Assessment and Differentiated Instruction:  
A Partnership for Success in the Heterogeneous Classroom

“When students clearly understood our learning objectives, knew precisely what success would look like, understood how each assignment contributed to their success, could articulate the role of assessment in ensuring their success, and understood that their work correlated with their needs, they developed a sense of self-efficacy that was powerful in their lives as learners.”

– Carol Ann Tomlinson


Differentiation in the Context of Assessment

Teachers in EL classrooms are familiar with using assessment to support, engage, and hold all students accountable for rigorous learning. They know the importance of crafting quality long-term and supporting targets, using assessment for learning strategies to monitor student progress and adjust instruction throughout a variety of learning experiences, and creating/using quality assessments to gauge student progress. Differentiated instruction is the proactive acceptance of and planning for student differences in readiness, motivation, and learning profiles, with ongoing adjustments based on the results of a variety of assessment for learning practices throughout the teaching and learning cycle. Differentiation in EL classrooms means that teachers proactively develop supporting learning targets in variety of ways to ensure that all students meet long-term targets and are successful on summative assessments.

In order to differentiate, teachers use “pre-assessment” to proactively determine what each student brings to learning in terms of prior knowledge, skill levels, interest, motivation, and learning preferences. Thus teachers lay the foundation for a classroom in which all students have opportunities for continuous improvement and appropriate stretch. Teachers also use assessment for learning strategies recognize students as evolving individuals and help each one move toward proficiency. Assessment for learning helps us recognize that although it is expected that all students work toward meeting the same learning targets (except in such cases where an alternative or highly modified curriculum is required by a students’ IEP), they may be doing so in different ways and/or with varying levels of support. Assessment for learning is integral to student growth and an essential part of differentiation in that it empowers students to recognize their own learning strengths and develop action steps for improvement.

When teachers craft the learning targets that all students will reach in a given period of time, they develop a roadmap for success. Teachers’ next job is to develop the methods to assess students’ different starting points and the means to determine whether they are moving appropriately along the journey. Teachers therefore articulate an assessment plan that will provide a comprehensive body of evidence from each student to determine proficiency.

Differentiation therefore requires frequent, ongoing adjustments for students and an intensive level of pre-planning to anticipate the supports or challenges that should be wrapped around each supporting learning target to ensure that all students maximize their learning. The substantial amount of time that teachers put into “frontloading” the planning of learning targets and differentiation pays off in the likelihood of more
initial student success, as well as built in opportunities for additional support and challenges along the way, lessening the need for significant remediation or intervention.

**Differentiated Instruction Linked to Learning Targets**

It is important to recognize that in a proficiency-based classroom, the learning targets themselves remain consistent for all students (with the possible exception of students working toward an IEP-based diploma whose IEPs call for curriculum modifications, or for those participating in other alternative pathways). In Expeditionary Learning Schools, we believe the most important role for differentiation is in the way the teacher implements the instruction needed to help students reach learning target, not in changes to the target itself.

Consider this example:

*General learning target:* “I can gather historical data from multiple sources in order to demonstrate my understanding of Irish immigration events.”

*Most students* read and text-code grade-level or above grade-level materials and take notes on a recording form. Based on students’ needs, the teacher also develops a more supportive version of the target, as indicated in brackets: “[Using text at my level and/or shorter chunks of text and a more structured recording form] I can gather historical data from multiple sources in order to demonstrate my understanding of Irish immigration events.”

*Some students meet the target* reading the lower-level text and completing a recording form that prompts them to find three ideas about people’s feelings, three ideas about living conditions, and three ideas about how immigrants made money.

The bracketing in the examples above represents teacher decision-making and implementation of activities/tasks. The teacher does not share the bracketed portions of the learning targets with the class on a large scale, though class members will eventually come to notice that some students are receiving additional support. When implementing differentiated instruction, therefore, it is essential to establish a classroom culture that emphasizes that all students get what they need in order to reach learning targets; all students deserve the opportunity to grow from where they are currently to the next level.

Consider another example, in which some students are supported and others are challenged by differentiation:

*General learning target:* “I can gather historical data in order to sequence events important to Irish immigrants.”

In this classroom, the teacher has used assessment for learning to determine all students can appropriately sequence events for a timeline. However, some will struggle and some are advanced in gathering historical data, both in terms of note-taking proficiency and because of their reading skills. The teacher decides all students will create a timeline, and she will be sure to help them understand quality timelines and provide opportunities for revision. She will differentiate the “gathering” portion of students’ work.

*Therefore, all students* participate in a whole-class viewing of a model timeline in order to generate criteria for quality, receive feedback on their timeline from the teacher and peers, and use that information to revise.
Most students use their class notes, textbook and a graphic organizer to gather and select information and construct a final timeline.

Additional supports for students needing more structure with the gathering phase are indicated in the brackets: “I can gather historical data to create a timeline of events and inventions important to Irish immigrants [using four events provided by my teacher and three that I find on my own] and/or [by using a timeline graphic organizer with a few key events already filled in].

The more challenging options for students who can work at a higher-level during the gathering phase are included in brackets: “I can create a timeline of events and inventions important to Irish immigrants [using a high-readability article provided by my teacher and without the structure of a graphic organizer].

The students receiving the challenge-level work are not given additional work to complete, but are provided with more complex work to cause them to stretch. By ensuring that all students work within their zones of proximal development, teachers maximize learning for everyone.

Creating Appropriate Challenge for All

There are several continua along which a teacher might consider adjusting the complexity of a learning target (the part that is inside the brackets). It is not necessary to consider each of these continua for each assignment/activity. Teachers should choose the continua that make the most sense for the task/activity being differentiated, preserve the core intention of the target, and best support student need. The targets described above, for example, are adjusted on the “more structured to more open” and “low readability to high readability” continua.

Most students use their class notes, textbook and a graphic organizer to gather and select information and construct a final timeline.

More structured/ lower readability: “I can gather historical data to create a timeline of events and inventions important to Irish immigrants [using four events provided by my teacher and three that I find on my own] and/or [by using a timeline graphic organizer with a few key events already filled in].

More open/ higher readability: “I can create a timeline of events and inventions important to Irish immigrants [using a high-readability article provided by my teacher and without the structure of a graphic organizer].

The practices and principles of differentiated instruction enable teachers to maintain rigorous learning targets for all students while providing appropriate support and challenges for diverse learners. By using differentiation in concert with assessment practices designed to help students envision and develop excellent work and measure their own proficiency levels to set goals for growth, teachers can ensure equity and access in heterogeneous classrooms.
Fig. 1: Continua for Adjusting Complexity of Learning

Concrete  Abstract
Simple  Complex
More structured  More Open
Less Independence  Greater Independence
Lower readability  Higher Readability
Clearly Defined Problem/Task  Fuzzy Problem/Task