

Meeting the Needs of Each Student: Implementing & Documenting Differentiation in the Classroom

~ by Pam Armstrong-Vogel

Individuals differ as learners and these differences matter in the classroom. Schools respect student differences by providing the appropriate instruction for all students by adapting sound instruction to individuals and small group need.

We begin with the examination of the quality of instruction over a span of time—looking at the big picture, and determining the path that will help to address the standards for the student. How can the student learn best? What amount of time should be allotted to help him/her? What standards are essential for the student to achieve?

Just as it is important to know what it is we teach and assess, it is important to document and communicate what we differentiate. This helps everyone in the school community understand how differentiation occurs and allows more teachers to learn about differentiation opportunities.

Within the curriculum framework or maps, the examples of differentiation should exemplify best practice, by incorporating model units and examples of differentiated activities and products, resources, and modes of assessments. Providing these fully developed

units increases the likelihood that differentiation will actually take place in the classroom.

“Differentiation done right” will occur in all classrooms—special program classrooms, as well as regular education classrooms serving students of mixed academic interests and abilities. The teacher’s responsibility is to know the skills and strategies that are needed to help each child grow more independent, to be flexible and accommodate for differences, to connect steps in the learning process, and know the best processes and materials to use with each child.

When teachers strive to understand what they need to know about reaching individual students, they have an in depth understanding of the curriculum, content, and pedagogy. They continually and systematically collect information. They look at problems closely, promote feedback, and engage in a problem-solving process.

As educators, we can improve the teaching and learning process by continually asking ourselves these questions:

1. Who are the students I teach?



2. What matters most for students to learn here (curriculum)?
3. How must I teach to ensure that every student grows systematically toward attainment of the goal and moves beyond it when indicated (instruction)?
4. How will I know who is successful and who is not yet successful with particular goals (assessment)? (McTighe & Tomlinson, 2006).

1. Who are the students I teach?

As educators, our responsibility is to attend to our students’ diverse learning needs. Understanding the interests, learning styles, and academic needs of the students are the basic elements of differentiation. This will require time to meet with parents, previous teachers, the student himself, and any others who can contribute to information about the student. The teacher will want to consider how students can learn to

participate without feeling singled out or different.

According to Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), educators:

- Attend to students' backgrounds and needs to build bridges that connect learners and important content.
- Attend to student readiness that allows for academic growth.
- Attend to student interest to enlist student motivation.

Both *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)* focus on the need to demonstrate increased achievement for all students. Knowing the students whom we teach is essential to accomplish this.

2. What matters most for students to learn here (curriculum)?

When districts identify the core knowledge and skills that need to be learned in grades PreK-12—the core standards and benchmarks at each grade level and in each content area—teachers and administrators have a clearer understanding of the essential curriculum. Knowing the content and skills that should be taught allows teachers to construct a framework that matches curriculum to the standards and insures that the most relevant curriculum

is taught in the amount of instructional time available for students to learn.

3. How must I teach to ensure that every student grows systematically toward attainment of the goal and moves beyond it when indicated (instruction)?

As the teacher reviews the curriculum framework, the teacher will need to understand the pedagogy and developmental skills of students to make sound decisions about what the student's next learning steps will be to acquire new content and skills. Teachers will consider the students first—determining the content, processes and products—before delivering instruction.

In order to improve student achievement, educators need to understand what students bring to the learning and how to connect new learning to prior learning. These questions can be used to guide decisions:

- What activities allow for visual, hands-on, or sensory experiences of the content?
- What activities will be used to allow the time required for each student to develop academic proficiency?
- What resources will be used to insure learning?

4. How will I know who is successful and who is not yet successful with particular goals (assessment)?

Educators must identify and understand what is expected from students at each grade level. This informs them of the data to be collected. We must know where students are in their own learning relative to where the content is pitched. By taking the time to appropriately assess where students are in their learning when they enter each grade level and throughout the year, we can establish a pace and mode of instruction to help insure that each student meets grade level expectations. Attending to student learning profiles enables efficiency of learning.

What should not be differentiated?

- Established Goals/Essential Questions

What may be differentiated?

- Content
- Skills
- Performance tasks/Activities
- Other Assessments

What should be differentiated?

- The plan for student learning

As we think about the student, the learning goals, and the context, we consider the teaching plan for each student.

A Coherent Framework

A well articulated curriculum and

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assessment framework builds coherently from one grade level to the next, from basic elementary concepts, to more intermediate concepts, to those more advanced. It is also standards based and proficiency oriented.

When we include differentiation in the curriculum framework, students, parents, teachers, and administrators can view an overall plan of each student’s curricular program at a glance. They are able to see the “big picture”—the scope of the entire program for the student.

programs, most students are at many different levels. As those who teach special programs map curriculum, they demonstrate how they individualize. To insure that each student’s learning needs are met, teachers map the program according to the student’s point of entry into the curriculum. Once the teacher knows the specific content and skills that each student has already mastered, he or she can map the curriculum to be addressed next. In the example in *Table 1*, one can follow a student’s learning path.

the Title I and other teachers who work with these students, regarding student status with specific skill proficiency.

In the Title I reading map in *Table 2* on page 26, the students’ initials are again listed. The teacher uses the coding:
 “M-Mastered”,
 “P-Partially mastered”,
 “I= Introduced”, and
 “NA=Not applicable at this point in the year” and codes skills for the entire year for each student.

Curriculum Unit for Special Education Resource Room: Reading: Grades 4-5		
Content	Skills	Students/Dates
<u>Comprehension</u> A. Basic Sight Words B. Context Clues C. Comprehension Strategies D. Antonyms, Synonyms, Homonyms E. High Frequency Words	1. Identify Antonyms, Synonyms & Homonyms 2. Chose correct word to complete a sentence (cloze) 3. Recognize basic sight words 4. Use a dictionary to look up an unknown word 5. Spell various High Frequency Words	JP, SN, <u>P</u> 1-5 (9-05- 9/06) CW- <u>M</u> 2, 3 & 5 <u>M</u> (2/06) JP, SN- <u>M</u> 1-5 (10/06) CW- <u>P</u> 4 (9/06)

Table 1.

When educators develop curriculum, whether through a curriculum map or another framework, the written curriculum should be a means to showcase how differentiation is provided.

Special Programs:

Special programs include special education, talented and gifted, Title I, and English Language Learning programs. In these

In this multi-year map, Jose (JP), Som (SN) and Courtney (CW) have practiced (P) skills 1-5 from September 2005 through September 2006. Jose and Som have mastered (M) skills 1-5 in October 2006. Courtney mastered skills 2, 3, and 5 in February 2005 and continued to practice skills 1 and 4 in 2006. This is a means of documentation that informs the teachers, both

Teachers who have documented differentiation in this manner have found it visually shows a “running record” of the various content and skills that students perform. This enables the teacher to define and communicate where each student is in the curriculum at any given point in time.

In the Special Program maps, time is a dependent variable.

Curriculum Unit for Title I Reading Program: Grade 2				
Unit	Content	Skills	Students/Dates	Differentiated Activities/ Assessments
Vocabulary	<p>A. Basic Sight Words</p> <p>B. Context Clues</p> <p>C. 5-Step Plan to figure out a word:</p> <p>1) Get it started (1st letter)</p> <p>2) Look through the word</p> <p>3) Look for chunks/small words</p> <p>4) Does it make sense?</p> <p>5) Does it look right?</p>	<p>1. Choose correct word to complete a sentence (cloze)</p> <p>2. Use a dictionary to look up an unknown word</p> <p>3. Recognize basic sight words</p>	<p>M=Mastered P=Partially mastered I=Introduced NA=Not applicable at this point in the year</p> <p>JS - Dismissed from program PP - Moved 12-1-05 BK - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I LK - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I RH - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I KS - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I LW - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I P SJ - Skill: 1:P 2:P 3:I LS - Joined program 2-28-05</p>	<p>Dolch Sight words in isolation and in context</p> <p>Sight Word BINGO</p> <p>Cloze sentences</p> <p>Successmaker Computer Program “Initial Reading” Practice 5-Step Plan</p> <p>Line Search Sentences activities to teach Dolch words</p> <p>Successmaker “Initial Reading” scores</p> <p>Dolch word check list</p> <p>Observation of reading</p> <p>Work assignments</p> <p>Successmaker Computer Program “Initial Reading”</p> <p>Sight Word Search cards, Sight Word Stories book, Sight word flash cards, BINGO cards 5-Step Chart</p>

Table 2.

What, when, and how instruction is delivered depends entirely upon the readiness of the individual student and his/her interest and capacity for learning at that point in time.

Teachers can add curriculum units, activities, etc., on an ongoing basis to keep curriculum up to date and in “real time”. Resources and assessments are components included in the written curriculum and may be differentiated.

By looking at the “Big Picture”, the entire scope of the curriculum, and through appropriate assessment of the student to determine what has already been mastered, the map provides evidence of the content and skill areas on which

Language Arts Grade 6 Map					
Unit/Time	Content	Skills	Differentiated Activities	Assessments	Resources
Unit 1-6 Weeks The Courage to be Me (fiction)	Literary terms Vocabulary from stories Short stories Poetry Paragraph Structure Conventions	Identify topic, detail, concluding sentences Write topic, detail, concluding sentences Write correct paragraph form Use correct spelling, vocabulary, end punctuation in writing samples Identify literary terms (plot, character, setting, theme, conflict, rising action, climax, resolution) Use the steps in the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing) Use context clues for vocabulary Sequence events	Two Column notes Think/pair share Learning logs Graphic organizers Cooperative Learning lessons/ Numbered heads	Story quizzes Written Paragraphs Spelling and Vocabulary Quizzes Learning log entries <i>Follow the Leader</i> (2x month)	<i>The Writer's Craft</i> (McDougal Littell, 1998) <i>The Language of Literature</i> (McDougal Littell, 2002) <i>Write Source</i> (2000) Short Stories (<i>Eleven, Who's the New Kid, President Cleveland-Where are You?, Trading Card Talk, Scout's Honor, Nadia the Willful, Tuesday of the Other June</i>) Poetry (<i>Life Doesn't Frighten Me, Primer Lesson</i>)

Table 3.

the student is working and those that should follow, based upon sequence of skills.

General Education Programs

Differentiation can be documented in regular education programs as well (Table 3). Providing a

component of the curriculum framework that is dedicated to differentiation—whether that is shown through activities, assessments, and/or resources—allows for the visual display and communication of differentiation.

In general education programs, content and skills are delivered to the students at a specified point in time. This time frame is communicated in the curriculum map or framework through a unit or month format.

Just as special program curriculum maps communicate how differentiation is incorporated, so can regular education curriculum frameworks. Documenting what takes place in the classroom communicates to all stakeholders the guaranteed and viable curriculum.

The whole premise of good teaching is to not teach kids what they already know and to build upon previous learning, as we reach the established learning goals for the student's grade level or his/her individual potential. As educators, we recognize that students come to us with many varied interests and needs and that it is our responsibility to consider these as we teach in order to help each student reach his or her fullest potential.

“Principles for Fostering Equity and Excellence in Academically Diverse Learners”

Good curriculum comes first.

The teachers' first job is to ensure a coherent, important, inviting, and thoughtful curriculum.

All tasks should respect each learner.

Every student deserves work that is focused on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills targeted for the lesson. Every student should be required to think at a high level and should find his or her work interesting and powerful.

When in doubt, teach up!

Good instruction stretches learners. The best tasks are those that students find a little too difficult to complete comfortably. Be sure there's a support system in place to facilitate the student's success at a level that he or she doubted was attainable.

Use flexible grouping.

Find ways and time for the class to work as a whole, for students to demonstrate competence alone, and for students to work with varied groups of peers. Using only one or two groups causes students to see themselves and one another in more limited ways, keeps the teacher from “auditioning” students in varied contexts, and limits potentially rich exchanges in the classroom.

Become an assessment junkie.

Everything that a student says and does is a potential source of assessment data. Assessment should be an ongoing process, conducted in flexible but distinct stages, and it should maximize opportunities for each student to open the widest possible window on his or her learning.

Grade to reflect growth.

The most we can ask of any person—and the least we ought to ask—is to be and become their best. The teacher's job is to guide and support the learner in this endeavor. Grading should, in part, reflect a learner's growth (Tomlinson & Cunningham-Edison, 2003).

Resources:

Tomlinson, C. and Cunningham-Edison, C. (2003). *Differentiation in practice: A resource guide for differentiating curriculum. Grades 5-9.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C. and McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating differentiated instruction and understanding by design.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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