Strategies **FOR** Managing **A** Differentiated Classroom

For many teachers, uncertainty about how to manage a differentiated classroom grows into a fear that stops them from attempting to provide instruction based on their students' varied interests and needs. Many teachers don't appreciate how skilled they are at attending to multiple signals and juggling a variety of roles. The same skills that help teachers succeed in the complex environment of a classroom can lead them toward success in a differentiated classroom environment, as well.

Benefits for Students and Teachers

As Piaget (1969) reflected, "The heartbreaking difficulty in pedagogy, as indeed in medicine and other branches of knowledge that partake at the same time of art and science, is, in fact, that the best methods are also the most difficult ones" (p. 69). Although managing a differentiated classroom is not always easy, progress in that direction tends to make school a better fit for more students. It also tends to make teaching more satisfying and invigorating.

Managing a Differentiated Classroom: The Basics

Worthwhile endeavors are often challenging—and usually worth it. Here are 17 key strategies you can use to successfully meet the challenge of designing and managing differentiated instruction for your learners.

1 **Have a strong rationale for differentiating instruction based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile.** Then share your thinking with your students and their parents—often. Just as teachers sometimes need help creating new mental images of classrooms as places that are fluid and offer many avenues to learning, so do students and parents.

If you help your students and parents understand and contribute to your new view of the classroom, they will be able to adapt. Without your help, they may feel that you are "violating the rules of the game," and then they may become confused or resistant. This communication strategy is so important that the next chapter more fully describes a way to prepare yourself, your students, and their parents for a student-centered, differentiated classroom.

2 **Begin differentiating at a pace that is comfortable for you.** Some teachers already make frequent adjustments in curriculum and instruction to allow for student differences in their classrooms. With just a few additional guidelines, these teachers are ready to move ahead quickly in differentiating instruction. Others who are less experienced or confident need to move in smaller increments. There's a strong parallel to students in a classroom here: Some leap like leopards through a given task, others move at a more measured gait. What matters most is that students—and teachers—make progress from their respective beginning points, not that they all work alike.

You may easily envision yourself working with varied learning resources, such as differing texts, multilevel supplementary materials, various computer programs, or peer tutors. You may, on the other hand, feel more comfortable using a single text with your class but allowing some students to move through it more rapidly, or differentiating activities so students gain—at their own pace—an understanding of ideas in the text. Perhaps you'd find it easiest to differentiate student products. Creating small-group tasks tailored to student readiness, interest, or talent may be more your style. Or you may want to begin by learning to use groups in your class—not varying the group tasks at first, but just gaining skill and confidence in directing groups. If you teach multiple subjects, you may want to try your hand first in the subject you

enjoy most. If you teach different groups of students each day, you might find it advantageous to begin differentiating instruction for the group you find easiest to work with. Finding your point of readiness and beginning there is as important for you as for your students. Not beginning is a guaranteed way to avoid progress. Biting off too much invites discouragement and failure. Begin where you can and chart a time line for your own progress. Figure 6.1 (see next page) lists some approaches to differentiation that tend to take less preparation time from teachers—and others that are likely to require more preparation time. One approach to becoming comfortable with differentiation in a way that doesn't overtake your life is to select a few low-prep strategies you're comfortable using consistently during a year, and then selecting one high prep approach per unit or semester to add to your repertoire. During a second year, you can hone the low and high prep approaches from the previous year, and add one or two more high and low prep approaches. In that cumulative way, you can work your way to a highly differentiated classroom in four or five years, without feeling absolutely frenzied along the way.

3 **Time differentiated activities to support student success.** Some students can manage group or independent work for long periods of time. Others have less capacity to sustain group or independent tasks. When designing your tasks, remember two things: (1) time allotted for a task should be a bit shorter than the attention span of the students who work on that task, and (2) advanced learners often have extended attention spans. When designing tasks for students with strong interest and ability in a particular area, allow a longer chunk of time during a class, day, or week than the amount of time planned for tasks for students whose interest or talent in the same area is not as great. A goal to strive for, over time, is helping all

Figure 6.1
Begin Slowly—Just Begin!
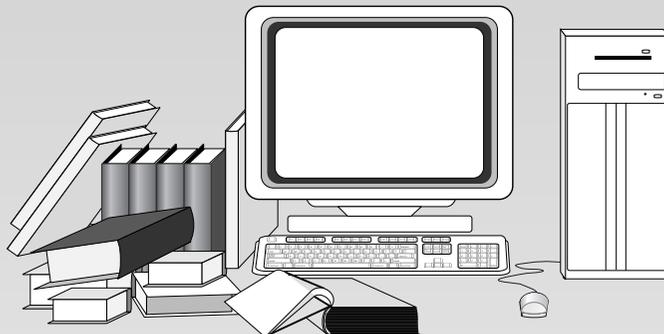
Low-Prep Differentiation
Choices of books
Homework options
Use of reading buddies
Varied journal prompts
Orbitals
Varied pacing with anchor options
Student-teacher goal setting
Work alone/together
Whole-to-part and part-to-whole explanations
Flexible seating
Varied computer programs
Design-A-Day
Varied supplementary materials
Options for varied modes of expression
Varying scaffolding on same organizer
Let's Make a Deal projects
Computer mentors
Think-Pair-Share by readiness, interest, learning
    profile
Use of collaboration, independence, and
    cooperation
Open-ended activities
Miniworkshops to reteach or extend skills
Jigsaw
Negotiated Criteria
Explorations by interest
Games to practice mastery of information
    and skill
Multiple levels of questions

High-Prep Differentiation
Tiered activities and labs
Tiered products
Independent studies
Multiple texts
Alternative assessments
Learning contracts
4-MAT
Multiple-Intelligence options
Compacting
Spelling by readiness
Entry Points
Varying organizers
Lectures coupled with graphic organizers
Community mentorships
Interest groups
Tiered centers
Interest centers
Personal agendas
Literature Circles
Stations
Complex Instruction
Group Investigation
Tape-recorded materials
Teams, Games, and Tournaments
Choice Boards
Think-Tac-Toe
Simulations
Problem-Based Learning
Graduated rubrics
Flexible reading formats
Student-centered writing formats

students sustain group and independent tasks-for longer than what was initially comfortable for them. The key to reaching that goal is their sense of success in those tasks.

4 Use an "anchor activity" to free you up to focus your attention on your students. "Ragged time" is a reality in a differentiated classroom. It is not your goal to have everyone finish all tasks at the same time, so some students will inevitably complete work while others have more to do. Using specified activities to which students automatically move when they complete an assigned task is important both to maintaining a productive work environment and to ensuring wise use of everyone's time. In almost every classroom, all students, from time to time, engage in activities like reading, journal writing, managing a portfolio, and practicing (spelling, computation, learning math through using tubs of manipulatives, and vocabulary). These sorts of tasks can become "anchor activities" that are options for students after assigned work is completed at a high level of quality. Begin by teaching your whole class to work independently and quietly on these tasks. Then move toward having half of the class work on the anchor activity (which can be adjusted to student readiness and interest), while the other half engages in a different content-based activity designed specifically for their needs. This may help you feel less fragmented in the beginning, because a sizable portion of the class will be engaged in work that is largely self-directed, freeing you to guide students in the newer and "less predictable" task. Later on, you can flip-flop the class, having the group that first worked with the anchor activity switch to an appropriate content-based activity, and vice versa. Then, when you feel ready, you can have a third of the class working with an anchor activity and two-thirds working with two differentiated content-based tasks. All sorts of combinations are possible. Do whatever feels best to phase you and your students into an environment where multiple avenues to learning are the norm. Ultimately, your aim is to have all students understand that when they complete a given assignment, they must automatically move to an anchor activity and work with that activity with care and concentration.

5 Create and deliver instructions carefully. Giving multiple directions to the class as a whole is confusing and calls too much attention to who is doing what. A better alternative is creating and giving task cards or assignment sheets to individuals or groups. Another option is going over an assignment with a few responsible students today so that they can share directions with their groups tomorrow. It is also helpful to tape-record directions, especially when they are complex, so students can replay them as needed. Tape-recorded directions are also handy for students with reading or sequencing problems. Be sure you've thought through directions carefully, have anticipated student problems, and have struck a balance between clarity and challenge. When part of the directions require students to move to another place in the classroom, specify a time limit for the movement to be complete (shorter is generally better than longer—but not so short that it causes students to dash) with clear expectations for what constitutes orderly movement.

6 Assign students into groups or seating areas smoothly. It's bulky and confusing to call students' names in order to send them to various seating areas or to assign them to particular groups. You'll find it's smoother to list names by color or group on an overhead transparency that also indicates where the colors or groups should report. Wall charts work well also, especially for groups that will have a somewhat extended duration. For young students, peg-boards and key tags with students' names on them allow you to "move" students to a

learning center or section of the room flexibly and with ease.

7 **Have a "home base" for students.** Beginning and ending a class or lesson from a "home base" or seating chart enables you to organize students and materials more effectively when there will be student movement during the class or lesson. In middle and high school classes, assigned or home base seats also allow you to check attendance without "calling the roll."

8 **Be sure students have a plan for getting help when you're busy with another student or group.** You can help students learn to work collegially by suggesting that they ask a peer for clarification when they get "stuck." Some classrooms have an "expert of the day" desk where one or more students especially skilled with the day's task sit and serve as consultants. (Astute teachers ensure that many students serve as "experts"; students also assist by checking answers, proofreading, answering questions about directions or texts, and helping with art or construction tasks.) Or students may try to get themselves "unstuck" by "thinking on paper" in their learning logs. Be sure students know when it's okay to come to you for help— and when it's not—and that they know and use several options if they need help when you are unavailable. For you to successfully manage a differentiated classroom, your students must know that it's never okay for them to just sit and wait for help to come to them, or to disrupt someone else.

9 **Minimize noise.** When students are active in a classroom, there will be some noise. There is no need for the noise to become oppressive or distracting. From the beginning of the year, work with students on working with peers quietly. Teach them to whisper or talk softly. Use a signal (such as turning the light on and off quickly) to remind them to reduce the conversation level. Assign a student in each group to monitor the noise level and remind peers to talk softly. Some students are especially distracted by noise. Finding a section of the room somewhat removed from the noise may be helpful for them. If that is not adequate, using a plastic headset with ear cuffs (common items in rooms with listening stations) can be a help. Ear-plugs such as those used on airplanes can make a difference as well. Remember to involve students in conversation about balancing their needs for conversation and concentration, and let them help you find other ways to retain both.

10 **Make a plan for students to turn in work.** There are times in a differentiated class when multiple tasks are going on at once, and when various students may turn in several different assignments in a relatively short time span. It is distracting for each student to come to you with the finished piece. Two strategies can eliminate the distraction. First, use an "expert of the day" who can check over a piece of work a student believes she has finished to see if it is both complete and of good quality. If the "expert" concurs that the work is ready to be turned in, have the "expert" sign the paper and have the student place it in a box or file labeled with the name of the task or an appropriate icon in a predesignated place in the room. If the "expert" feels the work is incomplete or lacking in quality, the student must continue working on the piece.

11 **Teach students to rearrange the furniture.** You can draw three or four floor plans with furniture arranged differently in each one and teach the students how to move the furniture quickly and quietly to correspond with the floor plan you designate (by name, number, or color). That makes you feel freer to be flexible with room arrangements than if you

personally must move all the furniture each time it's rearranged. Be clear about your expectations for orderly movement, and also help students understand how the variety from their work will contribute to their classwork.

12 **Minimize "stray" movement.** Kids need to move around, regardless of their age. It's not necessarily a goal to keep everyone glued to her chair. On the other hand, an undue amount of idle roaming isn't likely to come to a good end either. Think through the amount of movement you will be comfortable with, and let your students know what they can and can't do. For example, it may be fine to go to an "expert of the day" if you're stuck on a math problem—but only as long as there is only one person at a time with the expert. Or, it may be that you want to designate a "gopher" for each work group who will get materials needed for the day's work, noting that only the gopher should be up from the table—and perhaps that only one group's gopher can be up at any one time. The directions need to apply as much structure as is needed to keep you and the students feeling productive—but no more structure than is necessary.

13 **Promote on-task behavior.** Help your students understand that you value on-task behavior because it helps them do better, helps you concentrate on what you need to do to help them, and eliminates distractions for others. Be sure to clarify what you mean by on-task behavior. If your standards are different, students may feel they are working just fine when you think otherwise. You may want to let students know that you will be giving them a daily check on how well they are using their time. You can make a list of students who are working with extra concentration and put a plus by their names. Similarly, you can make a list of students who find it very difficult to stay on task, even after coaching from you and

reminders from peers, and put a minus beside those names. Most students most days will do fine. Later, you can fill the pluses and minuses into a gradebook or daily worksheet, then add checks by everyone else's name. Most days, there will be mostly checks. Letting your students look at their pattern over a period of a week or month can help them see how you're assessing their concentration. Also importantly, seeing patterns in the students' concentration provides good assessment information for you. It may indicate a student who is frustrated because work is too hard or too easy, a student who needs a different seating arrangement, or a student who is really taking off with their work.

14 **Have a plan for "quick finishers."** Students who consistently complete their work early, and do so with competence, are providing a diagnosis of tasks that are insufficiently challenging. (Some bright students will lollygag so you don't notice the work is easy. That's safer than signaling a need for something more complex.) Sometimes, however, the task is right for the student, but their goal is simply to be the first one finished. In instances like this, it's important for the student to know that you understand their competence, but that what you're interested in is "knock your socks off" quality. Ask them to tell you several indicators or characteristics of superior thought and craftsmanship on the piece of work. Feel free to contribute some indicators yourself. Don't accept work that doesn't bear those hallmarks.

15 **Make a plan for "calling a halt."** While you will want to use time flexibly in a differentiated classroom, the time will come when you simply need to bring closure to a lesson sequence or unit. There may still be students not yet finished. It's important to think through how you will handle that. Some helpful approaches include: giving students advance warning (a day or two ahead of time, for exam-

ple) of when the deadline will be, providing alternative homework assignments so students who want to can have a night or two to finish the work at home, using a learning contract or anchor activity time to allow for some additional work, or letting the student help you figure out how he can complete unfinished work, even as the class moves on.

16 **Give your students as much responsibility for their learning as possible.** Not only does fostering student responsibility make classroom management far more effective, it also helps young learners become independent—an important learning goal on its own. Students can pass out folders and other materials, critique one another's work, move furniture for group work, keep records of their own work, chart their progress by using established goals, help design some of their own tasks, and make suggestions for smoother classroom operation. We often underestimate the capacity of students to be self-sufficient.

17 **Engage your students in talking about classroom procedures and group processes.** Your "metacognition," or thinking aloud about your thinking, helps students understand your expectations as well as rationales for those expectations. It also helps them develop ownership in their classroom. Having ongoing conversations about what you're all experiencing individually and collectively is a great investment in the future—saving much more time and stress in the long run than these conversations require at the time. Besides, you'll be amazed at how many times the students can spot and think of a solution to a problem before you can figure it out. Use their eyes and minds to make the class work smoothly and comfortably.

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There are many other effective ways to develop a classroom in which students engage in a variety of interesting and engaging activities. Share your management-of-differentiation strategies with colleagues and ask them to share with you what works for them.