



Bordering on Excellence

A Teaching Tool for Twice-Exceptional Students

A major goal of education is to provide all students with the opportunity to reach their potential. Although few are able to argue with this goal, twice-exceptional students, including some of our most gifted students, are often on the brink of excellence due to the unique blend of assets and deficits they exhibit. Teachers are challenged each day to find ways to empower those bright students who may be unable to write a complete sentence, even though they are able to participate actively in a class discussion. These are the students who may not be able to read a science textbook, but may show their knowledge of physics by constructing an elaborate model of a roller coaster that demonstrates the concepts of friction and centrifugal force. Ensuring that these twice-exceptional students (students identified as gifted and talented and also identified with a disability defined by federal and state eligibility criteria) have access to rigorous instruction and knowing how to provide appropriate adaptations and accommodations to make this happen often is problematic.



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When educating twice-exceptional students, the one best practice agreed upon by virtually all of the experts in this field over the past 20 years is that students must have the opportunity to participate in gifted instruction (Baum & Owen, 2004; Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991; Silverman, 1989; Van Tassel-Baska, 1991). The benefits are obvious because this participation allows these students to work at their true cognitive level with their intellectual peers and to develop their abstract reasoning and critical thinking. Ultimately, it will be this development of strengths that leads these students to be successful as they pursue undergraduate and advanced degrees and eventually excel in a career that is based upon their strengths.

In this article, we present *Bordering on Excellence*, a framework and graphic organizational planning tool designed for teachers to use with any instructional material. Through our work over many years with twice-exceptional students, we found that the complexity of these needs, along with the demands of a rigorous curriculum, often seemed insurmountable when working to provide these special students with the appropriate instruction. *Bordering on Excellence* was born out of this need. It allows educators to effectively and efficiently integrate the best practices for appropriate adaptations/accommodations, interventions, and differentiation as they plan instructionally for their students. This tool also can be effective in helping many bright students, with or without learning difficulties and/or those with physical or sensory disabilities, achieve excellence. In her book, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, Tomlinson (1995) wrote that:

At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means

“shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products. (p. 3)

The Big Picture

Understanding the “big picture” in the classroom can be an overwhelming job. In addition to being able to analyze, know, and understand each individual student’s strengths, interests, and needs, teachers are responsible for knowing their school system’s and individual school’s policies and procedures, national standards, curriculum demands and requirements, educational theory, assorted instructional strategies, resources and materials, psychology, and child development. When teachers have twice-exceptional students with learning difficulties in their classrooms, they are further responsible for knowing and understanding the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach, used by some schools to evaluate students with learning disabilities, because they can and do affect school practices.

It is important for teachers to keep this big picture in mind as they provide rigorous and appropriate instruction for these students. This overview includes focusing on the strengths and interests of the student, while providing the necessary instructional adaptations and accommodations, and comprehensive case management. It means the direct teaching of

needed skills such as decoding, note-taking, organization, keyboarding, and the writing process, while at the same time providing for acceleration and enrichment with an emphasis on problem solving, reasoning, and critical thinking. A successful learning environment is one that provides students with choices and opportunities to be involved with open-ended tasks, creating authentic products, multi-sensory experiences, art integration, and choice, to name just a few.

Making Gifted Instruction Accessible to Students With Learning Challenges

Although it is heartwarming for parents to hear that the experts believe twice-exceptional children should be included in gifted education regardless of their learning difficulties, teachers may quickly realize that this practice is easier said than done. For example, how does one include a twice-exceptional student who has a disability in reading and writing when using a nationally recognized program like the William and Mary reading curriculum that stresses advanced reading and writing? Many teachers fear that they must decelerate their gifted instruction in order to make it accessible to their students with learning problems. In actuality, using appropriate adaptations and accommodations will ensure rigorous instruction. Adaptations are modifications in the delivery of instruction or materials used, rather than modification in content, which may affect the fulfillment of curriculum goals (Schumaker & Lenz, 1999). Accommodations allow these students to demonstrate their knowledge without being hindered by the effects of their difficulties. Examples of adaptations and accom-

modations made available through IEP or 504 Plans may include access to computers for writing, books on tape, text to speech software, and extended time for tests. In planning, it is crucial that the teacher consider instructional methods and strategies that either circumvent the student's difficulties or build in the necessary scaffolding to empower the student to be successful with the demands of the assignment (Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Roffman Shevitz, 2006).

Many teachers have found it helpful to use McTighe's (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) diagram of "Learning by Design" to visualize what they are being asked to do when adapting and accommodating a gifted lesson. Teachers are not to change the key concepts, essential understandings, and skills that are the goals of the lesson. What may be changed is how the students will learn the information and how the students will be assessed or will demonstrate what they have learned. To put this idea in its simplest form: reading is not the only way to gain understanding and writing is not the only way to demonstrate understanding. Furthermore, when reading and writing are the goals of the lesson, many accommodations are available that will allow students with deficits in these areas to succeed.

Formal assessments also will provide information about obstacles faced by the student that has instructional implications. Reading and writing demands may not be the only obstacles. Based on our experience, most gifted education presents four potential "stumbling blocks" for smart kids with learning difficulties: **Writing**, **Organization**, **Reading**, and **Memory**, or WORM (Weinfeld et al., 2006).

Listed below are the major issues that are involved with each part of WORM.

Writing

- The physical act of putting words on paper
- Handwriting
- Generating topics
- Combining words into meaningful sentences
- Organizing sentences and incorporating adequate details and support statements into organized paragraphs
- Revising and editing
- Using language mechanics effectively (grammar, punctuation, spelling)

Organization

- Following multistep directions
- Planning the steps needed to complete a task
- Organizing desk, locker, notebook, and other materials
- Locating needed materials
- Breaking long-range assignments into manageable steps
- Prioritizing

Reading

- Decoding unfamiliar words
- Inferring meaning of new words
- Summarizing
- Reading fluently and quickly
- Using textbooks

Memory

- Concentrating and keeping track of information
- Quickly recalling details
- Retrieving details after time has passed

Using the Bordering on Excellence Tool

Acknowledging the view that twice-exceptional students must have

access to gifted instruction, the first step that teachers must accomplish is to analyze their planned instruction to see potential stumbling blocks in the areas of writing, organization, reading, and memory that the lesson may present to their gifted students with learning difficulties. The analysis must include a careful look at students who have either an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that includes goals and objectives, accommodations, and a specific plan for direct instruction, or a 504 Plan that puts into place formal accommodations to be used both in the classroom and in testing situations. After analyzing the lesson, teachers are ready to use the Bordering on Excellence tool to identify interventions that will help remove any stumbling blocks. Based on the research literature, this tool attempts to create the best match of instructional practices, strategies, and interventions for each student. The Bordering on Excellence frames consolidate information for efficient and effective planning and ensure that the adaptations and accommodations in the student's IEP or 504 Plan are implemented.

The Bordering on Excellence frames provide a format for analyzing the needs of specific students, evaluating the obstacles inherent in a lesson, and choosing the appropriate adaptations and accommodations for a specific student or a group of students with similar profiles and needs (see Figure 1 for an example). The frames are applicable not only to gifted students with learning disabilities, but also to gifted students with other exceptionalities. Each bordering frame includes:

- Area of focus: writing, organization, reading, memory
- List of possible stumbling blocks
- Appropriate adaptations and accommodations (including

those from an IEP or 504 Plan) for use within the areas of:

- Instructional Materials
- Teaching/Assessment Methods
- Assistive Technology

The center of the bordering frame is designed so that teachers can list the specific students who require the interventions, record an analysis of the instructional material used, write notes about the parts of the lesson that are likely to present stumbling blocks to students with learning difficulties, or record any other pertinent information the teacher deems essential.

The Bordering on Excellence frame becomes a companion to the instructional materials used in a lesson (e.g., reproducible pages from a workbook, textbooks, teacher's editions, teacher-made worksheets, prompts, guide sheets). Problematic parts of the lesson can be circled or highlighted.

The following steps illustrate how to best use the Bordering on Excellence frames:

1. Use the bordering frame concurrently with the planned lesson and instructional materials.
2. Record name(s) of student(s) who are the focus for the interventions.
3. Write notes about the lesson or instructional materials in the middle of the bordering frame.
4. Highlight the intervention(s) that will remove the stumbling block.
5. Adapt the gifted lesson so that the learning activities and assessments are free from learning obstacles.

Some teachers may choose to rewrite the original lesson plan, while others may use the bordering frame with its highlighted interventions as a way to organize their teaching.

The power of the Bordering on Excellence frames and their ease of

use for teachers are shown in the following scenario.

Ms. Anderson understood the importance of differentiating lessons for her students, and appreciated the planning that went into making it happen. What always got in the way for her was that, when she had a bright kid with an IEP or 504 Plan, the student almost always had difficulty keeping up with the pace of instruction and completing the assignments. Ms. A. felt she never fully met the child's needs so that the youngster could be successful.

When introduced to the Bordering on Excellence frames, she found that they were practical and easy to use and, even more importantly, they provided a way to look at the demands of her lesson, while individually considering the student's needs so as to overcome any obstacles to instruction. The first lesson she attempted was a reading assignment. After regrouping for reading, she assigned *The Secret Garden* to her high-ability learners. Ms. Anderson collected the novel, teacher's guide, Bordering on Excellence frames, and her notes regarding the students in the group. One of the bright students in the group had an IEP because of his learning disabilities. Using the reading frame, Ms. Anderson circled the child's stumbling blocks and annotated the appropriate interventions. She made sure to have the book that the group would be reading on tape acquired from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic or the National Library Service. (These services are designated for individual students who require special devices.) She

structured the lesson so that the student would work in a small group rather than alone to complete the vocabulary and literature webs. She also wrote reminder notes to herself to use as she taught the lesson.

Using the Bordering on Excellence frame for writing, she again circled the child's stumbling blocks and annotated the appropriate interventions: she made sure she had the computer, word-predictive software, and a tape recorder available for the child to use when completing the assignment; she conferenced with the child after meeting with the reading group, went over the steps of the assignment, broke the assignment into smaller, manageable parts, altered some of the written requirements, and shared the rubric.

With the appropriate adaptations and accommodations, the child completed the assignment successfully and, with his intellectual peers, worked with advanced materials and rigorous instruction.

Teachers who have seen and used the frames have recognized how they can provide help when struggling to manage the instruction of twice-exceptional students. In particular, students in a graduate program reported that the frames were beneficial when trying to provide access to rigorous instruction for their students.

Conclusion

The Bordering on Excellence frame is offered as a valuable tool for many reasons. It clearly lists, in one page, the potential stumbling blocks

and the appropriate adaptations and accommodations teachers can use for many students with special needs. At the same time, the key concepts and essential understandings of advanced materials are not compromised. Because the teacher has recorded on the bordering frame the analysis of a student's needs and the specific interventions used when teaching a lesson, the bordering frame itself is evidence that differentiation and IEP or 504 Plan goals for students have been addressed. For those schools using RTI, the frame is a starting resource for determining student responsiveness to instructional strategies, adaptations, and accommodations, and a means of charting the student's own relative progress. The bordering frame also can be effectively used during parent-teacher or teacher-teacher conferences to communicate how rigorous instruction is delivered to students, and in building self-advocacy skills with students.

The importance of overcoming obstacles to learning and of providing appropriate adaptations and accommodations for twice-exceptional students can be found throughout the literature (Barton & Starnes, 1989; Cline & Schwartz, 1999; National Association for Gifted Children, 1998; Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Shevitz, 2002, 2005; Weinfeld et al., 2006). However, time is a limited commodity for educators who face greater and greater responsibilities for ensuring student success. A dynamic tool like *Bordering on Excellence* offers teachers and coordinators responsible for gifted instruction an effective and efficient way to annotate, correlate, and combine essential information when addressing the needs of children. The many uses of this tool are transferable and applicable to a variety of planning, conferencing, and implementation

Bordering on Excellence Frame Example

Adaptations/Accommodations		
WRITING		
Possible Stumbling Blocks		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the physical act of putting words on paper • handwriting • generating topics • formulating topic sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • combining words into meaningful sentences • using language mechanics effectively (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organizing sentences and incorporating adequate details and support statements into organized paragraphs • revising and editing
<p style="text-align: center;">Instructional Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • step-by-step written directions • a proofreading check-list • scoring rubrics, models, and anchor papers for students to evaluate their own work • graphic organizers • guides such as story starters, webs, story charts, outlines • dictionaries, word banks, and thesauri • personal dictionaries of misused and misspelled words • highlighter to indicate errors/corrections • copy of teacher notes or of another student's notes (NCR paper) • pencil grips • paper with raised lines • mechanical pencils • slant board 	<p style="text-align: center;">NOTES:</p> <p>-5 students with difficulties in writing</p> <p>-written production required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • literature webs (2 chapters) • vocabulary webs (2 words) • change matrix with specific evidence • written reflections <p>-I will need to address the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stumbling blocks (circled) • interventions (circled) • technology (circled) <p>-make sure students have access to computers/software</p> <p>-concerned with Johnny</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • great ideas, but poor production • doesn't have good computer skills • needs to be able to dictate ideas on tape or to an adult for transcription • needs to be able to use computer with word-predictive software 	<p style="text-align: center;">Teaching/Assessment Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on content rather than mechanics • focus on quality rather than quantity • begin with storyboards, guided imagery, dramatization, or projects before the writing process • set important purposes for writing, such as writing for publication, writing to an expert, or writing to a famous person • allow students to write in area of interest or expertise • allow students to demonstrate understanding through alternative methods/products • reduce or alter written requirements • break down assignments into smaller, manageable parts • additional time • work with partners or small groups to confer for revising, editing, and proofreading
Assistive Technology		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voice recognition software • organizational software • electronic spellers and dictionaries • tape recorder for student dictation and then transcription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • computer word processor with spelling and grammar checker or talking word processor • portable keyboards • word prediction software 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • programs that allow writing to be read aloud • programs that provide for audio spell checker, word prediction, and homophone distinction

Figure 1. *Bordering on Excellence* frame example.

Note. From *Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties: Overcoming Obstacles and Realizing Potential* (p. 114), by R. Weinfeld, L. Barnes-Robinson, S. Jeweler, and B. Roffman Shevitz, 2006, Waco, TX: Prufrock Press. Copyright © 2006 by Prufrock Press. Reprinted with permission.

situations including in-service and preservice opportunities. *Bordering on Excellence* is not only a frame, but also a framework that helps pro-

vide students with access to rigorous instruction and specifies strategies that obviate academic weaknesses. The bordering frame helps teachers extend

their students' personal borders into the realm of excellence! **GCT**

Resources

Print Resources

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room: Strategies and techniques every teacher can use to meet the academic needs of the gifted and talented. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Web Sites

- The Association for the Gifted
<http://www.cectag.org>
- 2e (Twice-Exceptional) Newsletter
<http://www.2enewsletter.com>
- Children and Adults With Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
<http://www.chadd.org>
- Council for Exceptional Children
<http://www.cec.sped.org>
- The Gifted With Learning Differences Educational Network
<http://www.gtlidnetwork.org>
- LD Online
<http://www.ldonline.org>
- National Association for Gifted Children
<http://www.nagc.org>
- NLD on the Web!
<http://www.nldontheweb.org>

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