

# Chapter 3

## Helpful Structures and Strategies for the Differentiated Class

**D**ifferentiation can happen both formally as we design our lessons according to learning models and informally as we adjust our lessons in the course of teaching them, such as when walking by a student's desk, noting a mistake, and deciding to stop and reteach the concept. To be flexible and employ the most effective techniques at the most strategic times, we need a large repertoire of responses ready to apply at any moment.

This section provides more than a dozen effective differentiation practices and structures that will help you refine your instruction. These practices are commonly used by teachers who are successful with diverse groups of students. I have presented them here as an initial description of the practice or structure, but the hope is that you will pursue further understanding of these ideas by experimenting with them in your classroom, discussing them with colleagues, and reading more about them in the resources recommended later in the book.

The practices and structures fall into two categories: "General Differentiation Approaches" and "Tiering." Both sections include principles and practical tips, but the tiering section also contains strategies aimed at the various learning levels that may be represented within a single classroom.

## General Differentiation Approaches

### Different, Not More or Less

With differentiation we strive to change the nature of our assignments, not the quantity. If we give bright students double the normal number of

assignments, they will start playing dumb to avoid the excess. Instead of asking them to complete thirty math equations while their classmates focus on fifteen, vary the complexity of the problems and their applications. Give these students *different* work, not *more* work.

When designing activities and assignments for your more advanced students, avoid thinking in terms of keeping them busy until the others can catch up. Instead, identify what students already know and help them move beyond their initial understanding, even if this means soaring past what *you* know about the subject or topic. Take a look at the section on compacting the curriculum, page 90, for more information about how to do this.

Try to maintain a roughly equivalent work load for all students, regardless of their readiness levels. By work load, I refer to the time and energy needed to complete the task. As long as these are roughly the same, we haven't changed the work load. For example, some students can balance twelve chemical equations in the same time that other students can balance five. The students have reached different levels of proficiency with chemistry. Both sets of students need fifteen minutes to complete their tasks, but we are not increasing or decreasing the work load by varying the number of tasks. Both sets of students have expended the same time and energy.

Let's consider this from another angle. When we first teach a skill or topic, we generally want to limit the number of required tasks so students can focus on learning the basics. As they gain proficiency, they can work more rapidly when practicing the concepts until they develop an almost automatic response or recall. At this advanced level, we often *want* them to complete more tasks in the same amount of time to demonstrate their increased proficiency. As the process unfolds, we maintain the same work load (time and energy needed) for students despite changing the number of required tasks according to their needs.

Keep in mind that while it may be appropriate to ask students to quicken their pace with some tasks, we don't want to require expediency in all learning situations. For much of the curriculum, knowing how to do something or how to learn more about a topic will suffice. For example, we might teach students to recognize direct and indirect objects in English or weigh rocks and minerals using a balance, but we don't make them race through a dozen related tasks within ten minutes. Understanding, not expediency, is the goal.

As you plan your differentiated lessons, ask yourself: Am I changing the work load or am I changing the nature of the task? Stay focused on changing the nature of the task in most cases. With some students, however, ask yourself: Are my students ready for introductory concept attainment, or are they ready for something more advanced that includes building expediency with the topic? If they are at the initial stage, it may be more prudent to give them fewer tasks that they can successfully complete

in a longer time period than ask to them to attempt many tasks quickly, which will merely frustrate them. Aim for a constructive learning experience, not a 100-yard dash.

## **Adjust Instruction Based on Assessment Results**

Some teachers view assessment through a narrow lens—as the test questions or projects that come at the end of a lesson or unit. Such summative results can help us determine students’ mastery of standards or learner outcomes, but they represent just a small part of the assessment data teachers can collect and analyze to improve achievement.

Effective assessment involves both gathering data and using it to adjust our practices. We shouldn’t spend hours analyzing students’ learning styles, interests, personality types, backgrounds, and readiness for learning specific content and skills and then disregard the information, plowing ahead with what we were going to do anyway. What a waste!

In a differentiated classroom we don’t separate assessment from instruction. We weave these two essential components of teaching together on the premise that we cannot have good assessment that does not instruct, and we cannot have good instruction that does not assess. Assessment should inform our practices at every turn. Consider two examples of how we can do this on a recurring basis.

In her expository writing, Tamika repeatedly makes general claims without providing supportive evidence. When the teacher notices this pattern in Tamika’s latest essay, he designs a quick mini-lesson to show Tamika the difference between writing that incorporates strong argumentation and evidence and writing that offers weak substantiation. After discussing the comparisons in published samples, he reinforces a previous lesson about how to find and report research. Finally, the teacher asks Tamika to analyze the evidence and citations presented in samples of students’ work (samples without names and identifications in order to protect students’ privacy).

While working with Rafael to create a PowerPoint presentation about the differences between DNA and RNA, the biology teacher notices that Rafael mentions RNA’s many roles in protein synthesis in the presentation but does not mention that some types of RNA carry genetic information from a cell’s chromosomes to its ribosomes—a point she wants to make sure he and his classmates know. In addition, Rafael writes lengthy text explanations for each PowerPoint slide when the point of the assignment is to write short, bulleted summaries of the major findings. In response, the teacher asks Rafael to review the rules for creating PowerPoint presentations

and revise his slides accordingly. Then she asks him to discuss the difference between RNA and DNA and their roles in cell physiology. Finally she asks Rafael to make sure that the information on his slides corresponds with the correct scientific facts.

Realistically, with thirty to thirty-five other students in the classroom, teachers can't assess and adjust their instruction for every student every time it's necessary. Over the course of a week, however, teachers generally can find time for multiple individualized sessions, using alternative structures and activities (see the Football and the Anchor descriptions beginning on page 91) to keep other students engaged.

Because the interaction between assessment and instruction is so crucial, teachers who differentiate try to spend the majority of their time designing and implementing formative assessments—more time, in fact, than they spend designing summative assessments. Sure, those summative assessments are important—they create direction for all we do—but formative assessments have the most impact on students' learning.

In addition, while formative assessments lead to students' mastery, they do not demonstrate final mastery, nor are they meant to do so. Instead, formative assessments provide useful feedback to students and teachers about their ongoing progress. As a result, formative assessments can have a much greater impact on student achievement. This is so important that over the years I've reinforced my intentions with formative assessment by reviewing my lesson plans week by week and circling every formative assessment listed. If I found only one or two examples in a given week, I added others.

Although we typically prepare and record formative assessments in our lesson plans, we also can informally assess students through classroom conversations, observations, and spur-of-the-moment products that we ask students to create. As a result, formative assessments don't have to be large and complex. They are often straightforward and directly related to what we're teaching. Here are some examples of formative assessment prompts we can record in our lesson plans as we design differentiated lessons or that might occur to us in the spur of the moment as we teach:

- Identify at least five steps you need to take in order to solve math problems like these.
- How would you help a friend keep the differences between amphibians and reptiles clear in his or her mind?
- Write a paragraph of three to five lines that uses a demonstrative pronoun in each sentence and circle each example.
- Play the F-sharp scale.

- In a quick paragraph, describe the impact of the Lusitania’s sinking.
- Create a web or outline that captures what we’ve learned today about ...
- Solve these four math problems.
- What three factors led to the government’s decision to ...
- Draw a symbol that best portrays this book’s character as you now understand him (her), and write a brief explanation as to why you chose the symbol you did.
- Record your answer to this question on your dry-erase board and hold it above your head for me to see.
- Prepare a rough draft of the letter you’re going to write.
- What is your definition of ...
- Who had a more pivotal role in this historical situation, \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_, and why do you believe as you do?

Notice that some of these quick, formative assessments can work as summative assessments as well; this is exactly as it should be. Great formative assessments are often small pieces of summative assessments examined separately. If formative assessments are a subset of the final assessment, we can use them to evaluate students’ progression toward the lesson’s goals and adjust instruction accordingly. If formative assessments are not related to the summative assessment, they won’t provide the data we need to chart the journey ahead.

“Exit cards” are often used for formative assessments. These brief exercises or reflections give us quick insights about how well students understood our lessons. For example, before we transition to another section or task, we can ask students to punctuate five sentences correctly based on their new understanding of comma placement in divided quotations. Or, we might ask students to briefly describe the correct way to determine velocity or to identify at least three errors in a sample science lab report. We can provide additional differentiation through the prompts we use for exit cards. Depending on the students’ readiness levels, we might ask some to identify examples of assonance and consonance in poetry but ask others to create poetry that uses assonance and consonance for a desired effect. Exit cards should be short and easy to review, making it efficient to assess students quickly and make appropriate instructional decisions.

When do we formatively assess students? Daily, if possible, and every fifteen to twenty minutes, ideally. We can’t always take the time to do this

with a formal product, of course, but we can also include in our formative assessments a general “reading” of students via their actions and facial expressions while we’re teaching: Are students responding to questions we pose with substantive answers or less so? Are they able to get started on a task successfully or are they floundering? Are their eyes glazing over or are they attentive? Are students actively looking for excuses to leave the classroom on unnecessary errands (a sign that students are not experiencing enough competence to warrant continued involvement in something that reminds them of how much they don’t understand) or do they not want to miss anything?

We have to take the temperature of the room frequently to be successful. For instance, in the course of teaching students to make metric conversions within the metric system, such as converting meters into decimeters, centimeters, and millimeters; grams into kilograms; and milliliters into cubic centimeters, my first formative assessment in the lesson would come after teaching students the metric terms such as *milli*, *centi*, *deci*, and *kilo*. This could be a quick vocabulary assessment in the form of a matching test, quickly drawn numbers on dry-erase boards, a number of fingers held up for the number of place values we move the decimal point, oral responses to individual questions, or something done by each student up at the board. If students didn’t know the terms well, I’d go back and reteach the terms. If they passed this formative assessment, I’d move on.

Soon after teaching students how to make simple conversions within the metric system, I’d give them four or five additional conversions to do on their own. I’d look over their responses to see if they have the basic idea. Students’ careless errors in this second formative assessment wouldn’t prevent me from moving on to the next topic I wanted to teach but would remind me to provide additional practice later. If students made errors that indicated true lack of understanding, however, I’d have to decide whether to move on. In some cases, moving on to the next level of challenge or topic would help students overcome their confusion with an earlier level or topic—the next one providing contextual meaning. In other cases, I would need to stop and reteach those conversion processes.

In this short sequence, I’ve suggested two formative assessments, each one directing my instruction. I may or may not record these assessments as steps to take in my lesson plan, but I keep searching for ways to use them and adjust instruction based on the data they provide.

For sources that provide more information about formative assessments, see the Recommended Resources.

### **Modify Options: Content, Process, Product, Affect, and Learning Environment**

We can differentiate instruction in many ways, but the methods tend to fall within these major categories, first popularized by Dr. Carol Ann

Tomlinson at the University of Virginia and described in *Differentiation in Practice* (Tomlinson and Strickland 2005):

- *Content*: Our legally mandated curriculum, including all the skills and content knowledge students are supposed to learn
- *Process*: The many ways in which our students learn the curriculum
- *Product*: How students prove that they've learned the content
- *Affect*: The socio-emotional factors that influence learning  
We might need to adjust learning experiences for students to feel safe and invited. Examples include building positive conflict resolution skills among quarreling students, posting exemplary work samples from students who don't typically get noticed, and spending extra time listening to students who seem depressed or upset.
- *Learning Environment*: The classroom configurations that provide the best opportunities for students to learn  
Here we consider factors such as whether special-needs students work in self-contained or regular classrooms; homogeneous or heterogeneous ability groups; single-sex or coed classrooms; adaptive technology and other equipment that can reduce distractions for some students; class periods interrupted by the lunch schedule; and any other structures that might affect a student's success.

Are any of these factors negotiable with students? Would we allow a student to say, "I don't want to learn this, but I want to learn that," or "I don't want to learn it this way, but I want to learn it this way," or "I don't want to take your test, but I want to demonstrate mastery this other way"? It depends.

If the issue concerns our legally mandated curriculum, then what students learn is probably nonnegotiable. When we teach fractions, for example, students must learn about numerators; denominators; improper fractions; mixed numbers; adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing fractions; and reducing to lowest terms. If we adjust the content by removing or adding standards or learner outcomes for an entire grading period, we have to declare that we're using an adjusted curriculum, and that's best avoided because of conflicts with local, state, and federal mandates. We might adjust a single lesson to meet the specific needs of students and resume the regular pacing later. We might adjust how we deliver the content while focusing on the same curriculum as well. We can do some adjusting here and there, but we still must rally around the same standards as identified by society as important in this discipline to teach to this age-group.

The techniques we use with students to teach specific content and skills are negotiable unless the lesson is literally about those techniques, which would most commonly happen in teacher preparation institutions only. For example, if we're teaching students how to write a proper introduction to a research paper, we can use different techniques, some more independent of, and some more dependent upon, the teacher. It doesn't really matter which strategies we use or which ones students prefer as long as they learn how to write good introductions.

Students who understand their learning styles can guide us as well. If a student tells us that the flash cards we assigned to help him learn his vocabulary words don't really help him, we should allow him to suggest alternative ways to learn the vocabulary. Insisting that he use the flash cards anyway—something ineffective—would be punitive, and we want to be instructive instead. One of the best ways to help students with diverse learning styles is to not limit them to our imaginations. We can't get so attached to our one method of learning that we are blind to something more effective.

The products students use to provide evidence of understanding can be negotiable as well. It shouldn't matter how students demonstrate their mastery of a topic or skill, unless the focus of our instruction is that specific product. For example, if we're teaching students about the rivalry between Sparta and Athens in ancient Greece, we can assess their understanding through multiple-choice questions, matching games, true/false identifications, fill-in-the-blank exercises, short answer and essay questions, artistic or musical representations, oral reports, creation of a website dedicated to the conflict, one-on-one conversations, and so on. If we're teaching students how to do a PowerPoint presentation, on the other hand, students will have to create a PowerPoint presentation and share it with the class; there are not alternative formats. In this case, we can differentiate *how* we teach students to create these presentations, including adjusting the pacing of our lessons, but the final product will be the same.

## Models of Instruction

Many teachers follow Madeline Hunter's direct instruction model (1993; 1994). It's a logical and well-loved approach that can be part of a differentiated classroom. It is ineffective, however, if it becomes the *only* model we use. Teachers who successfully meet the needs of diverse students become adept at mixing and matching multiple models of instruction. I have summarized the most common models below so you will have a frame of reference for your own exploration. The Recommended Resources provides sources for more information about these models.

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## *Direct Instruction*

- State objectives and standards for the day.
- Provide an anticipatory set or “hook.”
- Teach, including experiences with reviewing previously learned material/homework, input, modeling, and checking for understanding.
- Provide guided practice with feedback.
- Reteach (as needed).
- Review both during and at the end of the lesson.
- Closure (summarization).
- Assign independent practice.

## *Dimensions of Learning*

Designed by Robert Marzano (1992), this model asks teachers to plan their lessons according to five different dimensions.

- Positive Attitudes and Perceptions About Learning
- Acquiring and Integrating Knowledge
- Extending and Refining Knowledge
- Using Knowledge Meaningfully
- Productive Habits of Mind

## *One-third Model*

This is Robert Lynn Canady and Michael Rettig’s (1996) method of dividing lessons into instructional sections.

- One-third presentation of content
- One-third application of knowledge and skills learned
- One-third synthesis of the information

## *Concept Attainment Model*

This is a constructivist approach in which

- The teacher presents examples of a formula, concept, or idea being used, and students work with the examples, noting attributes or criteria of the formula, concept, or idea.
- The teacher asks students to define the formula, concept, or idea being learned.
- The teacher critiques more examples of the topic in light of this new thinking.
- Through different activities, students practice and apply their understanding of the concept.
- Students are evaluated through additional applications.

### *4MAT System*

This model appeals to students' different learning styles. According to Dr. Bernice McCarthy (2007), there are four types of learners. Each type represents a particular way in which students learn best. If a teacher provides instruction in the preferred approach, students will learn more.

- *Type 1 Learners* These students respond well to experiences in which they can think reflectively, pondering the *why* of the situation. They seek connections and are good observers.
- *Type 2 Learners* These students respond well to viewing and listening to the facts and concepts expressed by experts. They want to analyze things and know the *what* of the situation.
- *Type 3 Learners* These students prefer to learn by doing. They like to explore and analyze how things work. They seek relevance.
- *Type 4 Learners* These students prefer to explore the *what-if* questions. They like trial and error and making discoveries on their own.

For lesson plans, assessments, and tools for identifying these four learning styles, visit McCarthy's website, [www.aboutlearning.com](http://www.aboutlearning.com).

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Additional models of instruction and theories of learning that successful differentiating teachers use include Meyers-Briggs (2007) personality types, Anthony Gregorc's (1999–2007) scale and teaching model, Howard Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences theory, and Rita Dunn's (2007) learning style inventories. Try to find time to learn one of these new models and others each year that you teach. The single greatest tool you have

as a teacher is your knowledge about how the mind learns. Get up to speed on the latest thinking by exploring models and theories of learning.

## Flexible Grouping

Some students learn best through individual study, some learn best from small-group interactions, and some through whole-class instruction. There are many arrangements teachers can create within each of these major categories. However, for all the variety, many teachers use only one or two of these groupings in their classrooms. That's unfortunate because it means they may not be maximizing instruction for all students.

The “ebb and flow” of instruction (Tomlinson 2003)—moving from larger groups to smaller groups to independent study, and back again—is an important part of differentiated instruction. As we plan our lessons, it's helpful to ask some candid questions about our use of flexible groupings.

- Is this the only way to organize students for learning?
- Where in the lesson could I create opportunities for students to work in small groups?
- Would this part of the lesson be more effective as an independent activity?
- Why do I have the whole class involved in the same activity at this point in the lesson?
- Will I be able to meet the needs of all students with this grouping?
- I've been using a lot of [*insert type of grouping here—whole-class, small-group, or independent*] work lately. Which type of grouping should I add to the mix?

As we differentiate, we should become familiar with a range of flexible groupings, including:

- Whole class or half class
- Teams
- Small groups led by students
- Partners and triads
- Individual study
- One-on-one mentoring with an adult
- Temporary pull-out groups to teach specific mini-lessons

- Anchor activities to which students return after working in small groups
- Learning centers or learning stations through which students rotate in small groups or individually. Although commonly used in primary grades, learning centers can be appropriate for middle and high school students as well.

For example, learning stations in a math class might include activities that require students to use physical manipulatives as they explore a concept while another station might include activities that require students to work with the same concepts using only symbolic and abstract terms. In a foreign language class, learning centers might include headphones, CDs, and compact disc players that students can use to practice hearing and pronouncing words and phrases. Other stations could ask students to read and interpret written text emphasizing regular and irregular verbs.

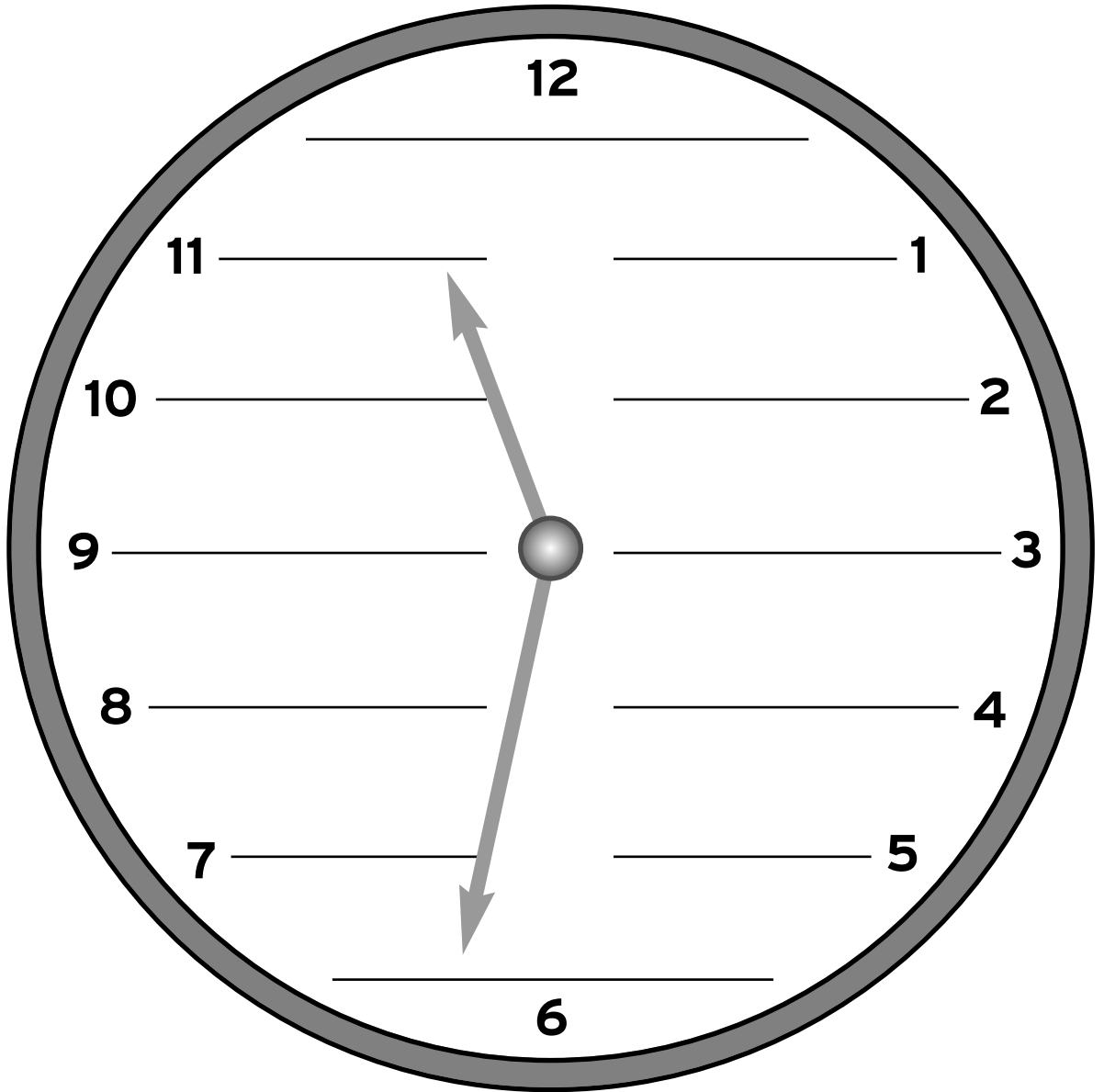
Flexible groupings enable us to move students fluidly through our lessons. Whole-class instruction might be fine for a lab demonstration, but if we want students to practice an experiment, we'd choose one of the smaller groupings, such as working in pairs or triads. If some students don't feel comfortable talking in front of the class, we give them opportunities to work with one or two partners until they become more confident. If we have to teach different subtopics concurrently to a whole class, centers and anchor activities may be the way to go. To engage students, we may occasionally form competitive teams. If we feel some students are relying too much on the work of others in their small groups, it may be time for some independent work so we can monitor each student's individual progress towards a learning goal.

Teachers are always looking for ways to manage groupings of students. One management technique found in many differentiated classrooms is "Clock Partners."

Students can stagnate if they always work with the same peers. To encourage a variety of collaborations without creating burdensome record-keeping, ask students to identify clock partners. To set these up, let students move around the room and identify classmates who would be willing to partner with them. To correspond with the twelve numerals on a clock, they will need to find twelve peers. They can't be too choosy—they need a lot of partners.

Partners agree to work together at a particular time. For example, if Steve is Miguel's 4:00 partner, Miguel writes Steve's name in the 4:00 slot on the clock face he's created, and Steve writes Miguel's name in his 4:00 slot on the clock face he's created. (See Figure 3.1 for an example of a sample clock partner form. A reproducible page of this form is included in the

**FIGURE 3.1** Sample Clock Partner Form



Appendix.) Continue this process until all time slots are filled. After the time sheets are completed, collect them and review them to make sure every slot is taken by an appropriate partner, then return them to students and ask them to keep these clocks in the front portion of their notebooks or binders for quick reference.

Another format that may be more familiar to students is an appointment calendar, such as they might find on a PDA or in computer scheduling software. Figure 3.2 shows a sample of one.

At the appropriate time, ask students to refer to their clocks or appointment calendars and consult with the identified partners. You might say, “Please work with your 7:00 partners and prove the theorem on page seventy-one. Then you and your partner should join another partner team and compare your approaches—were they successful or not? What would you change?”

Some teachers rightfully caution colleagues who use clock partners or similar systems for choosing partners because these practices can hurt the feelings of students who are not chosen right away or at all. This is a good point, and if this strategy bothers you or if you know the relationships in a particular class are less than friendly choose a more random selection process instead. Place students’ names on popsicle sticks and pull names out of a can two at a time to create partner teams. Or, simply form partners based on your knowledge of who might work well together and

**FIGURE 3.2** Sample Appointment Calendar

<b>7:00 A.M.:</b>	_____
<b>8:00 A.M.:</b>	_____
<b>9:00 A.M.:</b>	_____
<b>10:00 A.M.:</b>	_____
<b>11:00 A.M.:</b>	_____
<b>12:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>1:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>2:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>3:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>4:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>5:00 P.M.:</b>	_____
<b>6:00 P.M.:</b>	_____

announce the partnerships to the class. If you use clock partners, ask students to select different classmates each time until they have exhausted all the possible combinations.

If the activity is one in which it's okay for friends to work with friends, such as when playing a review game or working on something of mutual interest, it might be okay for students to choose their own partners, but it may still leave a few students feeling isolated, or at the very least, merely tolerated because the teacher is commanding the partnering.

Remember that if you choose the partners, you'll be the focus of students' appeals to change them from time to time. This is normal. Decide in advance how you will handle these appeals: No changes for one week, then you'll consider it? No changes, period? Deciding each case on its merits? Whatever you do, it's worth spending time to teach students how to work with someone with whom they disagree or don't like before they begin to work with partners. That's a skill critical to students' emotional growth and academic success.

Play with the flexible groupings and see how students perform in different settings. Keep in mind that a favorite arrangement one week may not work the following week but may work again later in the year. Try to roll with it. Differentiation helps us become more adaptive. Our openness to new experiences can inspire students to take similar risks, and vice versa.

## **Collaboration with Students**

Teaching is not a one-way street. Be open to the fluid nature of learning. Students are our partners in education; they are not just the clients or the passive recipients of our knowledge. If you're struggling to find an effective way to reach students, consider asking them for ideas. Notebook reflections and informal report cards in which we ask them to evaluate our performance are just some of the ways we can gather feedback. No one should expect us to know how to differentiate instruction and assessment for all students every day. We'll get closer to the ideal when we realize that good solutions often come from the collective wisdom of both teachers and students. In differentiated classrooms, teachers and students collaborate to deliver instruction.

## **Personal Agendas**

Some students become lost in the general lesson plan. The classroom experience is too distracting or the students are not organized enough to keep up with the group. They need specific steps to follow.

Providing an individual agenda on a piece of paper these students keep at their desks can serve as a checklist to keep them focused and show their

progress (Hollas 2006). Keep the personal agenda as close as possible to the goals for the rest of the class, but you may want to add details for some students to break the lesson into manageable chunks and/or help them remember steps.

When designing a personal agenda, try to use a computer so you can keep track of both long-term and short-term skills that need reinforcement. Some students might need regular written reminders to take out a pencil, place homework in the upper right-hand corner of the desk for the teacher to check, and complete the warm-up work on the SMART Board located at the front of the classroom. Other agenda items might pertain to a specific lesson.

Figure 3.3 shows a sample personal agenda for a student. At first glance, this agenda seems to involve a great deal of preparation. Keep in mind that you would only do this for students who really need it. Some students who drift off task can be refocused with a brief verbal or physical signal (saying their names, standing next to them, using their names in

**FIGURE 3.3** Sample Personal Agenda

<p><b>Daily Tasks:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. ____ Place last night's homework at the top right corner of the desk.</li><li>2. ____ Record the warm-up activity from the front chalkboard in your learning log.</li><li>3. ____ Respond to the warm-up activity.</li><li>4. ____ Listen to the teacher explain the lesson's agenda for the day.</li><li>5. ____ Record the assignment from the Homework Wall in your notebook.</li></ol> <p><b>Specific to Today's Lesson:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6. ____ Get a copy of the graphic organizer from the teacher and put your name and date at the top.</li><li>7. ____ Fill in the example while the teacher explains it to the class.</li><li>8. ____ Read both sides of the graphic organizer so you know what you are looking for.</li><li>9. ____ Watch the video and fill in the graphic organizer during the breaks.</li><li>10. ____ Complete the closing activity for the video.</li><li>11. ____ Ask Ms. Green to sign your assignment notebook.</li><li>12. ____ Go to math class, but first pick up math book in locker.</li></ol>
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the lesson) or by giving them something with which to fidget while listening, such as a stress ball.

You probably won't need to maintain the personal agenda for the entire school year. You may use it to guide a few students for a few weeks at a time.

The extra initial time you spend preparing these agendas should save you time in the long run by reducing behavior and other classroom management problems. You won't need to reteach students who weren't focused the first time. You won't have students acting out because they're frustrated; personal agendas provide physical proof of their accomplishments. For these reasons, agendas can be worth the hassle.

# Tiering

## A Slightly Different Definition

Tiering generally refers to the ways teachers adjust instruction and assessment according to the learner's readiness level (the capacity to handle different levels of challenge in an assignment), interests, and/or learner profile.

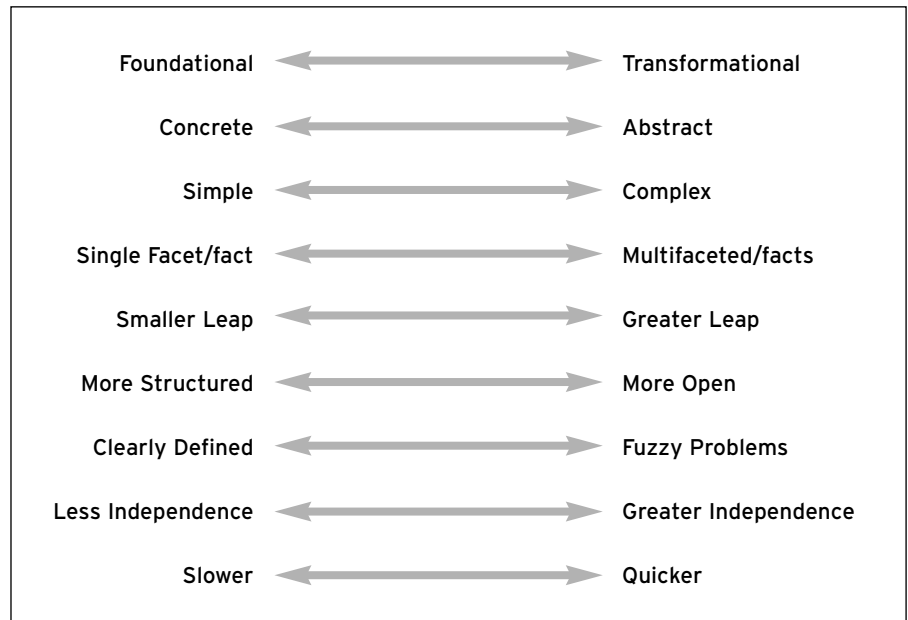
I'm not sold on this brief definition because it seems to reflect more lateral than vertical adjustments. Of the three variations, only readiness suggests a hierarchy of skills. In contrast, one student's interest in basketball isn't a higher tier than another student's interest in swimming. One student's intrapersonal intelligence isn't higher or lower than another student's proclivity for spatial thinking. Adjusting instruction to accommodate students' interests and learner profiles represents a horizontal strategy, not a layered, vertical approach implied in the word *tiering*.

So I'm going to use the common term but combine it with Carol Ann Tomlinson's explanation of ratcheting (1999)—adjusting the complexity of tasks and experiences to redesign instruction and assessments based on students' readiness to learn.

## Tomlinson's Equalizer

Tomlinson encourages us to consider more gradations, such as designing activities that will move students towards greater independence and juggle multiple variables. These tiers form a continuum of skills reflected in Tomlinson's Equalizer (Figure 3.4), a popular tool found in many books and websites, a number of which are included in the Recommended Resources section of this book.

**FIGURE 3.4** Tomlinson's Equalizer



We can use the equalizer to evaluate our assignments as well as our students. For example, Becca is a quiet student who's ready for more challenge. She's been completing the regular assignments for weeks without complaint, but her teacher has noticed the sophisticated connections that Becca has made between her personal reading (she always has a novel at hand!) and other subject disciplines and current events. Using the Equalizer, the teacher realizes that Becca is ready for open-ended assignments and experiences that incorporate more than one variable and enable her to make larger leaps in thinking.

This time, looking through the lens of the lesson plan, the teacher decides to adjust an upcoming assignment based on the Equalizer. Instead of asking Becca to define science terms, the teacher encourages her to read through several suggested experiment proposals and determine which will yield the most useful data for scientists and decision-makers.

Later, the teacher asks Becca to extend the scientific terms—*quantitative* and *qualitative analysis*—to poetry. What would constitute quantitative analysis of poetry, the teacher asks, and what would constitute qualitative analysis of poetry?

Becca's quantitative analysis might include the number of allusions to cytology (study of the cell) in the selected poem, the uses of figurative language, the rhyming pattern, meter, number of lines per stanza, and a comparison of these statistics with the poet's previous and subsequent works. The teacher also asks her to notice any change in these numbers as the poet aged and to try to attribute the changes.

For qualitative analysis, Becca might evaluate the poem using the general criteria for a specific type of poetry, such as focusing on the characteristics of a sonnet, narrative poem, haiku, or a poem with specific meter. Becca examines whether or not the poem follows the model, is a hybrid of some sort, or something that breaks the mold entirely. She looks for the specific effect the poet sought for his intended audience as she listens to the poet read the piece aloud, and she identifies strategies the poet employs to create that effect. She might categorize the poetic devices used and consider whether they helped or distracted the reader. Did the poet use the correct science, or did he fudge it in some places to fit the needs of the poem? Once these extensions are explored, the teacher brings Becca back towards the focus of the general science lesson and asks her to conduct quantitative and qualitative analyses of complex data sets obtained from an experiment conducted in class.

The Equalizer provided the catalyst for reflection the teacher needed to meet Becca's needs.

### **Gradations of Mastery**

The Equalizer gives us a great starting point for our differentiated lesson design. The levels on the continuum suggest a journey from early, introductory understanding of a topic to more sophisticated reasoning. As we design differentiated lessons, we need to carefully consider this progression.

Imagine a lesson in which we are teaching students to infer. We can use concrete and vivid examples of inference, and we can use symbolic and abstract connections.

Here's a quick lesson at the introductory level.

A student walks into the classroom while wearing a heavy coat, pretending to shiver, and saying, "Brrrr!" For fun, the teacher places some crushed ice or fake snow on the student's shoulders. Next the teacher asks students to draw a conclusion (make an inference) about the weather outside based on the data presented by their classmate's portrayal and their own background knowledge.

Here's a more abstract experience with inference.

As students read Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the teacher asks them to gather citations from the text to help them determine what the author was inferring about government propaganda during World War I.

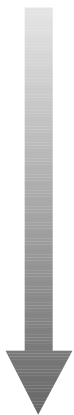
The first example is rather basic, easily experienced by a quick observation and comparison with prior knowledge. The second example requires more thought. There is no vivid portrayal to observe, and students have probably not had much experience with this type of commentary on government propaganda.

Teachers who are experienced with differentiation will identify both of these levels—introductory and sophisticated, as well as the gradations in between—then skillfully guide students toward full mastery. Let’s look at these levels in relation to several topics.

### *Surface Area of Three-Dimensional Solids*

**Introductory**

1. Determine the surface area of a cube.
2. Determine the surface area of a rectangular prism (a rectangular box).
3. Determine the amount of wrapping paper needed to cover a rectangular box. Don’t forget to overlap the paper along the edges so you can tape the corners neatly.
4. Determine how many cans of paint you’ll need to buy in order to paint a three-story house with the given dimensions, if one can of paint will cover forty-six square feet, and you are not to paint the windows, doorways, or external air vents.



**Sophisticated**

### *Vocabulary Terms*

**Introductory**

1. Define the vocabulary terms.
2. Compare the vocabulary terms.
3. Use the vocabulary terms correctly in conversation or writing.
4. Use the vocabulary terms strategically to obtain a particular result.

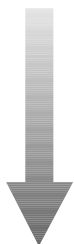


**Sophisticated**

### *Sumer and the Fertile Crescent*

**Introductory**

1. Identify the characteristics of Ancient Sumer.
2. Explore the connections between religion and government in Sumer.
3. Explain the rise and fall of city-states in Mesopotamia.
4. Trace modern structures/ideas back to their roots in the birthplace of civilization, the Fertile Crescent.



**Sophisticated**

## *Cellular Biology*

### **Introductory**

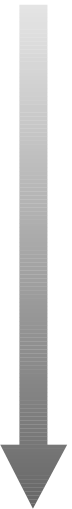


### **Sophisticated**

1. Identify the parts of a cell.
2. Explain the systems within a cell and what functions they perform.
3. Explain how a cell is part of a larger system of cells that form a tissue.
4. Demonstrate how a cell replicates itself.
5. Identify what can go wrong in mitosis.
6. List what we know about how cells learn to specialize in the body.
7. Explain how knowledge of cells helps us understand other physiology.

## *Multiplying and Dividing Fractions and Decimals*

### **Introductory**



### **Sophisticated**

1. Multiply fractions.
2. Multiply mixed numbers.
3. Multiply mixed numbers and whole numbers.
4. Critique the solutions of five students' work as they multiply mixed numbers.
5. Multiply mixed numbers and decimals.
6. Divide fractions.
7. Divide mixed numbers.
8. Divide mixed numbers and whole numbers.
9. Given similar problems completed by anonymous students, identify any errors they've made and how you would reteach them how to do the problems correctly.

There are many ways to raise and lower the complexity of an assignment for students. I've sorted through these strategies throughout my career and created my own list of strategies that help me address students' diverse needs. I staple this list into my lesson-plan book every year and frequently reference it. Some of the ideas were inspired by Grant Wiggins, Carol Tomlinson, Susan Winebrenner, and others who have written about differentiated instruction and assessment, and some of the ideas are my own, but all of them work in multiple subjects and grade levels. A version

of this list originally appeared in my book, *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom* (2006). I have updated it and included additional examples. For each one, ask students to

- *Manipulate information, don't just echo it.* “Once you understand the motivations and viewpoints of the two historical figures, consider how each one would respond to the three ethical issues provided.”
- *Extend the concept to other subjects and topics.* “How does this idea apply to the expansion of the United States railroads during the nineteenth century?” Or, “How is this sort of interaction portrayed in the Kingdom Protista?”
- *Integrate more than one subject or skill.* “Identify the limiting factors of the human habitat of Chicago during the industrial revolution. How would we determine its carrying capacity?”
- *Increase the number of variables that must be considered; incorporate more facets.* “Change the lab procedure so the three given potential sources of contamination are no longer a factor.” Or, “Now that you've designed a more energy efficient type of human transportation vehicle that operates on renewable fuels, design a similar human transportation vehicle that can be operated in a deep-sea research colony. Be sure to account for salinity, depth/pressure, the three-dimensional biologics (animals) that live there, air supply and proper mixture, water-tight construction, and easy egress and regress.”
- *Demonstrate higher-level thinking as indicated in ascending levels, such as in Bloom's Taxonomy, Williams's Taxonomy, or something else.* “On each of the six faces of a posterboard cube you create, interact with our topic via the following prompts: Describe it. Compare it. Associate it. Analyze it. Apply it. Argue for it or against it.”
- *Use or apply content/skills in new or different situations.* “As part of our service project, we need to fill this large rectangular sand-box in the playground with sand. How many cubic meters of sand do we need to purchase by Saturday in order to fill the box?”
- *Make choices among several substantive ones.* “Identify the three possible ways the character could resolve the dangerous situation before him, then weigh each one against your own code of ethics. Which one would you choose if you were in the situation, and why?”
- *Work with advanced or primary resources.* “Using the latest schematics of the Space Shuttle flight deck and real interviews

with professionals at Jet Propulsion Laboratories in California, prepare a report that . . .” Or, “Here is the raw data for immigration to New York City from 1920 to 1930. What can we conclude from it?” Or, “Create a robotic device that performs the following five tasks in sequence.”

- *Add an unexpected element to the process or product.* “What could prevent meiosis from creating four haploid nuclei (gametes) from a single haploid cell?” Or, “How might the world be different if President Truman had lost the election?”
- *Reframe a topic under a new theme.* “Rewrite the scene from the point of view of the antagonist.” Or, “Reconsider the United States’ involvement in war in terms of insect behavior.” Or, “Retell *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* so that it becomes a cautionary tale about McCarthyism.”
- *Work independently.* “Please do this on your own, without the assistance of parents, teachers, or classmates.”
- *Share the backstory to a topic.* “Why are so many factions interested in controlling the West Bank and Gaza Strip?” Or, “What was going on in the author’s life when he wrote this, and did it have an effect on his observations?”
- *Identify the misconceptions.* “What myths does this student unknowingly promote in his essay on the President of the United States?” Or, “Does the news reporter’s description accurately portray the event? Explain your reasoning.”
- *Identify the bias or prejudice.* “Examine the presentation of this news story on three different television networks. Identify each network’s slant for the story and note what was included or not included in order to create such a slant.”
- *Negotiate the evaluative criteria.* “Examine these four samples of exemplary [labs/essays/projects/speeches/performances] and identify at least five common characteristics that demonstrate quality. Afterward, identify features of this project that would provide evidence of quality. Be prepared to defend your choices.”
- *Deal with ambiguity and multiple meanings or steps.* “Explain both sides of the argument compellingly.” Or, “Argue for the opposing side of the debate, regardless of your personal views.” Or, “Identify the multiple connotations of *fire* in the poem.”
- *Use content/skills in real-world applications.* “Compose and send a business letter using proper business-letter format to a real company of your choosing. You can request more information or

replacement parts or compliment and thank the company for a good product.” Or, “Maintain accurate bookkeeping for your theater production as you purchase supplies, pay for advertising, sell tickets, and provide refreshments and programs for patrons.”

- *Analyze the action or object.* “Break the process down into six important steps.” Or, “What are the essential ingredients of this policy?”
- *Debate the merits of something taken for granted or commonly accepted by others.* “Should we expose all children to chicken pox so they will get chicken pox when they are young?” Or, “Is this book and the values it promotes appropriate reading for all students at this age?”
- *Synthesize two or more seemingly unrelated concepts or objects.* “How are grammar conventions like music?”
- *Critique something, using a set of standards.* “Evaluate the student’s choral performance against the criteria we identified for excellence.”
- *Consider and report on the ethical ramifications of a policy or act.* “Do the potential benefits of genetic engineering of humans outweigh the possible risks?” Or, “Is the federal government ever justified in restricting an individual’s rights to protect other citizens?”
- *Work with abstract concepts and models.* “Explain how logarithmic functions are the inverse of exponential functions.” Or, “Identify how the artist uses balance, movement, and unity to engage the viewer.”
- *Respond to open-ended situations.* “Brainstorm possible resolutions to the gang conflict in our town.” Or, “What are the current roles of men and women in society, and how will they change in the next twenty-five years?” Or, “Identify three or more ways to solve the problem, not just one.”
- *Increase expediency with a skill.* “Identify the errors in the following text, which is longer than you edited last time.” Or, “Do twenty problems of this type, now that you know how to do this.” Or, “Identify the most expedient way to tabulate the data.”
- *Identify big picture patterns or connections.* “What is the larger category into which this fits?” Or, “What conclusions can you draw from this information?” Or, “How will knowing this make the character able to respond successfully to the conflict?”
- *Defend their work.* “What is the evidence for your claim?” Or, “Would others draw the same conclusions as you have done



here?” Or, “Provide a flowchart of your thinking.” Or, “Identify potential arguments against your stance and respond to them compellingly.”

As you work with your students and the curriculum, consider the continuum of skills that will lead from an introductory level of understanding and performance to an advanced level. The creative challenge is providing different paths for students to move from novice to expert. Tomlinson’s Equalizer and the previous suggestions for adjusting complexity can spark our thinking.

## Respectful Tasks

If the focus of a lesson is teaching students how to write a conclusion to an essay or report, we should ensure that all students are learning to write conclusions. This may seem obvious, but many teachers think they are differentiating when they give students alternative tasks that have little connection to a lesson’s objectives. For example, some students may not be ready to fully analyze a period of history that we’re teaching, so we ask them to create an inviting travel brochure about the era to use as an advertisement for future time-travelers. What does this teach them about historical analysis? Not much.

Instead of providing an unrelated assignment, we could tier the lesson with respectful tasks. For students who are struggling to learn, we might break off the chunks they *can* do and progressively add complexity. In a lesson about historical analysis, students at the introductory level of understanding may be able to tackle only one aspect of the period or the culture under consideration—perhaps scientific progress or religion. For students in the middle range, we could ask them to consider two or three ideas but limit the amount of evidence required to substantiate a conclusion. Or, we might prime their minds by asking them to first analyze something much closer to the modern age. For advanced students, we might ask them to analyze multiple aspects of the historical period along different themes, require primary resource evidence to substantiate their claims, or use the identified themes to compare the historical period to modern times.

The point of respectful tasks is to never drift far from standards of excellence and to provide meaningful (developmentally appropriate) experiences for all students. Consider how this purpose plays out in the following scenarios.

*In a math class, a student is struggling to learn how to divide decimals, so the teacher*

- Asks him to critique the methods used by several anonymous students, some of whom followed the correct approach and some of

whom didn't. The student uses a list of evaluative criteria mutually agreed upon by the teacher and student. (*example of a respectful task*)

- Asks him to make an attractive bulletin board for the classroom that defines all the math terms used when dividing decimals. (*example of an unrelated task*)

*In an English class, a student already understands irony before the lesson starts, so the teacher*

- Asks her to identify two examples of irony in modern usage or to rewrite the last scene of a short story to reflect irony. (*example of a respectful task*)
- Asks her to write an acrostic poem about irony (I stands for \_\_\_\_\_, R stands for \_\_\_\_\_, and so on). (*example of an unrelated task*)

By the way, if we accept the premise that all assignments should be developmentally appropriate, then the grades we obtain from students' work will remain accurate and fair. If we grade an activity that has little to do with the focus of our lesson, the task becomes a means to baby-sit the student while the rest of the class catches up, and any grade earned is useless to both the teacher and the student.

### **Compacting the Curriculum**

If some students demonstrate advanced readiness early in the unit, we shouldn't waste their time focusing on skills and content they already understand. Instead, we try to shorten the process, making sure they've mastered the basic curriculum and double-checking their knowledge of more subtle points. Then we provide extensions that enable the students to explore important details in greater depth or breadth, consider a theme from a unique angle, or develop projects that include teaching someone else what they've learned.

For example, if a group of students already knows how to set up one type of media presentation software on the computer, we can teach them about other multimedia tools. If we don't know how to use these tools ourselves, we could direct students to related resources or experts in the field. Afterward, the students can present their findings to the class.

We have very little time with students, and there's so much for them to learn. Forcing them to plow old ground means they can't discover new territory. The heart of differentiation is recognizing that each student may follow a different path to knowledge. Compacting the curriculum is an effective way to unleash their potential.

## The Football and the Anchor: Teaching a Variety of Levels at the Same Time

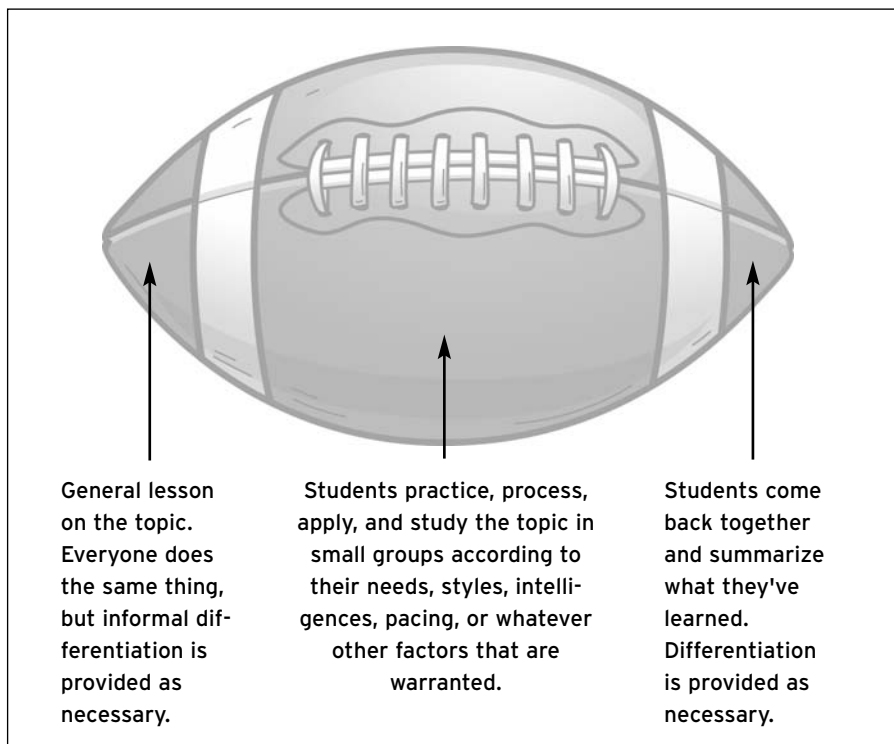
Many of us see teaching as a linear, step-by-step process, but this approach limits our imagination and our effectiveness. Because students usually are at different levels of readiness for learning, we need to design a sequence of tasks that will let each of them progress, no matter where they started.

Two structural sequences that enable teachers to reach a diverse group of students at the same time are the “football” and the “anchor.” Okay, I know this sounds cheesy, but I’m going to write it anyway: Let’s tackle the football first.

### *The Football Structure*

The football metaphor comes from the way we think about the lesson’s sequence: a narrow, whole-class experience in the beginning, a wider expansion of the topic as multiple groups learn at their own pace or in their own ways, then a renarrowing as we gather again to process what we’ve learned. In short, a football, as shown in Figure 3.5. (Figure 3.5 also appears as a blank form in the Appendix.)

**FIGURE 3.5** The Football Structure



In this three-part sequence, we first teach a general lesson to the whole class for ten to fifteen minutes. Although we might differentiate here and there as warranted—such as providing a second example to study, adjusting the pacing, using preferential seating, or allowing the use of calculators for those who need them—most of the students will be engaged in the same activity. We’re providing a predominantly whole-class learning experience.

After the general lesson, we divide the class into groups according to readiness, interest, or learning profile and let them process the concepts at their own pace or in their own way. This wider, middle section of the lesson lasts for fifteen to thirty minutes. While students work in small groups or independently, we circulate throughout the room, clarifying directions, providing feedback, and answering questions.

We can vary this middle section extensively to meet the needs of students. We might have two groups interacting with the topic of the first section at different levels or nine groups focusing on a different aspect of Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences.

Here’s an example of this topic expansion from my own classroom: Students were studying World War II in one of my colleague’s history classes, and I was teaching literature about the Holocaust in my English class. In addition to discussing how authors make their novels historically authentic, we were exploring the way characters evolve through conflict in narratives. I divided my students into groups according to their reading levels.

Some students used excerpts from *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank 1993), while others used excerpts from *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (Magorian 1982), *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (Yolen 1988) and *Lisa’s War* (Matas 1989). Each of these books has different levels of complexity, including Yiddish (Yolen), dialect (Magorian), intense content (Frank, Yolen, Magorian), and use of conflict to advance the story and characters (all four), as well as varying reading levels. Students focused on the same universal elements—character evolution and historical authenticity.

Once students have explored the initial content and skills through small-group exercises and individual tasks, they are ready to come together as a whole group and process what they’ve learned. This is the final portion of the football instructional metaphor. This processing can take the form of a summarization, a question-and-answer session, a quick assessment, or some other specific activity that engages students and enables them to debrief with each other. This phase usually takes about ten to fifteen minutes.

Figure 3.6 includes a 3–2–1 activity that I used during the previously mentioned study of authenticity in literature. A 3–2–1 activity is a summarization task in which the student is asked to respond (in writing, drawing, or speaking) to three prompts.

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

**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 summarization prompts to meet the needs of students from time to time.*

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.

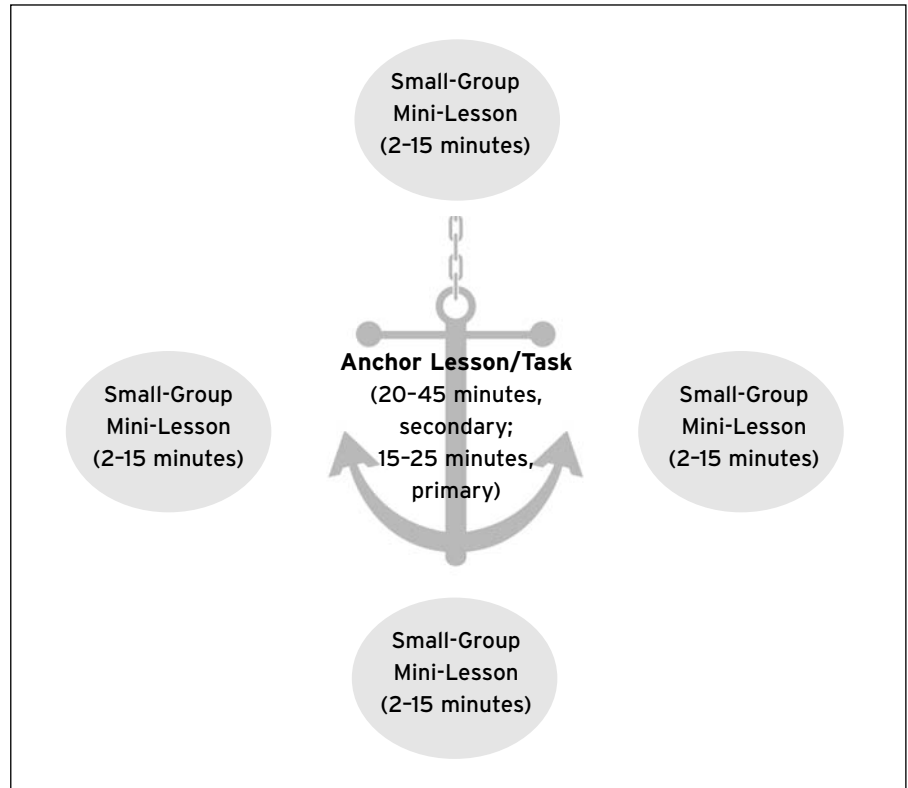
### *The Anchor Structure*

When I was first learning to differentiate, I realized I had students who were performing below, on, and above grade level, 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 classroom, such as when they ask students to complete puzzles or read ahead to the next chapter while waiting for classmates to finish a test. To

**FIGURE 3.7** Visual Anchor Metaphor for Classroom Planning



me, such tasks are better described with the metaphor of a sponge—activities that soak up time. By contrast, an anchor activity to me should be more substantive and truly root the lesson, not just keep students occupied. Figure 3.7 shows the visual metaphor for classroom planning. (A blank version is included in the Appendix.)

In an anchor-lesson structure, the teacher assigns a task for the entire class to complete autonomously. As students work individually, the teacher is free to gather small groups of students for mini-lessons based on their needs. After the mini-lesson, she sends the students back to the main activity and rotates to another small group. In a band or orchestra class, for example, the teacher can pull several students to one side to practice their fingering for a complex set of measures. With another set of students she can provide feedback on yesterday's performance, and with yet another group she can discuss techniques they have been working on after school with private instructors. While the teacher assists each group in rotation, the rest of the band members tune their instruments, warm up, or practice their individual portions of the upcoming concert.

The mini-lessons a teacher designs can be as simple and informal as stopping by a student's desk to explain how to use a semicolon or as com-

plex and formal as teaching students how to determine the weight that structures will bear in a physics experiment. The focus of the mini-lesson doesn't have to be related to the day's topic. Teachers also can use this time to reinforce separate skills and concepts that will improve students' learning overall.

Three components must be in place for the anchor lesson to succeed. First, students must know how to work independently. During anchor lessons, the teacher will focus on small groups and individual students and shouldn't be interrupted except for emergencies. If students become confused while working on the anchor activity, they should try to solve the problem before asking the teacher. To help students develop autonomy, the teacher can remind them of the steps to take before asking for assistance. Here are some suggestions.

### *Suggested Steps for Students to Take When the Teacher Is Not Available*

- Draw a picture of what you think it says or asks.
- Move on to the next portion, then come back to the trouble spot later. Something may trigger an idea.
- Reread the directions or previous sections to see if you missed or misinterpreted something.
- Read the directions and/or your response aloud.
- Find a successful example and study how it was done.
- Ask a classmate: “Ask Me,” “Graduate Assistant,” and “Technoid” (see sidebar on page 96 for helpful tips).
- Define difficult vocabulary.
- Try to explain the topic or idea to someone else.

It's helpful to create a “Ten Things to Do *Before* Asking the Teacher” poster for the room. Ask students for suggestions so there are plenty of options as well as student ownership.

The second essential component of a successful anchor lesson is making sure students understand the tasks involved. Teachers inexperienced with this approach often design large and complex tasks, and students aren't clear about the expectations, what the final product should look like, what resources to use, or how to break the objectives into basic steps. When students don't understand the anchor activity, the teacher will function like a fire chief—calling out directions, interrupting the job at hand, and stamping out new blazes.

The third essential component is having multiple parts of the anchor activity. Reading a personal-choice novel for forty-five minutes might



## Ask a Classmate Tips

“**Ask Me**” refers to primary-grade situations in which a designated student “expert” on a topic wears a visor or baseball cap with *Ask Me* written on the visor. The teacher has already determined that these students have advanced skills or competencies with the task and recommends that their classmates consult them. ASCD’s video series “At Work in the Differentiated Classroom” (2001) shows clear examples of these visors in action.

“**Graduate Assistant**” is the older-student version of the Ask Me visor. The teacher places triangular tent cards with the words *Graduate Assistant* at designated students’ desks. Again, the teacher identifies these students and encourages others to seek their advice when stuck. Because most students will not be familiar with the concept of a graduate assistant, the teacher explains how they function in a university setting.

“**Technoid**” refers to those students with computer or technology expertise who would be helpful if anyone has a problem with either.

If you use one of the first two examples as one of your support structures for anchor activities,

make sure to rotate every student into this position at least once during the year. If a struggling student hasn’t had a turn, find a way to teach him or her the basic material for an upcoming lesson at least a day or two ahead, then assign the student the role of Ask Me or Graduate Assistant expert on the day of the lesson. Also make sure to “seed the classroom” with questions and needs, and make sure you are unavailable to assist students. Seeding the classroom means that we set up challenges for the larger class with which they will definitely need assistance from a knowledgeable student, and we ask some students to seek assistance from the expert.

It may be necessary to subtly manipulate the circumstances to give chronically underachieving students an opportunity to shine. It’s important for their classmates to consider them competent, and it’s crucial that all students have at least one chance during the year to feel the self-confidence and moderate euphoria that come from being perceived as an expert.

work for some students on some days, but it won’t work every time. Design the anchor activity to include several steps that involve different cognitive and physical skills, if possible. The task(s) should be substantive and directly related to the curriculum. Here are sample anchor activities from different disciplines.

**History** Read pages 45–52 about the Industrial Revolution. Identify the five principles that the labor unions representing employees in the meat-packing industry were fighting for. Next, design a flag that includes symbols for each idea. Finally, write a short paragraph describing the flag’s symbols.

**Math** Identify the number of faces, edges, and vertices for each of the following three-dimensional shapes: cube, rectangular prism, rectangular pyramid, triangular pyramid, triangular prism, pentagonal pyramid, pentagonal prism, and cylinder. Next, draw the patterns for each shape on paper. Finally, use the two-dimensional patterns to build the three-dimensional shapes.



**Language arts** Draw and label a plot profile of the novel, making sure to include markers for the setting, rising action, conflicts, climax, and resolution of the major conflict. Next, draw a second plot profile, but this time pretend that a character from another book is inserted into the story at the midpoint and has a major influence on the outcome of the story. Draw the new changes into the plot profile and explain in writing how the story might change based on this new character's appearance.

Here are some other tips for creating and using anchor activities.

- Require students to turn in a product by the end of the allotted time. This increases their sense of urgency and accountability.
- Start small. Begin with just two groups—assigning half of the class to each—then work toward developing multiple groups.
- Occasionally videotape students as they work on anchor activities independently. Use the video to demonstrate proper and improper behavior. Showing a ten- to fifteen-minute segment should be enough to make an impression.
- Use task cards, which are large index cards or 8½-by-11-inch sheets of paper with the directions and examples listed clearly for students to follow. Task cards can be particularly helpful when you have students at multiple readiness levels working in groups as part of their differentiated learning experience.
- Use a “fish bowl” simulation to show the class how a small group of students should work on a related task while other students complete the main assignment. In this scenario, students observe the actors as they would view fish in an aquarium and use score sheets to evaluate the performance based on previously discussed criteria.
- Train students to disengage from one activity and move into another one successfully. It's worth taking the time to practice moving in and out of small groups or moving from high-energy activities back to quieter individual activities and speeding up the rearrangement of desks or tables or cleaning up one's work space. Practice these transitions multiple times, helping students become familiar with your expectations and expedient in their execution.

## **Scaffold Instruction**

Scaffolding is when we provide direct instruction and support for students as they initially learn a concept or skill, then slowly pull back until students can fly solo. For example, we might ask students to follow a precise guide when they first learn how to write an editorial, but later we'll ask

them to play with the format freely, moving pieces around for the best effect. In a foreign language class, we scaffold the instruction initially by asking students to conjugate an irregular verb using a cloze text (students fill in the blanks of sentences with the correct verb tenses) method. Later, students choose their own verb conjugations from a list we provide. And later still, they apply their knowledge during conversations.

When we first use an anchor activity in a differentiated classroom, we need to be very direct about the process we want students to follow, and we carefully sequence the steps. Later we gradually pull away those structures and let students monitor their own behavior and productivity. In the first anchor activity we do, for example, we might ask students to complete five small tasks with very explicit directions, one after the other, without deviation. As students become proficient, we ask them to identify the steps they'd like to take in order to finish the task and get the steps approved before starting. Later, we assign diverse tasks but students must figure out how to do them with minimal advice from the teacher.

Readers may notice the similarities between scaffolding and tiering. There is a difference. Scaffolding is what we do for some students as we tier. It represents another mind-set: Do students have enough direct instruction and support to complete this task, or do they have too much? How can I build their independence with this task by slowly releasing my control of their learning? In *Deeper Reading* (2004), Kelly Gallagher describes three questions that he asks himself before planning a lesson, all of which seem very helpful when thinking about scaffolding (I have added the italics):

- *Without* my assistance, what will my students take from this?
- *With* my assistance, what do I want my students to take from this?
- What can I do to *bridge the gap* between what my students would learn on their own and what I want them to learn? (199)

A part of our teaching mission is to build students' independence. We want them to require less and less direct instruction in order to grow. It's very easy for teachers to make students dependent upon them for learning, but it's a truly successful teacher who has guided students to their own autonomy. Oscar Wilde had it right when he said, "The goal of any teacher is to put himself out of a job."