Where have all the bluebirds gone?

How to SOAR with Flexible Grouping

JoAnne Caldwell & Michael P. Ford
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how to SOAR with FLEXIBLE GROUPING

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THE CLASS MARY RAE TEACHES IN MIDDLE SCHOOL IS OFFICIALLY titled Communication Arts. The purpose of the class is to integrate the language arts and include reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Reading workshop and writers’ workshop provide the framework for the class. Within this framework, she uses flexible grouping for a variety of language arts activities. Different circumstances determine how she organizes her flexible groups. She forms flexible groups on the basis of ability, need, chance, choice, or interest. The flexible groups in the classroom are temporary. The groupings do not last for long periods of time nor are they static.

Mary Rae taught for many years when ability grouping was the most common form of instruction. She found it very frustrating. She has discovered that her heterogeneous groups are a wonderful improvement. While there are circumstances when she feels compelled to organize her groups based on the students’ ability to perform a certain strategy or task, students also benefit from other grouping formats.

Ability or Need Grouping

Learning how to write effective buddy letters is one instance where Mary Rae often forms flexible groups based upon student need. Her eighth graders self-select the books they read, and then they are required to write buddy letters to each other about these books. About the fourth week of school, Mary Rae models a buddy letter on the overhead. She shares the kind of information and thoughts that should be in an effective buddy letter. She then gives students a
copy of the grading criteria and asks them to write a buddy letter to the teacher. During the next class period, the students exchange these buddy letters and utilize the grading criteria to establish a grade for each other’s letters. The students circle the aspects of the buddy letter that fit the grading criteria.

After these initial lessons, Mary Rae assigns students to a buddy. Every other week, she expects them to have a conversation in writing about their two books. If some students experience difficulties writing buddy letters that meet the established criteria, she groups these students and assists them with their letter writing. To do so, she models another buddy letter, and the group discusses exactly what they need to do to meet the criteria. This group meets only one or two class periods unless otherwise indicated by the students’ progress.

As well, the class may have several short-term review sessions as the year progresses for students who are still experiencing difficulty. In most cases, Mary Rae leaves involvement in the review lesson up to the students. They can choose to attend or not attend. At times, however, students who need the most help often do not recognize that fact. When this occurs, Mary Rae requires students to be present. If a student who is already doing well also decides to join a review session, she allows that student to attend.

During writers’ workshop, Mary Rae also forms flexible groups according to skills the students have not mastered. She evaluates their stories or essays, and when a specific strategy or skill seems to be causing difficulties, she groups students according to their need. For example, there may be students who still have trouble organizing their writing into paragraphs. She meets with them and uses their writing to help them decide when to begin a new paragraph. She might also call together a group of students who are having trouble writing dialogue that is believable and mechanically correct. At times, she has organized groups of students who need help with homonyms, spelling strategies, or punctuation. These groupings are usually very short-term and, in most cases, voluntary.

**Chance Grouping**

Chance grouping occurs when Mary Rae arranges seating charts. Students in the classroom are seated at round tables, with three or four students at a table. These table groups engage in a variety of group activities during writers’ workshop and reading workshop.
When arranging seating charts, Mary Rae tries to accomplish a variety of things. First of all, she separates any students who encourage each other to be disruptive or distracting. As well, she finds it beneficial to purposefully integrate the sexes. Most of the male-female relationships in eighth grade revolve around “going together.” She wants the students to establish and experience male-female relationships that are based upon the sharing of thoughts, knowledge, ideas, and opinions. She rearranges these chance-seating arrangements about eight times a year and tries to avoid the same combinations of students if possible.

Mary Rae also believes students need to be able to work cooperatively, and many of the class activities encourage or require cooperative or collaborative behavior. In reading workshop, students self-select their books. During group sharing, they share something about their particular book. For example, when Mary Rae teaches her students about good story leads, she covers the idea from a reader’s perspective and a writer’s perspective. First, she shares some excellent leads from books or short stories in the classroom. Then she asks students to read the beginning of their book and decide if it is a good lead and why or why not. Once all students are prepared, she has them share the lead from their current book and their evaluation of that lead. Since the table groups are randomly selected, the variety of books being read and the types of leads vary greatly. These types of discussions encourage students to share the books they are reading and participate in book talk. Students learn about other books and become interested in reading the books of others at their table.

One of the next lessons deals with the actual writing of leads. Students are asked to write about ten leads they feel would really grab the reader. They also share these in table groups. Students are encouraged to voluntarily share with the entire class. Students gradually become a little more comfortable sharing information with a large group.

With chance grouping, there is always a good possibility that a really worthwhile discussion will happen. For example, throughout the year, students in reading workshop select a short passage from the book they are reading to read to their table group. Students must justify their choices. At one session, Mary Rae was a group member at a table where a student read a selection from Pinballs by Betsy Byars. She chose the section in which Harvey’s father accidentally ran over Harvey’s legs and what should have been the happiest day of Harvey’s life became the worst. The student’s comment was, “I think I like this part because I can relate to important days being ruined.” What followed was a very interesting discussion about some truly horrible days.
Choice Grouping

Choice grouping occurs quite often in Mary Rae’s classroom. Many middle school students feel strongly about selecting whom they would like to work with on projects or assignments. There can be drawbacks to this selection process, and some students may feel excluded. However, with careful guidance, a teacher can involve all students in selecting peers for sharing or working together. For example, during group sharing in writers’ workshop, some students are too uncomfortable sharing their writing with the entire class. It is less threatening if they share with a smaller group, especially if it is a group they have self-selected. As the year progresses and the students share their writing more, Mary Rae moves from choice grouping and assigns student groups for sharing. Eventually she requires all students to share a piece of their writing or a section of it with the entire class. In this way, they gradually work toward the type of whole-class sharing that students normally find threatening.

Interest Grouping

At times, students are grouped by interest. For example, they may work in literature circles based on their interest in a particular book.

There are three grade-level themes in Mary Rae’s eighth-grade Communication Arts curriculum: relationships, suspense, and conflict. The class reads novels in which these themes are the main focus.

When the class begins a new theme, Mary Rae distributes a different novel to each table group. The groups, which are probably chance groups, read the back cover and the first few pages. They then prepare a short book talk for the whole class about their predictions of the contents of the books. As students listen to these book talks, they write down at least three titles that interest them and that they are willing to read. Students then select a book. Students who choose the same title are grouped together for discussion purposes and comprehension activities.

Students who read the same title also prepare a short skit about their book. Their purpose is to interest their audience in reading the book, and many groups succeed. Skits often range from TV talk-show formats to game shows to scenes from the book. The group earns a grade that is shared equally by all members. Many times, students read more than one book in a specific theme. Those students select the title group they want to work with for the skit. Students also have an individual project that is part of their grade.
Final Thoughts

Teaching new strategies or skills to a large heterogeneous group is how Mary Rae begins most instruction in her classroom. Once she is aware of the skills or strategies that her students need, she can begin arranging flexible groups. Some are based upon need or ability. Other grouping formats include chance, choice, and interest groups that are formed on a regular basis. All the groups are truly flexible and short-term. Throughout the year, as students are grouped in a variety of combinations, they become comfortable working as contributing members in a large group and as contributing members in a short-term flexible group.