Weighing Anchor in the “Ragged Times”

“Ragged time” is a reality in a differentiated classroom. It is not your goal to have everyone finish all tasks at the same time.

—Carol Ann Tomlinson

Consider two different scenarios of group work that result in off-task behavior. In the first scene, imagine a class of 13-year-olds sitting in heterogeneous groups of four discussing an assignment. Each member contributes by adding a different perspective about the reading of *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe.

All the groups are assigned one task that they are to complete collaboratively: create a visual representation of the poem to share with the class. Two of the five groups finish before the allotted time. Social chatter begins. Now what?

In the second scenario, a class of students is working in groups to review *The Raven*. Based on the short assessment of the reading, the class is organized into three meaningful and strategic tiers, armed with critical thinking questions and captivating discussion opportunities. After ten minutes, Group Three has important questions for the teacher in order to continue its work, but the teacher is assisting other students. Now what?

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Now let’s return to the two scenarios. Both classes in the introduction seem to function well initially, but as demonstrated in a whole-class heterogeneous grouping system and a small-group, tiered model, grouping will result in some middle level learners completing their work early, asking questions about the assignment, seeking teacher input, or requesting additional time to collaborate. Tomlinson (2001) calls this interval in which students complete their work at different times “ragged time.” The challenge is for the teacher to maximize student learning while simultaneously facilitating the work in groups—often different and complicated tasks, depending on the groups’ understanding of the assignment experience collaborative learning. Allowing students to participate in groups is no longer just an option for 21st-century teaching; rather, it is a mandate if young adolescents are to develop the skills and attitudes to work effectively in our global society. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recognizes collaboration as a 21st-century skill. In fact, it has released a position paper that states, “Twenty-first century readers and writers need to . . . build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally” (NCTE, 2008). The ability to collaborate is so important that instructing without incorporating the skill is disadvantageous. Johnson and Johnson (2010) believe that “teaching students to think in groups is the epitome of deep, student-led processing, a valued skill for the 21st century learner” (p. 203). Certainly, most will agree that the benefits of group work outweigh the challenges, but the reality of an out-of-control grouping experience can feel like sailing in high winds without a safety vest.

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and the members’ ability to work together to solve problems.

**Anchor Activities**

Even the best-planned group work can have “ragged” time. Because students learn at different rates and inquire at different levels, teachers must prepare for the uneven intervals that will emerge. Anchor activities are respectful learning activities that students can work on independently during a unit (or longer) that adds to their overall academic experience (Tomlinson, 2001). Although anchor activities are not the key for successful group work, they certainly provide a set of expectations that help students maximize their learning in meaningful ways.

Anchor activities have several benefits in the classroom. Because students complete group work at staggered times, anchor activities allow them to continue their learning independently while other groups continue to work on the original assignment. For students who need more advanced learning opportunities and for students who need to review a concept, the anchor activity can be the vehicle to extend their learning in differentiated ways. Anchor activities allow students to focus their learning, while allowing the teacher to maximize the value of class time for all learners.

**Integrating Anchor Activities into a Class**

No matter which level or type of anchor activity a teacher implements, steps must be taken to integrate this type of learning seamlessly into the English language arts classroom. Just assigning an anchor activity is not enough direction or attention to implementation. Basing my integration steps loosely on the work of Tomlinson (2001), I have added a few critical components.

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITE THINK**

**Independent Work within a Group Context**

This article shares several ideas for independent projects as part of group work. Here are a few more examples from ReadWriteThink.org:

- **Alphabiography Project: Totally You**
  The traditional autobiography writing project is given a twist as students write alphabiographies—recording an event, person, object, or feeling associated with each letter of the alphabet.
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/alphabiography-project-totally-937.html

- **The Year I Was Born: An Autobiographical Research Project**
  Students explore the year they were born through interviews and research, and then weave the details into a newspaper or booklet, written from another person’s point of view.
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/year-born-autobiographical-research-419.html

- **Writing and Assessing an Autobiographical Incident**
  Students build upon their knowledge of biographies to write their own autobiographical incident. After going through a process of revision, they use a rubric to assess their work.

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org
that a teacher can include in order to execute the anchor. First, the whole class should have an opportunity at the beginning of the unit to review the project and ask questions about content, assessment, and responsibilities. The teacher should address any concerns and explain the independent work involved. The next time the students work on the anchor activity as a whole group, the teacher can review the expectations, answer individual questions, and observe students’ ability to learn independently. At this time, the teacher may choose a “class assistant” for the day, someone who can help students with basic questions.

The third time students focus on the anchor activity, the teacher allows the “class assistant” to answer questions. At this point, the students should demonstrate high levels of independence. If not, the assignment may be too difficult for independent work, or particular students may need a “buddy” to help them initially transition into this task. The teacher can now begin to work with small groups of students while part of the class focuses on the anchor activity.

Eventually, the students will not only be able to collaborate in groups, but when their task is complete or they are unable to continue because of questions, they can turn to the anchor activity until the teacher or the “class assistant” is available. As a result, students will develop the sense that a highly functioning classroom maximizes learning opportunities, despite the ragged times that will come in the process.

**Examples of Anchor Activities**

Anchor activities for middle school students can range from short writings to a year-long project. When determining the best activity to “anchor” the class, consider your pedagogical objective(s) and the amount of time students are expected to devote to the work. The basic anchor activity principles are:

1. The work assigned deepens students’ understanding.
2. The work is respectful (not additional work on the same skills students have mastered).
3. The work is engaging.
4. The work (or at least parts) can be created at any stage of the unit.
5. The work can be completed independently by the student.

Table 1 offers an example of how anchor activities can be differentiated for various students and contexts. Note the widely different levels of depth and time commitment required for the myriad options. Below are three anchor activities that can be adapted into a reading and writing workshop class or into shorter unit projects.

**ABC Book**

An *ABC Book* is an organized, student-created book or journal that requires students to use each letter of the alphabet to illuminate an assigned or self-selected topic. Students can use a notebook (three-ring binders work best) or computer to create an ABC book. For example, this could be a memoir book where eighth graders write and reflect on their middle and early school years. For each letter of the alphabet, students find a word, memory, or image that corresponds. The student then writes about it in a multigenre form, adding pictures, hyperlinks, or drawings.

**Spin-off ideas:** A literature-vocabulary notebook, character journal (one text or multiple texts), nonfiction notebook, or career/college journal.

**Challenges:** Enforcing the “use every letter of the alphabet” rule is not realistic. One option is for students to use at least twenty different letters, and six may be used twice.

**Situation Simulations**

*Situation Simulations* are modern-day situations related to events and characters’ decisions in a text.
that require students to think critically. The teacher creates up to eight simulated situations for each main character that will cause the student to think critically about that character’s motives and choices. During a unit, students can choose a character from the class text. The teacher can set specific guidelines for the assignment, but the purpose is for students to think more deeply about the literature from the viewpoint of that character. Students record their responses to the simulation and share throughout the reading of the novel.

**Spin-off ideas:** A few simulations may reflect issues around dating, getting along with difficult friends, making choices about time, saving “important” people, and creating a budget on a limited income.

**Challenges:** The simulation topics should be related to the characters’ lives. Creating multiple simulations related to the lives and decisions of the main characters can be time consuming.

### Nonfiction Notecards

*Nonfiction notecards are brief excerpts of paraphrased research related to a text.* The Common Core State Standards ask students to think deeply about texts, including nonfiction. One way to do this in the middle school classroom is for students to investigate terms that impact their understanding of the text. For example, if students read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, each student could research an aspect of the time period to better understand the text. One student may research the Star of David, while another may choose “ghettoes.” Students will select a research topic by choosing a notecard from a “text shoebox.” As the term becomes relevant during the reading, students can share their notecards with the class. The cards include a paraphrased definition or description, a picture, and examples of its use in the text.

**Spin-off idea:** Instead of notecards, students can create a class nonfiction notebook in a three-ring binder, which makes it easier to preserve from year to year.

**Challenges:** Students need enough terms and sub-terms to research during the unit. Consider dividing larger topics, like Jewish customs, into sub-topics.

### Grading and Assessment

When assessing an anchor activity, it is important to keep in mind that this work is an extension of the learning students do in the classroom. Having a rubric beforehand helps learners un-

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**Table 1. Sample anchor activity differentiated menu**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option 1</th>
<th>50 pts: Five Nonfiction Notecards</th>
<th>100 pts: ABC Vocabulary Book (26 letters)</th>
<th>50 pts: Five simulations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Option 2</td>
<td>90 pts: Nine Nonfiction Notecards</td>
<td>50 pts: ABC Vocabulary Book (13 letters)</td>
<td>60 pts: Six simulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option 3</td>
<td>40 pts: Four Nonfiction Notecards</td>
<td>80 pts: ABC Vocabulary Book (18 letters)</td>
<td>80 pts: Eight simulations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understand the expectations. The rubric in Table 1 combines all of the anchor activities and gives students three choices to earn their points. Certainly, one rubric can assess one anchor activity instead of multiple ones. For students who already need more time to complete their work on the original assignment, their point system on the rubric can be adjusted and individualized.

**Conclusion**

Anchor activities are not the answer for successful group work, but implementing them in the classroom sets high expectations and gives teachers plausible ways to manage student learning. In response to the question posed earlier—What do you do when students work in groups and have staggered ending times or questions during the experience?—we have one possible answer: You teach them to own their learning, value academic time, and maximize opportunities to increase their understanding. You give them an anchor.

**References**


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**2013 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership**

Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: (1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); (2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; (3) publications that have had a major impact. This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee’s curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2013**, to: Wanda Porter, 47 Puukani Place, Kailua, HI 96734; wandrport@hawaiiantel.net (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

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