

Ten Differentiation Strategies for

Building Literacy in the Australian Curriculum

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Preface

I have one simple purpose in writing this book – to share effective strategies I have seen in action that engage students in reading and writing. Struggles with school assignments that require reading and writing plague many students. Some just haven't developed the skills necessary to complete the assignments, and others, for a variety of reasons, choose not to engage with the work. Teachers must make hundreds of decisions a day in response to the cognitive, social-emotional and physical needs of their students, and many revolve around reading and writing.

- Can all of my students read this text? Should I read it aloud to ensure everyone gets the information?
- Students don't like the textbook – what are my options?
- We're supposed to integrate more writing into the curriculum – how do I do that?
- What should be in-class work and what can I expect to be done at home?
- How can I use our digital devices effectively?

Because our students come to us with a variety of skill levels and a multitude of attitudes related to literacy, we must be flexible in our thinking as we develop assignments. Differentiation is a result of flexible thinking. Anticipating student learning needs and planning appropriately is a key component of differentiation, but so is paying close attention to student responses and adapting the lesson plan as needed.

This book focuses on practical, specific strategies, not the big picture of differentiation. If you want to understand the intricacies of differentiation, learn how to develop differentiated units, or acquire skills in assessing in a differentiated manner, read works by Carol Tomlinson and Rick Wormeli. I have all of their books and attend their sessions at conferences. They both speak with an authentic teacher voice and show an obvious appreciation for the uniqueness of the young adolescent.

The strategies in this book will help you differentiate in several ways. Sometimes you are doing a whole-class lesson, and you need an approach that has several layers addressing learning preferences. Other times, you assign students a task, and they need individual support to be successful. And yet in other instances, you are looking for ways to engage students with varied interests. Differentiation is a multi-faceted enterprise with a variety of solutions.

The Australian Curriculum is upping the literacy ante for everyone because its literacy requirements reach across the curriculum. It's often a hard slog to convince content area teachers to integrate literacy strategies into their instruction; they are under tremendous pressure to teach a gazillion standards. Therefore, I included strategies that are relatively easy to use but will ratchet up the engagement level of students by causing them to interact with the content at high levels. I have used all of the strategies myself, usually with middle years students. Some of the digital ones did not exist when I was still teaching the middle years, but I use them personally in my work. And, once again, this book does not propose a comprehensive approach to literacy in a middle years context. Nancie Atwell, Janet Allen and Jeff Wilhelm are my go-to experts on that subject. The strategies in this book are helpful approaches to use as you support your students' reading and writing in your content area.

This book is the second in a series about differentiation strategies. The first, entitled *Ten Differentiation Strategies for Building Prior Knowledge*, was republished in Australia by Hawker Brownlow Education in 2015. The books share a similar organisation: Part 1, a discussion of differentiation; Part 2, answers to frequently asked questions; Part 3, the strategies and, finally, the appendix and references.

Instead of just showcasing ten individual strategies, I have used teaching challenges to anchor the approaches. Examples include Building Skills to Cite Evidence, Providing Less-Able Readers Access to Rich Curriculum Materials and Building Grammar Skills for Clear Communication. Most of the sections include multiple suggestions.

Ideas for integrating digital learning are woven into each section. Technology should be part of our curriculum and instruction. Thus, I believe it must be integral to any discussion of teaching and learning and not relegated to books and articles focused solely on technology.

The Australian Curriculum has been under a lot of scrutiny recently, and the interpretations of how it should be addressed in the classroom are multiplying exponentially. Unfortunately, these interpretations are often at odds with each other. I am a very pragmatic person, and so I look for what makes sense for the age group one is teaching. Twelve-year-olds are not

ready to participate in a literature seminar at the university level. They need to learn how to analyse, evaluate and synthesise in a manner that provides lots of non-threatening practices in different contexts. These experiences should be different than a Year 12 literature subject. You will find ideas for addressing the Australian Curriculum literacy requirements sprinkled throughout Part 3.

Finally, supporting the creative endeavours of students is always in the back of my mind. The last 10 years have often found these ideas stifled because too many teachers that I have worked with have been forced into regimented curricula. But I sense a sea change as the public recognises what we are losing when we tamp down creative and innovative thinking. The February 2013 *Educational Leadership's* theme was Creativity Now! and made me want to jump and shout! In this book, one of my favourite strategies to support creative thought is the last one, synectics. I challenge you to try this strategy with your students even if it takes you out of your comfort zone. You won't be disappointed.

This was a fun book to write for several reasons. I love to think and talk about ways to rev students' engines through reading and writing experiences. Secondly, the opportunities presented by the digital world fascinate me, and I am on a mission to convince every teacher I meet to jump on the digital bandwagon. Lastly, writing keeps me learning. Before I began the research for this book, I didn't know much about the gender gap in literacy or how to apply gaming theory to learning in school. I read a lot on those two topics, and though far from becoming an expert, I have added a wrinkle or two to my grey matter related to those topics.

My greatest hope is that this book is helpful in some way to my readers. I thank you for what you do each and every day for our young people. Teaching is a worthy and wonderful way to spend our professional lives. As John Steinbeck said, "Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit."

Cheers!

Jill Spencer

Reading and Writing Differentiation and the Australian Curriculum

Gathered together, the class readies itself for the final writers' share circle to listen to one another's research reports. But what the students will share are not your average secondary school reports that roll on regurgitating fact after fact. Instead, these will be narratives where the writer has taken on the "voice" of one of the actual participants in the historical event.

Vanessa begins: "My name is ..." (dramatic pause) "Anastasia Romonov. I did not die on that horrible night in July of 1918. This is my testimony. We had gone to bed as on any other night, but were awakened at around 2 a.m. by sounds of booted feet tramping down the hall. Told to dress, we were rushed down to the basement where Papa asked for three chairs ..."

Down the corridor, another class is sitting in a fishbowl configuration. Five students sit in the inner circle discussing the Logan family's ability to survive amidst the prejudice in the 1930s described by Mildred Taylor in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. The rest of the class sits on desks in an outer circle taking notes and listening somewhat attentively. There is always an empty chair in the inner circle, so students from the outer circle can join the active discussion. One of the students says, "Well at least things are better now – people aren't faced with the kinds of discrimination the Logan family faced – insults and intimidation like when Mr Simms forces Cassie to call Lillian Jean 'Miz Lillian.'" Toolan hopped off of his perch and went to the empty chair and said, "Let me tell you, that type of discrimination does still exist!" He proceeded to tell them what it was like to be an Indigenous Australian and live in other parts of the country. The outer circle sat mesmerised as Toolan connected the prejudice he had experienced with that of the Logan children.

The human condition, powerful ideas and history-changing events come alive when students engage in reading and writing activities that catch their imagination, challenge their sense of fairness, or breathe life into important events. The Australian Curriculum literacy requirements should be harnessed to craft powerful learning experiences such as the ones just described for our middle years students. Using differentiation strategies that tap into student strengths and creativity will invite students into the instructional process. Schools must not let the Australian Curriculum be done to them, but rather, mould any implementation plan to fit their students' learning needs. Educators must inform themselves on what the document actually says and then collaborate to design intellectually stimulating and developmentally appropriate lessons and units.

Easier said than done, I know. But let's explore reading and writing through the combined lenses of the Australian Curriculum and differentiation to see the possibilities. The overview of the Literacy general capability from the Australian Curriculum: English states

“Students learn to comprehend what they read and view by applying growing contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge. They develop more sophisticated processes for interpreting, analysing, evaluating and critiquing ideas, information and issues from a variety of sources. They explore the ways conventions and structures are used in written, digital, multimedia and cinematic texts to entertain, inform and persuade audiences, and they use their growing knowledge of textual features to explain how texts make an impact on different audiences.

Students apply knowledge they have developed in other strands and sub-strands to create with clarity, authority and novelty a range of spoken, written and multimodal texts that entertain, inform and persuade audiences. They do so by strategically selecting key aspects of a topic as well as language, visual and audio features. They learn how to edit for enhanced meaning and effect by refining ideas, reordering sentences, adding or substituting words for clarity, and removing repetition. They develop and consolidate a handwriting style that is legible, fluent and automatic, and that supports sustained writing. They learn to use a range of software programs including word processing software, selecting purposefully from a range of functions to communicate and create clear, effective, informative and innovative texts.” (ACARA, 2015)