick Olma, Josee Duckett, Cynthia Rhodes-Foley, Lili Stewart, Carolyn Williamson, Holly Miskelly, Michelle Chomniak, Kate Sienna, Claudette Oegema, and Brendan Harman. These remarkable educators work tirelessly to ensure that all children and adolescents in their charge are successful.

And finally, to my partner, Nanci Wakeman, who has read, suggested, questioned, and edited my fuzzy thinking at each stage of the writing process, thank you.
Solution Tree Press would like to thank the following reviewers:

Ron Ballentine
Coordinator, Environmental Education, Science, and Technology
Halton District School Board
Burlington, Ontario

Denise Bowling
Assistant Superintendent, Instructional Services
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Susan Brookhart
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# REDEFINING FAIR

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## INDEX
Damian Cooper is an independent consultant who specializes in helping educators in schools and school districts throughout the world improve their instructional and assessment skills. In his varied career, Damian has been a secondary English, special education, and drama teacher; a department head; a librarian; a school consultant; and a curriculum developer. For more than twenty years, he has specialized in student assessment. Damian served as assessment consultant to the School Division of Nelson Education, where he worked on the development of assessment principles and strategies for a wide variety of K–12 resources. He was also coordinator of assessment and evaluation for the Halton District School Board in Burlington, Ontario.


Visit www.damiancooperassessment.com to learn more about Damian’s work. To book Damian for professional development, contact pd@solution-tree.com.
By Michael Fullan

Damian Cooper is a teacher’s teacher. He covers every possibility when it comes to differentiated instruction. When you put together the big instructional ideas of the day—differentiation, diverse learners, excellence, equality, assessment, instruction, fairness, and more—you could end up with a lot of clutter. Not Cooper. *Redefining Fair* is at once clear, comprehensive, practical, and action packed. Reading this single book and applying its ideas will make you a better teacher and a better leader of teachers. The book is that good.

Cooper has five imperatives that he carefully honors throughout: curriculum must be meaningful, instruction must be responsive, assessment must be informative, grading must blend consistency and professional judgment, and communication must be truthful and transparent. He proceeds in chapter after chapter to render these concepts crystal clear in terms of their essential qualities and practical uses.

*Redefining Fair* anticipates and answers every question that any teacher might have about putting differentiation into action: Why is differentiation essential? How do curriculum and assessment connect in a mixed-ability classroom? How do you assess diverse, mixed-ability learners? What is the most effective way to link assessment to instruction in order to get best results? And the big one—what is the best way to handle grading and reporting to students and parents so that grading is seen as both fair and motivating for further learning? With the demand for personalization growing with fierce insistence—partly because too many learners are disengaged, and partly because international assessments have increased the need for more effective teaching (the recent PISA results in the U.S. were called a “Sputnik moment”)—teachers are badly in need of instructional ideas that are clear, comprehensive, and effective in engaging the vast majority of diverse students.
Redefining Fair is a treasure trove of great ideas, but it is also focused and coherent. It goes to the heart of teaching in today’s classroom. All educators will find this book a spur for immediate action.

This is a book that will keep on giving the more you use it.

Michael Fullan is professor emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.
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, grading 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 grading:

- 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 high 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 card grades 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 grading. 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 organize, 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 maximize learning for all students.

The Five Imperatives

Here are five imperatives that should guide our work with respect to curriculum, instruction, assessment, grading, 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. Grading 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
developers are increasingly focusing on broad generic skills as the foundation for 21st century learning. As always, the answer to such questions lies not at either extreme of the continuum, but in a balance. And this balance can be achieved only through ongoing dialogue among educators applying the criteria of meaningfulness, coherence, and relevance to inform their decisions.

2. **Instruction must be responsive to students’ needs.** Teaching is a craft. Effective teaching is hard work because it demands constant monitoring and adjustment to optimize learning. The teacher’s job is not to cover the curriculum, regardless of student learning. Rather, it is to understand deeply the intent of the curriculum, and then to use instruction flexibly and adaptively to engage students in ways that maximize learning for all.

3. **Assessment must be informative.** Assessment serves different purposes at different times. One of these purposes—determining what and how well students have learned at the end of an instructional period—receives the most attention but is least important in terms of improving student learning. The first purpose, pre-assessment, is the starting point for differentiation. Information gleaned from pre-assessment informs teachers and students about areas of strength and areas of need. But the most effective type of assessment is formative—that is, assessment whose purpose is to improve learning. It could be argued that such assessment is indistinguishable from instruction.

4. **Grading must blend consistency with professional judgment.** Grading occurs during brief “time-outs” from teaching and learning. Grading is an accounting process used to summarize large amounts of information about learning into a crude kind of shorthand to let students and their parents know where students stand, relative to known standards. Grading doesn’t improve learning—it simply summarizes it. That said, teachers must employ clear, fair, and consistent ways to summarize assessment data and information into grades. But they must also look at each student individually and, when necessary, exercise professional judgment to ensure that report card grades represent the trend in growth, progress, or achievement over time. (I define professional judgment as “decisions made by educators, in light of experience, and with reference to shared public standards and established policies and guidelines.”) In short, grades should never come as a surprise
to anyone—neither to the teacher who determines them nor to the students and parents who receive them.

5. Communication about learning must be truthful and transparent. Communication about student learning must involve much more than grades. As stated earlier, grades are a form of shorthand. Effective communication with students and their parents involves both formal and informal elements: report cards and parent interviews are formal, whereas telephone, email, and face-to-face conversations, as well as anecdotal notes and commentaries, are informal. All of these communications must be characterized by truthfulness and transparency. These conditions necessitate the separation of information about progress and achievement of knowledge and skills from information about behaviors and attitudes, the use of clearly stated performance standards to describe how learning is measured, and a commitment by teachers to communicate frequently and honestly about every student’s learning.

These five imperatives provide the foundation for this resource. In some cases, an imperative applies explicitly to the content of a given chapter. At other times, the imperative is implicit in the messages of the chapter.

Chapter 1 establishes the context for differentiation as a necessary response to the changing demography of schools, to our deepening understanding of how students learn, and to the changing demands of society and the world at large.

Perhaps the greatest obstacles to differentiation of instruction and assessment are outdated beliefs about fairness. As long as fairness is equated with sameness, teachers, students, and parents will perceive variations in teaching and assessment as being unfair. Chapter 2 explores this prevalent and harmful myth and suggests ways to deal with resistance.

As policymakers debate the relative importance of subject content and 21st century skills, teachers continue to struggle with curriculum overload. Chapter 3 examines this issue and suggests that relevance, manageability, and backward design are essential attributes of curriculum planning.

The starting point for differentiated instruction (DI) is a comprehensive process for determining students’ needs, interests, and learning preferences. Chapter 4 provides suggestions for how to do this efficiently and effectively.
Effective approaches to differentiation thrive in schools where educators believe in the capacity of all students to be successful and where expectations of excellence underlie the work of both students and teachers. Chapter 5 examines ways to create a culture of excellence in your classroom.

Beginning with a review of norm-, criterion-, and self-referenced assessment, as well as a discussion of growth, progress, and achievement, chapter 6 explains the critical distinction between assessment designed to improve learning (assessment for learning) and assessment designed to measure learning (assessment of learning) (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004).

Chapter 7 focuses on effective instructional practices. Strategies for empowering students as learning resources to themselves and their peers are presented, as well as recommendations for grouping students, differentiating lessons, and scaffolding learning.

Differentiated assessment requires that teachers understand how to offer students different ways to demonstrate their learning, while maintaining the integrity of the learning targets to be assessed. In chapter 8, we consider how to design assessments that are flexible and responsive to students’ strengths, needs, and learning preferences, yet provide evidence of essential learning.

Chapter 9 explores how we should grade learning in the mixed-ability class. While differentiated approaches to instruction and assessment are essential in meeting the needs of all students, the grades used to summarize learning for students and parents must be clear and must be used consistently. That said, teachers must be cognizant of the need for professional judgment when using summary grades to describe achievement or progress.

Few report cards succeed in their intended purpose: to communicate an accurate, succinct, and easily understood summary of learning to students and parents. Chapter 10 examines the different types of information that a report card should communicate and includes recommendations for how reporting may be improved.

The appendix contains reproducible pages that may also be found online. Visit go.solution-tree.com/instruction to download these resources.
CHAPTER 1

Why Is Differentiation Essential Today?

The mission of education has changed. Educators and policymakers the world over are coming to understand that everyone benefits when increasing numbers of students graduate from school with the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary to make meaningful contributions to society. Schools can no longer afford to focus primarily on sifting and sorting students into high, average, and low achievers. Instead, schools must serve to increase the knowledge and skills of all children and adolescents.

If the new mission of schools is proficiency for all students, then differentiation is not merely desirable, it is imperative. Most approaches to differentiated instruction identify three broad reasons for adapting teaching to meet the differing needs of students: interest, learning profile, and readiness. These are summarized in the “teacher talk” of figure 1.1 (page 8).

Unfortunately, in many schools that I visit, adapting teaching to students’ interests and learning preferences dominates how teachers differentiate instruction. It is extremely rare for me to see teachers collecting and analyzing data about students’ strengths and needs with respect to learning and then tailoring instruction strategically on the basis of these data. A far more common practice is requiring students to complete batteries of interest surveys and learning preference questionnaires at the beginning of the school year and then categorizing and labeling students as V/K (visual/kinesthetic), L/M (logical/mathematical), and so on. For the remainder of the year, students find themselves grouped according to their learning preferences and offered choices of learning and assessment tasks based on their interests. Not surprisingly, they tend to pick tasks and topics they like and think will be easy! This is not effective differentiated instruction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Variation</th>
<th>Teacher Talk That Responds to the Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Interest**      | • What are some things that you hope we do during this unit?  
|                   | • On yesterday’s exit card, several of you asked how this technique helps architects save time and effort.  
|                   | • For those of you who are interested in finding out more about the fourth state of matter, . . .  
|                   | • I put some magazines on the topic in the resource center.  
|                   | • Some of you raise horses and are wondering how the life cycle of a horse compares to the life cycle of humans.  
|                   | • I want you to research the Spanish-speaking country that you would most like to visit someday. Later, we’ll share what we learned in mixed-interest groups.  
|                   | • Darius is planning to show his understanding of balance of powers in the United States by sharing information about the government in his homeland.  
|                   | • Amanda, I’ve found someone at the local university who is willing to have you work with him in his lab. |
| **Learning Profile** | • To write your newsletter, you will need someone who is a good artist, someone who is a good writer, someone who is a good researcher, and someone who is a good organizer.  
|                   | • It doesn’t matter to me how you show me that you know the parts of a plant and how they work together to keep the plant healthy. You could tell me, show me, draw a diagram, or write about it.  
|                   | • As long as you choose wisely, you may choose where and with whom to sit.  
|                   | • There are study carrels in the back if you need a quiet space to work.  
|                   | • As long as you do not distract others, you may bring a drink or a snack to eat during class.  
|                   | • To get started with today’s work on alliteration in poetry, you may choose to listen to poems that use alliteration, read poems that use alliteration, or write a poem using alliteration.  
|                   | • You may present your final product in front of the class or to me via video or in person by appointment.  
|                   | • Let’s think, pair, and then share.  
|                   | • Last week, we broke into teams to see which team knew the most math facts. Today, I want you to work by yourself to improve your score or your time.  
|                   | • You will each take on a different role to debate the effect of current immigration policy. |

Figure 1.1: Three variables on which to base differentiation decisions.
Why Is Differentiation Essential Today?

Readiness

- Those of you who indicated a need for help in coming up with a topic for your short story, please meet over here, and I will help you brainstorm ideas.
- If you rated yourself a novice in writing lab reports, start with this assignment. If you rated yourself an apprentice, try this other assignment.
- If you feel that you have already mastered the material in this chapter, please see me to discuss an alternative project.
- Please visit those stations that will help you the most as you review for the test.
- If you have trouble reading and following a map, you will find some bookmarked websites that will help you improve your skills.
- If you feel that the work I am asking you to do is too hard or too easy, please write me a note.
- There are vocabulary sheets available for those of you who need them.
- I have put some sample projects in the back of the room so you can see how other students have approached this assignment in the past.
- As you think about your independent research topic, browse this journal for some ideas that scientists in the field are currently tackling.
- I have provided resources that are at varied levels of reading. Please use the techniques we have discussed to help you choose appropriately.


Effective approaches to differentiated instruction require students to work within their zone of proximal development, the zone that challenges without frustrating them, such that their learning is maximized (Vygotsky, 1978). This requires that teachers gather rich preassessment data about students’ readiness prior to instruction—data about their prior knowledge and skill levels—and use these data to select entry points for instruction, develop mini lessons for students with similar needs, and adjust instruction on the fly to optimize learning. This aspect of differentiation is by far the most difficult to implement, but I would argue that it is the most important and effective in terms of improving learning.

Taking students’ interests and learning profiles into account is an important element of effective instruction, but unless teachers accept that adjusting instruction on the basis of students’ strengths and needs is their primary responsibility, no amount of differentiation according to interests and learning profiles will result in increased learning.
The differentiation model is powerful (fig. 1.2) because it places the teacher’s response to learners’ needs as the starting point for all subsequent decisions. This model also sends an essential message to teachers by placing readiness *before* interests and learning profile.

**Teacher Readiness to Implement Differentiated Instruction**

Teachers’ readiness to implement flexible approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment depends on their current skill levels as well as their attitudes toward differentiation. Figure 1.3 (page 12) offers an implementation profile in the form of a continuum that is useful in assisting teachers and administrators in determining readiness with respect to current knowledge and skills. The differentiated instruction continuum may be found online at [go.solution-tree.com/instruction](http://go.solution-tree.com/instruction) and in reproducible form in the appendix (page 161).

A continuum is a powerful learning tool because it is descriptive, not evaluative. It enables the learner—in this case, the teacher—to identify current skill levels and to set personal goals for improvement.

However, determining teachers’ *attitudinal* readiness to differentiate instruction is more difficult and sensitive. To assist in this area, I go back to the wisdom of David Hunt, a professor from whom I had the privilege of learning while completing a master’s degree in education. Dave required all of us to “begin with ourselves” (Hunt, 1987). He asked each of us to identify our personal metaphor of teaching. He then had us explore all new learning we acquired and every decision we made as teachers through this lens. Applying Dave’s approach to the essential elements of our craft, we might ask certain kinds of questions. For example, with respect to:

- Curriculum, am I merely the conduit, or am I an architect?
- Instruction, am I the controller or the facilitator of learning?
- Assessment, am I a coach or an accountant?
- Grading, am I a calculator or a professional adjudicator?

By discovering our own metaphor for teaching and then applying it to each of these elements, we can discover a great deal about our readiness to differentiate programs to optimize learning for all students.
Why Is Differentiation Essential Today?

Differentiation of Instruction is a teacher’s response to a learner’s needs guided by general principles of differentiation, such as

- respectful tasks
- flexible grouping
- ongoing assessment and adjustment

Teachers can differentiate according to the student’s

- Content
- Process
- Product

- Readiness
- Interests
- Learning profile


Figure 1.2: Concept map for differentiating instruction.

Three Case Studies

The case studies beginning on page 13, drawn from my own experience as a consultant, 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.
**PRE-IMPLEMENTATION**
Developing Instructional Routines and Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modeling to Learners</th>
<th>Shared Practice With Learners</th>
<th>Guided Practice With Learners</th>
<th>Independent Practice With Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation, and the learning environment for the class as a whole based on curriculum expectations and my own strengths and preferences.</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation, and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and a general sense of the learning needs of the class.</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation, and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and a general sense of the learning needs of the class. I try to design a variety of options for my students.</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation, and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and on the specific learning needs of the students in the class. I try to ensure that the learning experiences I provide are a “good fit” for each of my students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I model while students observe and try to understand.</td>
<td>I work together with students. I model and help students complete the activities.</td>
<td>Students complete the activities while I help them.</td>
<td>Students work independently by adapting my model while I observe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students learn and demonstrate their learning in the same way all or most of the time.</td>
<td>Students experience, over time, a variety of ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning.</td>
<td>Students have a choice of ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning on an ongoing basis.</td>
<td>Students are routinely provided with, or choose when appropriate, ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning that are designed for their particular learning needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples:**
- Anticipation guide, exit card, graphic organizers, supplementary materials
- Activities for all that address different learning styles or intelligences on different days, multiple entry points for all
- Over time, varied supplementary materials

**IMPLEMENTATION**
Expanding Instructional Routines and Skills

**BUILDING CAPACITY**
Developing the Routines, Habits, and Skills for Differentiated Instruction

**SUSTAINING CAPACITY**
Sustaining a Differentiated Instruction Culture in the Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Same for all students</th>
<th>Different options for different students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LITTLE DIFFERENTIATION</td>
<td>MUCH DIFFERENTIATION</td>
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</table>

*RAFT = role, audience, format, topic


Figure 1.3: A differentiated instruction continuum.
Senior History

I was observing a senior grade history class in which the teacher was very proud of her use of differentiated instruction. She had a set of brightly colored index cards that summarized each student’s learning modality and preference. During the class, she utilized a number of grouping strategies: students worked at times in home groups and at other times in expert groups, with the latter based on their learning preferences. The climate in the room would best be described as chatty and kinesthetic! Since students spent almost the entire lesson in groups, the teacher felt that she was able to chat with me. However, I quickly discovered that while there were plenty of trappings of DI in place, the learning was superficial at best. The jigsaw (Kagan, 1994) structure was largely ineffective. While in their expert groups, all students read and discussed their assigned text, but once they regrouped in their home groups, it was clear that the other group members had not read anything beyond their own expert group assignment. Consequently, despite the teacher’s expectation that there would be sharing and insightful questioning in the home groups, students did not have the necessary background knowledge to be able to do so.

This points to the danger of a superficial understanding of differentiation. Because differentiation requires significant planning and organization before class, teachers often fall into the trap of “too much process, too little learning.” Simply assigning students to various groups based on their interests and learning preferences does not ensure learning. In fact, such approaches may result in less learning than traditional, teacher-centered approaches. In this classroom, whole-class instruction aimed at teaching students strategies for reading and responding to historical texts should have occurred prior to the jigsaw lesson. Furthermore, all students needed to have read all of the texts to ensure that the discussion back in their home groups was productive. And finally, the teacher needed to constantly move from group to group, monitoring and intervening as necessary, to ensure that each group was functioning effectively.

Grade 5 Science

Helen was introducing a project for the following week designed to engage students in independent research about illnesses and diseases affecting human beings.
She spent the greater part of thirty minutes reading and explaining the five-page project outline. Occasionally, she paused and asked, “Are there any questions?” A small number of students asked a few questions. Sitting at the back of the room, I observed as increasing numbers of students became distracted and increasingly disengaged. With just minutes remaining before the lunch recess, Helen issued a few final instructions and then dismissed the class.

We had agreed to chat over lunch. I began by asking, “How did you think that lesson went?”

“I’m ready to quit, Damian,” she replied.

“And why is that?”

“Probably two-thirds of my students either won’t be able to do a good job on this project or else won’t be bothered to. And it’s always like this! I’m so frustrated.”

I said, “It seems to me that there are three groups in that class. One group that doesn’t need a five-page task to get them going—just a clear purpose for the project, an assessment rubric, and a few suggestions, and they’ll be off and running. By the way, were the students who asked you questions when you paused in your explanation these self-starters?”

“Yes,” Helen replied. “How did you know?”

“I see it all the time.” I said. “The students with the questions are usually those who already know what they want to do and how they’re going to do it. They’re just seeking affirmation. Now, you seem to have another group who could manage if the task were shortened and simplified somewhat. And they’d probably benefit from working in pairs to support each other’s learning, especially as they get started. And then there’s a group who won’t know how to get started, or who will choose not to start, without significant support from you.”

“How do you know my class so well? You were in there for only half an hour, and I spent most of that time talking!”

“I’m simply describing most classes I find myself in these days.”

“So what do I do?” Helen asked.

“Be proactive. Begin with a common plan for the whole class. This means common, broad learning targets—enduring understandings and essential skills, in the language of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe [1998]. And when it comes to assessing the learning, begin with a common design for the task
and a common set of assessment criteria. Then, as part of your planning, adapt and modify the task for the different groups of students in your class.”

“What does that look like?”

“The self-starters need minimal direction and lots of freedom to explore their own ideas, but within the parameters of the task as you’ve designed it. The minimal-support group may need the task to be scaffolded. For example, you could reduce the number of resources they are to use and provide an outline of how to conduct their own research, and as I suggested before, you could assign students working partners based on your knowledge of their strengths and needs.”

“What about the weakest group?”

“They need to begin by working directly under your supervision. You’ll need to scaffold the task still further for them and do plenty of review of the foundational knowledge and skills required by this project. What I’m talking about is a blueprint for assessment task design that begins with an overall common design for the task but also includes accommodations, modifications, and scaffolding that will enable the various groups in your class to be successful.”

“But isn’t this just ability grouping, which I thought we aren’t supposed to do?”

“Good question. The problem with ability grouping was that students tended to become stuck in the group they were assigned to. The result, as you know, were the ‘eagles,’ ‘sparrows,’ and ‘crows’ that served only to consign large numbers of students to a school career of drill-and-kill drudgery. With effective differentiation, the composition of the groups I’ve described will change constantly. In the differentiated classroom, your goal is to have all students produce excellent work that reflects mastery of essential learning and to have them do so independently. But to get all students to this point, you will need to employ the kinds of strategies we’ve been discussing.”

Helen left our lunchtime chat feeling encouraged and positive about her class. And I wasn’t afraid that she might quit!

This case study reflects a problem that I encounter almost daily in elementary, middle, and high schools: students are clustered in a classroom that is identified as one grade level (in this case, grade 5). Our standards-based models of curriculum and grading emphasize that all students enrolled in this class are expected to master a prescribed set of skills and understand a set of concepts by the end of the year. In other words, learning has been defined in
terms of seat time, rather than demonstrated understanding and proficiency, with little consideration given to the range of students in the class.

Helen had been constrained by the “learning-as-a-function-of-seat-time” model, which she had interpreted to mean one size must fit all. She also felt constrained by all the curriculum outcomes that she had to cover, and the thought of differentiating her approach for groups within the class invoked panic and desperation. She needed a process and format to help her design assessment tasks for her mixed-ability class.

Grade 10 Mathematics

The high school mathematics department heads in a large Canadian school district had become increasingly dissatisfied with student results in their schools. These were their major concerns:

- Unacceptably high, as well as highly variable, failure rates on end-of-semester examinations—for example, a 50 percent failure rate on the January examination and a 5 percent failure rate in June. The exams were similar and created by the same people, the only difference being the way they were graded.

- Numbers of students receiving passing grades at the end of a course, despite having shown little or no understanding of some of the key concepts or little or no evidence of some of the essential skills in a given course.

In the province of Ontario, all assessment must occur with reference to a four-level performance standard. However, report card grades must be expressed as percentages, and 50 percent is the pass/fail threshold. The Ministry of Education provides teachers with the scale shown in figure 1.4 to align the four levels of performance with percentage grade ranges.

Because it did not appear that the Ministry of Education was about to raise the 50 percent cut point for pass/fail, these educators set themselves the following challenge: how can we assure students and parents that a final grade of 50 percent in a mathematics course means that the student has demonstrated minimal mastery of all of the essential learning in that course? Their initial thinking (this is a work in progress) was as follows:

To get a credit in grade 10 academic (college level) mathematics, all of the overall expectations (learning outcomes or standards) must be demonstrated to a minimum of Level 1. This work is an attempt
Why Is Differentiation Essential Today?

### Percentage Mark

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<tr>
<th>Percentage Mark</th>
<th>Achievement of the Provincial Curriculum Expectations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80–100</td>
<td>The student has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills with a high degree of effectiveness. Achievement surpasses the provincial standard. (Level 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–79</td>
<td>The student has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills with considerable effectiveness. Achievement meets the provincial standard. (Level 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>The student has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills with some effectiveness. Achievement approaches the provincial standard. (Level 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>The student has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills with limited effectiveness. Achievement falls much below the provincial standard. (Level 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 50</td>
<td>The student has not demonstrated the required knowledge and skills. Extensive remediation is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Insufficient evidence to assign a percentage mark (for grade 9 and 10 courses only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>The student has withdrawn from this course.</td>
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**ESL/ELD**—Achievement is based on expectations modified from the curriculum for the course to support English-language learning needs.

**IEP**—Individual Education Plan

**French**—The student receives instruction in French for the course.

**SHSM**—Specialist High Skills Major (for grade 11 and 12 courses only)

**Course Median**—The median is the percentage mark at which 50 percent of the students have a higher percentage mark and 50 percent of the students have a lower percentage mark.

Figure 1.4. Aligning four levels of performance with percentage grades.

to articulate the bottom-line for each overall expectation: what is the least students can show us and still get credit? We hope this will seed a discussion, rather than being the final word!!

One of the criticisms of the new model for evaluation in math is that students will get a credit when they shouldn’t. The articulation below should give us confidence that the students have achieved some level of understanding in all topics in the course—as compared to the past, where students could earn a grade 10 academic credit with virtually no understanding of quadratics, for example, because they could earn enough marks in trigonometry or analytic geometry to earn a grade of 50 percent.
As in the past, there will still be students who earn credit but are apparently not ready for grade 11 academic level math. Again, we must emphasize that while they have the right to take any course for which they have a prerequisite—and in some cases even when they don’t—students should not consider themselves ready for the next course at the same level unless they have achieved Level 3 or 4 in the prerequisite course.

Here are some of the ways that final grades may be determined.

- Use multiple and varied opportunities for students to demonstrate the threshold requirement for each overall expectation to earn the credit. A final grade of 45 percent in a course would indicate that only one of the overall expectations is absent and that the credit could be recovered by addressing that expectation. A final grade of less than 45 percent would indicate more comprehensive gaps.

- Use multiple and varied opportunities to assign a level of achievement for each cluster of overall expectations in a strand. (Assign the most recent or consistent level.) Use the lowest of the levels achieved for each of the strands as a starting point, and then modify upward (within that level or the next at the low end) by looking at the other strands.

- Exams and other summative assessments should be viewed as final opportunities to demonstrate and confirm the levels of achievement by students throughout the course.

- A Level 3 rating requires that students demonstrate all of the overall expectations to a considerable degree.

- A Level 4 rating requires attaining a minimum of Level 4 in all strands, as well as consistent and thorough demonstration of the overall expectations. (S. Godin, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

I applaud the work of these mathematics educators as they struggle to address the pervasive problem of students’ and parents’ believing that a grade of 50 percent is good enough. Their work is one of the best examples I have seen of aligning percentage grades with clearly understood public statements of proficiency—meaningful grades. All students and all parents deserve grades that accurately and truthfully summarize what students have learned, and by implication, what they have not learned.

This case study identifies a common district-level problem: large numbers of students are poorly served and often failed by a curriculum that was designed by academic experts for only a portion of the population—university-bound students. This example also highlights the limitations of a points-based, percentage-grade system when applied to a
standards-based curriculum purportedly designed to ensure that students acquire essential skills and understanding. Such an unhappy marriage of two conflicting paradigms—one designed to sift and sort students into high, average, and low achievers, and the other to certify the proficiency of all—inevitably leads to a situation in which some students who may have learned a great deal still “fail” the course, while others “pass,” despite the fact that there are huge gaps in their learning!

In subsequent chapters we examine the kinds of challenges reflected in these three case studies.

**Conclusion**

Differentiation, or *responsive teaching* (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006)—a term I use increasingly instead of differentiation, as many teachers react negatively to what they regard as the latest panacea—is a response by the educational community to 21st century demands that *all* learners leave school equipped with the knowledge and skills they will need to function in an ever-changing global community. While many teachers have not been trained specifically in differentiation methods, all educators have a professional responsibility to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Differentiated instruction is much more complex than simply offering students choices with respect to how they will learn and how they will demonstrate their learning. While determining students’ interests and learning preferences is necessary to optimize learning, the most important, albeit most challenging, task facing the teacher in the mixed-ability class involves determining students’ current knowledge and skill levels and adjusting instruction accordingly. Teachers’ success in undertaking this task depends on their own current skill levels, as well as their willingness to be flexible in terms of differentiating both instruction and assessment.
REDEFINING FAIR
HOW TO PLAN, ASSESS, AND GRADE FOR EXCELLENCE IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS

In these times of changing demographics and new insight into how students learn, differentiated instruction and assessment are widely acknowledged as necessary. Outdated beliefs about fairness often stand in the way of effective classroom implementation, however. Damian Cooper looks closely at the assumptions and realities, and provides solutions that are clear, comprehensive, engaging—and fair.

Redefining Fair also shows K–12 teachers and administrators how to:

• Respond to resistance to the new assessment methods
• Handle curriculum overload and plan a curriculum that focuses on essential skills
• Ensure that report cards convey essential information clearly to parents and students

“Damian Cooper writes about differentiated teaching from three important qualifications: he has done what he asks his readers to do; he has studied the classrooms of many other teachers, so that his sense of classroom reality is broad and deep; and he understands that excellent teaching is not a set of strategies but the determination to do what it takes to make the classroom work for those who have little choice but to spend their days in its boundaries.”

—Carol Ann Tomlinson, William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor, University of Virginia, and author of The Differentiated Classroom.

“This is a great book! It will be useful for anyone struggling with the question of what is fair in instruction and assessment. . . . Cooper’s advice is broadly applicable, because all classrooms are mixed-ability classrooms.”

—Susan M. Brookhart, Senior Associate, Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning, Duquesne University

“Damian challenges traditional thinking on all the difficult instruction, assessment, and grading issues. . . . A rich array of case studies provides opportunities for teachers to be reflective about teaching and learning—and maybe best of all, it contains a wealth of practical materials teachers can use or adapt.”

—Ken O’Connor, Consultant, Assess for Success Consulting, Ontario, Canada