



**The
Differentiated
Classroom**

Responding to the Needs of All Learners

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deficits, and fostering independence. Thus, she places on each student's agenda work focused on each of those areas. In a two- to three-week agenda cycle, all students are likely to work in several subject areas. They'll work with some things they love and some they could do without. All will set and monitor daily and weekly goals. All will work alone and with peers. All will meet with the teacher informally and formally throughout the agenda period, both at the teacher's request and at their own.

Ms. Clayter finds agendas a great way to attend to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile. At this one time in the day, she can extend, enrich, and support student growth in all subject areas. Her students love the calm way to ease into the school day, the variety, and the sense of autonomy the agendas provide.

Differentiate What: Ms. Clayter can differentiate virtually anything through agendas. They allow her to differentiate content by varying materials, subjects, topics within subjects, and degree of teacher support. Agendas permit differentiation of process or sense-making by varying the degree of difficulty of tasks as well as ways students make sense of ideas. Agendas also allow for pacing variation. Students can have differing amounts of time to make sense of a particular skill or concept. Agendas facilitate product differentiation by providing time for students to work on long-term products in class where the teacher can monitor and coach their planning, research, quality of thought, and production.

Differentiate How: Once again, agendas allow great flexibility for modifications based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile. Ms. Clayter can form like-readiness or mixed-readiness groups. She can form groups of students whose skills in a

particular area lag, or she can form groups with students who have long since mastered basic expectations. She can point individual students toward materials and tasks they will find appropriately challenging. She can vary working conditions so that auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning modes are available, or so that students can select spatial, musical, or linguistic avenues of expression, either independently or collaboratively. Agendas also allow her great opportunity to tap into student interest. Agenda time provides a tailor-made chance to have one student work with fractions through music, another with fractions through baseball trading cards, and still another with fractions through stock market reports.

Differentiate Why: Ms. Clayter is a relatively new teacher, but in her classroom she observes a wide range of student interests and needs in all subjects. It is difficult for her to figure out how to modify curriculum and instruction in every subject all day long. Using agendas allows her to concentrate her efforts at differentiation during one time of the day and still be effective in addressing a great array of student needs. She finds she can achieve most of the goals of differentiation through agendas, and she does so in a way that makes her planning manageable.

Complex Instruction

Complex instruction is a rich strategy developed to deal with the sorts of academic ranges that frequently exist in classrooms that are academically, culturally, and linguistically heterogeneous (Cohen, 1994). Its goal is to establish equity of learning opportunity for all students in the context of intellectually challenging materials and through the use of small instructional groups. Like most

Start Here ↓

promising classroom approaches, complex instruction is itself complex, and it requires considerable reflection and planning. The payoff, however, can be immense. It helps establish a classroom in which the contributions of every individual are prized by all students, and high-level instruction is standard fare for all learners.

Complex instruction tasks

- require students to work together in small groups,
- are designed to draw upon the intellectual strengths of each student in the group,
 - are open ended,
 - are intrinsically interesting to students,
 - are uncertain (thus allowing for a variety of solutions and solution routes),
 - involve real objects,
 - provide materials and instructions in multiple languages (if students in the class represent varied language groups),
 - integrate reading and writing in ways that make them an important means to accomplishing a desirable goal,
 - draw upon multiple intelligences in a real-world way,
 - use multimedia, and
 - require many different talents in order to be completed adequately.

An effective complex instruction task does not

- have a single right answer,
- allow for completion more efficiently by one or two students than by the whole group,
- reflect low-level thinking, or
- involve simple memorization of routine learning.

Teachers who skillfully use complex instruction move among groups as they work. They ask students questions about the work, probing their

thinking and facilitating understanding. Over time, teachers also delegate increasing authority for learning to students. They then support students in developing the skills needed to manage the authority well.

Two additional—and vital—teacher roles are discovering students' intellectual strengths and "assignment of status." Cohen (1994) reflects that traditional cooperative groups often fail because students know who is "good at school" and who is not. Those who are good are given, or take, responsibility for successful completion of group tasks. Those who are not "good at school" relinquish, or have taken from them, responsibility for successful completion of school tasks. This, says Cohen, stems from the fact that many school tasks are highly dependent on encoding, decoding, computation, and memorization. Those things become synonymous with school success in the minds of students as well as teachers.

Complex instruction seeks tasks that call on a much wider range of intellectual skills, such as generating ideas, asking probing questions, representing ideas symbolically, using rhythm to interpret or express ideas, hypothesizing, or planning. Teachers study students continually and systematically to identify individual strengths. Teachers then design complex instruction tasks that call upon the various student abilities.

In "assignment of status," teachers seek key moments in group work when a student (often one not perceived as "successful" by peers) makes a worthwhile comment or suggestion. The teacher articulates to the group what she heard the student say and why she feels it is a contribution to the work of the whole group. Students begin to see peers in a different light, and they also begin to develop a vocabulary that reflects a wide range of

intellectual strengths. Finally, in presenting complex instruction tasks to the class, the teacher leads the students in listing the full range of intellectual tasks required for successful completion of the work. This helps them understand that all students have something of the required strengths, but no one has all of them.

Grade 10: English

In Ms. McCleary's 10th grade English classes, students have been studying how writers' lives and works intertwine. They have read a variety of types of literature this year, including poetry, and they've looked at writing as "mirror and metaphor." That is, they have explored how a piece of writing can become a metaphor for a larger idea, and they have explored how writing holds a mirror up to readers for readers to better understand themselves and their world. Students recently completed a "stepping stones" writing assignment where they diagrammed and wrote about the events in their own lives that were most important in shaping them to be 10th graders.

Today, Ms. McCleary's students will begin work on a complex instruction task. They will work in small groups for the next four or five class periods to complete the task, sharing what they have learned with all other groups during an additional class period. Homework during this time also focuses on the group's tasks. The task will be one key element of student assessment when the marking period ends. Each group received a task card that reads as follows.

We have been working with how writers' lives (and ours) are often metaphors which they (we) create through actions and deeds—including writing. We have also

looked how good authors hold up a mirror to readers, allowing readers to reflect upon their own lives and feelings. Robert Frost wrote a poem called "The Road Not Taken." Your task is to analyze the poem as a metaphor for Frost's life and as a mirror of our own. To do that, you should:

1. Find the poem, read it, interpret it, and reach consensus about what's going on in it and what it means.
2. Research Frost's life, making a "stepping stones" diagram similar to the one you created for your own life earlier this month.
3. Develop a soundscape that takes us along Frost's "journey in the woods." Use music; found sounds; sound effects; and appropriate mime, body sculpture, or narration to help your audience understand the feelings that a "journeyer in the woods" would experience as he or she came to straight places, landmarks, or decision points. Be sure you develop a script for your presentation.
4. Create an "overlay" of Frost's life and the poem, using words and images in such a way that they represent the metaphorical relationship between the two.

5. Transfer the key ideas in the poem to the life and experience of a noted person about whom we are all likely to know a little but could learn a little more. Your "transfer" must clearly draw a relationship between the person and the poem and clearly communicate to classmates how literature can help us understand ourselves.

6. Be certain that your final products demonstrate your understanding of metaphor and mirror, the relationship between varied art forms in communicating human meaning, and details of the people and poem with whom/which you are working.

As usual, you should appoint a group

convener, materials monitor, recorder, and time monitor. Determine the best role for each person in your group to play in completing your task. Remember, everyone has strengths to contribute to your group's success. No one has all the strengths needed. Because your time is limited, you should develop a written work plan, including a time line and group conference times. In the end, be ready to share criteria by which your group's work should be assessed (including required elements as well as your group's sense of what makes a high-quality presentation). Your group may have up to 20 minutes to make its presentation to one other group plus a 10-minute question exchange with students who serve as your audience and for whom you are an audience.

Differentiate What: Ms. McCleary can use the complex instruction sequence to differentiate content by providing books of varying reading levels and in varied languages along with videos, music, and other resources. She does this while ensuring all students focus on the same essential understandings. She differentiates process by providing multiple segments of a rich task that allow students to make sense of ideas in a range of ways. Here, product differentiation (the 20-minute presentation) is differentiated in that students will "specialize" in one facet of the larger project.

Differentiate How: This complex instruction example provides for readiness differentiation through use of varied materials, interest differentiation in selection of biographical subjects, and learning profile differentiation with investigation and expression through multiple modes of intelligence. It could also be an important learning profile differentiation to provide resource materials

and instructions in multiple languages if the class contained students for whom English was not their primary language.

Differentiate Why: Ms. McCleary has differentiated learning and expression options within a group endeavor rather than individually. She wants students with differing readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles to work together in ways that dignify each student. Thus, she has opted to use heterogeneous groups and has taken great pains to provide for individual needs and success within that context.

Orbital Studies

Chris Stevenson (1992, 1997) suggests "orbital studies" as an ideal way to address both commonalities and differences among middle-level learners. Indeed, the strategy appears easily adapted to learners at all levels. Orbital studies are independent investigations, generally of three to six weeks. They "orbit," or revolve, around some facet of the curriculum. Students select their own topics for orbitals, and they work with guidance and coaching from the teacher to develop more expertise both on the topic and on the process of becoming an independent investigator.

Orbitals work from the premise that all learners are dignified by developing and sharing knowledge and skills. This strategy is not unlike the merit badge system in Scouting except that (1) in orbital studies students develop their own topics rather than select from a prescribed list and (2) topics stem from the curriculum. Stevenson (1992) suggests that initial lists of potential topics be derived from surveys of student interest, then augmented by suggestions from parents and mentors (or even perusing the Yellow Pages!).

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