

# Focused Instruction

An Innovative Teaching  
Model for All Learners

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GWEN DOTY

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# Introduction

*Focused Instruction: An Innovative Teaching Model for All Learners* introduces one of the most powerful instructional models available to teachers. Using this research-based design, teachers can easily differentiate learning content, course of action, and final student product, while maintaining a student-centered classroom.

## **What Is Focused Instruction?**

Focused instruction is a well-planned, standards-based lesson map. This map includes the teaching components that are crucial for a deep, long-term understanding of individual student learning needs. Focused instruction involves sequential instruction that is purposeful, engaging, relevant, and customized for unique learners. This book organizes this teaching model into manageable chunks, providing teachers with a simple and highly effective process—one that empowers them to address their students' unique learning needs.

## **How Does It Compare to Other Instructional Models?**

The individual components of the focused instruction model are not original, never-been-done-before innovations. When one views them separately, it is apparent that the steps of focused instruction are based on specific features of existing models that have been shown by research to be highly effective for student achievement. Focused instruction brings these best practices together in a powerful new model and provides a step-by-step guide for teachers, along with the tools they need to support diverse learners. Let's examine how focused instruction has drawn on the best practices of three earlier models: direct instruction, indirect instruction, and differentiated instruction.

***Direct Instruction***

Direct instruction is a teacher-directed approach that involves passive rather than active learning. Classes follow a series of lesson steps that may or may not be scripted, and there is always a clear and focused direction to the lesson plan, similar to the following (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001):

- Activation of prior knowledge
- Stating the objective
- Modeling the skill
- Student practice
- Checking for understanding
- Closure
- Independent practice

Because this model does not consistently emphasize student engagement and student interest, the personal relevance to students of the content is not always apparent. Classroom management is fairly easy with direct instruction, since there is less interaction and less kinesthetic activity than in other models.

***Indirect Instruction***

Indirect instruction is clearly student-centered and has a high level of student involvement. Students are encouraged to find personal relevance in their learning activities, and teachers often use a discovery or inquiry approach. The teacher strategically creates the learning environment, the students conduct the inquiry, and the teacher provides specific feedback (Martin, 1983). This approach affords students many opportunities to use higher-order thinking skills. Teachers may or may not have clear goals or learning strategies in place. Because students are actively engaged and out of their seats, classroom management may be more challenging than in other forms of instruction.



### ***Differentiated Instruction***

Differentiated instruction involves both direct and indirect instruction, taking into account the needs of each student, including background, academic level, language, and learning style. In a journal article entitled “Reconcilable Differences? Standards-Based Teaching and Differentiation,” Carol Ann Tomlinson shares her views on differentiated instruction:

What we call *differentiation* is not a recipe for teaching. It is not an instructional strategy. It is not what a teacher does when he or she has time. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is a philosophy. As such, it is based on a set of beliefs:

- Students who are the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances.
- These differences are significant enough to have a major impact on what students need to learn, the pace at which they need to learn it, and the support they need from teachers and others to learn it well.
- Students will learn best when supportive adults push them slightly beyond where they can work without assistance.
- Students will learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences.
- Students will learn best when learning opportunities are natural.
- Students are more effective learners when classrooms and schools create a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected.
- The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student.

(Tomlinson, 2000, p. 8)

Carol Ann Tomlinson’s differentiated instruction model includes all of these approaches—clear goals and learning strategies, focused direction, and a sequential learning process. However, some of the other models that have been built on her work do not take each of these components into consideration.

## How Focused Instruction Integrates the Three Instructional Models

Focused instruction has adopted the components from each of these three models that research has shown to be most effective and most critical for academic proficiency. The effective traits from the direct instruction model include a clear and focused direction in each lesson, with specific learning strategies in place. These are combined with effective traits from the indirect instruction model—a high level of student involvement, finding personal meaning in the learning, and activities that encourage higher-order thinking skills. From the differentiated approach, focused instruction takes into account students' individual learning needs and a willingness to use effective differentiation strategies to meet those needs. Table I-1 shows how focused instruction draws on the typical strengths of the three models.

**Table I-1. Comparison of Most Prominent Attributes of Four Instruction Models**

EFFECTIVE TRAITS	DIRECT INSTRUCTION	INDIRECT INSTRUCTION	DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION	FOCUSED INSTRUCTION
Clear and focused direction in each lesson	✓			✓
Teacher-centered	✓			
Student-centered		✓	✓	✓
High level of student involvement		✓	✓	✓
Standards made clear to students	✓			✓
Personal relevance		✓	✓	✓
Teacher modeling	✓		✓	✓
Various practice opportunities	✓		✓	✓
Classroom management easy to monitor	✓			✓
Discovery or inquiry approach		✓	✓	✓
Takes into account the individual needs of each student			✓	✓
Can involve both direct and indirect instruction			✓	✓



## How Focused Instruction Benefits Diverse Learners

Each student who walks through the classroom door has unique learning strengths and weaknesses, as well as a distinctive path for information absorption, processing, and application. Because students' backgrounds, knowledge, and vocabulary on any given topic also vary greatly, they each perceive and interpret new information in a distinct way.

That is why for each standard you teach, you must preassess students' current level of skill or knowledge. This allows you to customize the learning for the material in that particular lesson. Rather than labeling, categorizing, or classifying students, look at individual readiness levels with each new standard presented and make instructional decisions accordingly. Whenever you introduce a new standard, the groupings of students also shift according to their needs, interests, and skill level. In some groups, gifted students and special education students might be working on the same task.

Focused instruction includes modifications and customizations for the following diverse learners:

- Culturally diverse students
- English-language learners
- Children growing up in poverty
- Special education students
- Gifted and high-ability students
- Students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Regular education students

Users of focused instruction benefit from its step-by-step, solidly researched-based instructional map, which integrates some of the highest impact strategies research has to offer. Every one of its 11 steps builds toward customizing the content, course of action, and final student product to meet the needs of diverse learners. In subsequent chapters, we will explore in detail each of the 11 steps of this process:

1. Analyze the standard
2. Preinstructional strategies

3. Goals and purpose
4. Brain activators
5. Learn the language of the standard
6. Sequential and active instruction
7. Check for understanding
8. Student practice with scaffolding
9. Teacher feedback
10. Final student product
11. Student reflections

Through various tasks, graphic organizers, and chapter activities, the research-based learning tools presented here are clearly modeled for the reader. You will find many of them in reproducible form in the Tools and Templates sections at the end of every chapter and also on the Internet at [teachinginfocus.com](http://teachinginfocus.com). We hope you will engage with these resources and become an active participant in the learning. Doing so will enable you to benefit much more fully from them. Enjoy the process!