

Putting It All Together: High School Examples

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ERIN SWANSON, NORTH CAROLINA '02

9th Grade English

TEACHING TO THE MIDDLE

I think I realized the importance of differentiated instruction at institute. Over our summer training, I taught math and science to 6th graders, many of who were English language learners. I had a difficult time, and I remember constantly wishing I were better equipped to

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teach students on such varied levels of language – never mind math/science – proficiency.

My students here in North Carolina, where I teach 9th grade English, are equally on different levels. Probably 25% of my students should be in our honors level class (but they are not) and probably 25% should be receiving special services in an EC (exceptional children) class. The first semester of

my first year, although I realized I should be differentiating my instruction, I couldn't/didn't (you probably recognize that feeling of wanting to but not feeling like you could...). What did I do instead? I did the dreaded "teaching to the middle." At the end of that first semester, I assessed my students' growth and my own feelings about the semester and I knew I wasn't reaching all of my students.

SMALL STEPS FORWARD

The second semester of my first year of teaching, I started to take small steps forward to avoid the dreaded "middle." I started by strategically grouping my students in collaborative groups. I got the idea for strategic grouping by going and observing other teachers – even teachers who taught subjects other than English – and talking to my Program Director, who shared a packet on differentiation with me. Here are some specific examples of how I have used grouping to meet my students where they are:

- I group students in **homogenous groups** based on reading level and have them rotate through stations set up around the room. One day, the objective was to identify, compare, and contrast different rhetorical devices in Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream*

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speech. It was important to group students homogeneously for this task because I wanted all students to be able to work at an appropriate pace for them. I have found that struggling readers really need more time to process written text, and this gave them an opportunity to do that. Now, you may be wondering, “So were the advanced students just twiddling their thumbs waiting to move to the next station?” Good question. The answer is no, because I had extension activities that students were required to complete at each station if they completed the basic objective. That is one thing about homogenous grouping – you have to plan for students that will complete things at different times.

- When reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I grouped students in **heterogeneous groups** based on reading level and asked each group to find examples of figurative language in a particular section that we had already read. This was a group competition, with the goal of finding as many examples as possible. Everyone was expected – and able – to contribute a few examples of figurative language, especially since everyone had already read the text and had opportunity to come to a basic understanding of it.

Hopefully you can see the rationale to my grouping: if there is a process to go through, a skill that needs to be learned in steps, or a text that has to be read for the first time, I usually group students homogeneously so they can work at an appropriate pace; if the task involves digging deeper into a text that we have already read, or a group challenge, I usually group students heterogeneously so they can learn from each other. While these flexible groups are probably the corner stone of my differentiation, I also use other, relatively simple strategies that differentiate either the learning “process” or the “product”:

- I **give some students more concrete support than others**. For example, in one lesson I wanted students to match words with their definitions when we were learning vocabulary that had to do with tone, such as *forlorn*, *incredulous*, and *timid*. Some students had to use their previous knowledge of prefixes, roots, and suffixes to determine the correct definition, while other students were asked to try that for a few minutes, but then were given a dictionary when they had done all they could.
- I also might **provide or require some students to make tangible tools**. For example, if students have flashcards with literary terms in front of them during a lecture or group discussion, they are more likely to grasp the concepts we are exploring.
- I may **require a difference in quantity, especially to build the confidence** of struggling students. If students are working on a piece of writing, and I’m assessing a certain number of skills (correct punctuation, varied sentence structure, and strong verb use, for example) I would assess my advanced students on *all* of those skills and tell them my expectations up front. For groups of students who are struggling, I would tell them to only focus on correct punctuation and varied sentence structure – the most crucial learning goals. I do this on an individual student level as well. For example, I have a student who has been labeled as severely learning disabled. He is very intelligent, but he has been told for so long that he is not good at English that he believes it. To build his confidence, he needs to be pushed to

(A struggling student is) allowed to focus on quality over quantity, and receives recognition for progress that in turn builds confidence for more challenging tasks.

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take one small step forward, and to experience success in that, before he can be pushed to take many steps forward. So, if I ask students to write three sentences about something, I will quietly tell him to write one sentence – but one perfect sentence (in terms of basic grammar and punctuation). He is therefore allowed to focus on quality over quantity, and receives recognition for progress that in turn builds confidence for more challenging tasks.

- I **keep a portfolio for each student** that allows the student and me to assess progress over time. These portfolios obviously look very different for each student, and they don't require a ton of time for me to maintain. About once a month, we'll choose one piece of writing to make a copy of and place in the portfolio.
- I allow **students to work toward the learning goal they think is right for them**. With "tiered, or layered, assignments," students can pick the grade they want to work towards. For example, when grading on a 5 point rubric, I tell students that if they want to get an A, they should shoot to meet the criteria in the 5th column for each skill. If they want a B, they should reach the criteria in column 4. I talked to a science teacher who was doing this with analysis of experimental results, and at first I honestly wasn't sure how I felt about this strategy – did I really want students to "settle" for an 80%? However, I tried it with our *Romeo and Juliet* papers, in which students had to write a five-paragraph essay on a character in the play. I told students that a solid 5-paragraph essay (of course, I defined what "solid" meant) would earn them an 80%. If they added a visual component, such as a diagram, chart, collage, etc. they could get up to a 90%. If they added the recitation of a short monologue to those two pieces, they could get a 100%. My Pre-AP students actually suggested criteria for a 110% essay, which was to write a comparative analysis of the theme of *Romeo and Juliet* and the theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, rather than a basic 5-paragraph essay. I was pleasantly surprised, because the majority of the students picked the level that was most appropriate to them. This process, and their final papers, made me realize the importance of allowing students to set goals for themselves. For many of my students, an 80% was a great grade and it was a huge achievement to write the basic 5-paragraph essay. When students set a goal for themselves and reach it, their confidence grows and they are more likely to reach higher the next time.

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Of course, none of these strategies would work without a few basic things in place in my classroom – namely, a solid understanding of my curriculum, the knowledge of where my students are in terms of literacy skills, and effective classroom management. Let me explain in more detail.

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PRE-REQUISITES TO TAKING THOSE SMALL STEPS

As you have hopefully discovered, a strong understanding of the learning goals you are working toward with your students is key to good teaching. There is no way I could create tiered assignments that were meaningful if I didn't know the most critical objectives for my

There is no way I could create meaningful tiered assignments if I didn't know the most critical objectives for my grade level.

grade level. My suggestion: take some time to really look at your standards and boil them down into the key skills for the year. The clarity that process will bring you will be a huge bonus for your instruction in general, never mind your ability to differentiate.

I also need to have a clear profile of each student's reading and writing ability. This is something that I gather at the beginning of the semester in a variety of ways. Before the first day, I look back at each student's scores on the 8th grade end of course exam. (This is something that I find incredibly helpful, and most people just don't know it can be done). I create my own reading diagnostic by cutting and pasting comprehension passages and questions from old End-of-Course tests at the 9th grade level. I create a writing diagnostic by asking students to respond to a basic prompt and grading it with a rubric. In addition to assessing basic skills, I also ask students about their learning styles using a learning style inventory. This information not only reminds me to help students to access information in a variety of different ways (reading a story themselves, sometimes reading it aloud to them or using a tape, sometimes watching a movie based on the book too, etc.) but it helps me be strategic in assigning both heterogeneous and homogenous groups.

Certainly, another key is classroom management. Before I could ever put my students in cooperative learning groups, I had to be sure that students knew exactly what I expected of them during that time. For example:

- When we transition into groups, we have set systems for moving furniture. I have numbers that hang from the ceiling, so group 1 knows to arrange their desks directly under the number 1, with desks facing to the left and right.
- Students can't move around the room unless they have permission first. When the timer rings (or when the music shuts off, if we are doing something that can have music in the background) then they must move to the next station in the way we practiced.
- If you're working in a group and you have a question, it is "group first, teacher second." That means you have to see if your group members can answer the question first, and if they don't know it, you can raise your hand and I will come help you. Yelling my name across the room won't work, and if you see me working with another group, skip the problem, keep working, and I'll get to you as soon as I can.
- If you finish the assignment early, you have to begin the provided extension activity.

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Certainly, systems and clear expectations for behavior will help you integrate differentiation strategies that require more movement and small group work. When I say clear expectations for behavior, I also mean behavior in terms of how students think of and speak to one another about being on different levels and doing different assignments.

EFFECT ON CLASSROOM CULTURE

I have never had a conflict between students due to my differentiation strategies, but I think

I have an open dialogue with my students...there are times when everyone is “the advanced kid” and times when everyone needs additional support.

that is because I am up front with my students from the beginning. I use myself as an example. I put a math problem up on the board (because I am not so good at math!) and I take a long time to figure it out. The whole time I am struggling with the problem, I say to my students, “Ms. Swanson often struggles with math...she needs extra time to complete a problem like this, and maybe even extra help...can anyone in here give her some tips for how to solve this?” I have an open dialogue with my students about

how everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, and that there are times when everyone is “the advanced kid” and times when everyone needs additional support. Once that understanding was in place, I can determine if the specific differentiation strategy I’m using needs to be explained, or if I don’t need to even mention it. For example, I have a student in my class who is repeating English for the second semester in a row. In a matter of fact manner, I told students that he had already read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and so would be doing an independent study on a different book. That situation seemed to warrant an explanation, whereas many others don’t, given the precedent that was initially set. And honestly, I don’t think my students notice all that much – if you asked them to explain the differentiation that occurs in my classroom, they would probably only say, “well, sometimes we do different things in different groups...”

The result of avoiding “middle of the road” instruction has had a powerful effect on my class. My high level students rarely talk about being bored – instead, those that need an extra challenge are in fact challenged. I’m not talking over the heads of students who struggle. This has been so important to the atmosphere of my classroom – relationships are more positive, students are more motivated, and student achievement has gone up. And it all began with me making an attempt during my second semester.

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YOU, TOO, CAN TAKE SMALL STEPS FORWARD

I bet I can list the things that keep you from trying to differentiate your instruction, as they are probably the same things that held me back: time. materials. resources. knowledge about how to do it. You hear people say, “You should differentiate.” You think, “I have *no idea* how to do that.” I was there, and I still feel like I am learning how to do this.

But I started, and you can too. Try grouping, try stations, try giving some kids a dictionary and some not. Don’t feel pressured to do it until you have your classroom management at a reasonable level. If you are on a semester schedule, differentiate a lesson or lesson format the second time around. If you aren’t on a semester schedule, I bet you are already comfortable enough with certain “types” of lessons to try to differentiate those. Also, seek out a colleague to do this with. You might think teachers around you aren’t differentiating, but they are probably doing it more than you realize, they just might not call it “differentiation.”

You hear people say, “You should differentiate.” You think, “I have no idea how to do that at all.” I was there...But I started, and you can too.

As I’m sure you know, our job is to ensure each of our students moves forward so he or she is better set up to succeed in life. If students need slightly different support, slightly different learning goals, or a slightly different path to get there, it is your job to provide that to them. Just remember, you can provide different support, goals, or paths in a *small* way first.

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P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

ROB LoPICCOLO, SOUTH LOUISIANA '999th Grade Physical Science

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

I knew from the beginning of my teaching experience that differentiation was important. Students come to you from different educational backgrounds and cultures with different ability levels, learning styles, and interests. I mean, it makes sense, right? With differentiation, there was no “aha!” moment for me, no light bulb turning on. I knew it was something I needed to do to “meet the needs of all my students,” but it just seemed like too daunting and too heavy a task. I had 150 kids – how was I supposed to “meet the needs of *all* my students”? I bet you’re feeling the same way, and it is probably because people have *told* you that differentiation is daunting and hard. I heard that from people at institute. Veteran teachers at my school told me the same thing. And as a first year teacher, I believed them all.

What happened, you ask? I couldn’t get all of my students to complete their assignments on a regular basis. Many complained the work was too hard. Other said it was too boring. Students would get off task and behavior would spiral downward. In general, student self-esteem and motivation seemed low.

A lot of what had been holding me back turned out to be myths. I discovered that differentiation does not mean making 150 different lesson plans every day. It doesn't even mean figuring out 150 different ways to teach your one lesson plan every day.

I knew something needed to change. While I had been too daunted by the thought of differentiation, I knew my students were essentially crying out for it. And you know what? A lot of what had been holding me back turned out to be myths. I discovered that differentiation does *not* mean making 150 different lesson plans every day. It doesn’t even mean figuring out 150 different ways to teach your *one* lesson plan every day. The truth was, differentiation was not as tough to do as I had been told (or at least as I had “heard” – perhaps I had a selective filter on...).

I realized that differentiation *does* mean meeting students where they are and figuring out the best learning pathway to get each student to where they need to be. But we’re still not talking about 150 different pathways here. Students can be grouped in efficient ways: perhaps by ability level, reading comprehension skill, interest, or learning style. You can look at an objective and consider the most strategic way to group students as you work toward that objective – thus allowing you to differentiate fairly efficiently. I found that effective differentiation can also involve a lot of student choice – so you might create a lot of different pathways for students, but you let them choose the way that seems right for them.

THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND MY DIFFERENTIATION: STUDENT CHOICE

I’ll be honest – I’m a fairly repetitive teacher. When I present a new concept or skill, students hear me explain it, they see me do it, they see a picture or it, they watch a demo, they read about it, they investigate the concept themselves, etc. I give multiple, natural, opportunities

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for students to come to their own understanding. For example, I recently put students in heterogeneous groups and asked them to build the various kinds of circuits we had been learning about. Students got to the end goal – the ability to build circuits in parallel and in series – in a variety of ways. Some kids needed to reproduce the circuits based on a picture. Others wanted to just play around with it and form them by trial and error. Other students exclaimed, “I don’t get it!” and so I sat with them and made up an analogy about rivers and bridges to illustrate the differences between parallel and series circuits to them.

Note that I had not sat down for an hour and planned out these various options; instead, I am always flexible in how I let my kids explore a concept and get to the end goal. I’ve found that by encouraging “self-differentiation,” students can become exposed to the information in a way they are comfortable with. Who has control over how information is explored is a huge factor in how quickly and how deeply students learn the information.

Giving students a choice in how to process new information and how to prove mastery of that information is really my number one differentiation “strategy” – and actually that isn’t even a strategy with a template you can use, but more of my philosophy of teaching.

Giving students a choice in how to process new information and how to prove mastery of that information is really my number one differentiation “strategy” – and actually that isn’t even a strategy with a template you can use, but more of my philosophy of teaching. Not only do I allow students to self-select during practice time, but I also do this on

assessments. Here’s a small example: for the circuits question on our recent test, I wrote three different questions. Students had to pick one of the questions and answer it. The most challenging question was worth the most points. It is easy for me to write three different questions; it would be hard to write three different tests and determine which test to give to which student. But because I never assess my students until they have proven they have gotten it during independent practice, I knew all of my students could draw and build simple circuits. During class time, we did a circuit challenge where I kept goading them to build more complicated ones: “Show me how good you are at this...you got that one, but can you do this one?” “Who wants to try this even harder one?” By the time we got to the test, students were like, “I’m going to show him!” Students who *could* do the hardest one usually chose to do that one, while students who had a perfectly solid, but more basic, understanding of circuits typically completed the easiest one.

MR. LP’S LEARNING CAFÉ

Another differentiation strategy I use a lot in my classroom is similar to a personal agenda, or list of assignments that students can choose from and complete over the course of a unit. When I begin a unit, I have all of the objectives for the unit determined (more on that below). I use those objectives to create a “menu” for Mr. LP’s Learning Café. That menu is divided up into sections – appetizers, soups and salads, entrées, desserts. Then, there are specials that have different combinations of those “courses.” One special might have 1 appetizer, 2 soup and salads, 1 entrée and no dessert. Another might be 2 appetizers, 1 soup and salad, and 1 dessert. Each course is worth a certain amount of points, and each special adds up to the same total.

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The trick is that each “course” type represents either a different learning style or a different level of ability. For example, when we are doing a unit that requires a lot of calculations, an appetizer might be 15-20 practice problems. Students who struggle with math will definitely be given a special that requires them to do that first, so they have the opportunity to build their skills and confidence before they move to the higher level of the “soup and salad.”

The beautiful part of the menu strategy is that I can implement it in many different ways. Sometimes I assign specific kids specific specials in a very purposeful way – and I tell them

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that (although of course not by holding up a big banner that says, “you are doing something different”). Other times, I do it “randomly” – that is, I have a handful of colored index cards that represent each special. I pass them out and then announce, “If you got a red card you are doing special #3”...but I have ordered them already in the way I’m passing them out, so it isn’t random at all. And, sometimes I let students self-select their special. When students are allowed to self-select, however, they must go over their objective sheet, find the skills they still need to demonstrate mastery of, and find the corresponding pieces on the menu.

Student choice carries through to center activities as well. Given that I have a very odd-shaped room with furniture bolted down to the floor – certainly a challenge, but hey, I have to overcome that – my centers do not involve students moving around, but instead the center materials moving around the room. So, I might have five different groups and five different centers that get at an objective in a variety of different ways. Do all students complete all five center assignments? Yes. Do I assess each student on each center assignment? No. I pick the one they are best at, or I ask them to tell me which activity they want me to grade. Because all activities are objective-based, and correct completion of them signifies mastery, this works.

FOUNDATIONS

There are two key foundations to my ability to differentiate: (1) classroom structure coupled with extremely high expectations for behavior and (2) my objective based tracking system. I’ll explain each in turn.

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1. Classroom Structure and High Expectations. I certainly have routines and procedures in place. Students know exactly how to handle the equipment. They know they can only leave their seat for an academic purpose (e.g. to get a book from the bookshelf). They know their voice has to be at a particular level (I even have a decibel meter that I use to measure how loud they are scientifically! \$40 from Radio Shack). They know the activity has to be passed to the right when the signal is given. They know what to do if they finish their work early. But I'll be honest – during group investigations I let the leash out a little and don't walk around with a hammer. Do I walk around constantly? Yes. And I wear a good pair of shoes.

What happens in my class might sound like lowering expectations for behavior, but it really is just the opposite – I raise the bar for behavior by giving kids the ability to get a book from the bookshelf if they need it

But if and when students get off task and talk about what happened last night, I walk over to their group and remind them that what we're working on is the interesting thing. During my circuits unit, I told them that my car's head lights went out, but because I could read the schematic diagram of the headlight wiring for my car, I spent \$10 and fixed it myself, rather than paying someone else \$350 to do it. "You can save \$350 by knowing how to read these things!" is a much better motivation than, "This is going to be on the test." I really think that when most teachers think about differentiation, their biggest fear is losing control, having kids not completing their work, etc. What happens in my class might sound like lowering expectations for behavior, but it really is just the opposite – I *raise the bar* for behavior by giving kids the ability to get a book from the bookshelf if they need it, or to look more closely at one of the diagrams on the wall, or even just needing to discuss a certain point with their peers.

2. My Tracking System.

When most secondary teachers think about differentiating, they sigh and think, "but I have 150 students – how can I do this?" My response: THIS is how you differentiate. I now have data that allows me to account for different rates of learning. If I see an objective that 80% of the students didn't get a "1" for in the spreadsheet, I know I need to re-teach that concept to the whole class and assess that objective on the next test. If a small group of students has a "0" for that objective, then I need to address it in small group instruction or after school.

- Me, when asked about the benefits of my objective-based tracking system.

There is no way I could differentiate effectively if I didn't know how my students were doing on the specific learning goals of 9th grade physical science. Having those objectives laid out and tracking the data helps me determine who gets what. In addition to being able to track progress on my objectives, I have also found that it is critical to determine students' reading comprehension and math skills, as I often group students based on reading/math levels. To determine that information, I look at their IOWA test scores from 7th grade and the state standardized tests from 8th grade. Armed with these sources of information, and given that

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my tracking system allows for at-a-glance analysis of student strengths and weaknesses, I can group students in a variety of ways and provide different activities and test questions based on the range of abilities and learning styles in my classroom.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I'm still trying to learn how to differentiate more effectively. I've read Carol Ann Tomlinson's books. I'm constantly reflecting on and tweaking my instruction and assessment. I'm going to a conference on differentiation this summer. Why am I so focused on improving my differentiation? I have seen the effect on my classroom. My students have no excuses for not learning: they can't say the work is too hard, they can't say it is too boring. Before, they could. My students' self-esteem and motivation is significantly higher. Before, it was too low for us to learn productively. Students have clear goals they each are working toward (demonstrating mastery of all our objectives), but they are doing so at their own pace, taking the learning path that suits them. I have gone from a huge deviation in test scores to a much smaller one. And it isn't because I am bringing my top kids down – I'm working to bring all of them up. I'm sure that is what you want to do with your students too.

[Note: A copy of Mr. LP's Learning Café Menu Activities can be found in the Tools section, under the Assessment heading. Click on "Assessment Options: High School Science.]

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Differentiation Example: 10th Grade Math

Mr. Wildermann found that the performance and readiness levels of his 10th grade math students varied greatly. After two years of ignoring these student differences, he decided to differentiate his instruction. A primary imperative for him was to avoid grouping his class by ability, since this hadn't seemed to serve anyone well in the past. He used a diagnostic at the beginning of the year to determine where each student was performing. He then explained to students that he expected them to achieve specific learning goals, but noted that some students might exceed these goals while others would need to work hard to meet the high baseline expectation. Mr. Wildermann differentiated instruction by creating tiered assignments to meet learning objectives. For example, for a unit involving quadratic equations, he introduced quadratics and had students collectively develop criteria that would identify quadratic equations. He then described the different learning objectives that would comprise the unit:

1. Students will demonstrate the ability to multiply parenthetical notations and find the root of quadratic equations.
2. Students will graph equations and identify the roots and vertex of each equation.
3. Students will identify the influence of each coefficient.
4. Students will apply quadratics to kinematics equations to develop a ramp that will launch a marble into a trashcan.

Mr. Wildermann prioritized the first three objectives. He knew that his high performing students would fly through the first three objectives, so he designed the physics application to extend their understanding of quadratics. He knew that many of his students would struggle with just the first stage, so he developed different visual and tactile models to represent parenthetical multiplication. Mr. Wildermann used graphing calculators to help students visualize the influences of different coefficients. Throughout the quadratics unit, he introduced the more subtle components of quadratics using direct instruction and provided time for students to demonstrate their solution methodology.

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MATT KELLEY, DELTA '02
11th Grade English

GETTING KIDS EXCITED ABOUT READING

To me, differentiation has a very simple definition: it's meeting each of your students on their own individual levels, and doing what ever is necessary to get your students what they need to take the next step in their education. As with every other part of teaching, this is much easier said than done. Yet the fact remains that kids come into every classroom at such different levels that it just doesn't make sense to teach them in the same way and give them the same resources. To teach only in whole-class lecture or discussion format was handicapping my kids. It wasn't what they needed, and my job is to meet their needs to make sure they make up the difference in academic achievement between them and other students in this country.

The fact remains that kids are coming into every classroom at such different levels that it just doesn't make sense to teach them in the same way and give them the same resources...[it] was handicapping my kids.

Let me say up front that I didn't start differentiating in my classroom until this year (my second year of teaching) but I can already see a huge difference in my kids' attitudes toward reading. Here's the difference: last year, I had kids who told me right off the bat that they hated reading. Last year, I had every student in my class reading the same short story at any given time. Guess what? Those kids who hated reading hadn't changed their views by the end of the year. This year, many of my new kids once again said that they hated reading. But this year, everyone is reading books and articles that are appropriate for their level. This year, as students see their reading levels improve and they get that feeling of accomplishment, they start to enjoy reading. That alone is a huge difference due to differentiating my instruction, and it's something I wish I had been able to instill in my kids last year too.

The need to [differentiate] became crystal clear when I performed a quality diagnostic with my new students in September and saw that in one class, I had students whose reading levels ranged from second grade to eleventh grade.

LEARNING MORE

Last year, I didn't explicitly diagnose my students. I had no idea where each student was academically, and therefore no idea about what I needed to focus on with each student. I didn't even have the foundational knowledge I needed to differentiate. The need to differentiate – and the information I needed to do so effectively – became crystal clear when I performed a quality diagnostic with my new students in September and saw that in one class, I had students whose reading level ranged from second grade to eleventh grade. I knew that I could not have all my students reading the same thing all the time; it was simply not going to work. I decided I needed to learn how to differentiate in order to teach my students.

One of the first places I turned for assistance was to my Program Director, Alex Quigley, who did a workshop on differentiation at one of our all-corps meetings. He passed out a good article that summarized the importance of differentiating and some simple strategies to try. I did a lot more reading on the topic to fully understand it, including a couple of books. More

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recently, to further develop my skills, I've found some great differentiation resources on www.tfanet.org.

STARTING A READER'S WORKSHOP

By far, the most success I've had this year in differentiating my instruction has come from incorporating a Reader's Workshop. When I saw the huge disparity in my students' reading levels and realized how many different reading selections I would need to have available for them, I started soliciting donations from various people in our community, as well as my old

The idea behind my class library was to fill it with high-interest books that my students would want to read, as well as being on their levels. We have everything from Sponge Bob Square Pants picture books to classic literature by Vonnegut and Dickens.

high school and other people from my home community in Philadelphia. Now, we have an in-class library with around 700 donated books, which has been absolutely central to my differentiated instruction.

The idea behind my class library was to fill it with high-interest books that my students would *want* to read, as well as be able to read. We have everything from Sponge Bob Square Pants picture books to classic literature by Vonnegut and Dickens. For example, if a student wants to read a horror book, he can find one on

any level – we have books in the *Goosebumps* series, young adult books by R.L. Stein, and more advanced books by Steven King.

When we do Reader's Workshop in my class, it takes about 25-35 minutes of the day. In the beginning of the year, I taught my students a lesson on how to choose a book, instructing them on the process of reading a page and putting the book back if you didn't recognize 5 or more words on that page. I stressed to them the importance of choosing the right book, and how it was okay to be on a different level than their peers since we all learn differently. I've been surprised at how good they are about picking books that are on the appropriate level for them (based on their diagnostic and on-going assessments). If I see a student with a book that may be too advanced, I can talk to him about his choices and show him that this may not be the best book for him right now.

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We did Reader's Workshop pretty frequently in the beginning of the year to get them used to reading for a significant period of time each day. Now, we do it less often, but Reader's Workshop runs itself: my students choose a book and read it silently for about half an hour. In addition, my students read their Workshop books whenever they have finished an in-class assignment early – they know we have a system where they can go put their work in the box for their class period, and then pick up their book. Implementing Reader's Workshop was such a simple way to differentiate my classroom, but it's made a huge difference in my students' progress in reading and excitement about books. That's the thing about differentiation – you can start small, and it doesn't have to be complicated.

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MOVING ON TO CONTENT, PROCESS, PRODUCT

After I saw the success of Reader's Workshop, I started thinking about the books I had read on differentiation and how they all had similar messages about the three ways teachers can differentiate their instruction: in content, process, or product. I thought about how I could further differentiate my English classes in these ways, and I started implementing a few more systems that I've found to be pretty successful.

- **Content: Grammar Skills.** I've been trying to diagnose my students on a specific set of grammar skills and then break them up into homogenous groups for guided practice. For example, right now all my students are working on subject-verb agreement, but the students who got it right away have moved on to quotation marks, while some students who need more help are doing a hands-on activity where they put subjects and verbs together using puzzle pieces.
- **Process: Writing.** When my students are writing, I give some students a basic outline to work from to help them organize their thoughts at the beginning. For my other students, I don't give them the outline and instead encourage them to make more decisions as they are writing. Those are the students I feel would benefit from less supervision and more individual control.
- **Product: Vocabulary.** Finally, when I give my students a vocabulary assignment, I'll often give them choices of products to complete for me. I'll let them decide whether they want to put a word in a sentence, draw a picture of what the word represents, or think of a way to act out its meaning. They can choose whichever way they think will best demonstrate to me their knowledge.

I certainly don't differentiate everything, especially when we're focused on preparing for the state standardized test, but it's not difficult to differentiate a substantial amount of the reading and writing my students do. For example, recently I taught a lesson on skimming as a skill, and I passed out two different texts to my students. I gave some kids a selection that was harder to skim because it was written at a higher reading level and not as "broken-down" in terms of format; my other students skimmed an easier selection. The content of their texts was different, but they were practicing the exact same thing.

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The progress I've seen in my students now that I differentiate has been astounding. For example, I have a student named Marquis who was diagnosed at a reading level of 5.5 (about the middle of fifth grade) at the beginning of the year. I doubt he would have gotten much out of my teaching last year, but now that I have the resources to help him read on his level, he's advanced two grade levels in half a year – his mid-year diagnostic score was a reading level at almost 7.5. At the same time I've been moving him forward, I've also seen another students moving from 9th to 10th grade or 3rd to 5th grade in reading levels – it's not just one particular grade that's improving. Differentiating my reading instruction has

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literally allowed me to reach all of my learners, and it was as simple as keeping a bunch of different books on hand.

TRYING IT YOURSELF

I understand why you may not be differentiating in your classroom right now. Last year, I didn't because I didn't know how to do it, and even if I had, I was struggling to just get one good lesson plan done. Now, I'm confident enough in my teaching to differentiate – partly because of experience, partly because of the resources I have, and partly because of doing the research and putting in the work necessary to do it. I suggest that you start by making sure you have a good regular lesson plan that you feel confident about, and then start small. This was the best piece of advice that I got from my PD and every other resource I accessed: pick one lesson plan way off in the future that you feel good about, and think of a way to differentiate one part of it – like by giving the same lesson on the same skills to all your students, but using two different tests to assess them afterwards. There are low-intensity and

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low-effort ways to differentiate; you should start small and work your way up.

I must admit that differentiating my instruction this year does take up a fair bit more time than my simple lesson planning did last year. For me, I take great care to find everything on different levels for my students, which can be time consuming. Reader's Workshop doesn't take as much effort on my part, but when I'm having my students do different grammar activities and have to prep two great grammar lessons

for one day, it can cause a decent amount of work. However, once you've differentiated and seen how well it works, there's no turning back. The extra work is totally worth it. It's amazing to see some of the things that my kids are able to do this year that I don't think they could ever have done last year. Plus, remember that you won't be overwhelmed by the work if you start small and adapt what you already have! Give it a shot. You won't regret it once you see the impact differentiating will have on your kids and what they can accomplish.

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JEE PARK, DC '02
High School Spanish I

A MATTER OF NECESSITY

I remember hearing about differentiation at institute but not really thinking about it too much – it's probably fair to say I didn't even really understand what it meant until I started teaching in the fall. However, I realized what my CS's and CMA's had been talking about the first day I walked into my classroom and saw the huge range in skill level among my kids. Because my school requires every student to take two years of a foreign language in order to graduate, I teach introductory Spanish to kids on all levels, from those who have never spoken a word of

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the language to those who are native Spanish-speakers and have no other options (my school doesn't offer very many language choices, and there are often scheduling conflicts).

I had some students who were more comfortable with the language than I was myself – and yet needed to take Spanish I to get graduation credits; other students only knew how to say "hola." At first, it was a nightmare! I

had to differentiate my instruction, if only to control my classroom. It was clear that I needed strategies and systems to keep all students engaged and learning, regardless of their incoming level. For my native speakers, I also needed to push them to a new level by providing enrichment activities and assigning them to tutor their peers. This happened progressively, but now I simply can't go a day without differentiating.

TESTING ONE, TWO, THREE

To me, differentiation is not just about varying the strategies and techniques I use to *deliver* my material, but also about varying how I assess my students to make sure they understand the material I presented. In order to be a good teacher, I have to know that my students grasped what I taught them; with my students on such different levels I have to assess them in different ways.

The first type of differentiation I actually used was creating two different forms of one test. I gave Form A to my more advanced students and Form B to my students who were just learning the language. Both tests assessed the same knowledge and material, but they asked students to show me what they had learned in different ways. I got this idea from my Learning Team Leader, Veronica Nolan (DC '98), who taught Spanish to a class of students who were receiving special education services. When I saw the simple way in which she modified, I borrowed her different tests and

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designed my own using her ideas. It was easy to differentiate the assessments myself after physically seeing how she had modified them for her various groups of students; if you want to do the same, included in this binder are Form A and Form B of a test of my own.

From there, I began to differentiate the preparation for my weekly quizzes. One week, I decided to pair my students based on ability, having a student who understood the concept well work with a student who was struggling. If the struggling student got at least a B on the quiz, then the “tutor” got extra credit for having taught him or her effectively. It worked so beautifully that I now do this on several quizzes a year; this pairing system creates accountability, positive pressure to succeed academically, and a way to give all my students the targeted instruction (or deeper grasp of a skill that comes from teaching it) they need, even if it’s not coming directly from me. It’s a win-win situation for all involved. And the best part of this strategy? I don’t have to create any extra forms or put in more time designing my instruction. I do, however, have to know the level of each of my students on the particular skill(s). Certainly, knowing where each student is on specific skills is a critical foundation to effective differentiation.

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BUILDING UP FROM THERE

After learning how to differentiate my assessments and preparation for them through partner work, it was easier to begin to differentiate my instruction through collaborative groups as well. It of course helped to have classroom management systems in place – I learned the hard way my first year that you have to *teach* your students how to work in pairs and

I learned the hard way my first year that you have to teach your students how to work in pairs and collaborative groups before you can differentiate your instruction through those methods.

collaborative groups before you can differentiate your instruction through those methods. I’ve found that it works well to start the year by just having your students work in pairs and setting clear expectations for their partner work; I only allow them to work in larger groups when they have proven they can stay on task when working collaboratively with one classmate.

In my class, every group member has a part (like facilitator, spokesperson, recorder, etc.). No one is allowed to sit back and let others do the work. In the beginning of the school year I will often assign group roles to reflect students’ interests and abilities, but as students become more comfortable with themselves and each other, I let them do it. I also make a concerted effort to constantly change my groups, varying between homogenous and heterogeneous grouping based on the assignment and its purpose. For example: At the end of the Clothing unit, my students put on a fashion show for the class. They are placed in heterogeneous groups of 3-4 persons. Each student is responsible for a specific role, whether it is to keep the group on task or to write-down ideas. The outcome of the project is beautiful!

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In addition, I differentiate for my native speakers and other rapidly progressing students by not giving them any “down time” in my class. When students finish class work, they know to go directly to the back of the class and get extra-credit work from the tray or the computer. I have a mini-library with articles they can read in Spanish, materials for them to use to practice for the SAT, and other resources to keep them busy when they’ve completed an assignment and I’m working with students who need more support. My kids know that some students work fast and some don’t, and they think it’s totally natural and nothing to be embarrassed about. I worked hard to teach them that at the beginning of the year. For example, my students are required to sign our Classroom Expectations Contract as soon as they step into my classroom. This document – and our discussion of it – emphasizes building a respectful and positive classroom environment. Especially during the first couple of months, I incorporate a lot of team-building activities. By the end of the 1st grading period, my students understand the benefits of being a positive, active team player who respects the different levels of his or her classmates.

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EFFECTS ON MY STUDENTS AND ME

This might not be what you want to hear, but differentiation may require a lot of your time and energy at the beginning. However, now that it has become more of my teaching style, it comes to me more naturally (thank goodness!). It still takes more time than before to design exams, for example, since I’m coming up with at least two versions of each one, but other ideas for differentiation come to me in the middle of teaching a lesson. Also, I think I save time overall because differentiating my instruction forces me to focus on the big picture, so I don’t spend so much time on the little things and I can be more efficient in my teaching. The amount of time I put in is worth it – it’s such a natural part of my teaching and the key to my students’ learning that I couldn’t truly teach without it.

For my students, differentiation has really given them a lot more confidence. Here’s a specific example. Last year I had one student who came into my class very reluctant to learn Spanish, but then became interested in the subject and was engaged in the class. When the first test rolled around, however, he failed, and lost all of his enthusiasm for learning the subject. Right after that was when I started making two versions of my assessments. I gave him the modified version, and he got a B! He was so excited to be able to prove to me that he knew the material. This clearly illustrated the need for assessing student skills in a way they could understand; once I was able to do that, I saw a huge boost in confidence in my students and I knew I was meeting their needs. If you asked my students to explain the difference in my class before I started differentiating my assessments and instruction, my lower-level students would probably say, “Before I didn’t understand Spanish, and now I’m getting better.”

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You may be wondering, “Don’t students see the different tests? How do they respond to that?” Honestly, most of my students don’t even realize that they are taking different tests. Once, a student asked me why, and I told the class it was because I didn’t want them to cheat. They were happy with that answer, and that was the end of that! My students do know that I require them to always be doing something (enrichment activities if they are done with the assignment) and that I provide a range of activities to keep all students engaged.

MY ADVICE TO YOU

I think you can visualize how important differentiation is in a classroom if you picture telling all of your students to wear the exact same size clothing. It just wouldn’t work! My students are so different in their incoming skill levels and learning styles that it wouldn’t be fair to use a one-size-fits-all approach to their education. I want all my students to know that they are smart and they can achieve and be successful, but they might need to do different things in order to get there.

I understand that you may be intimidated by the amount of extra work that goes into differentiating instruction or assessments, but the work it involves is well worth the investment of your time. In addition, you may hesitate to differentiate for fear of treating your students differently when you have been trained to think of them as equal in many respects, and you may think differentiation would be unfair to your kids. To that, I would have to respond, “Come into my classroom and I’ll show you things that are really unfair – things that are probably unfair in your classroom too. It’s unfair that my students don’t always have textbooks. It’s unfair that some of them can’t even read a single sentence in English but are forced to take a foreign language.” It would be unfair to *not* differentiate for my students – the challenges they face are so multi-faceted that I simply cannot ignore them.

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I understand how stressful beginning to differentiate can be, but know that it comes in time. When you fully realize how many different levels your students are on, and when you start to feel a sense of urgency about reaching all of them and meeting all their needs, you find it easier to make time to differentiate. Just take baby steps. It doesn’t have to be elaborate. Like my partner system for preparing for quizzes, it can be something simple. And above all, know that what you do will help your students meet your ultimate objectives for them. All of your kids will get to the finish line you have in mind, they’ll just travel different ways, and that’s often what works the best.

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