READY-TO-USE

Differentiation Strategies

Grades 6–8

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CONTENTS

WHAT IS
Differentiation?

"Four different lesson plans: one for modifications, one for ELL, 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 given that this sampling of teachers produced such a wide range of responses. 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 district- 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 catalogs, 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 middle school classroom. As a theory, differentiation can be studied, analyzed, and defined, but for students to receive the most benefit from differentiation, teachers have to completely jump into the role. Teaching using the differentiation lifestyle does not mean just differentiating this lesson or that product. A teacher who lives the differentiated lifestyle in the middle school classroom views every aspect of his or her teaching, from the simplest task to the most complex one, through a differentiated lens.

As students ourselves, we may have experienced some of these invigorating teachers throughout our school years. These were 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. Take a moment and consider your teachers throughout the years. Can you name all of the teachers you had during your middle school years, like you can with your elementary and high school teachers? Or do only certain teachers come to mind? For many adults, those middle school years are a black hole. People can recall the names of their old friends from that era, and what activities they enjoyed, but perhaps only a few, if any, of their teachers. Those memorable teachers are those who made a connection with you, either personally or educationally. These are teachers who embraced the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom.

Not all teachers who teach this way realize 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, advanced products) into their teaching; however, by embracing a differentiated lifestyle in the middle school classroom and applying the constructs of differentiation in every aspect of the daily lesson cycle, from preassessments and guided practice, to independent practice and even anchor activities, teachers compound the richness of students' learning experiences 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 that differentiation allows. This may seem contradictory to what middle school students loudly profess to want: personal freedom and a

ride on the "It's all about me" train. So why would our middle school students be unreceptive to differentiated opportunities?

It seems that 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. Many of our middle school students have "played school" long enough to have figured out the system of giving teachers what they want. By middle school, students have mastered the technique of ferreting out the information the teacher is seeking and then providing it so they can go back to whatever they prefer doing: talking with friends, reading, and of course, secretly texting under their desks! This is otherwise referred to as the "Is this what you want?" question sequence. Students ask, "Is this what you want?" or, "Is this right?" until they have narrowed down what the teacher is seeking, and that is exactly what they will quickly produce and submit for grading. This behavior helps students avoid the "Gotcha Factor," which many middle school students have experienced in earlier grades when working on seemingly open-ended assignments. The teacher, after thinking through a supposedly open-ended assignment, has already predefined 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 technique, many middle school students may become confused or frustrated when a teacher who has embraced the differentiation lifestyle in his or her 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 her seat knowing she will not receive the response for which she had hoped. For the teacher who is adopting the differentiated lifestyle in the classroom, the "Is this what you want?" questions can last for 1–2 months at the beginning of the school year, depending on the students' experiences, abilities, and tenacity. Slowly, fewer and fewer students will ask the teacher a 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 meet 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 that students 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 and/or written learners. Second, visual and written activities are usually less subjective and easier to grade. Consequently, it is easier to justify the grades that students earn; serious middle school students are some of the best debaters and arguers in the school system. Lastly, visual and written products tend to lead to quieter, more organized classrooms; it does not take much for middle school students to get off task, and it takes even longer to get them refocused! All of these reasons are valid when it comes to offering primarily 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 middle school students, the resounding responses are tactile/kinesthetic and verbal. This, of course, is based on our observations of middle school students constantly playing with their pencils and touching other students' things, as well as items on teachers' desks! As for the verbal responses, we know that many of our middle schoolers have no problem talking to others when they should be listening to instructions. This disconnect between lesson design and learning style has been going on for generations for the reasons previously mentioned. To be clear, tactile/kinesthetic learners can certainly work with visual strategies; however, if you really want to know how much a learner knows, you must give him an opportunity to express his knowledge through his preferred learning style.

This is best illustrated 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 that 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. This book, however, 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; and
- 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 analyzed, 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 needing 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 here, 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 middle school 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.

Preassessment. 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 "2" 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 2 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 center or in a folder that 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 a 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; however, many of these ready-to-use strategies can be effective in other areas with minor adjustments. Examples here will fall into the categories of: preassessment, 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 materials 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 that include 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.