

# A DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH TO THE COMMON CORE

*How do I help a broad range of learners  
succeed with challenging curriculum?*

Carol Ann  
**TOMLINSON**

Marcia B.  
**IMBEAU**



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(develop Us), and be able to use what they learn (execute Ds). All standards—Common Core and otherwise—are phrased as Ks, Us, and Ds. In fact, because the Common Core emphasizes outcomes, all Common Core standards are written as Ds. To ensure that students are learning in the multiple dimensions necessary for ownership of the Common Core’s complex content, instructional designers need to identify the unstated but frequently implied Ks and Us that are embedded in the standards. This is what we mean when we talk about “unpacking” the standards: examining them and rephrasing them in a way that clarifies both the explicit and implicit KUDs.

The following is an example of the KUDs derived from a 7th grade Common Core standard for reading literature. Note that these KUDs incorporate both implicit and explicit knowledge, understandings, and skills derived from unpacking the standard. They also incorporate additional Ks, Us, and Ds that stem from the teacher’s knowledge of her students’ needs, interests, and experiences, along with her sense of how she can help her students connect with the standard as something relevant to and important for them.

**Common Core Standard:** Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes characters or plot) (RL.7.3).

**Know:**

—Elements of fiction (plot, setting, character, theme)

should be planned with student differences in mind. A teacher might ask questions like “Are there students who lack context for this assessment prompt?” “Would it be wise to build in support for reading?” “Could the vocabulary used in this set of directions get in the way of student understanding?” and “Would it support student success to provide more than one way to express learning?”

For the first of two examples of teachers using formative assessment to guide instruction and monitor student progress, we’ll consider Mrs. Martin’s process for her 1st grade unit on describing story events, retelling events in sequence, using temporal words to link events, and writing opinion pieces. When designing her unit, she decided to use a teacher-student interview as a pre-assessment. Over a period of several days, she met with each student for about five minutes. Using a checklist to guide her thinking about student responses, she asked all learners to do the same three things. First, she asked them to arrange some simple sketches in an order that tells a story and to share with her the story in the pictures. This gave her a sense of the individual students’ readiness to arrange and retell events in sequence and the degree to which they were incorporating temporal words into their expression. Second, she asked them to describe a place shown in one of the sketches and a character who appeared in several of the sketches. This gave her a sense of the individual students’ comfort with description and the kind of vocabulary they used in that process. Finally, she asked them to tell her what, in their opinion, was the best part of school and why they thought

Classrooms in which teacher and students work together to honor learning differences and establish a balance between structure and flexibility support the interrelated goals of the Common Core and differentiation. Figure 3 capsules two days in Mrs. Navin’s kindergarten class during the unit on counting and illustrates curriculum that is both orderly (with clear KUDs derived from Common Core standards and aligned with instruction and formative assessment) and flexible (with whole-class, individual, and small-group instruction, and tasks differentiated by readiness, interest, and learning profile) and delivered in an environment designed to provide both stability and flexibility.

**FIGURE 3: Differentiated Instructional Plans for a Kindergarten Math Unit**

Whole-Class Activities	Differentiated Activities
<p><b>Tuesday</b></p> <p>Review of cardinal numbers</p> <p>Calendar math emphasizing cardinal numbers</p>	<p>Ordering events using cardinal numbers—four readiness-based groups</p> <p><i>Group 1:</i> Ordering pictures</p> <p><i>Group 2:</i> Ordering pictures with sentences</p> <p><i>Group 3:</i> Telling a story in steps</p> <p><i>Group 4 (Teacher Guided):</i> Telling a story with Spanish and English cardinal numbers</p>



## A CHECKLIST FOR REFLECTING ON THE EIGHT STEPS FOR DIFFERENTIATING COMMON CORE INSTRUCTION

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### *Response Key:*

+ I do this consistently while continuing growth in this area.

→ I'm going in the right direction here, but I know I need to improve.

? My work in this area is questionable and I need to grow significantly.

### **Step 1: Planning to “Teach Up” as a Catalyst for Challenge and Success**

\_\_\_ I see human differences as positive and enriching in the classroom.

\_\_\_ I believe virtually all students have the capacity to succeed academically.

\_\_\_ I accept responsibility for each student's growth and success.

\_\_\_ I work to know and respond to each student's culture, interests, and perspectives.

\_\_\_ I continually study my content to understand it for meaning and relevance.

\_\_\_ I continually study my students to understand them as learners.