



Combs Educational Consulting, Ltd.

Special Delivery

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Likely you have heard of, and even attended some training on the topic of “differentiated instruction” or “DI”. Carol Ann Tomlinson defines it as “tailoring instruction to meet individual needs.” This approach is well established to benefit all learners, including those who are gifted and talented AND those with disabilities and other learning challenges. One of Tomlinson’s key concepts in DI is referred to as “respectful work.” Respectful work means that while learning experiences that are offered to different students may differ, they should all be equal in interest, importance and engagement. This month’s newsletter gives a quick review of some strategies for creating various options for “RESPECTFUL WORK”. The following concepts can be further explored in any of Tomlinson’s many wonderful books, found at www.caroltomlinson.com.

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RESPECTFUL WORK

Rubrics allow for teachers to evaluate consistent key learning points in a consistent way even across learning products that may be very different.

Entry Points can vary for students at different readiness levels. Formative assessment helps determine the right “entry point” for different students when planning flexible groups. This concept is sometimes referred to as “The Goldilocks Rule”: giving children learning experiences that are not too hard, not too easy but “just right”.

Station teaching involves small groups of students rotating through stations to

participate in different activities related to the same instructional content and objectives. This strategy offers an efficient way for teachers to offer different learning options for different groups of students based on readiness, learning style or interest.

Project-based learning is a strategy wherein the teacher sets up opportunities for students to use authentic resources to learn content through an extended investigation of a real life issue, question or problem. Students have an active role in choosing topics for exploration, finding resources, creating learning products and presenting their findings.

Equal interest, importance and engagement across different groups is important when planning differentiated activities. For example, the group of students at one readiness level should not have a fun and engaging hands-on lab experience while students in a different readiness group do a word search or coloring page. All students should have work that is appropriately challenging and fun.

Curriculum compacting is a strategy in which teachers make adjustments in content for students who have shown mastery of some of all of the content objectives through formative assessment. This allows students to move ahead with alternative learning objectives, content, resources or activities that can enrich or extend their learning in an area of strength. This option can be used for many students at times, since most students have areas where they have relative strengths in their knowledge and interests.

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Tiered activities are the basis of DI planning, as they allow teachers to plan different learning activities based on various factors, including readiness level, complexity, learning style, student interests, different tools and resources, or different learning products.

Flexible grouping is very different than the grouping we may remember from our early days in school. Rather than grouping that remains static and tracks students according to one trait, such as reading level, FLEXIBLE grouping uses ever-changing information to group students according to various characteristics for different learning experiences. Flexible grouping can be done based on readiness level, learning style, student interests, or even random assignment. This ensures that students have maximum opportunities to interact with different peers, enter learning at the appropriate challenge level, and engage in highly motivating and engaging activities.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a planning framework that encourages teachers to consider multiple options for how they present information to be learned, how students can express what they have learned, and which maintain a high level of interest and engagement for all learners.

Learning modalities are the various pathways through which we experience learning, gain knowledge and express what we have learned. All of our senses are involved in our learning and all students have strengths and preferences in how they learn. Visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic learning activities offer options to capitalize on different student learning styles and preferences.

Web resources are a valuable resource to capture the engagement and interest of many students who may be less interested in traditional classroom opportunities. Strategies like independent research, Webquests and Flipped Classroom activities are all good options to explore in engaging today's learners.

Options for content, processes, and products of learning are the foundation of DI. Formative assessment, learning styles assessments, student interests, IEP accommodations and other learner characteristics are key data for teachers to use to determine how the content, the teaching process and learning products should differ for different students.

Ragged time activities are important to consider, since in DI, it is likely that different students will finish various stages of learning at different rates. This ragged time can be addressed through independent, ongoing "anchor activities" that all students know they can return to while other students are finishing their work. Examples of anchor activity could include independent research projects, silent reading, journal writing, or content related art projects.

Kid-centered instruction is a key concept in DI. In DI, the teacher is more of a "facilitator" of learning, rather than the "center" of instruction. This means that the teacher's main role is to set the stage for learning through ongoing assessment, flexible grouping, planning of tiered activities and provision of resources that allow students to take a more active role in their own learning.

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