

# DIFFERENTIATION TIPS FOR TEACHERS: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

## Part I: Preassessment (*first of a series*)

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### **What Is Differentiation? Why Is It Important?**

As educators, we know and agree that it is critically important to have a classroom that meets the academic and emotional needs of each student. However, with a classroom of twenty-five to thirty students and the pressures of day-to-day school demands, that task becomes a challenge. Oftentimes, we as teachers feel overwhelmed and underprepared to effectively run a classroom focused on continuous academic progress for all students. In order to ensure that continuous

progress, we need to be aware of the critical components of differentiation. Using differentiation in the classroom means designing and implementing curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessments to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of all students. In fact, Kentucky's regulation for gifted education, 704 KAR 3:285, Programs for the gifted and talented, defines differentiation as a "method through which educators shall establish a specific, well-thought-out match between abilities, interests, needs, and curriculum opportunities in terms of enrichment and acceleration options that maximize learn-

ing experiences." Differentiated service experiences are defined as "educational experiences which extend, replace, or supplement learning beyond the standard curriculum." It's the law in Kentucky; check your own state regulations.

### **Planning: The Need for Preassessment**

In order for differentiation to be effective, assessment must be an ongoing part of teaching and learning. Preassessment is especially critical to be able to determine the student's level of readiness to proceed with the new unit of study. These three questions should guide every lesson:

- Planning: What do I want students to know and/or to be able to do?
- Preassessment: Who already knows the information and/or can do it?
- Differentiation: What can I do for them so they can make continuous progress and extend their learning?

### **Planning: What Do I Want Students to Know and/or to Be Able to Do?**

Those educators following best practice must plan their instructional objectives carefully. These objectives reflect national and state standards, the Core Content, Program of Studies, and Learning Goals. If a teacher has not assessed what she is doing in a unit, then she can certainly not guide her students to those outcomes. He is like the captain who doesn't chart his course and doesn't know his destination.



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### ***Preassessment: Who Already Knows the Information and/or Can Do It?***

Once those objectives are created, the teacher must then ascertain who already knows the information or can already perform the skill. There are myriad ways to preassess. Teachers match the preassessment with their content, their students, and their own teaching styles. Some will use the final assessment as the preassessment. If a child already knows 80% of the material, then there is no need for him to “learn” it all over. He’s already mastered it.

Another strategy that works particularly well with skills is “the five hardest questions” (Winebrenner 1992). In math, for example, ask the five hardest questions in the unit. If a child gets four out of five correct, then she doesn’t need to study that material.

Not all preassessments must be pen and paper. (Although written preassessments provide important documentation.) Teachers can determine what kids already know by a class discussion, a KWL chart (What do you already KNOW? What do you WANT to know? How do you want to LEARN?), or even an oral question/answer session.

If something written is a better match, it still does not have to be the printed preassessment in the teacher’s manual (although those are handy to use and important to document the starting

point). It could be that before you begin a new unit on photosynthesis, for instance, you instruct students to jot down what they know about the topic. A quick skim over the papers helps the teacher put them into three piles; those who write a page with diagrams go in one while those saying “photo-what?” go in another.

The form of the preassessment isn’t nearly as important as its utilization. Not only do educators need to preassess, but they must also use those results in teaching the unit. That’s where differentiation comes in.

### ***Differentiation: What Can I Do for Them So They Can Make Continuous Progress and Extend Their Learning?***

Now that a teacher has a strong understanding of who knows or can do what, she plans. He will differentiate the content, process, or product to better meet the needs, abilities, and interests of all kids. Stay tuned on how to accomplish that.

The next article in the series will look at practical differentiation strategies.

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Winebrenner, S. (1992). *Teaching gifted kids in the regular classroom*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.