

Providing Curriculum Alternatives to Motivate Gifted Students

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How to get the best performance from every student is a challenging task, especially in classrooms where there are many different levels of ability. Often, students who are gifted are not challenged to perform to their full capacity because they seem to be doing just fine.

Unfortunately, these students may never achieve their potential because they have not had complex tasks and have never learned to really work. This digest presents two strategies to help highly able students get more out of school. Teachers may find that the following strategies enable them to challenge and motivate not only gifted students, but also other students who have talents and abilities in specific areas.

Strategies for Motivating Students to Work and Learn

Gifted students benefit from participating in activities that are different from those designed for other students. Such alternative activities should extend basic concepts and allow students to connect their personal interests to the course curriculum. Extra credit activities should be avoided as they send a message that more work is required. Two strategies that are helpful to teachers in managing alternative activities are compacting and contracts.

Compacting. Students who demonstrate previous mastery spend less time with the regular curriculum and more time with extension and enrichment opportunities.

Contracts. Written agreements between teachers and students that outline what students will learn, how they will learn it, in what period of time, and how they will be evaluated. Contracts allow students to engage actively in the decision-making process, directing their course of study (Parke, 1989, pp.70-71).

Guidelines for Compacting

The following guidelines are useful for pretestable subject areas where students move between an instructional group and extension activities.

1. At the beginning of a unit, provide opportunities for interested students to demonstrate mastery in some way. The same activity may be used for postassessment.
2. Students who achieve a specified criterion or grade attend class only on the days when instruction includes concepts they have not mastered. On those occasions, they become part of the regular class and participate in assigned activities.
3. For each student who achieves a specified criterion level on the preassessment activity, prepare a contract listing required concepts, enrichment options, and specified working conditions. Check only the topics students have not mastered so they know when to join the larger group.

The following guidelines are useful when material may not be pretestable because it is unfamiliar to students. Compacting is still required because gifted students need less time than their age peers to learn new material.

1. Prepare a study guide that includes the same concepts for which all students will be responsible.
2. Offer the study guide opportunity to all students who have exhibited easy mastery of previous topics. Eligible students will be expected to learn the study guide material, but it is understood that they will spend the majority of their school time working on their extension tasks. Students should not be required to write out the answers for the content of the study guide. They may use any means they choose to learn the material, but must be able to demonstrate mastery.
3. Include dates when students must meet with the rest of the class to demonstrate their competence with the required concepts. Students who do not demonstrate competence must return to work with the class for the rest of the unit.

Thus, during a specific unit of time, students are moving back and forth between the teacher directed group and independent work on extension activities.

Guidelines for Contracts

The following guidelines are useful for pretestable subject areas where students are moving between instructional group and extension activities.

1. In one section of the contract, list the concepts or outcomes that the whole class will learn. In another section of the contract, list a variety of alternative or extension activities from which students may choose. These activities may be developed by the teacher, the student, or both. If extension activities are developed solely by the teacher, options should include "Your original idea" so that students can link their personal interests with the required curriculum. Ideas designed by the student must have teacher approval.
2. Students work on alternative activities on the days when the class is learning concepts they have previously mastered.
3. Students should be responsible for documenting their time. One option is to ask students to keep a log of their activities on the days they are not working with the rest of the class. Set guidelines for those activities.
4. Student outcomes or grades result from a combination of work completed with the class and a posttest or postassessment activity. The section on Guidelines for Evaluation of Alternative Work provides details.

The following guidelines are useful for subject areas that may not be pretestable because material is unfamiliar to students. In this case, teachers use a study guide with an independent study agreement, illustrated on the reverse.

1. Provide students with a study guide that contains a list of expected outcomes for a unit, which they may choose to achieve independently. Instead of working with the regular class, these students will research and present information about an alternative topic related to the general theme or unit.
2. Students work on the extended activity in school during the time the class is working with the regular content. Thus, the activity becomes their real work for the class period.
3. Students sign an agreement similar to the following illustration.

Independent Study Agreement

The following terms are agreed to by teacher and student:

The student may learn the key concepts or the information described on the study guide independently.
The student must demonstrate mastery at appropriate checkpoints to continue this arrangement for the rest of the unit.
The student must participate in selected group activities when one day's notice is given by the teacher.
The student agrees to complete an independent project by (date) to share with the class.

Project description: _____ .

The student agrees to work on the selected project according to the following guidelines while the remainder of the class is involved with the teacher. (List guidelines.)

Teacher's signature

Student's signature

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A similar agreement may be used with all independent study activities. The prototype may be used for ideas on what to include, or teachers may use their own ideas. Students rejoin the large group for special experiences in which all students should participate.

4. Students who do not work on their alternative activity or do not honor the working conditions of the agreement are required to rejoin the class for the duration of the unit.
5. Students present their project to the class at an appropriate time. Written work is not required. Students are expected to present a talk of 7-10 minutes, accompanied by at least one visual aid. Or, students may negotiate a suitable means of demonstrating to the class what has been learned.
6. Evaluation or grading alternatives are described in the section that follows on Guidelines for Evaluation of Alternative Work.

Guidelines for Evaluation of Alternative Work

The following guidelines are useful for pretestable subject areas where students are moving between instructional group and extension activities.

1. Alternative student work is more easily managed when student activities require more than one class period to complete. In mathematics, for example, students might research the real world applications of the course content, work with various number bases, or investigate the lives of famous mathematicians. In writing or English classes, students might work on more complex or open-ended writing assignments, or investigate the writing style of several authors.
2. When eligible students work on alternative activities, the goal should be to provide them with opportunities to master challenging tasks. They would earn the same credit as if they had completed the regular tasks as long as they adhere to the agreed-upon working conditions.

The following guidelines are useful for subjects that may not be pretestable because material is unfamiliar to students.

1. Alternative work extends the regular curriculum. Therefore, extension projects should earn at least a grade of B or the equivalent because the students are going beyond what is required.
2. All criteria for evaluation should be presented and understood before students begin an extended activity. Teacher expectations should be clearly stated.
3. Students earn a grade of B if the completed work represents typical research that merely reports secondary sources and if the presentation is properly made to an appropriate audience.
4. Students earn a grade of A if the completed work represents unique or creative research, provides evidence of primary sources, represents an interesting or unusual synthesis of available data, or the material is presented in an original manner.
5. It is important for students to understand that they need to be working productively during school time. If they do not follow the expected working conditions, they need to rejoin the regular instructional group and may be required to make up some of the regular work. If students become immersed in the topic and wish to continue beyond the expected date, they must provide a progress report at regular intervals.
6. If point systems, rubrics, or holistic assessment methods are used for other activities, these methods may also be used to

evaluate students' extended projects. Students may become engaged in the creation of the scoring rubrics and evaluate their own work as the project progresses by measuring their project against the rubric criteria. Responsibility for evaluating student work is then shared between teacher and students.

Summary

Effective teachers at all grade levels have found that students differ in the ways they learn best and therefore learn better when teachers vary approaches to learning. Compacting and contracts make it possible for teachers to present alternative activities to highly capable learners that are challenging, promote cognitive growth, and are based on student interests. Regular use of compacting and contracts will benefit not only gifted students, but also provide interesting educational opportunities for the entire class.

Resources

Parke, B. N. (1989). *Gifted Students in Regular Classrooms*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Reis, S., & Renzulli, J. (1992). "Using curriculum compacting to challenge the above-average." *Educational Leadership*, 50 (2), 51-57.

Winebrenner, S. (1992). *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

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