

11 PRACTICAL WAYS

TO GUIDE TEACHERS TOWARD DIFFERENTIATION

(and an evaluation tool)

BY CAROLYN CHAPMAN AND RITA KING

Differentiated instruction adapts learning to the students' unique differences. The strategies and activities are student-centered, based on readiness, planned with flexible grouping designs, and changed as needed to meet the needs of all learners. These personalized experiences give students access to all of the information and skills they can assimilate in their learning journeys.

Differentiated instruction focuses on the diverse needs of the individual learners. The first step in developing a differentiated instructional program is to provide an introduction to the philosophy and an overview of the benefits for learners. After the introductory

phase, teachers need to identify existing practices that effectively differentiate instruction.

Next, teachers can engage in reflection and discussion. The following statements and suggestions may help guide improvement sessions:

- What areas need to be improved?
- How can we strengthen our strongest areas for continuous growth?
- How can we strengthen our weakest areas?
- Which components need to be deleted?
- What areas require more professional development and training?

- What do individual teachers need to become more responsive to the unique needs of learners?

Staff developers, curriculum specialists, administrators, and teachers must build a repertoire of common terminology. A few phrases and terms related to differentiated instruction can serve as discussion points. As specific needs and goals are identified, the list can be adapted for growth and planning.

1. KNOW THE STANDARDS.

■ Rationale

Standards provide the base for teachers to use in planning cus-

CAROLYN CHAPMAN is an educational consultant and trainer. You can contact her at Creative Learning Connection, P.O. Box 572, Thomson, GA 39824, (706) 597-0706, fax (706) 597-0705, e-mail: cchapman@csranet.com.

RITA KING is an educational consultant and trainer. You can contact her at King Learning Associates, 2187 Oak Hill Drive, Murfreesboro, TN 37130, (615) 848-8439, fax (615) 896-7205, e-mail: kings@bellsouth.net.

tomized learning opportunities. Teachers strategically select the standard for each lesson. They interweave the strategies and activities to teach it.

Teachers often begin with standards that can be easily tied to strategies and activities that match their own intelligences, learning styles, and modalities. For example, a teacher with an affinity for music is apt to select standards that can be taught through musical experiences.

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Ask teachers to bring a list of the standards they use to a professional development session. Provide each participant with green, yellow, and red markers. Use directions similar to the following for teachers to analyze their knowledge and effectiveness with each standard:

1. Place a green dot by the standards you teach effectively.
2. Place a yellow dot by the standards that need more emphasis.
3. Place a red dot by the standards not addressed.

A majority of the marks will be green. The yellow and red marks identify the standards that need more emphasis. Encourage teachers to keep the list in their planning book or in a visible place so they can change the yellow and red dots to green as they become more confident and effective in teaching these standards.

Give teachers time to write each yellow and red standard on a sticky note. This makes it convenient for them to select a standard that needs more emphasis in their lessons.

2. VARY INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES.

■ **Rationale**

A variety of novel, stimulating strategies and activities will intrigue and challenge minds. Learning experiences must be planned to entice students with exciting, meaningful content. The learner must be guided to

create relevant, personal connections to each lesson. When uniqueness and novelty are evident, students are more likely to focus on the lesson. More students grasp information and adapt it when their learning styles, modalities, intelligences, and interests are engaged.

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Ask grade-level or subject-area teams to choose an upcoming unit that needs more variety in instructional strategies to meet diverse learner needs. When the group meets, have members brainstorm to identify a variety of instructional strategies and activities to teach a standard. Ask them to write each idea on a sticky note. When the group has generated many possibilities, have members choose the most practical and effective approaches. They can identify the multiple intelligences, learning styles, or modalities addressed in the strategy or activity. For example, list the eight intelligences (verbal/linguistic; musical/rhythmic; logical/mathematical; bodily/kinesthetic; visual/spatial; naturalist; intrapersonal; interpersonal) across the top of a large sheet of paper to create columns. Place the sticky note with a strategy beneath the intelligence it addresses. If the strategy uses a movement activity, the sticky note is placed in the bodily/kinesthetic column. When each strategy is placed in the appropriate column, it is easy to identify the overused and omitted intelligences.

3. CREATE A LEARNING CLIMATE.

■ **Rationale**

A differentiated classroom provides a safe, inviting environment. Learners are respected and made to feel that they are special. They know their errors will become learning opportunities. Risk taking is promoted. Success is celebrated.

An effective, personalized climate is designed to motivate, challenge,

and stimulate each student's desire to improve and to know more. The visuals convey the content and skills from recent teaching and learning. Displays of work reflect differentiated instruction and personalized learning opportunities. Areas are designated for learning stations or centers. Desks and tables are conducive to partner and small group work. The room feels like a special place to learn.

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Take a classroom tour with teachers when students are not present. Use the following questions as a guide for discussions:

- How is student work displayed?
- Can you tell what the students are learning?
- How is the environment student-focused?
- How would students feel about the environment?
- Would you want your child in this room? Why or why not?

4. EXHIBIT "WITHITNESS."

■ **Rationale**

"Withit" teachers exhibit a passion for teaching. They instill a love of learning. They know that their own attitudes determine the students' learning achievement. These teachers show they care and make each class member feel that he or she is a valuable part of the diverse learning culture. These special educators create a rapport with the class and often become a legend in the students' lives.

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Use an activity similar to the following to focus on the value of "withitness."

Form interest or grade-level teams and give the following directions:

- Write your definition for "withitness" at the top of a sheet of paper.
- Draw an outline of your hand in the center of the paper.

- Brainstorm with your group to answer: What are the obstacles that keep a teacher from exhibiting “withitness”? Record responses outside the hand outline.
- Think of teachers you know who demonstrate “withitness.” What characteristics do these educators possess? Write these characteristics inside the hand outline.
- Discuss the value of developing the characteristics for “withitness” that are within the teachers’ hands.

5. PROVIDE A WIDE VARIETY OF MATERIALS AND RESOURCES.

■ Rationale

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher selects materials and resources to coordinate the learners’ knowledge, ability levels, and interests. The teacher creates productive problem solvers and thinkers while challenging and stimulating minds in novel ways. The selected materials provide successful experiences for learners.

■ Professional development opportunity

Teachers must select materials and resources wisely to teach what is needed and necessary. Beware of purchasing one program, because a variety of materials are needed to meet the different needs of the students. Remember one program or set of materials does not fit the needs of all learners.

Lead a session related to the materials and resources needed for teaching and learning in a differentiated program. Form subject-area or grade-level teams. In those teams, ask teachers to:

- Brainstorm the materials and resources needed to more effectively differentiate in the classroom;
- Make a list of major needs based on group consensus; and
- Prioritize the materials and resources to fit immediate and long-term purchasing goals.

HOW TO BE A CATALYST FOR DIFFERENTIATION

The following acrostic provides a way to view the key components of differentiated instruction. Staff developers can personalize this list by allowing time for grade-level teams or interest groups to develop an acrostic that describes their differentiated classroom.

Determine the standards to be taught.

Identify student needs with strong assessment tools before, during, and after learning.

Formulate plans that link the targeted standards with individual needs.

Find effective strategies and activities to teach the information.

Engage students in activities that employ their interests and the ways they learn.

Relate learning to the students’ worlds.

Encourage risk taking with wise choices.

Nurture the social and emotional aspects of the students.

Target the learners’ needs with flexible grouping designs.

Ignite each student’s desire to learn.

Address assignments to match the learner’s abilities, knowledge levels, and interests.

Tailor lessons with student-focused activities.

Entice and ignite lifelong learners.

Plan sessions devoted to identifying businesses and individuals who could be sources for donations of the materials and resources.

Provide time for teachers to create centers and stations based on the diverse needs of their students.

6. KNOW THE STUDENTS.

■ Rationale

Teachers must learn as much

about each student as possible.

Improved understanding of individual students helps guide teachers’ decision making to match appropriate materials and strategies to meet each learner’s needs.

■ Professional development opportunity

Give teachers professional planning time periodically throughout the year. Ask teachers to plan strategically to know each student. They may spend time developing appropriate, user-friendly inventories and surveys to identify the learner’s experiences, likes, dislikes, and interests. They use the results to guide students to make links and connections between the learning and their world. Affording teachers time for planning differentiated experiences allows teachers to develop vital information for linking information to students’ lives and to provide choices.

7. ASSESS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE LEARNING.

■ Rationale

A strong preassessment is an essential tool. An informal or formal assessment tool identifies the students’ knowledge base, prior experiences, and interests related to the standard or topic. Teachers identify this information one or two weeks before planning a lesson to be able to effectively and strategically meet the needs of a specific group of learners.

Before a new topic is introduced, teachers should ask:

- What do students know?
- What can they do?
- What are their interests in the topic?

Continuing to assess and diagnose the learner during instruction is crucial. Teachers must use tools and strategies to find the reasons students are not performing to their potential and then select strategies based on the diagnosis for each learner to overcome obstacles. Effective assessments are ongoing and differentiated to meet

the needs and the purposes of the learning. Assessments used during learning identify what must be retaught to fill gaps in students' understanding.

Post-assessments show evidence of mastery and the parts that need further development and understanding. Following a lesson, the teacher knows the information was taught, but must consider key questions, such as, "Did the student learn the information? Is the student able to use the ideas, skills, or concepts in the real world?"

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Share varied assessment tools, both formal and informal, so teachers have a list of tools to use. Have a make-and-take session for creating materials for instant use.

8. ADJUST ASSIGNMENTS.

■ **Rationale**

Teachers must adjust assignments according to the student's needs, knowledge base, and interests:

- One group of students has high interest in the topic and knows the information. The lessons may be boring and redundant for these

RESOURCES

- *Differentiated Assessment Strategies: One Tool Doesn't Fit All*, by Carolyn Chapman and Rita King. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004.
- *Differentiated Instructional Strategies: One Size Doesn't Fit All*, by Gayle Gregory and Carolyn Chapman. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2001.
- *Differentiated Instructional Strategies for Reading in the Content Areas*, by Carolyn Chapman and Rita King. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003.
- *Differentiated Instructional Strategies for Writing in the Content Areas*, by Carolyn Chapman and Rita King. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003.

learners. They need an alternative assignment that will entice and

challenge them. A contract, a different agenda, or a project may be assigned.

- Another group of students may be ready for the new information. These learners have the proper knowledge base and background and are ready to learn the standard.
- A third group of students may not have adequate background or knowledge about the skill or topic. These students are not ready for the information. Provisions must be made in the plan to fill the gaps in their knowledge.

■ **Professional development opportunity**

Groups of teachers identify a standard or concept that is difficult to teach because of students' diverse knowledge base. The teachers brainstorm the learning required by different levels. (Students will be identified by their classroom teacher as novice, approaching mastery, or high level of mastery.) Teachers fill in the learning gaps and brainstorm ways to teach each group so each student is challenged.

THE DIFFERENTIATED CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM

TOOL

Check the appropriate box next to each item. Use the comment box to provide ideas for improvement in specific areas. If the form is completed during multiple observations, use tally marks. Review the results with the teacher as soon as possible to identify specific areas for improvement and to praise strengths.

Teacher: _____ | Grade Level/Subject Area: _____ | Observer: _____ | Date: _____

	Evidence of Implementation			
	Often	Sometimes	Little or no	Comments
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT				
Presents an inviting, relaxed environment for learning.				
Provides comfortable desks and work areas.				
Contains individual, designated personal spaces for extra books and other items.				
Is designed for quick and easy groupings of tables and chairs.				
Is arranged for teacher and student movement during work sessions.				
Provides work areas for individual needs, including knowledge/ability levels.				
Reflects current content or skills through student displays and artifacts.				
TEACHER BEHAVIORS				
Works with total groups, individuals, and small groups.				
Monitors individuals and small groups.				
Uses a variety of ongoing assessment tools such as checklists, surveys, and anecdotal records.				
Applies assessment information to guide instruction.				
Addresses academic, emotional, social, and physical student needs.				
Provides time for students to actively process information.				
Gives specific feedback to individuals and/or small groups.				
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT				
Exhibits on-task behavior while working alone.				
Works effectively in small groups.				
Works on their individual knowledge or ability levels.				
Uses materials/resources on the student's own level of success.				
Feels respected and emotionally safe.				
Uses self-discipline.				
MATERIALS/RESOURCES				
Include a variety of reading levels related to the subject or topic.				
Are accessible to students.				
Support the standards and topic.				
Are age-appropriate.				
Are up-to-date.				
Are available in an adequate number for the class size.				
Include appropriate reference sources and materials.				
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES				
Uses a variety of assessment tools before, during, and after learning.				
Uses a variety of instructional strategies and activities to teach standards.				
Meets the diverse needs of learners.				
Engages students in various flexible grouping designs.				
Uses centers and/or stations for individual and small group instruction.				
Engages students with projects and/or problems-solving activities.				
Presents students with choices in learning activities.				

9. PLAN STUDENT-FOCUSED OPPORTUNITIES.

■ Rationale

In student-focused activities, assignments meet individual needs and interests. Learning experiences are designed to fit the student's intelligences, learning styles, modalities, and interests. Several instructional techniques accomplish this task, including centers, labs, stations, agendas, menus, choice boards, cooperative learning, and contracts.

■ Professional development opportunity

Ask teachers to select one differentiated strategy, design, or model for a focus in a professional development session. Provide an overview and study of the selected area. Form interest groups to develop strategies and activities for the selected area of focus. If teachers select choice boards, they need to become familiar with various designs for the boards. Each interest group can create activities for specific units or topics of study. The activities can be compiled and copied so everyone has a choice board packet.

10. USE FLEXIBLE GROUPING DESIGNS.

■ Rationale

Flexible grouping designs are vital components in planning for differentiated instruction. The acronym TAPS — T=Total groups, A=Alone, P=Partners, and S=Small groups (Gregory & Chapman, 2001) — helps teachers understand ways to engage learners. Using a variety of these group designs allows students to move according to their demonstrated performances, interests, and varied knowledge levels.

Each student needs experiences in all grouping designs. Instruction planned with a variety of grouping scenarios taps into the learner's potential, allowing students to learn how to work both independently and in different groups.

ADAPT THE TOOL

Use the sample observation form on p. 24 to assess differentiation in action before, during, or after implementing. It may be adapted for use by a:

- Teacher;
- Peer-to-peer coach;
- Administrator;
- Supervisor or curriculum specialist;
- Staff developer.

■ Professional development opportunity

Using two weeks of completed lesson plans, have teachers review each activity and assignment and label the grouping scenarios according to the TAPS used. For example, if a student read a passage independently and then shared what he or she learned from the passage, the activity is labeled AP. Teachers can chart the results and readily identify overuse or omission of grouping scenarios.

11. KNOW CHANGE IS GRADUAL.

■ Rationale

Staff developers, curriculum specialists, and administrators must remember that change comes gradually. In their leadership and coaching roles, they also must differentiate their approaches to guide teachers on paths to differentiation. Each teacher is unique in professional knowledge, experiences, and interest in implementing this philosophy.

Teachers often experience dissonance when asked to replace teaching beliefs with new approaches. In this state, they cling to familiar, successful practices as they become aware of their need to change. Teachers will embrace a differentiated program when they realize that it leads to more successful experiences for students.

■ Professional development opportunity

Make long-term, professional development opportunities available on the topic of differentiation, including professional learning sessions, courses, and faculty meetings focused on related issues. Remember that implementing a differentiated instructional program is a growing process. Some ideas are:

1. In newsletters and morning announcements, present tips, new activities, strategies, and novel ways to differentiate.
2. Guide teachers as they individually create a T-chart for self-analysis and goal setting related to implementing differentiation. To create a T-chart:
 - a. In the first column, have teachers list the strategies or approaches they currently use effectively.
 - b. In the second column, record strategies or approaches that need to be implemented or accomplished.
 - c. Prioritize the second column items to set goals for further growth.
 - d. Record steps needed to accomplish the first two goals to create a plan for immediate improvement.
3. Establish a book study of differentiated strategies and approaches. Share the most practical ideas derived from each study session. Staff developers and administrators become catalysts for differentiation when they exhibit their knowledge, energy, and enthusiasm for the philosophy. Their support and praise for each teacher's efforts to focus on the needs of individual students will lead to differentiation as a reality.

REFERENCE

Gregory, G. & Chapman, C. (2001). *Differentiated instructional strategies: One size doesn't fit all.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ■