Differentiated Instruction

In Practice

Diving Deeper into Differentiation

As differentiation deepens, so does learning. Students come to expect tasks that are appropriately challenging, and find greater satisfaction in their learning. They engage fully in work that is meaningful and interesting to them. And they continue to broaden their knowledge about how and why they learn.

As skill with differentiating lessons improves, the following sections on tiering and compacting assignments, engaging student choice, using technology, and supporting all students with special needs, suggest ways in which differentiation might be taken to a more advanced stage.

Tiered Assignments

Students come to school more or less ready for different types of reading, more or less fluent with math facts or problem solving, with more or less background in historical documents, or more or less ready to participate in the scientific process. Tiered assignments involve parallel tasks at varying levels of complexity so that students can work toward the same learning targets in a way that is responsive to their readiness. Tiered assignments are developed using varied levels of scaffolding and extension for students who are ready for an additional “push,” and for students needing additional support. By creating tiered tasks, teachers ensure that all students get appropriately challenging work—work that is challenging enough to push learning to new levels, but not so challenging that it’s overwhelming.

Apply “The Equalizer”

The “equalizer” (Figure 3) is Carol Ann Tomlinson’s visual representation of the various layers of complexity in lessons or tasks that teachers can tier. Focusing on one or more layers of the equalizer when planning lessons and tasks will help teachers create responsive, tiered lessons. For example, some students may be given a writing assignment with a structured template that will help them organize their main points, while others may be given only a prompt—the expectation is that those with just a prompt are more ready for the challenge of organizing their writing independently. In another example, all students may read the same short story, but they are given different reading response activities depending on the results of a pre-assessment. Students who struggled with the pre-assessment are given more specific questions, and pointed to particular
places in the text to help them build their understanding. Students who did well on the assessment were given a more open-ended version of the assignment, and asked to build their own understanding from scratch.

It is important to note that we make a key departure from Tomlinson’s equalizer. Whereas she suggests varying the level of text based on student readiness, we would suggest instead varying the amount of text based on readiness levels so that all students are challenged to read grade level or above texts. It’s important not to think of these levels on a continuum of “high ability” to “low ability.” Rather, each level simply represents the reality of what a student currently needs in order to do his or her best.

Figure 3: Tomlinson’s “Equalizer”

Focus on Equity When Creating Tiered Assignments

- **Establish clear learning targets.** Generally, all students are working toward the same learning targets on tasks that vary in complexity, abstractness, number of steps, concreteness, and independence. In order for tiered assignments to be effective, it’s essential that they be designed with the same core learning targets in mind.

- **Introduce all tasks with the same level of enthusiasm and interest.** All students should feel that the work they have been asked to complete is “respectful.” It helps when the tiered activities “look” the same, including labeling the activity with the learning target so that students see that they are all working toward the same goal.

- **Ensure that all students are equally involved and active.** Take care to give different work, not simply more or less work, for different tiers; as well as activities that are equally appealing and desirable.

In the following close-up, teacher Sydney Chaffee applies tiering to a variety of lesson components. Note specifically how she tiers the structure of the task, and the complexity of the prompt.
Strategy Close Up:

A Tiered Assignment in a High School Humanities Class

Sydney Chaffee, ninth grade humanities teacher and department chair at Codman Academy Charter Public School, teaches a very heterogeneous class. She says “I am differentiating all the time. My students come into ninth grade with widely varying skill levels. This year someone was at fourth-grade reading level sitting next to someone at a college reading level. I have students who came to this country a year ago and those who have been here their whole lives. One student was in a substantially separate classroom and received one-on-one instruction last year, and now he is in my full inclusion classroom with 15 other kids.”

Chaffee uses a variety of structures for creating tiered writing assignments. Beginning with the same final writing product, she offers some students optional scaffolding. For others, she requires it. This year she has begun to track which students receive which kinds of scaffolding with the explicit goal of moving them more intentionally towards needing less support. “I keep track of all of these iterations on a spreadsheet so I can see whether a student mastered the learning targets after I offered a certain accommodation, or whether pulling an accommodation caused a student’s scores to drop.” She explains, “I want to be able to phase out the scaffolds over time and be more intentional with what I’m doing – to ensure the most appropriately challenging set of scaffolds for each student.”

She uses several strategies to decide which version of an assignment each student gets. “I look at their IEPs to see who needs legal access to accommodations like graphic organizers. I also consider any previous writing assignments or assessments they’ve done for me. (For example, if, on a previous essay, a student was able to write a basic essay but included no transition sentences, I might give them the checklist as an initial intervention to see if that helps.) I conference with students after they write essays; we review the rubric and my comments together, and they make notes about what they should do during the revision process. These conversations can help me see if my scaffolds are helping them or if I need to give them more structured support.

“Finally, if I believe a student is able to meet the learning targets, skillwise, but is struggling with test or writing anxiety, I might offer them some supports on the next essay to build their confidence, and then remove those supports the next time through.”

An example follows of one of Chaffee’s tiered assignments. In this example, students are developing and writing an argumentative essay on the topic of Puerto Rico. She created two rubrics: one in grade-level language, and one in simplified language. (Note that the learning targets do not change.) A graphic organizer is required for some students, and made optional for others. Lastly, an assessment checklist is also required and/or made optional, depending on student need.

The original language for the prompt:

Write a five to six paragraph argumentative essay responding to the following prompt: What should Puerto Rico’s relationship with the U.S. be: a state, a territory, an “enhanced commonwealth,” or an independent nation?
The modified rubric and prompt for those students who needed:

Write a 5-paragraph essay responding to the following prompt: Should Puerto Rico be a state, a commonwealth, an “enhanced commonwealth,” or an independent country?

Next, some students have the option of using a graphic organizer before writing their essay. Others are required to use it.
Five Paragraph Argumentative Essay Template

**Introduction Paragraph**
Hook (grab the reader’s attention with imagery):

Hook:

Thesis (respond to the prompt and add three claims):

Thesis:

**Body Paragraph 1**
Claim #1 (from your thesis):

Claim #1:

Evidence #1 (an example or detail to support Claim #1)

Evidence #1:

Evidence #2 (an example or detail to support Claim #1)

Evidence #2:

Evidence #3 (an example or detail to support Claim #1)

Evidence #3:
Transition (smoothly move from paragraph 1 to paragraph 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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A final checklist provides all students with the opportunity, and some students with the requirement to check that their essay is ready before turning it in.

**DOUBLE-CHECK THIS LIST BEFORE YOU TURN YOUR ESSAY IN!**

- My essay is either 5 or 6 paragraphs long.
- My essay starts with an introduction paragraph that has:
  - a hook (choose from: quotation, personal story, statistic/shocking fact, or imagery)
  - context (background information about the topic)
  - a thesis statement
- My thesis statement has parallel structure.
- My essay contains body paragraphs. Each body paragraph:
  - starts with a clear claim
  - includes 3 pieces of evidence
  - ends with a transition sentence that leads into the next paragraph
- My essay includes a counterclaim and rebuttal in each body paragraph.
  OR:
- My essay includes a counterclaim and rebuttals in a separate paragraph.
- My essay ends with a conclusion that:
  - summarizes my claims
  - leaves the reader thinking (choose from: return to hook, make it bigger, make it current, predict the future, or challenge the reader)
- My essay includes at least 8 Words of the Week (these are listed on the back of the rubric)
- I used a semicolon somewhere in my essay.

As Chaffee assesses her students, she is constantly reconsidering her approach and assignments. She says “The great part, and thing I’ve become more comfortable with, is the need to constantly innovate, tinker, and go back to the design of the assignments. In much the same way I ask kids to work on their writing, what works and doesn’t work, I need to do the same thing with my teaching. Is the wording of an assignment clear, is it visually overwhelming?”

Above all, she advises us not to shy away from doing what is right for a particular student. “Sometimes when we’re just starting out [with differentiation], we’re scared [the work we assign] is going to be too easy. The lowest level where someone needs lots of support will look very different than the place where you will eventually take that student. It’s okay if their first step is really simple. Be comfortable figuring out where this kid is now. It’s not where he will stay forever.”

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In another example of tiering, first-grade students are working toward the same learning target—“I can sort shapes by their common attributes.” Their task, however, is tiered in complexity based on student readiness. Their teacher, Mrs. Marts, has prepared three kinds of baggies full of different kinds of shapes. Some baggies have simple shapes of varying colors that the class has been working with already (e.g., circles, triangles, squares); others have these same shapes plus a few more complicated shapes; still others have an assortment of these shapes, plus dominoes, pencils, and other classroom objects.

Students are challenged to create a “rule” and sort their shapes in their baggie by that rule. The range of complexity in their rules mirrors the complexity of the shapes in their baggies, and meets each student at their level of readiness for the task:

- Shapes that are orange and have four sides
- Shapes that are fat
- Shapes that have sharp points

At their tables, which are arranged for this lesson so that students with the same baggie of shapes are working together, students then work together to figure out their peers’ rules for how they sorted their shapes. At the conclusion of the class students self-assess, from 1-5, how successful they feel sorting shapes by common attributes.

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*Tiering allows all students to work with the same academic content at the level of challenge that best meets their needs.*