

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

Interests

Student interest is the level to which the student is motivated or engaged by a particular topic. Student engagement and learning improves when the content inspires curiosity or passion. Your students have interests related to content, the social dynamics of grouping strategies, and the liveliness and pace of the instruction. Students have process-related interests as well that can be used by a teacher to enhance student learning. These factors should percolate in your mind as you choose among instructional strategies and plan your lessons.

Note: There is a strong connection (and considerable overlap) between this aspect of differentiation and giving students academic choices, an important element of developing students' understanding that they will benefit from achievement (I-2, "I Want"), since both recognize the necessity of motivating students by incorporating their interests. For example, if the objective is to write a persuasive essay but the standards do not specify a topic, then students would be more likely to work hard on an assignment if they had some choice in choosing their subject matter.

To incorporate student interests into your instructional plans, first determine what those interests are, and then use appropriate strategies in your lessons to acknowledge those interests.

How to Determine Student Interests

| Strategies | Explanation | Examples |
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| See students' interests as opportunities, not burdens | Invest time in knowing what your students' interests are so that you can leverage those interests into academic gains for your students. | You may find that the Olympics fascinate the majority of your students. In that case, you might teach an Olympics unit (just think of all the great ways to meet your objectives) in small groups representing countries that the students have researched and written about. |
| Survey student interests at the beginning of the year | Get a glimpse of your students' curiosities. | At the beginning of the year offer a list of general topics you're considering teaching and ask students to choose the 10 that interest them the most. (By doing so you offer them an empowering opportunity to shape their own learning, and convey to them the active role they will play in your classroom.) |
| Survey student interests prior to a unit | Get a sense of what your students want to learn and what they care about. | See the Tools section for tools you can use. |
| Survey student interests to solicit feedback on your teaching process | Feedback might reveal that students perform particularly well in response to particular instructional strategies. | For example, in your first quarterly feedback form from students, you might receive thirty variations on a theme: "Ms. Smith, you talk too much." While you certainly have to filter that kind of feedback through your best judgment as a teacher, you may also need to consider using fewer whole-group lectures and injecting more hands-on learning opportunities into your classroom. Similarly, you might find that your students are highly motivated by the opportunity to get in front of the class and present their knowledge, and they work together in small groups very well. You might consider using that strategy more often. |

Strategies to Incorporate Varying Interests

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| <p>Offer multi-product option assignments</p> | <p>Let your students regularly choose amongst multiple product assignments to ensure that their interests can be pursued. Let students choose the method through which they can express their knowledge.</p> <p>Meaningful choice is more intricate than simply offering three different essay questions from which to choose. Substantial choices for exploring a topic could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Writing and performing a play ▪ Creating a newsletter complete with photos and articles ▪ Creating a multiple-choice exam ▪ Writing a letter ▪ Developing a mural with labels ▪ Creating and singing a rap explaining a scientific process ▪ Interviewing older students who have already studied the topic ▪ Planning and delivering a lesson to introducing the topic to younger students |
| <p>Give multiple content options within an assignment</p> | <p>Let students select from different content choices.</p> <p><u>Example:</u> Ms. Prasad incorporated the principles of student choice when covering content standards on labor laws and unions. She planned to focus on the organization and purpose of unions and labor laws, but she knew student interest in the topic would vary. So she decided to give a general overview of unions and allow students to explore a labor union of their own choosing.</p> <p>She developed a list of unions that would appeal to a broad group of students, including the Pullman Porters, United Farm Workers, American Federation of Labor, Screen Actors Guild, sporting unions, the American Federation of Musicians, the American Federation of Teachers, and a couple of local unions with which her students might have a personal connection. She gathered information and collected resources for each of these groups to ensure students could engage in meaningful research. She briefly introduced each union to the students, and let them review the information that night so they would be prepared to make an informed selection the next day.</p> <p>The following day students chose the topic they would research. She presented the expectations for their work along with a timeline. Their projects would allow for an exploration that would determine how the union historically used or currently uses its power, influence and resources to obtain rights and privileges for its members.</p> |
| <p>Provide process options for student engagement of material</p> | <p>Offer a variety of activity options to enable students to master the content.</p> <p>Let students choose between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interest centers that encourage students to explore subsets of the class topic of particular interests ▪ Meeting with small groups ▪ Independent work |

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| <p>Provide multiple materials</p> | <p>Textbooks should be treated as one of many resources. Whenever possible present a selection of primary source documents from which students can choose.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Historic and current newspaper articles ▪ Letters to the editor discussing an historic or timely controversy ▪ Print or television advertisements ▪ Screenplays ▪ Famous artwork ▪ Unique software ▪ Public records ▪ Historical documents ▪ Experts in their field ▪ Political comic strips ▪ Non-fiction books |
| <p>Coordinate individual student “sidebar studies”</p> | <p>Sometimes, student interest cannot be the first and foremost concern of teaching when state standards dictate certain content. Tap into student interests (music, sports, or fashion, for example) and have students look out for their special topic within the context of the classroom’s subject matter.</p> |
| <p>Independent studies</p> | <p>Students choose a topic of interest that they are curious about. Research is done from questions developed by the student and/or teacher. The researcher produces a product to share learning with classmates.</p> |
| <p>4MAT</p> | <p>Teachers plan instruction for each of four learning preferences over the course of several days on a given topic. Some lessons focus on mastery, some on understanding, some on personal involvement, and some on synthesis. Each learner has a chance to approach the topic through preferred modes and to strengthen weaker areas.</p> |
| <p>Tic-Tac-Toe Choice Board (sometimes called “Think-Tac-Toe”)</p> | <p>The tic-tac-toe choice board is a strategy that enables students to choose multiple tasks that interest them to practice a skill, or demonstrate and extend understanding of a process or concept. From the board, students choose (or teacher assigns) three adjacent or diagonal task selections. To design a tic-tac-toe board:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify the outcomes and instructional focus 2. Design 9 different tasks 3. Use assessment data to determine student levels 4. Arrange the tasks on a tic-tac-toe board either randomly, in rows according to level of difficulty, or you may want to select one critical task to place in the center of the board for all students to complete. <p>For Tic-Tac-Toe and Choice Board examples, see the Tools section. (use rotate button in tool bar to turn image counterclockwise)</p> |
| <p>Choice Boards</p> | <p>Work assignments are written on cards placed in hanging pockets. By asking students to select a card from a particular row of pockets, the teacher targets work toward student needs yet allows student choice.</p> |

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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| | See Tic-Tac-Toe strategies above – what is written on the board is instead written on cards and placed in pockets for students. |
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Remember, what you determine about student interests can be used to differentiate:

- Content (what you teach)
- Process (how you teach)
- Product (how you ask students to apply or show mastery of content)