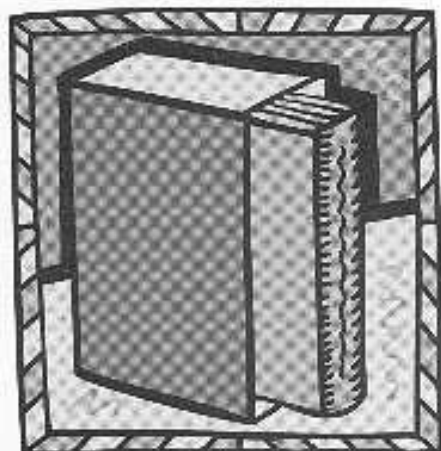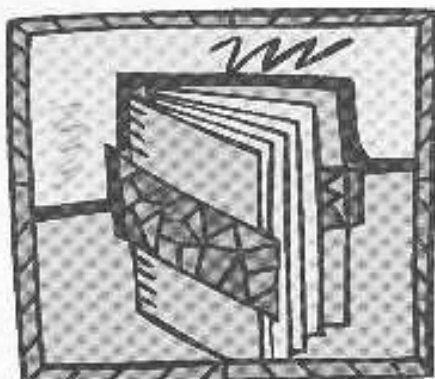# Multi-Task Folders:

A Strategy for Differentiation in the Middle School Classroom

Elizabeth S. Brumpton and Michael L. Fisher, Jr.

In the summertime people across the country are jumping into swimming pools to cool off. The next time you are at the community pool, look for a mother teaching her children to swim. The mother, with arms outstretched, calls to her child in the shallow end, "Swim to me, swim to me." The child learns to swim closer to his mother because she is only a short distance away. The mother moves back slowly as the child gets closer and learns to swim. Meanwhile, her other child has passed her and is waiting in the deep end, diving and playing games, getting frustrated as the mother spends the majority of her time with the child who has not mastered swimming.

If the mother swims to the deep end and says to her child in the shallow water, "swim to me, swim to me," that child will drown. Likewise, if she stays in the shallow water and asks her child in the deep end to keep swimming back, boredom will set in and that child may not enjoying swimming at all. The mother must know her children's needs and challenge them accordingly if she is to provide the richest experience possible in the pool.

In this analogy, of course, the mother is a teacher. The child in

the shallow end is the one who is lower performing. Those in the deep end are those that have already mastered the necessary skills. As teachers, we must not let any of our kids "drown" or become bored. We must get to know them, teach them, and challenge them. If we don't take the time to create individual experiences in our classrooms, we are putting our students at a disadvantage, and they may indeed drown from a lack of understanding. As teachers, we are always on the lookout for ways to provide a personal and meaningful experience for the students we teach.

If we don't take the time to create individual experiences in our classrooms, we are putting our students at a disadvantage...

Many teachers are willing to seek information about the tools they need in order to be successful. Those tools, however, are useless unless we put them into action. Likewise, the tools won't work unless we understand the materials with which we work: our students.

We've all read or heard of the research on such topics as Multiple Intelligences, Learning Styles, Cooperative Learning, Higher Order Thinking Skills, and Zone of Proximal Development. They are all great strategies to use in your class-

room, but who has the time to dream up ways to implement them? Plus, on top of all these strategies, we also need to find ways to extend and invigorate the curriculum while giving our students opportunities to explore on their own. Multi-Task Folders are a step in the right direction. They provide opportunities to incorporate some of this research while reinforcing the Standard Course of Study and End of Grade (EOG) testing strategies.

When we started thinking about how to provide differentiated experiences for our students, we thought of all the things that we wanted to consider. Of course, the research cited here was high on our list, but we also wanted to offer the students a range of choices so they could be as successful as possible. We felt that if the students had more choice in activities, they would be willing to invest themselves more fully into their work. These folders also provided an opportunity to let the students guide themselves, to an extent, through the process of completing a task on their own with less teacher intervention, and more student directed learning.

Differentiation in our classrooms is difficult because it monopolizes our time. We must understand many things about the students that we are teaching and where they are in our "pool." At the same time, there are so many other factors that affect what we do in our classrooms on a daily basis; for example, we must teach the Standard Course of Study while inspiring our students to learn for the sake of learning and not because someone has made them.

Where do you find the connection among all of these things?

Multi-Task Folders can help you encompass many of the factors that concern teachers daily, while supporting the Standard Course of Study and reinforcing EOG strategies. It's also convenient and less time consuming.
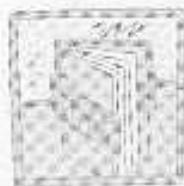
Creating the Folders

There are several ways you can create these folders in your classroom. You can create long-term and short-term project-based folders, folders that can be used as learning centers, or short-term task folders. These folders allow you to be as creative as possible in their use.

One of the styles that we chose to implement were long-term project based folders, grounded in our Standard Course of Study for 6th Grade. We started by thinking of tasks that would fit in with our Standard Course. As we created the folders, we tried to create several activities that were more concrete, as well as activities that were more abstract. Of course, there were several activities that were between concrete and abstract. We put the more concrete activities into a stack that we labeled Group A. The activities that had both concrete and abstract components were labeled

Group B. The activities that were primarily abstract were labeled Group C.

Now that we had three groups of tasks based on the Standard Course of Study, they needed to be refined

for differentiation based on the other factors that affected our classrooms. First of all, we valued research done on Learning Styles and used that information in our classrooms. However, rather than label the activities auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learner, we decided to use the categories Research, Technology, and Creativity. Within those categories, we would address auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles.

With that decided, we separated the activities (Groups A, B, and C) into the Research, Technology, and Creativity categories.

First we did this based on what we were asking the student to do with the task. For example, one of the projects that we chose required

students to create a video that illustrated how a prism refracts light. We asked the students to use materials from a list that was provided. Next, we asked them to conference with the teacher and the media specialist to find time to record their video. Then they were asked to write a summary of their video to use when they presented it to their class. This is one of the projects that we felt was between abstract and concrete, hence it went into Group B. We also chose to put this in the Creative Category because the students would use their research to make a product. Further, it was a kinesthetic activity with some visual components. When they present their video to the class, they would also be attending to visual and auditory learners.

As you begin to build your folders, you can decide what level of strategies and which strategies you should put into them based on the needs of your students. The last thing that we did was to try and relate EOG skills into the folders. We looked at higher order thinking skill words such as analyze, describe, and interpret, and we included those in the directions for each task. Then, we thought it would be interesting to actually have the students create EOG style questions themselves. For instance, one of their tasks might be to read and

respond to an article, but in order to complete this component of their projects, they must write five or ten EOG style questions using stems like:

• Which of the following...
• All of the following except...
• Which is most likely...
• Which is least likely...

The last part in creating the long-term project folders was to consider the length of time that each folder's task would take to complete. Our objective with the folders was, as always, to help more students become critical thinkers. We would rather they chose the more abstract activities, but some students need time and practice to build up to the abstract, so we adjusted the assignments to the point that they could all be accomplished successfully and in a similar period of time.

An Example

Another use of this is short-term task folders. The End Of Grade Reading Test in North Carolina is composed of short examples of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, with questions about those passages. In the 6th grade language arts class, the students are exposed to skills and concepts such as main idea, cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, and sequencing. All of these are

components of the End of Grade Reading test.

Another way to challenge our students was to create and implement folders that could be used in class during a daily lesson. In these short term task folders in language arts, teachers could use a variety of passages and questions to correlate with and reinforce End Of Grade tested concepts.

For example, in the poetry folders we created, poems were chosen that included such tested literary devices as similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia, and personification. In these folders, three levels of activities were also created, each with about the same time commitment. The A section of the folders was dedicated to End Of Grade style questions only, and asked such things as "What is the main idea of this poem?" or "All of the following describe . . .except." or "What is the purpose of the author?"

The B section encompassed two End Of Grade style questions and an activity to complete, such as a Venn Diagram used to compare similar poems, or to identify main characters or concepts in a passage.

Section C was devoted to a more abstract activity that required higher level thinking. For instance, after having read a poem that contains personification, students were required to compose their own poems using personification. Another section C poem was "Belinda Blue" by Jack Prelutsky. In the poem the main character overreacts to having to eat green beans. The students were asked to write a clarification paper telling when and

why they overreacted to something. This supports not only the Standard Course of Study, but also the Open Ended Assessments that are required of students.

These short term task folders are meant to be completed within a short period of time. They can be used when a student finishes required work early, as a reinforcement activity, or as a homework assignment. Like the long term folders, these folders allow the students a choice in their learning. They reinforce necessary skills and concepts required to be mastered in the curriculum and are designed to help with End Of Grade Testing success. One of the best aspects of these folders is the choice that they give to students. Students can choose activities based on their level of comfort.

Additional Suggestions

Once we completed the insides of our folders, we printed them on standard copy paper, and glued them to a standard manila folder. We then had these laminated so that we could use them over and over. We also decided to make several copies of each folder just to avoid competition as the students race to acquire folders to use in class.

Once you've finished creating your folders there are only a couple of other things to take into consideration. One of those is conferencing with your students. It helps to keep them on the right track with their activities whether they are involved in short term or long term activities. You can make after school or in class conferences a part of the requirements for completing an activity.

Grading the Folders

We wanted the students to be accountable for the completeness of their tasks. Students were asked to complete a "Completion Worksheet" where they write down what folder they've chosen and what activity in that folder they chose, and then they write a para-

graph explaining how they felt they did on their project. This also helps to get the students thinking in an abstract way. The more reflection that they can learn to do, the better they can refine their skills.

We found it easier to use a rubric for grading the project folders. You can write your own rubric, simple or complex. Ours was quite simple. We graded based on five areas: following directions, completing the reflection worksheet, overall completeness of the project, neatness, and whether it was turned in on time. You can modify yours accordingly when you set up your folders.

Looking Back

The data below was gathered from the students who chose Long Term Project Folders in science class. It is based on 65 students who turned folders in.

Percentage of students choosing Project A in any folder.   26%

Percentage of students choosing Project B in any folder.   32%

Percentage of students choosing Project C in any folder.   42%

Percentage of low performing* students who chose Project A in any folder.   40%

Percentage of high performing* students who chose Project A in any folder.   30%

Percentage of low performing* students who chose either Project B or C in any folder. 60%

Percentage of high performing* Students who chose either Project B or C in any folder.   70%

*Based on North Carolina End Of Grade Tests. High performing students would have scored a 3 and a 4, or a 3 and a 4 on a combination of Reading and Math Tests. Low performing students would have scored either a 2 and a 2, a 1 and a 2, or a 1 and a 1, or a combination of the Reading and Math Tests. Total number of high performing students in science class: 40. Total number of low performing students in science class: 3.

Based on the data for the long term project folders in science, we found that students were more apt to choose a B or C activity. We looked specifically at low performing and high performing students to see what kinds of activities they chose. We wanted to see if we could alter the dynamics of our "pool" by inciting renegade learning!

What we discovered is that given the opportunity, many students seem to want a thinking challenge, and prefer to work smarter, not harder. Of course, these are assumptions based on our set of data and we hope that this trend will continue as we implement the folders in the future. The major thing we would like to see develop, however, is lower performing students choosing the higher thinking activities. We want our students to work at a comfortable level for the sake of increased success, but we also want to move them a little outside of the box, outside of that comfort zone, and get them thinking.

Another thing that we were glad to see represented in our data is the fact that many of the higher performing students chose a challenging activity. Even though we are expecting these students to "swim" with the class in our "pool," we were excited to see that they moved out and chose to challenge themselves.

Overall, the folders at least serve the purpose of giving students a choice. We provide a menu of things to choose from and the students decide what they want to do. We felt that the best way to differentiate is to let the students decide. The more student-directed your classroom is, the more likely that students will be

successful as they learn to master the concepts you present.

In the future, when we are keeping up with who chooses which folder we can encourage our students to choose higher thinking activities. If we have students who are consistently choosing A projects or tasks, we can evaluate whether the students are working at a good level for them, or whether they need to move up to a higher thinking activity. Likewise, if we have students that we know can do the higher level projects, we can encourage them to spend their time more wisely.

Many of the strategies you use are based solely on what you value as a teacher and what you think will benefit your students the most. Every folder will not encompass every teaching strategy, but will be a part of an overall plan to reach every student. The main thing to remember is that the students will be making the choice based on how they feel about their level of success on a particular task. The more control the students have, the better they perform on the tasks we offer.

The ideas that we've presented here are based on the fact that we wanted to find ways to incorporate the research we've been learning and correlate it to our Standard Course and End Of Grade tests. Our other major objective was to try and reach every student in our "pool" in a convenient way that was less time consuming. We are still in the process of refining our system as we see what the students are accomplishing, but we feel like this is a step in the right direction.

A Science Example

You may choose from either A, B, or C. In order to receive full credit, you must do all of the activities in that section and turn them in with a Completion Worksheet (posted on wall). Your best work is expected, and neatness and spelling count. If you have questions, please ask me!

Research - Dynamic Earth

A

• *Define the following words: Soil, Humus, Soil Profile, Horizon, Leaching, Igneous, Sedimentary, Metamorphic, Plate Tectonics, and Pangaea.*

• *Interview 5 people, including a parent, another teacher, and 3 people of your choice. Ask them a question you've developed that deals with soil pollution. You will need a conference with me in order to do this activity.*

• *Write a brief summary of each of the five interviews to turn in.*

B

• *Use the Internet or CD-ROM encyclopedia to find out about the Continental Drift theory. Print two or three articles and write a one-page summary of what you discovered. I especially want to know what evidence supports this theory.*

• *Create a Poster/Model that illustrates what Pangaea was. Draw arrows on each of the continents to show which direction it will drift based on the theory of Continental Drift. With your poster, include three EOG style questions, including one question that viewers of your poster and articles can answer.*

C

• *Interview three local landscapers and ask them to discuss ways in which erosion affects their jobs. What do they do to correct erosion problems? You will need an afternoon planning session with me in order to work on this activity. We will plan several interview questions that you will be able to use when you talk to the landscapers. You will write a one to two page paper on what you learned from the landscapers. You may include pictures of the landscaping if you wish.*

Elizabeth Brampion teaches English language arts and Michael Fisher teaches science at Kannapolis Middle School in Kannapolis, NC.