

What Is Flexible Grouping?

Flexible grouping is not a new concept in American education. It has its roots in the original one-room rural schoolhouse where students of varying ages, backgrounds, and abilities were grouped and regrouped to meet instructional needs. As towns and cities grew and universal education became a national goal, ways of grouping students changed. The assumption that students of the same age learned at about the same rate caused most schools to group students in classes by their ages, a practice that continues today. Whole-class instruction was a natural outgrowth of that decision.

Observing that same-age children learned to read at widely varying rates, teachers began to divide students into subgroups based on perceived ability. Math subgroups soon followed. But change is happening. Today, classrooms are filled with children from an increasing variety of cultural and economic backgrounds. As part of a national push for citizens who can think, solve problems, work with others, and learn on the job, educators are taking a close look at the implications of using whole-group and ability-group instruction exclusively. Teachers are discovering that informally grouping and regrouping students in a variety of ways throughout the school day can make a teacher's job easier and students more productive. This teaching strategy is called flexible grouping.

Teachers who use flexible grouping strategies often employ several organizational patterns for instruction. Students are grouped and regrouped according to specific goals, activities, and individual needs. When making grouping decisions, the dynamics and advantages inherent in each type of group must be considered. Both teacher-led and student-led groups can contribute to learning.

Teacher-Led Groups

Teacher-led groups are the most common configuration used in classrooms today. They include whole-class, small group, and individual instruction. In general, communication paths in teacher-led groups are almost exclusively between teacher and student. Teacher-led groups are an effective and efficient way of introducing material, summing-up the conclusions made by individual groups, meeting the common needs of a large or small group, and providing individual attention or instruction.

- **Whole-Class Instruction** Whole-class instruction is often used to introduce new materials and strategies to the entire class. Working with the whole class to introduce new concepts can build common experiences and provide a shared basis for further exploration, problem solving, and skill development. Whole-class instruction also can help identify students' prior knowledge and experiences that will affect new knowledge acquisition.
- **Small-Group Instruction** Small-group instruction is familiar to most

teachers; it is an often-used strategy. Small groups can provide opportunities for working with students who have common needs, such as reinforcement or enrichment.

- **Students Working Alone in Teacher-Directed Activities**
Although learning to work cooperatively constitutes an important educational goal, students must also learn to work independently. Individual responses may prove especially helpful for students in refining their own thoughts. For example, after sharing strategies in small, student-led groups, each student might reflect on the group's problem-solving methods and formulate a personal problem-solving strategy.

Student-Led Groups

Student-led groups can take many forms, but they all share a common feature—students control the group dynamics and maintain a voice in setting the agenda for the group to follow. Student-led groups provide opportunities for divergent thinking and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. One of the benefits of student-led groups is that they model "real-life" adult situations in which people work together, not in isolation, to solve problems. Students working in groups learn to work with people from varying backgrounds and with different experiences, sharpening social skills and developing a sense of confidence in their own abilities. A variety of group types and a sampling of activities that may be appropriate for each are described below.

- **Collaborative Groups** The essence of collaborative learning is the team spirit that motivates students to contribute to the learning of others on the team. Because team success depends on individual learning, members share ideas and reinterpret instructions to help each other. In this environment, students convey to one another the idea that learning is valuable and fun.

Students in collaborative-learning groups can make predictions or estimations about a problem, share ideas, or formulate questions. After working independently, group members might cooperate in composing either an oral solution or a written response. These groups prove particularly effective for open-ended problem-solving investigations. Collaborative groups come in all sizes and configurations, depending on the instructional goal to be achieved. Two strategies for using collaborative groups are described below.

Circle Sharing In circle sharing, children sit in a large circle so that each student can see the rest. The leader (either the teacher or a selected student) presents an open-ended statement or problem, and each student in turn responds with his or her own conclusion. One student records each group member's response in order. Students may "pass" as their turn comes

up, but they should have an answer ready when the circle is completed. As an alternative, students can pass a sheet of paper from one to the next. When the signal is given, the first group member writes down his or her idea for approaching the investigation. The paper then passes to the person on the left. This strategy is excellent for brainstorming divergent approaches to a problem.

Four Corners Pose a question or problem with four parts, operations, or solving strategies. Have students select which of the four is their choice to work with. Have each child go to the corner of the classroom where that problem part is displayed. This is a quick way to get children who have similar interests together to do further problem solving.

- **Performance-Based Groups** Sometimes groups of students with similar needs might benefit from additional support in the completion of a task. Unlike traditional ability groups, performance-based groups form for a short time and respond to the dynamic nature of learning. Performance-based groups are most effective when formed on the basis of a particular need rather than in response to predetermined performance levels. Performance-based groups provide a means for increasing students' access to a particular concept or skill. Suitable strategies for these groups include introducing language, using concrete models, playing a concept game for skill practice, or practicing strategies. Strategies for use with performance-based groups are listed below.

Group Study Group study most often occurs after a session of whole-group instruction. After the main concept is discussed as a class, students get into small groups of two to four to complete a cooperative assignment that reinforces, expands on, or tests their knowledge. Groups can brainstorm ideas or complete various explorations or investigations.

Interview for Options After working individually on an investigation, group members take turns interviewing each other to determine how each person approached the problem. After they have all had a chance to share their thinking, the group can summarize what they learned from the interviews. Use of graphic organizers or posters can be helpful

- **Student Dyads, or Pairs** Grouping students in pairs often forms the basis for peer and cross-age programs. Various strategies for use with student pairs include the following.

Partner Turns Students are paired before a whole-class presentation is made. As you make your presentation, give pairs a chance to share ideas, information, and plans or strategies for problem solving. This strategy provides a good way to quickly reinforce active listening and individual

approaches to problem solving.

Think, Pair, Share After whole-class instruction, have individuals think about what strategies they would use for approaching the investigation. Students should write down their ideas. After a time, have pairs meet to share their ideas and strategies. This approach helps encourage divergent thinking and provides students with immediate feedback on their approaches to problem solving. As with any change, implementing flexible grouping requires a period of adjustment. But the results will be worth the effort!

TEACHER-LED GROUPS		
Grouping Options	Teacher's Role	Activities
Whole Class/ Small Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains procedures • Provides instructional scaffold • Faciliates discussion • Provides explicit instruction • Affirms student diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outlining day's agenda/schedule • Giving an overview of concepts • Sharing student work • Presenting strategies • Developing background knowledge
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guides individual development • Encourages individual student interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying key concepts, strategies and skills • Composing written responses • Completing understanding • Creating own investigations
STUDENT-LED GROUPS		
Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes students' roles • Describes students' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing collaborative project • Collaborating on projects

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> interpersonal skills Encourages student interaction Monitors group effectiveness Guides understanding Affirms student diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing group projects Discussing students' evaluation of group's success Applying key strategies and concepts Discussing different perspectives
Performance-Based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies students' needs Provides instructional scaffold Provides explicit instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing short-term groups Introducing new concepts Teaching specific concepts, strategies and skills
Dyad (Pairs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies students' interests or needs Models instructional strategies Guides understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisting partners Tutoring peers Responding to peer writing Collaborating

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Ability and Instructional Grouping Information

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To borrow, nay paraphrase, albeit badly, from Shakespeare, "To group or not to group, that is the question." If you're learning to be a teacher, it's a question that you'd answer best when provided with some fundamentals. Effective teaching, it seems, always comes back to understanding the fundamentals...

Ability grouping, also called by some (erroneously), instructional grouping, is based on the belief that students can be placed into various groups or configurations for teaching purposes is a given in schooling and education. It is done every day in thousands of schools and classrooms. However, students learning to be teachers are often perplexed about various grouping strategies and techniques, and how effective they are. When asked, many indicate that "cooperative learning" is the way they're going to go when they become teachers. For some reason, a lot of future teachers believe that cooperative learning

will be easier to manage than some other grouping or instructional approach. Not necessarily. Placing students into groups to maximize the effectiveness of an instructional technique can be a powerful tool for both teaching and classroom management. Done without planning and careful thought, it can also lead to inefficient use of teacher and student time. The following information and table is adapted from an [Eisenhower National Clearinghouse](#) article. It was written by Carol Damian, ENC Instructional Resources. I believe Carol has written one of the most organized and useful summaries about grouping available anywhere, and so it is included here because it represents the "toward the best" theme of the ADPRIMA site.

Dr. Bob Kizlik

Grouping That Leads to Real Learning		
Common Characteristics of All Types of Effective Learning Groups		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work done in groups is challenging and meaningful. • The teacher is always actively involved in the students' learning process, serving as a resource person, questioner, guide, evaluator, and coach. • Learning goals and timelines are clearly understood by the students and monitored by the teacher. • Groups are heterogeneous, and all students are actively involved. • Cooperation is valued over competition. • Students have a sense of being able to accomplish more learning together than they can alone. • The group process provides a comfort level for discussion and airing questions. • Student interaction and social skills are required, but the purpose of grouping is not primarily social. Group time is not "free time" for student (or teacher). • Multiple means of assessment are possible (rubrics, portfolios, quizzes, interviews, presentations, etc.). Evaluation can be of the individual student, of the group, or a combination of these. 		
Three Learning Group Strategies		
Problem-Solving Partnerships	Cooperative Teams	Collaborative Groups
Two to three students per group.	Three to four students per group.	Three to six students per group.
The duration of group work is short (part of a class period to a few days).	The duration of group work ranges from several days to several weeks.	The duration of group work can be short (days) or longer (weeks or even months).

<p>The specific task or problem to solve is limited in scope (a single problem or question or a limited set) and is usually a challenge or practice activity for students to apply recent learning.</p>	<p>The problem or task is clearly defined by the teacher.</p>	<p>The task or problem is open-ended and may cover large amounts of course content.</p>
<p>Multiple approaches to solving the problem are encouraged. There is no single "right" way to solve most problems, and all reasonable solutions or answers to the problem are honored</p> <p>Individual students have an opportunity to explain and discuss their suggested solutions as well as their misconceptions</p> <p>New understandings are developed by the individual, by the team, and, finally, by the whole class.</p> <p>Group and class discussions (and solutions) provide immediate feedback to the student.</p>	<p>A team plan of operation and goals is specified, and teams are highly structured. Each student has a clearly defined role in the team such as recorder, questioner, reporter. The teacher takes time to teach each student role.</p> <p>Team members share leadership within the framework of specific roles.</p> <p>All team members must contribute or the team cannot progress. (Teams "win or lose together.") The end product represents the entire team.</p> <p>The team focus is on cooperation as well as on achievement of goals. Awareness of the group process is as important as completing the task.</p>	<p>Student roles are flexible and may change throughout the project or assignment. Students observe (and help with) other students' work, and critique, evaluate, explain, and suggest ways for improvement.</p> <p>Open communication and multiple approaches are emphasized. All students are involved in honest discussion about ideas, procedures, experimental results, gathered information, interpretations, resource materials, and their own or other students' work.</p> <p>Students are constantly aware of the collaborative communication process, as well as the product or goals. They know they can change direction to meet goals.</p>

Links to other information and research about grouping that are

Ways to Group Students Quickly and Effectively

In the struggle to reach every student in the classroom it occasionally becomes necessary to divide them into groups, but how? Whether it's for an activity, remediation, or even a quick little game, grouping students quickly and effectively can be tricky. I have been struggling with this concept, because my kids really want to work in groups on a full time basis. However, I'm doubtful of how much actual work will take place if I spend too much time helping one group over the other.

That dilemma has sparked a search for a solution. Like most teachers I need a solution that works in the classroom, not one that just sounds great on paper. Since classrooms are made of different personalities, I've decided to try different ideas to determine which works best in my class.

Here are some grouping strategies that may work for you.

- **Setup an area for groups in your classroom**- this works well if your kids don't stay in groups throughout the day, or if the groups change regularly.
- **Pass out one playing card to each student**-this way you can separate them by suite, evens, odds, factors of a number (factors of 6), the same number (four 9's), card-runs (2,3,4,5; or 6,7,8 depending on how big you want the group), divisible by, etc. The kids will be less likely to complain about the card they have, because they don't know how you are going to call the groups.
- **"Number Pops"**- "Number Pops" works like this: Get a bunch of craft or Popsicle sticks and write numbers on them. These numbers should correlate to the number of groups that you would like and the number of people in each group. Example: If I wanted six groups of four students, then I would have four 1's, four 2's and so on. This may take a while to prepare for the teacher, but once it's done... it's done. Note: If you don't want to set it up ask a few of your "helper" students to do it for you during recess or something. Even better you could write on the can the number of groups. That way you could have cans that separate your class into groups of 4, 5, and 6.

- **Synonyms**- on index cards you can write synonyms and have the students find their partners by matching the words together. Note: This concept can be confusing to some students. You may want to go over which of the words match before hand to calm the kids confusion.
- **"Group of the Day"**-this strategy should be setup during the first few days of school, while you are still setting up your classroom routines. Have different groups for different days of the week. (Groups of 4, 5, and 6 for Mondays, Tuesdays, etc. That way on Monday if you say groups of four they know who they belong with, and on Tuesday their group of six maybe different) By doing this the students can get accustomed to getting in their groups, and you can develop a routine. Routines are a teacher's best friend!!! The kids will know immediately what is expected of them and who they should pair up with. Make a Bulletin Board sized calendar just for this grouping, this way the kids can reference it throughout the year.
- **Partners, Teams, and Panels**- like "group of the day" you may need to establish these at the beginning of the year, but it works well for the different types of activities that you need them to achieve. Once established don't change the people in the groups, because keeping a routine will make the transition very quick. Once created the teacher will just have to say, "I need Partners to do such and such", "I need my Teams to complete...", or "As a Panel discuss...."
 - **"Partners"**- pair the students up or have them in groups of three. These types of groups work well for study groups, or paired reading.
 - **"Teams"**- separate your kids into groups of three and four. (NOTE: DON'T PAIR TWO GROUPS OF PARTNERS!!! They will become too friendly or get tired of each other. Plus it's good to have fresh input into the group.) These types of groups work well when there is a "hands-on" activity to be completed.
 - **"Panels"**- the kids are separated into groups of five or six. These groups are designed to talk. However, the teacher should have something constructive for them to talk about. Since the groups are so large you don't have to walk around as much just a quick visit to make sure they're on task. (Note: These groups are best at discussing written works, hot topics, "what if" scenarios, cause and effect, and problem solving. Make sure to give each student a participation sheet so they can document their feelings, ideas, solutions, etc. This will make each student in the group accountable for their individual work.

- **Birthday Buddies**- match the students according to the months that they were born. This may or may not work depending on the dynamic of your classroom. I for example have 5 birthdays that fall in June, while only 1 is in March. So for my classroom, I chose to do "Birthday Buddies" by season. You could also separate them by the beginning, middle, and end of the month.
- **Burger Buddies**- have your kids choose the fast food establishment they like the best. Have choices for the number of groups that you would like. Example: Which do you prefer? McDonald's, Burger King, Hardee's, Subway, etc. You may have to even up the groups by asking which beverage they prefer. (Note: I teach in a very small town and they only have one fast food place. So, I took it a step further and asked what is your favorite type of food to get from this place/what would you like on your burger.)
- **Genre Groups**- separate your kids by the types of books, movies, music, or subjects that they enjoy. (Note: "Genre Groups" and "Burger Buddies" can be done through an interest survey at the beginning of the year. Since these surveys are done on paper, they will have no clue that you are using the survey as a means to group them. They will probably think that you are just trying to get to know them better.)
- **Color Pencils**-have your kids pick colored pencils out of a can. Have four or five of the same color and have as many colors as you need groups.

[Using Groups Effectively: 10 Principles](#)

Confession: as a student, I usually hate group work. I know, I know. Having students work in groups reaps a bounty of benefits, including boosting students' social skills and upping the number of "happy campers" in the classroom. Such findings filter through my thinking when I'm preparing to teach, so I do use group interaction, hoping that the promises from its advocates will be realized. Occasionally they are; often they are not.

I recently attended a conference session featuring Keith Sawyer. In addition to being a jazz pianist (a musical collaborator), Sawyer is an expert on the effectiveness of group efforts. His presentation focused on what has been and potentially can be accomplished through collaboration, but he hinted that just getting people into groups is not the answer.

This piqued my curiosity, so I bought his book *Group Genius*. In it I've begun to find some answers to my questions: When are groups effective as means of learning? What tasks are better accomplished collaboratively than individually? How do you structure groups for optimal effectiveness and results?

Though his focus is on creativity, I think Sawyer's insights apply to our use of groups to foster learning. Here are ten principles I've picked up:

1. **Flow matters.** *Flow* is a term used to describe a state of high engagement in which thoughts run freely and progress occurs, often without group members being conscious of it. However, flow is like [intrinsic](#)

motivation; it can't be created on demand. The best we can do as teachers is provide a classroom environment that fosters flow.

2. **Conversation is key.** Sawyer succinctly explains this principle: "Conversation leads to flow, and flow leads to creativity." When having students work in groups, consider what will spark rich conversation. The original researcher on flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, found that rich conversation precedes and ignites flow more than any other activity.¹ Tasks that require (or force) interaction lead to richer collaborative conceptualization.
3. **Set a clear but open-ended goal.** Groups produce the richest ideas when they have a goal that will focus their interaction but also has fluid enough boundaries to allow for creativity. This is a challenge we often overlook. As teachers, we often have an idea of what a group's final product *should* look like (or sound like, or...). If we put students into groups to produce a predetermined outcome, we prevent creative thinking from finding an entry point.
4. **Try *not* announcing time limits.** As teachers we often use a time limit as a "motivator" that we hope will keep group work focused. In reality, this may be a major detractor from quality group work. Deadlines, according to Sawyer, tend to impede flow and produce lower quality results. Groups produce their best work in low-pressure situations. Without a need to "keep one eye on the clock," the group's focus can be fully given to the task.
5. **Do *not* appoint a group "leader."** In research studies, supervisors, or group leaders, tend to subvert flow *unless they participate as an equal*, listening and allowing the group's thoughts and decisions to guide the interaction.
6. **Keep it small.** Groups with the minimum number of members that are needed to accomplish a task are more efficient *and* effective.
7. **Consider weaving together individual and group work.** For additive tasks—tasks in which a group is expected to produce a list, adding one idea to another—research suggests that better results develop when *individual thinking precedes the pooling of ideas* in a group setting. Researchers also suggest that alternating between individual and group work helps keep the work focused but not fixated—i.e., not limited to one aspect or detail of an idea or issue. (By the way, this weaving of individual and group interaction may be reason why technological or "electronic brainstorming" is often effective.)
8. **"Divide and conquer" ≠ collaboration.** When groups assign members to specific responsibilities for completing a task they undermine the thinking that collaboration can produce. Sawyer talks about creativity via collaboration as being "exponential," meaning that it is constructed via conversation. One individual's thought may inspire another group member's insight, which in turn sparks new concepts for another. It is this emergent thinking that enables collaboration to accomplish what individual effort cannot.
9. **Think threefold.** Group tasks that produce the best results often have three defining characteristics: 1) they are novel, something students have not done before, 2) they feature a visual component, something that can be represented in nonverbal forms, and 3) they are relational, meaning they require the combining of ideas or components to be accomplished.
10. **Be complementary.** The best groups are composed of members who have enough familiarity with one another to be comfortable but who possess varied backgrounds and experiences. Again, because of how we typically use groups in classrooms, we tend to form groups around ability—if there is at least one "good student" in the group, we think something will get done. However, Sawyer suggests ability should be less of a consideration than diversity in experience. This can be challenging to accomplish but it's worth considering when grouping students for collaborative tasks.

These insights have me rethinking groups, not whether or not to use them, but when and how to use them effectively. As with every aspect of teaching, using groups effectively requires mindful planning and attention to more than who works with whom. As Sawyer summarizes, "Putting people into groups isn't a magical dust that makes everyone more creative. It has to be the right kind of group, and the group has to match the task."²

References

1. Sawyer, K., *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 43.
2. Ibid., 73.

Flexible Grouping: When, How, and Why

The topic of grouping for literacy, especially any grouping that involves sorting children according to their abilities, is charged politically and can polarize teaching communities. The key in my classroom is to be flexible, basing groups upon the specific skills that will be developed in the group. There are no set groups in my classroom; students have freedom to move in and out of small groups based upon their changing needs, the group focus, and students' growing awareness of those needs.

I think about when and how to group daily. The school day is rich with opportunities to learn about words - vocabulary, decoding and spelling strategies, and features. These grouping opportunities are both planned and spontaneous.

Assessing Before Grouping

I do not put any students into small groups until I have built relationships and trust with my class. I need to get to know them as learners first, and we need to have a solid community in place. At the beginning of the year, I mix whole-class instruction with individual conferences, and gather lots of information about each child and the class social dynamic before I begin grouping.

I appraise my students' writing daily, looking for word learning confusion (spelling and vocabulary) and listen to my students read, noting miscues. I then ask myself, "Which students have similar confusion, and what are the roots of the confusion?" This question helps me determine a focus for small-group word work. Then I consider at what point in the school day I should bring these students together for focused word learning.

Group Formats and Duration

My small-group lessons are short (usually no more than ten minutes) and focused on immediate needs, because I want my students to practice these skills in real contexts. My goal is independence and automaticity with the word learning feature. These groups are temporary, lasting no more than a couple weeks, based on students' emerging understandings of word study concepts as they apply to the reading/writing process.

When I pull students over for small-group instruction, texts are a key consideration. I need to be careful that my word work instruction is not asking students to practice skills and strategies in isolated texts, divorced from the reading of their classmates. I try to use the same text the remainder of the class is reading (i.e., textbook or whole-class read-aloud chapter book) or something popular with students for independent reading (i.e., a news magazine like [Time for Kids](#) or a book of

poetry). This allows group members to read the same material as their classmates and absorb the same content and concepts, but with more support.

Understanding the Social Nature of Academic Groups

I always consider the social dynamics of pulling together small groups. First, bringing together a group can send the message that this group is not smart. I know the first time I pulled a group for word work with last year's class I was anxious. One of the participants in this group was a class leader and soccer queen, Amanda. I briefly chatted with Amanda about my desire to pull her over and work with her with a group of peers she normally did not interact with. Amanda's reply was matter-of-fact with no stigma attached, "I stink at spelling, thanks." Amanda relieved me of my worries, and I felt more comfortable flexibly grouping kids based on specific short-term goals. I realized by that point in the year (late in the fall), I had created an environment where students like Amanda were secure in their strengths as learners, and so felt comfortable working in groups to develop new skills in other areas.

I have also found that it's always useful to issue an open invitation to the remainder of the class when beginning a new group, asking anyone if they would like to join. This reinforces the notion that we are targeting short-term specific skills and needs in each group -- not labeling classmates broadly as more or less able than their peers academically. In my class, all students are responsible for monitoring their reading and writing process through notebooks, logs, class discussions, and conferences with me. I am always pushing them to think about what they can do well, and what they might work on next -- to take responsibility for their learning. Because students are always analyzing their literacy development, they know instantly if a group topic or skill is something they might need and they are free to join in.

The added benefit to these flexible groups has been the discussions within the groups. I'm fascinated by how students with a range of abilities scaffold each other. Students that normally would not interact socially are discussing their thinking and strategies as they work towards a common learning goal.

Grouping to Teach Spelling and Convention Strategies

The most effective small-group lessons for my students are the ones that focus on spelling features. Students have such different needs as spellers, and there are myriad strategies I can pick for a group. They also know many adults who are very bright and still struggle with spelling, so no one loses face by acknowledging problems with spelling.

The duration of these groups vary, but they average about two weeks. The small group meets with me for roughly five to seven minutes each day, working with a spelling feature or convention strategy that supports their learning to look at print in new ways. I use the groups to support their understanding of the generative nature of spelling, and help them connect known spelling patterns to unfamiliar words. A sample lesson I might use in one of these small groups can be found [by clicking here](#). This particular group was focused on learning to capitalize proper nouns.

Amanda's comment in blithely accepting her need for some group instruction and my relief afterward remain with me as I start the process of observing and planning for small groups with this year's students. I will again take on the challenge of flexible grouping -- but only after my students and I know each other well.