

READY-TO-USE

Differentiation Strategies

Years 3–5

Laurie E. Westphal



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WHAT IS

Differentiation?

“Four different lesson plans, one for modifications, one for English-language learners, one for on-level and one for GT.”

“Meeting the needs of all of your students.”

“Altering content, process and product.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, changing the content, process and products that you give the students.”

“This new thing we have to do now.”

These are just a few of the responses I received when I recently posed the “What is differentiation?” question to various groups of teachers I spoke with while attending a state education conference. Although this question seems straightforward, perhaps it is not so simple if there is such a wide range of responses from this sampling of teachers. In fact, for many, this term has become nebulous; defining it is like putting a pin in a cloud. There are theoretical definitions, practical definitions and even region- and school-specific definitions for the word *differentiation*. From experienced veterans to recent graduates, teachers are being given the task of differentiating instruction for their students. “My students need differentiation!” is their battle cry as they hungrily devour catalogues,

visit websites and attack booths in conference exhibit halls that address that golden word: differentiation.

Differentiation as a Teaching Lifestyle

That being said, I am not going to share another definition for differentiation; instead, I am going to focus on differentiation as a way of life in the classroom. As a theory, differentiation can be studied, analysed and defined, but for students to receive the most benefit, teachers have to completely jump into the role. Teaching using the differentiation lifestyle is not just differentiating this lesson or that product. A teacher who lives the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom views every aspect of their teaching, from the simplest to the most complex task, through a differentiated lens.

As students ourselves, we may have experienced some of these invigorating teachers throughout our school years. These are the teachers who seemed to design each and every lesson with you in mind, even though you may have been one of 150 students they instructed during the day. It seemed as if they talked directly to you and questioned you and everyone else was just along for the ride. That is a teacher who has embraced the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom.

Not all teachers who teach this way realise they are, in fact, differentiating, because the focus of differentiation is often on the more formal, time-consuming forms of differentiation. Of course, these teachers also incorporate formally differentiated lessons (e.g. tiered lessons, menus, compacting alternatives) into their teaching, but by embracing a differentiated lifestyle in the classroom and applying the *constructs* of differentiation in every aspect of the daily lesson cycle, from pre-assessments and guided practice, to independent practice and even anchor activities, the richness of the students' learning experience is compounded exponentially.

“Is This What You Want?” and the “Gotcha Factor”

It is important to note that teachers who embrace the differentiated lifestyle in their classroom may not have students who are ready for the personal freedom and independence it allows. In fact, the less students have been exposed to differentiated aspects of the lesson cycle, the more timid and insecure they may be about accepting and moving forward with differentiated tasks. Students are most familiar with the technique of ferreting out the information the teacher is seeking and then providing it, otherwise referred to as the “Is this what you want?” question. Students ask, “Is this what you want?” until they have narrowed down what the teacher is seeking and that is exactly what they will produce and submit

for marking. This behaviour helps students avoid the “Gotcha Factor”, which students have experienced when working on seemingly open-ended assignments. The teacher, after thinking through an open-ended assignment, has already pre-defined a number of correct “creative” answers. Any answer that is not one of the predetermined responses is incorrect – gotcha!

“Is This What You Want?” and the Pronoun Shift

Having experienced and often perfected the “Is this what you want?” question, many students may become confused or frustrated when a teacher who has embraced the differentiation lifestyle in their classroom suddenly changes pronouns. The student asks, “Is this what you want?” and the teacher deftly responds with a question that changes the pronoun, such as, “Does your work meet the guidelines for your activity?” The student is immediately confronted with a response that requires “my”, “mine” or “I” – a pronoun shift from “you” (the teacher) to “me” or “I” (the student). The student may not be deterred and it may take a few more variations on the pronoun-shifted response to the “Is this what you want?” question before the student returns to their seat knowing they will not receive the response which they had hoped for. For the teacher who is adopting the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom, the “Is this what you want?” questions can last for one to two months at the beginning of the school year, depending on the students’ experiences and abilities. Slowly, fewer and fewer students will follow the teacher around asking the barrage of confirming questions. Instead, the teacher will begin hearing students tell each other, “You may as well not even ask, the teacher is just going to ask whether or not it follows the directions or meets the guidelines and if we can defend it, it will be right.”

Differentiation and Learning Styles

To keep things simple, I focus on four basic learning styles: kinesthetic/tactile, verbal, visual/written and auditory. Although these learning styles are representative of all of our students, the majority of lessons and products student experience in the classroom are traditionally visual or written in nature. There are various educational reasons for this phenomenon.

First, most teachers prefer to teach and assess new information in the manner in which they themselves learn best and most teachers are visual learners. Second, visual and written activities are usually less subjective and easier to year. Consequently, it is easier to justify the marks students earn. Last, visual and written products tend to lead to quieter, more organised classrooms. All of these

reasons are valid when it comes to offering visual or written products, but perhaps there is more to consider.

When teachers are asked to share what they perceive to be the most common learning style of their primary students, the resounding response is usually “tactile/kinesthetic” or “verbal”. Primary students just want to touch everything! No story told by students of this age is simple – it is filled with so many “and thens” that an English professor would be mesmerised by the students’ capacity to create so many elaborate run-on statements. This disconnect between lesson design and learning style has been going on for generations for the above-mentioned reasons. To be clear, tactile/kinesthetic learners can certainly work with visual strategies, but if you really want to know how much a learner knows, you must give them an opportunity to express their knowledge through their preferred learning style.

This is best exemplified using teachers themselves as examples. Consider teachers who are attending a workshop or training and are asked to share what they know about a new concept. Which activity would tend to provide more information to the facilitator: having teachers complete a questionnaire or asking teachers to act out a scenario for their peers? The majority of teachers would undoubtedly respond by saying a questionnaire would provide more information. Why? Responding through a written, visual format reflects the most common learning style of teachers and therefore they are more likely to provide more complete, in-depth information. The implication of this discovery is that opportunities for students to learn new information, process what they have learned and express their knowledge should accommodate various learning styles, including, of course, visual and written.

Selecting Activities for the Differentiated Lifestyle in the Classroom

After years of living the differentiated lifestyle as a teacher, I have had to defend the use of small, everyday, often verbal and tactile/kinesthetic experiences as a way to support differentiation theory as we know it. Many resources discuss the intricacies and implementation of differentiation and the various strategies that go along with it. But this book focuses on activities that support the daily routines found in standard lesson design, doing so with the words “ready to use” in mind.

As a result of the buzz about differentiating instruction, most teachers have been exposed to different concepts of differentiation. After reading a copious number of articles and books on differentiation and rethinking standard lesson designs and activities, I have brainstormed and assembled a list of criteria for activities designed for the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom. Effective

differentiated activities seem to possess at least 90% of the following criteria.

Differentiated activities

- are always based on the content being studied – they serve an academic purpose
- have a degree of built-in success for all learners
- meet the needs of diverse ability levels without ceilings
- are flexible and will grow and change based on students' experiences and abilities
- encourage intellectual risk taking for students
- generally have more than one "right" answer
- provide different ways to obtain and share information
- ask students to think and stretch
- accommodate more than one learning style
- allow for collaboration in pairs, small groups or large groups
- allow for a degree of choice
- accept the students where they are and encourage them to move forward
- foster responsibility and independence in action and thought
- allow and expect instructional pronouns to change from "you" (teacher) to "me" (student)
- incorporate real-world applications whenever possible
- allow students to move into the highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy and encourage higher level thinking.

Not all differentiated activities or strategies will meet every criterion at once, but when analysed, the activities selected for inclusion in this book meet at least 90% of the criteria listed above.

How to Use This Book

The strategies in this book are broken into two groups: no preparation and low preparation. Strategies requiring no preparation are those that can be used at a moment's notice and implemented without needing to create or photocopy materials. Strategies designated as having a low amount of preparation require only minor amounts of preparation, such as gathering or creating needed materials that can be used again in the future. These carefully selected strategies can be easily integrated into different phases of the lesson cycle, allowing the benefits of differentiation to be integrated seamlessly into teachers' already-prepared, often traditional lessons and units.

Strategy Pages

Each ready-to-use strategy page follows a similar format. An explanation of each aspect is included below, although not all strategies will include every aspect.

Title

This, of course, is the title for the strategy, although you should feel free to use whatever title will make the most sense to your students.

Learning Styles Accommodated

There are four learning styles addressed with these activities: tactile/kinesthetic (hands-on, acting out), auditory (listening), verbal (speaking) and visual/written (drawing or writing). All of the strategies selected for inclusion in this book meet more than one of these learning styles. The majority of the ready-to-use strategies incorporate the most common learning styles of our primary learners: tactile/kinesthetic and verbal.

Best Practices

This section lists how each ready-to-use strategy might fit into the typical lesson cycle. A brief description of each follows.

Pre-assessment. These are activities that either take place on the first day of the lesson, when objectives have been shared with the students, but before any instruction has taken place or are suggested as a curriculum compacting option.

Discussion. These strategies can be used to facilitate small- or large-group discussions, depending on the instructions that are given or the strategy that is implemented.

10–2. These strategies are those that fit nicely into the “two” piece of the 10–2 instructional technique. This active learning theory states that in order to increase students’ retention and understanding of new information, the presentation of new information in direct instruction needs to pause approximately every 10 minutes to allow students two minutes of quality processing time before instruction continues. Traditionally, this occurs when the teacher pauses and asks students if there are any questions (and there usually are not). Strategies with a 10–2 designation replace this “Any questions?” practice and will enable students to take a few minutes to process the information that has just been presented.

Checking for understanding. This early phase of the lesson cycle is used to quickly check to see that students understand the basic vocabulary and any prior knowledge required before moving forward with the new information.

Guided practice. This term describes the teacher-supported practice found in most direct teaching models. Strategies with this designation allow for effective teacher monitoring of the practice process, often with the option of releasing students who are showing mastery into their independent practice portion of the lesson.

Independent practice. These strategies provide students an opportunity to use and extend their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Most of the ready-to-use strategies can be used individually or in small groups.

Review. These strategies focus on ways that students can revisit and process the lesson or unit's content in new and different ways than it was presented. The reviews often require students to interact in small and/or large groups.

Anchor activity. Anchor activities are made available to students after they have finished their assigned work. The anchor activity strategies can be placed at a centre or in a folder students can access when they finish their work for the day. Most anchor activities are self-paced and can be completed without teacher monitoring.

Extension. Strategies that are appropriate for extensions have the option to extend over more than one day and encourage greater depth and research into the content being taught.

Description

This is a short, one- or two-sentence description of the activity.

Implementation

This section outlines the general implementation of each strategy in the classroom. Although strategies have different uses and ways they can be implemented, this section focuses on the most common use of the strategy and includes any tips or suggestions to make its implementation more effective.

Specific Uses or Ideas

This section explains all of the strategies as they relate to the best practices addressed earlier. When a strategy is selected to represent a best practice, this section will give either a general description of how it could facilitate differentiating that practice or a specific content-based example of its use in a classroom. Some of the best practices for a strategy will be obvious based on its implementation suggestion, but many of these ready-to-use strategies can be effective in other areas with minor adjustments. Examples here will fall into the categories of: pre-assessment, discussion, 10–2, checking for understanding, guided practice, independent practice, review, anchor activity and/or extension.

Materials

Although the majority of the strategies require few to no materials, any that are needed for the activity will be listed here.

Directions for Creating the Strategy

Some of the strategies require the teacher to create accompanying materials for student use. There are two different kinds of strategies included in this section: those with materials the students will use (and consume) during their activity, usually content-based questions for a specific subject and those with materials that need to be created just once and can be used multiple times throughout the school year. These strategies were chosen with the planning and preparation process in mind; the creation phase should not take longer than 10 minutes. This section will provide the steps needed to create the materials used in each strategy.

Modifications

Although the strategies themselves are differentiated to meet the needs of the students' varying levels, teachers may want to modify the activity somewhat or allow for more independence on the part of the students. This section shares modifications that may be needed based on the needs of individual teachers and their students.

Sample Explanation

Some of the activities are accompanied by templates or ready-to-use examples that follow the strategy pages. This sample explanation may simply identify the templates that follow or provide instructions for implementing specific content examples.