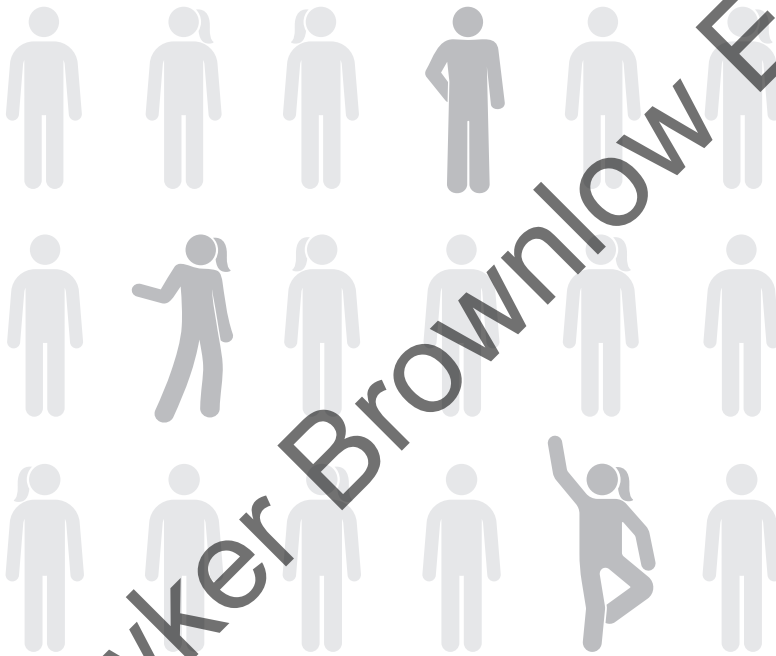


DOABLE DIFFERENTIATION

12 Strategies

to Meet the Needs of All Learners



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Table of Contents

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About the Author	xiii
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INTRODUCTION

What Makes Differentiation Doable?	1
The Goal of Doable Differentiation	3
Key Doable Differentiation Principles	7
About This Book	10
Reflection Activity	12

PART 1: THE FOUNDATION **13**

CHAPTER 1

Cognitive Processes and Effective Differentiation	15
The Doable Differentiation Framework and School	17
Cognitive Processing Styles in the Classroom	28
Reflection Activity	31

CHAPTER 2

Clear Learning Goals and Expectations	33
Clear Success Criteria	33
Clarification of the Big Ideas	34
Learning Progressions	37
Learning Maps	39
Reflection Activity	40
<i>Big Ideas in Early Mathematics</i>	42



PART 2: THE STRATEGIES 45

CHAPTER 3

Choice 47

The Choice Strategies 48

Two Big Success Essentials 57

Common Concerns About Choice 59

Why Choice Works 60

Reflection Activity 61

CHAPTER 4

Wait Time 63

The Wait Time Strategies 64

Three Big Success Essentials 70

Common Concerns About Wait Time 72

Why Wait Time Works 73

Reflection Activity 74

CHAPTER 5

Unambiguous Instruction 75

The Unambiguous Instruction Strategies 77

Two Big Success Essentials 82

Common Concerns About Unambiguous Instruction 83

Why Unambiguous Instruction Works 84

Reflection Activity 85

CHAPTER 6

Pressure-Prompted Accommodations 87

The Pressure-Prompted Accommodation Strategies 90

Two Big Success Essentials 96

Common Concerns About Pressure-Prompted Accommodations . . . 98

Why Pressure-Prompted Accommodations Work 99

Reflection Activity 100

CHAPTER 7

Student-Centered Discussions 101

The Student-Centered Discussion Strategies	103
Four Big Success Essentials.	111
Common Concerns About Student-Centered Discussions	114
Why Student-Centered Discussions Work.	115
Reflection Activity	117

CHAPTER 8

Curiosity Creators 119

The Curiosity Creator Strategies	120
Two Big Success Essentials	133
Common Concerns About Curiosity Creators	134
Why Curiosity Creators Work.	135
Reflection Activity	135

CHAPTER 9

Open Questions. 137

Open Question Strategies for Interdisciplinary Literacy	138
Open Question Strategies for Mathematics	144
Open Question Discussion Protocols	146
Three Big Success Essentials	151
Common Concerns About Open Questions	154
Why Open Questions Work	155
Reflection Activity	156

CHAPTER 10

Concept Maps 159

The Concept Map Strategies	160
Four Big Success Essentials.	168
Common Concerns About Concept Maps	171
Why Concept Maps Work	172
Reflection Activity	173

CHAPTER 11

Big Notes	175
The Big Notes Strategies	176
Five Big Success Essentials	181
Common Concerns About Big Notes	182
Why Big Notes Work	183
Reflection Activity	185

CHAPTER 12

Moveable Organizers	187
The Moveable Organizer Strategies	189
Two Big Success Essentials	197
Common Concerns About Moveable Organizers	198
Why Moveable Organizers Work	199
Reflection Activity	200

CHAPTER 13

Planned Movement	201
The Planned Movement Strategies	201
Two Big Success Essentials	210
Common Concerns About Planned Movement	211
Why Planned Movement Works	212
Reflection Activity	213

CHAPTER 14

Talking to Write	215
The Talking to Write Strategies	216
Two Big Success Essentials	224
Common Concerns About Talking to Write	225
Why Talking to Write Works	226
Reflection Activity	228

PART 3: LESSON PLANNING 231

CHAPTER 15

Two-Step Differentiation 233

A Differentiated Lesson Plan for Adults 234

A Primary-Grade Example 238

A Secondary-Grade Example 244

Reflection Activity 246

Epilogue 249

References and Resources 253

Index 267

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INTRODUCTION

What Makes Differentiation Doable?

Step back into yourself as a teenager. You're taking an assessment on the first moon landing in July 1969. Which of the following assignments would you rather tackle? (Remember, you're choosing as a student, not as an adult educator.)

- Write an essay about the first moon landing. Be sure to cover the following learning targets for this unit: Understanding the Cold War context surrounding the goal of landing on the moon before the end of the 1960s and being able to explain the building of capacity to design and manufacture equipment, challenges in the training of astronauts and ground personnel, reactions to the televised event, and advances in scientific knowledge that directly resulted from the space program through July 1969.
- Imagine you watched the 1969 moon landing live. Choose a viewpoint: Were you an engineer or someone in another role at Mission Control? Did you watch it on television with your family? Were you related to an astronaut? Write a letter to a friend or relative about your experience. Be sure your letter demonstrates your knowledge of the learning targets for this unit. *Note: Your letter doesn't need to accurately replicate the experiences of the person you choose; rather, it should express how a person in that role or situation may have reacted to the moon landing.*

If you teach elementary students, which of the following would you have chosen when you were your students' age?

- Make a double timeline. On the top line, show the sequence of main events in the fairy tale "Cinderella." In the bottom line, write about why each event is important to the story.
- Rewrite "Cinderella" from the viewpoint of any character but Cinderella. Make sure your tale shows the same sequence of main events as the original version we read together as a class.

There—I differentiated (twice) in just two steps. In both examples, I wrote an assessment task that I would have wanted to answer as a student. I then wrote one that covers the same learning targets for students who think and reason differently than I do.

This is *doable differentiation*. It's one lesson plan that involves just a few minutes of extra effort to differentiate a learning task by providing choices so that students can use their strengths to demonstrate mastery of learning targets. When educators consider differentiated instruction, choice often comes to mind as a strategy for tapping student interests, skills, and more. Mastering choice strategies, as in these examples, is just one key way teachers can work within established definitions of differentiated instruction. There are many more. As you read the following definitions, each from a different resource about classroom differentiation, note the powerful role that giving choices can play in implementing effective instruction. And, bring to mind other differentiation strategies you've used:

At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means “shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively. (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 1)

[Differentiating instruction means] understanding where each student begins, where he or she is on the journey toward the success criteria for the lesson. (Hattie, 2012, p. 104)

[Differentiating instruction means] adjusting instruction for individual learners' needs, styles, cultural values, and/or interests. (Kise, 2007, p. 1)

The first definition focuses on differentiating how students access content, process what they are learning, and demonstrate mastery via different products. The second definition focuses on differentiating instruction based on students' current proficiency levels. The third focuses on various differences among students. Providing choices fits within any of these definitions but will seldom be enough to help every student reach mastery. Thus the concept of differentiated instruction has grown to include all kinds of sophisticated tools and methods. But what is the track record for differentiation in this world of evidence-based reform?

In a study of over 2,000 middle school students, researchers Catherine A. Little, D. Betsy McCoach, and Sally M. Reis (2014) find that differentiating instruction based on proficiency makes little difference in learning outcomes. After reviewing the impact of professional development on classroom instruction, researchers Martin Mills, Sue Monk, Amanda Keddie, Peter Renshaw, Pam Christie, David Geelan, and Christina Gowlett (2014) conclude that differentiation is complex, yet schools and districts often require it of teachers without providing sufficient training and support. While investigating teacher attitudes toward moving to mixed-ability classrooms, researchers Karen Dunn and Ellie Darlington (2016) note an attitude of hostility toward differentiation. Teachers voiced their fear of barriers such as time constraints, class size, emotional impact on students of some differentiation strategies, and more. Writing for EdSurge, Wendy McMahon (2019) reports that 95 percent of the 600 teachers who responded to a 2019 study

consider differentiation important—and difficult because of lack of time and resources. Still other voices decry, “Differentiation doesn’t work!” (Delisle, 2015; Schmoker, 2010). Although many teachers have succeeded at using differentiated instruction (Bal, 2016; Lai, Zhang, & Chang, 2020), these collective findings indicate educators have jumped on the differentiation bandwagon without adequately allowing for one or more crucial factors for success, such as extensive professional development, planning time, and scaffolding for newer teachers.

These studies draw on input from teachers at every level of experience, but the struggle to implement differentiation is often most dire for those newest to the classroom. Imagine a surgical intern, fresh from medical school, being asked to perform advanced abdominal, orthopedic, cardiovascular, or plastic surgery for patients with varying degrees of acute conditions, all in the first months of practice. You wouldn’t want to be one of those patients!

Yet, school systems, states, and provinces ask new teachers to facilitate multiple subjects with diverse learners in contained classrooms. They’re striving to build relationships, master classroom control, plan lessons, and assess student readiness and progress. The expectation to differentiate, especially using a complex model, can overwhelm their capacity for learning. New teachers, and teachers new to differentiation, don’t have resistance to differentiated instruction; rather, they react naturally to a scarcity of time, of expertise with foundational skills, and of expert coaching with deliberate practice. In particular, research shows expert coaching is essential to developing true expertise (Mielke & Frontier, 2012).

That’s where this book comes in. It provides twelve valuable strategy groups you, as a K–12 teacher or leader, can use with what you are already doing in the classroom or at your school to meet the needs of four core cognitive processing styles your students have and that you will learn about in this book. Within each of the twelve strategy groups, you will find several approaches to using the strategy effectively with your students. Will these strategies solve every problem in a mixed-ability classroom? No, but for every strategy, you’ll learn about the issues it *can* address, its research base, and multiple ways to use it. The teachers I’ve shared these differentiation strategies with—many of whom struggled with or resisted implementing differentiation in the past—say, “Wow, this is doable!”

In this introduction, you will learn the goals and key principles of doable differentiation. You will also become familiar with how I’ve organized this book so you can best use it based on your own cognitive processing style.

The Goal of Doable Differentiation

With an overarching mission focused on increasing learning for all students, this book’s goal is to help you and your colleagues foster classrooms where all students reap the following benefits of differentiation.

- **Successfully learning:** Teachers need clear learning goals and ways to provide time and support so every student can reach them. Differentiation is at the

heart of equity, ensuring students each experience the kind of academic success that fosters a growth mindset and the self-efficacy that helps them internalize the belief, *I am a learner!*

Example: A teacher team I worked with helped 100 percent of eighth-grade students complete and pass their National History Day projects, compared with failure rates as high as 30 percent on similar projects in past years. The team used pressure-prompted accommodations (chapter 6, page 87), combined with choice strategies (chapter 3, page 47).

- **Thriving as members of a learning community:** Classrooms, policies, curricula, and adult-student interactions need to reflect that the whole child comes to school. Social-emotional learning (SEL) isn't an add-on (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Students constantly pick up strategies, healthy and unhealthy, to meet their emotional needs. Careful implementation of many strategies in this book aids students in developing critical skills for cognitive processing, self-monitoring, understanding of differences, and more.

Example: A teacher used a wait time strategy (chapter 4, page 63) to help her kindergartners learn to hold their thoughts until every student, including the English learners, had a response ready for discussions. These young students learned about having patience and respecting each other's ideas from this simple teacher move.

- **Engaged actively in their education:** Many strategies in this book require students to think for themselves, make choices, create their own meaning, evaluate their own work, and take charge of their study time.

Example: A teacher used an open question strategy (chapter 9, page 137) and a student-centered discussion strategy (chapter 7, page 101) to change her mathematics students from passive learners to persistent problem solvers who enjoy open-ended tasks.

- **Agile thinking:** The agile mind is open to new ways of thinking, learning, and doing. Real-life problems seldom have textbook answers; students need to draw on past learning experiences *and* comfortably explore new options.

Example: A teacher introduced her students to the four cognitive processing styles that underlie doable differentiation (chapter 1, page 15). She encouraged students to make choices in assignments that were different from what they'd normally choose. Several students commented, "I had to work hard, but you gave me strategies that helped me stretch. I think I learned more than if I'd done the usual."

- **Maturing decision makers:** Creating lifelong learners can't be a meaningless generality. Students need to learn how to learn for their own sake. If teachers tell them what and how to learn, how will they learn to define their own learning targets, narrow down the information that will be most helpful, and plan for mastery? If teachers make all their decisions, how will they learn to make decisions themselves?