

# Differentiation

From Planning to Practice Years 6–12

**RICK WORMELI**

FOREWORD BY CAROL ANN TOMLINSON



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Had I taught in a school where Rick Wormeli taught, I would have found him, become his friend and been his student. I feel fortunate to have done the latter two – and sad not to have had the opportunity to share a school setting with him.

Rick's work is not going to move the educator who has a ready supply of “yes, buts” (“I could do this, but there isn't enough time”, “I could do this, but the kids aren't responsive”, “I could do this, but the room is too small”). Rick's work is for the teacher who wants solutions, who wants to grow.

For those teachers and administrators, Rick offers knowledge that comes from having been in a classroom for a long and rich career and from having studied the best of scholarship about teaching and learning. He anticipates the questions teachers will ask about differentiation and answers them directly and economically. He knows what it feels like to succeed with a student—and what it feels like to fail. He prefers the former and he has developed a boundless repertoire of strategies designed to be catalysts for student success and to diminish the opportunity for students to fail.

Rick knows that good teaching – and high-quality differentiation is really just good teaching – requires proactive planning. He knows that powerful teachers place students in the centre stage of plans and see themselves not as lead actors in a play but as directors of student learning.

He knows that powerful teachers proactively plan for the success of every student, both when the teacher is presenting and when the student is making sense of knowledge, ideas and skills. He knows that curriculum, assessment and instruction are three interdependent sides of a teaching triangle.

Rick points out that differentiation is a derivative of informed assessment and an imperative for effective instruction of students with “special needs” and goes on to remind us that every student has special needs at some time (or many times) in a school day, a school year and a school life. Differentiation is what we do if we intend to have every student understand what they are learning, why they are learning it, why they should care and how it makes them more fully human.

Perhaps the most durable of Rick's contributions to the teacher-learners among us is an affirmation of what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a growth mind-set. The subtext of Rick's work is the statement, “Of course each student can succeed with important ideas and skills. Of course I can figure out how to make that happen. Of course that's my aspiration. Of course I'm willing to do what's necessary to make that happen.”

As my first colleagues taught me, that's what it really means to be a teacher.

*Carol Ann Tomlinson*

# Chapter 1

## Developing a Common Frame of Reference

### Rationale

You already know how to differentiate a lesson. You've been employing a variety of developmentally responsive strategies throughout the school year. Here are some examples from your current practices:

After your lesson about Renaissance art, a student calls you over to her desk, tells you she's confused and asks you to explain the main points again. You do so, providing extra examples that she can reference while she completes the chapter summary you previously assigned. With the new information, she's able to work independently.

A student is struggling to draw a perfect circle for part of another project. You just happen to be carrying a roll of masking tape in your hand, which you now tap against the student's desk, pondering aloud, "Hmm. I wonder what you could use as a tracing guide to create a circle ... There has to be something here that you can use." The student grins, grabs the tape, turns it flat against his paper and traces the inside contour of the roll. "Thanks", he says as he hands the roll back to you.

A student has a learning disability in reading. You record one of the history textbook's chapters on a compact disc or audiocassette so he can listen to your clarifying vocal inflections while he reads the text silently. This practice increases his comprehension of Winston Churchill's life, which enables him to fully participate in class discussions about the world leader.

A student finds wide-ruled paper too cumbersome to use. She stretches her letters to fill the lines and, consequently, her handwriting sprawls illegibly. You suggest that she use medium-ruled paper, which has

**FIGURE 2.1** Three Stages of Planning for Differentiated Lessons

<b>Steps to Take Before Designing the Learning Experiences</b>	<b>Steps to Take While Designing and Implementing the Learning Experiences</b>	<b>Steps to Take After Providing the Learning Experiences</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify your essential understandings, questions, benchmarks, objectives, skills, standards and/or learner outcomes.</li> <li>2. Identify those students who have special needs and start thinking about how you will adapt your instruction to ensure they can learn and achieve.</li> <li>3. Design formative and summative assessments.</li> <li>4. Design and deliver pre-assessments based on summative assessments and identified objectives.</li> <li>5. Adjust assessments and objectives based on further thinking while designing assessments.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Design the learning experiences for students based on the information gathered from those pre-assessments; your knowledge of your students; and your expertise with the curriculum; cognitive theory; and students at this stage of human development.</li> <li>2. Run a mental tape of each step in the lesson sequence to make sure that the process makes sense for your diverse group of students and will help the lesson run smoothly.</li> <li>3. Review your plans with a colleague.</li> <li>4. Obtain/create materials needed for the lesson.</li> <li>5. Conduct the lesson.</li> <li>6. Adjust formative and summative assessments and objectives as necessary based on observation and data collected while teaching the lessons.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. With students, evaluate the lesson's success. What evidence do you have that students grasped the important concepts and skills? What worked and what didn't, and why?</li> <li>2. Record advice about possible changes to make when you repeat this lesson in future years.</li> </ol>

*Give yourself time to figure out what's important to teach.*

*weeks.* This extended time period may be necessary to (a) understand the content yourself and (b) make sure you are teaching what the school, governing body and experts in your discipline expect. Few things are as frustrating as spending six weeks on a topic and discovering that there is only one short question about it on the standardised exam. In addition, experts in our field might cringe at our misinterpretations or misrepresentations of particular topics. Our students and our communities are depending on us to teach the material accurately and comprehensively.

Figuring out what is accurate and important to teach students is a critical step in our lesson design. Most teachers recognise that there are too many standards and objectives in the modern curriculum to address in daily fifty-minute periods over the course of a single school year. Although we may follow regional-mandated pacing guides, we won't be able to do justice to everything listed in most disciplines.

*Actions We Take Prior to Lesson Planning*

1. Identify what we have to teach (our objectives).
2. Figure out how our students are different from one another and how they best learn.
3. Create our assessments, starting with the final, summative assessment and including many ideas for both pre-assessments and formative assessments.
4. Conduct the pre-assessments for the unit or lesson, then contemplate the results and what the data means for adjusting the learning experiences.
5. Double-check our assessments against the learning objectives and make adjustments to keep them correlated.

*Actions We Take While Lesson Planning*

1. Given what we've discovered about students' learning needs, our lesson's objectives and the assessments we will give, we brainstorm potential strategies or learning experiences we can provide students so they will be successful.
2. Cluster these strategies into introductory experiences through more advanced experiences to get a rough sequence of learning and to more efficiently match the experiences to learner needs.
3. Double-check that the strategies meet all the needs of exceptional students and the learning objectives.

**Sequence the Strategies and Teach the Lesson**

Now we're ready to develop the actual sequence for the lessons. The list of strategies clustered by complexity and the short list for some of the unique needs of our students can be saved on our computer or printed as a hard copy and stapled to our lesson-plan book. But we will want to frequently reference these lists as we arrange items in our lesson plans, so we need to make them accessible.

As mentioned earlier, brainstorming for one lesson can lead to a whole unit of ideas. We've done that here. So, as we move ahead, let's narrow the focus to just a portion of what we've brainstormed for the larger unit – something for just a one- or two-day lesson. The procedures for designing and executing this lesson will be the same no matter which portion of the unit we choose. For the purposes of this example, then, let's choose a lesson from the middle of the sequence: Cortéz's impact on the Aztecs.

*Students laugh at the invader and don't take the staged event seriously.*

- Apologise to the students for not foreseeing this interruption and putting a stop to it, but remain in character: concerned, serious and a little unnerved.
- If the laughter gets out of hand, let students see the “behind-the-scenes” work of the lesson. Tell them that you designed the experience as an opening “hook” to create interest in the lesson instead of resorting to more mundane activities such as reading a chapter in the textbook and answering questions. Remind students that you could quickly switch to a slower, less compelling activity if the laughing doesn't stop. Anyone who continues to detract from the experience can be asked to leave (moving to a colleague's classroom to complete an assignment for ten minutes while the rest of the class finishes the simulation). You will have a serious discussion with this student later.
- Tell the volunteer to stop and ask the disruptive students for their names and the names of their parents. This usually makes students nervous and quiet.
- Stand next to the laughing students and glare at them sternly. Give these students a sharp desist command while looking concerned about the intruder.

*Students take the invader too seriously and become upset.*

- Break character and ask the invader to take a bow and introduce themselves to the class. Give the volunteer a small acting award – half a sheet of paper on which you've quickly scribbled “Academy Award for Acting” or a sculpture quickly made from aluminium foil in the shape of a statue of “Oscar” from the Academy Awards.
- Discuss the metacognitive aspects of the lesson. Remind students that simulation is a powerful way to learn information and tell them that you wanted to move the content into long-term memory by making it vivid. If the activity continues to bother students, apologise sincerely.
- Consider giving some students roles in the drama so they will feel more in control. This is particularly effective for overly excited or talkative students.

*Students can't come up with any ideas for what our communities will look like in fifty years.*

- Ask students to identify another person, real or imagined, with a strong personality and predict the changes that person might prompt in a community. For example, what new rules might a

**FIGURE 3.6** 3-2-1 Activity for Group Processing of Narrative Authenticity

- 3 Working with a partner, identify three techniques authors use to create authenticity in their historical narratives.
- 2 Working with the same partner, write a quick scene that takes place in any other historical era and uses two or more techniques authors use to create historical authenticity. You will need to understand the period of history well to complete this task.
- 1 Working independently, identify one piece of advice you would give writers trying to make their narratives more authentic to the period.

*Remember that you may need to adjust the complexity of the summarisation prompts to meet the needs of students from time to time.*

One of the great aspects of the football sequence is that all students can contribute to the final conversation in substantive ways. In the previous example, everyone can comment on how authors create authenticity in a novel. Everyone could observe how characters change and grow as a result of conflict in a story. Everyone had the right tools (although they might not have been the same as those used by their peers) to achieve the same learning outcome.

### *The Anchor Structure*

When I was first learning to differentiate, I realised I had students who were performing below, on and above the year level average, yet I only had one class period a day to teach all of them. If I concentrated on each level or need in linear sequence, I couldn't address all the issues by the end of the week, much less by the end of the class period, nor could I complete the curriculum I was supposed to teach. I also didn't want to give up my breakfast, lunch, after-school time or planning period to reteach lessons for students who didn't learn concepts and skills the first time, nor did I want to require additional commitments from students. I didn't mind occasional overtime, but not every day.

The question was, how could I be in two or more places working with two or more groups of students at the same time? In other words, how could I teach a variety of students concurrently, all within the same class period? It was while trying to solve this problem that a colleague mentioned anchor activities to me and I was hooked, though admittedly I took this technique in a different direction.

Many books, videos and presentations about differentiation explain anchor activities as tasks that teachers use to maintain momentum in the