

Ten Differentiation Strategies for

Building Prior Knowledge

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Preface

I see them everywhere – in the supermarket, on TV, in the newspaper, on the street, even in the rolling credits of a Clint Eastwood movie. Thirty-plus years of students. Translated into real numbers, over 3000 wonderful kids touched my life. I'm so very proud of them. They are entrepreneurs, lawyers, sales clerks, community activists, entertainers, lobstermen, parents, politicians, doctors, accountants, loggers, social workers and teachers. But some faces still haunt me, and I still worry about them. Every child did not find success in my classroom and I continue to wonder what I should have or could have done differently to ensure they were more successful. *If only I had known, maybe I could have...* But the past is gone and I don't get any do-overs.

We can only go forward and work toward improving learning experiences for the present generation of students and those that follow. Improving instruction for young adolescents is my passion and it is why I write. I am on a mission to share strategies and approaches, based in research, that I have learned from my own experiences and from observing and talking with marvellous educators across the country.

Differentiation is something I really wish I had understood as a young teacher. I was a liberal arts graduate without any education background and I believed that if I created wonderfully engaging and innovative lessons, my students would learn. Many did. Some did not, and *I didn't know what to do about it*. Plus, a few students were far more knowledgeable about certain topics than I was, and to tell the truth, I was a bit intimidated and... *I didn't know what to do with them*. Those were the days of one-size-fits-all instruction and too many students were left behind or bored.

Fortunately, over the past 35 years the research on how people learn has exploded and educators have been able to apply this research in classrooms. We now understand that

the brain makes connections between bits of information and that what students already know about a topic often predetermines how well they will master new information and skills. Hence, accessing and building prior knowledge is a critical element of any learning plan. We've also learned that reading issues are often not directly related to intelligence and that when we find ways for dyslexic students to access complex texts, they can discuss and respond to ideas in sophisticated ways. My goodness, we have even learned that intelligence is not a fixed commodity and can be improved through multiple exposures to intellectually stimulating experiences.

I am distressed by recent policies that promote a one-size-fits-all instructional approach despite the fact that there is much evidence that it rarely has long-term beneficial effects on one's learning. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum with its year level expectations will present educators with ongoing challenges. Fortunately, the recent research on formative assessment and the importance of feedback and early intervention identifies positive actions that can support students as they work to meet standards.

There will still be students who have advanced beyond their year-level academic standards in some areas, but not in others. Some students will still need additional help, while others fight personal demons that eat away at their motivation and perseverance. One-size-fits-all learning will never be the best solution to ensure that each student reaches their academic and personal potential. Differentiation remains a critical, viable option that we need to incorporate into our thinking as we plan and implement the Australian Curriculum.

There is a major, recent advancement in teaching and learning that makes the promise of differentiation a reality and that is technology. Digital tools and internet resources provide teachers and students with multiple avenues for accessing information and demonstrating mastery and opportunities for collaborating with others around the world. When I visualise those faces of students whom I didn't reach, I always think, "Ah, if only you could have used text-to-speech capabilities; if only I could have connected you to an expert in the field; or if only you could have downloaded a video that you could watch multiple times, then maybe our time together would have better met your needs."

Whether using technology or more traditional strategies, differentiation is a complex process. When Carla Weiland first suggested that I write about differentiation, I struggled with the organisation and focus of the book. What did I have to say that Carol Tomlinson or Rick Wormeli and others hadn't already said? Then Carla had the brilliant idea of

breaking the topic of differentiation in general into a series of shorter books, each focusing on a particular aspect of instruction. *Ten Differentiation Strategies for Building Prior Knowledge* is hopefully the first in a series of books that highlight specific strategies to help teachers plan lessons and units addressing the learning needs and preferences of each of their students. Focusing just on the prior knowledge part of differentiation allows me to walk the reader through all the thought processes and application steps of each strategy.

Teaching is a wonderful way to spend one's life. It is intellectually challenging, emotionally fulfilling and downright fun! Let's work together to keep the torch of learning burning bright – our students deserve the best we can offer.

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Introduction

Teaching and learning are two complex processes. We hope that they are in perfect sync – what the teacher teaches, the student learns. But alas, that is not always the case. As a teacher I designate the learning targets, the curriculum materials I use, the instructional strategies I will employ and how I will assess whether or not the students achieved mastery. I do not control the internal learning process of my students. I can use all of the resources I have to create optimal learning conditions; but they are not a guarantee that each and every student will learn what I want them to learn. Therefore, I have to continually check for understanding and adapt my instructional plan as needed to help the students struggling with specific skills and knowledge. Adapting my instruction and curriculum materials to ensure each student has equitable access to a rich curriculum is one aspect of differentiation.

But first, before I finalise my overall teaching plan, I need to know my students' level of expertise related to the upcoming lesson or unit. Do they have the skills and knowledge I assume they have that are a necessary foundation for the new learning? How will I find out? What background knowledge would be helpful for all students to possess before we move forward? Do my students have any misconceptions based on past experiences that will get in the way of acquiring new knowledge? How will I uncover them? How will I correct them? Which students already have mastered the skills addressed and assessed in this lesson or unit? These questions all relate to accessing, building and assessing prior knowledge, an extremely critical part of any instructional plan or curriculum unit.

Furthermore, if accessing, building and assessing prior knowledge is so important, then I have to make sure to use strategies that engage every student. I need this information about my students' prior knowledge for 100% of my students. Yet I have a class full of

students with specific learning needs and I don't have the time to interview each and every one of them to find out what they already know. What can I do? The purpose of the book is to share 10 strategies that will help you access, build and/or assess prior knowledge in a differentiated manner so that you get the feedback you need to thoughtfully move forward in your planning.

Differentiation is a word that is bandied around as if educators, parents and students all share the same definition. We don't! My favourite definition comes from Carol Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson in *Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum* (2003):

“... *differentiated instruction* refers to a systematic approach to planning curriculum and instruction for academically diverse learners. It is a way of thinking about a classroom with dual goals of honouring each student's learning needs and maximising each student's learning capacity.” (p. 3)

As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. What are the details we need to know about *learning needs* and *how to maximise learning capacity*? Fortunately, writers like Tomlinson, Wormeli and Rakow address these issues extensively in their writings and presentations. They give concrete examples of designing units, using time strategically to orchestrate differentiation and addressing cognitive differences. They help us internalise the principles of differentiation so that it becomes a natural extension of our lesson and unit planning.

But there still remain competing state and national trends that complicate our thinking about differentiation. The Australian Curriculum has *year-level specific* achievement standards that will be assessed. Year 7 students will be expected to demonstrate mastery of skills and knowledge such as these.

- By the end of Year 7, students understand how text structures can influence the complexity of a text and are dependent on audience, purpose and context. They demonstrate understanding of how the choice of language features, images and vocabulary affects meaning.
- By the end of Year 7, students solve problems involving the comparison, addition and subtraction of integers.

The Australian Curriculum is quite clear about expectations. Meanwhile, there is also pressure to customise and personalise learning with time as an important variable – students do not always learn in a lock-step sequence and manner on a rigid timeline.

Larry Cuban (2012) in *Educational Leadership* quotes Jay McTighe and John Brown: “How can teachers address required content and grade-level performance standards while remaining responsive to individual students?” (p. 14). Cuban goes on to say that teachers make compromises.

Differentiation, despite the pressures for uniformity, continues to be a valid and effective way to approach teaching and learning that addresses the needs of the myriad of diverse learners sitting in any one classroom. This book will be helpful to teachers in different circumstances:

- *For teachers who have the big picture of their next differentiated unit already in mind:* Here are 10 strategies to consider as you get down to the nitty-gritty of the specific day-to-day planning and are thinking about the ways to access, assess or build prior knowledge.
- *For teachers who are just getting their toes wet in the differentiation ocean:* Here is a place to start to explore in a limited way (the beginning of the lesson) what differentiation looks like in practice.
- *For teachers who know they should incorporate accessing, assessing or building prior knowledge in their lesson and units, but rarely do:* Here are a variety of different ways to increase the effectiveness of your lessons and units by building students’ interest and gaining valuable information for yourself about what your students know and believe about a topic.
- *For teachers who just love to try new strategies:* Here are 10 strategies to adapt to your own classroom needs.
- *For teachers whose classrooms are fully engaged in the digital world:* Here are some traditional strategies that have been given a digital twist and some that only exist because of the power of the internet and Web 2.0 tools.

The book opens with a short description of the importance of prior knowledge to learning and different ways to think about differentiation. Next are the detailed explanations of the 10 strategies. Each strategy has three classroom applications that from come from many different learning areas. The content examples certainly can be adapted to other types of classes or situations. They are designed to suggest possibilities, not as etched-in-stone examples.

Teaching and learning should be joyous processes. Classrooms should be filled with happily active students who create, debate and collaborate as they work diligently to master

important skills and knowledge. Hopefully, readers will find an approach or two they can use to initiate lessons and units in a way that gives them the critical information they need about their students' prior knowledge while engaging their students in thoughtful consideration of the upcoming topics.

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