

Curriculum Compacting: A Necessity for Academic Advancement

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Unfortunately, the reward for many students who master coursework quickly is more of the same. It is little wonder that academically advanced students often report feeling bored and unchallenged (Plucker & McIntire, 1996). Instead of completing work quickly that they know they have already mastered, they sometimes become disenchanted, mentally dropout, and fail to finish even the simplest of assignments. From 5 to 15% of secondary students could benefit from some form of curricular modification.

Curriculum compacting is one of the most common forms of curriculum modification for academically advanced students. It is also the basic procedure upon which many other types of modification are founded. Compacting is based on the premise that students who demonstrate they have mastered course content, or can master course content more quickly, can buy time to study material that they find more challenging and interesting (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

Both basic skills and course content can be compacted. Although basic skills compacting is easier for teachers new to the process, the latter is probably more common in secondary schools. Basic skills compacting involves determining what basic skills students have mastered and eliminating the practice or repetition of those skills. For example, beginning chemistry students who have demonstrated mastery of the periodic table would have little need for further drill and practice in its use and would be better served by advancing to more complex course content.

Sometimes, academically advanced students may not have mastered course content, but they are capable of doing so at an accelerated pace. They may have some understanding of the content and may require minimal time or instruction for mastery. In these cases, content compacting is useful. Perhaps a sophomore class is reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and reflecting on the societal ramifications of racial prejudice. Some students read at a much faster rate and are able to cover the novel more quickly than others or are able to demonstrate mastery of the objectives associated with the novel. A former student of mine relayed the following story about his sophomore experience with the novel.

Josh loved to read and was excited when his sophomore teacher distributed *To Kill a Mockingbird* on Friday afternoon. She assigned the first few chapters for weekend reading. Josh was scheduled to play a basketball game that evening and decided to start reading the book on the bus trip to the game. He became engrossed in the story and finished reading the novel that evening after returning from the trip. Monday morning he reported to his literature teacher that it was a great book.

"You didn't finish it already," she commented. After a short conversation, she was convinced he had.

"What are we reading next?" he asked. She gave him the next novel. He finished it in a couple of days and asked for the next one.

She hesitated, "I don't want you mixing up the stories when we discuss them in class, so I'm not going to give you the next one."

"Mr. Siegle, I'm not going to mix up *To Kill a Mockingbird* with--," he relayed. He enjoyed the class discussion and didn't want to miss it. He simply wanted to continue reading interesting literature. This young man would have been a good candidate for content compacting.

I once explained compacting to several junior high students who were part of a study being conducted by The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. One asked, "What is it again?"

I explained that their teacher was planning to test them on their school material and they would then not be required to do worksheets or workbook pages for the material they already knew. One young woman looked at me rather puzzled and said, "Well, that just makes sense." Curriculum compacting does "just make sense." Each year thousands of students coast academically as they repeat material that they already have mastered or which they could easily master in a fraction of the time.

Imagine that you've just finished vacuuming your home and your spouse arrives. After complimenting you on how nice the house looks, your spouse suggests that you vacuum it again. When you question your spouse, s/he responds that you might forget how to vacuum and you ought to practice. After you refuse, your spouse tells a friend that s/he can't understand why you didn't want to vacuum the house again. Your spouse notes that s/he knows that you know how to vacuum but can't understand why you "just won't do it." While this story may seem absurd, many of us have heard teaching colleagues complain about one of their students who knows how to do a particular worksheet or homework assignment, but the student "just won't do it." Perhaps, like the vacuuming incident, if the student has demonstrated that he or she knows the material it doesn't need to be repeated again.

The compacting procedure is simple: Determine what the students already know and what they still need to learn, and replace it with more challenging material that they would like to learn (Starko, 1986). Generally, two basic principles are recommended when compacting. First, grades should be based on the material compacted (what the student has mastered), rather than the replacement material. Students may be reluctant to tackle more challenging material if they risk receiving lower grades that may reduce their chances for academic scholarships. This is not to say that replacement activities should not be evaluated. Second, replacement material should be based on student interests. Since replacement material will require greater student effort, the task commitment and responsibility necessary to work independently (which is often, but not always, the learning situation) mandate that the student have a vested interest in the content.

There are eight basic steps to curriculum compacting.

1. Determine the learning objectives for the material.

2. Find an appropriate way to assess those objectives.
3. Identify students who may have already mastered the objectives (or could master them more quickly).
4. Assess those students to determine their mastery level.
5. Streamline practice or instruction for students who demonstrate mastery of the objectives.
6. Provide small group or individual instruction for students who have not yet mastered all of the objectives, but are capable of doing so more quickly than their classmates.
7. Offer more challenging academic alternatives based on student interest.
8. Maintain a record of the compacting process and instructional options provided. (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992a)

Educators new to the process should consider the following recommendations:

- Start with one or two responsible students.
- Select content with which they feel comfortable.
- Try a variety of methods to determine student mastery of the material (a brief conversation with a student may be just as effective as a written pretest).
- Compact by topic rather than time.
- Define proficiency based on a consensus with administrators and parents.
- Don't be afraid to request help from available sources such as community volunteers. (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992b)

Curriculum compacting works best when adopted by a school district as a regular part of good teaching practices. When superintendents, principals, and other administrators support and encourage the process it is certainly much easier. All students, including those who are academically advanced, are entitled to an education in which instruction is geared to their needs, interests, and developmental levels.

Being a teacher is an awesome responsibility. It means being given charge of the nation's most valuable resource, the talent of its youth, and helping develop it. It means working with future O'Keeffes or Einsteins or Steinbecks at a time when they are most vulnerable, when they are learning about themselves and their talents. If those talents are not developed and recognized, the loss is not only to the nation, but to the individuals who, when not challenged, often fall into patterns of underachievement and boredom. By providing an appropriately modified and differentiated educational experience, such as curriculum compacting, the buds of youth do open into radiant blooms of productive and fulfilled adults.

References

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