DIGGING DEEPER ON DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES

All three of the literacy shifts have in common the goal of making worthy texts and worthy intellectual tasks the domain of all students. In fact they attempt to redress a misguided educational approach—one shaped by the notion that some texts are just too hard for some students and that basic skills must be mastered before complex, meaningful work can be taken on. In the new paradigm, differentiation means giving students the pathways and supports they need to access the same texts and the same standards without doing the work for them.

Throughout the chapters of this book are examples of strategies that help all students make the most of challenging texts and harness them for their work and learning.

Common Strategies

- **Unpacking the learning targets.** If all students are guided in understanding the learning targets for a literacy lesson and taught to self-assess against those targets, they are more likely to engage with the text and the task.

- **Doing more with less.** Short, complex texts and frequent, short writing assignments enable all students to participate to the best of their ability and enable teachers to closely monitor and assess progress. This doesn’t mean never assigning full-length works or novels, but it might mean not insisting that all students read the entire complex text. Students who need shorter texts would benefit from having chunks of a novel summarized and being guided through close reading of certain sections versus reading a whole novel without much comprehension or analysis at all, simply because they are trying to keep up.
• **Slowing it down.** Taking time to teach a content area concept through a text with students, rather than assigning the text for homework, reinforces the concept and the literacy skill.

• **Making it predictable.** When teachers use clearly defined steps and protocols to help students engage with complex texts and tasks, all students benefit.

• **Giving students a turn first.** All of the shifts emphasize close reading and enabling students to encounter a text with as little interference as possible. Students read and then reread, and then write and take notes, and read again.

• **Using expert read-alouds.** This is not the same as students taking turns reading aloud. Expert read-alouds come from a teacher or audio recording of a text and are provided, without interruption or explication, as a scaffold into complex text.

At first, fifth-grade teacher Andrew Hossack worried that his students might get bored with close reading and that some of them would not be up to the task. He says, “I used to do a lot more scaffolding and prereading activities before I let students have a turn with the text. Something I notice is that now that they are used to reading and rereading a text and trying it out for themselves, they are showing a lot more perseverance.” Instead of being bored, Hossack finds that his students, especially those who struggle the most, love the predictability of the process and the power they get from learning something well.

There are times when students require additional support according to different sets of needs. We divide these strategies into two groups: front-end scaffolding and back-end scaffolding. Although still adhering to the general strategies previously listed, the teacher chooses additional scaffolding strategies to assist groups of students who need them. Some may benefit the whole class and others will be used only for certain students.

*Front-end scaffolding* is defined as the actions teachers take to prepare students to better understand how to access complex text before they read it. Traditionally, front-end scaffolding has included information to build greater context for the text, front-loading vocabulary, summarizing the text, and making predictions about what is to be read. Close analytical reading requires that teachers greatly reduce the amount of front-end scaffolding to offer students the opportunity to read independently and create meanings and
Teachers should make every effort to provide supports that give all students the opportunity to work with the text independently first.

questions first. It also offers students the opportunity to own their own learning and build stamina. Examples of front-end scaffolding that maintain the integrity of close reading lessons include the following:

- Providing visual cues to help students understand learning targets (For example, a teacher might use two speech bubbles to visually cue students that the academic vocabulary word *discuss* involves at least two people talking, not just one person talking and the other listening or writing things down.)
- Identifying, bolding, and writing in the margins to define words that cannot be understood through the context of the text
- Chunking long readings into short passages (literally distributing sections on index cards, for example) so that students see only the section they need to tackle
- Reading the passage aloud before students read independently (This will happen frequently with younger students and sometimes even with older students when texts are particularly challenging. The important thing to remember is to read the passage through fluently without stopping for think-alouds or commentary.)
• Providing an audio or video recording of a teacher read-aloud that students can access when needed (using tools such as SchoolTube, podcasts, ezPDF, or GoodReader)

• Supplying a reading calendar at the beginning of longer-term reading assignments so that teachers in support roles (special needs, English language learners) and families can plan for pacing

• Prehighlighting text for some learners so that when they reread independently, they can focus on the essential information

• Eliminating the need for students to copy information—and if something is needed (such as a definition of vocabulary), providing it on the handout or other student materials.

Back-end scaffolding is what teachers plan to do after students read complex text to help deepen their understanding of the text. When teachers provide back-end scaffolds, they allow students to grapple with hard text first and then provide help as needed. Examples of back-end scaffolds include, but are not limited to, the following:

• Providing hint cards that help students get unstuck, so they can get the gist—these might be placed in a basket, for example, and students would take them only if they are super stuck

• Encouraging and enabling students to annotate the text, or—if they can’t write directly on the text—providing sticky notes or placing texts inside plastic sleeves (GoodReader is an app that enables students to mark up text on an iPad. Adobe Reader works on a wide variety of electronic platforms.)

• Supplying sentence starters so all students can participate in focused discussion

• Placing students in heterogeneous groups to discuss the text and answer text-dependent questions (For example, in the accompanying video, “Grappling with Complex Informational Text,” Andrew Hossack had his fifth-graders engaged in the carousel activity described previously.)

• Providing task cards and anchor charts so that expectations are consistently available

• Highlighting key words in task directions

• Simplifying task directions and/or creating checklists from them so that students can self-monitor their progress
• Placing students in homogeneous groups and providing more specific, direct support to the students who need it most

• If special education teachers, teachers of English language learners, or teaching assistants are working with English language arts teachers during class, teaching in stations so that students work in smaller groups

• Designing question sets that build in complexity and offer students multiple opportunities to explore answers in ways such as these:
  • Having students discuss the answer with peers, then write answers independently and defend answers to the whole class
  • Providing time for students to draft written responses before asking for oral responses
  • Identifying and defining vocabulary that students struggled with
  • Using CoBuild (plain language) dictionaries
  • Providing partially completed or more structured graphic organizers to the students who need them
  • Providing sentence or paragraph frames, so students can write about what they read

Whole-class strategies to scaffold and deepen understanding include the following after students have given it a shot:

• Analyze a model and identify key strengths; have students compare their work to the model and then revise

• Provide a teacher think-aloud about how he or she came to conclusions and have students revise based on this additional analysis

• Review text together as a class (using a Smartboard or document camera, for example) and collaboratively highlight the evidence