Contents

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