Diff erentiated instruction emphasizes tailoring teaching methods to diverse learning styles, ensuring each student’s unique needs are met and fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment. This Spotlight will empower you with tech advice for implementing effective accelerated learning; strategies for supporting students with learning differences; five essential components for effective tutoring; five ways to differentiate instruction online; and more.
Accelerating Learning: Tech Advice to Make It Happen

By Alyson Klein

Schools around the country have a big task ahead of them: Making sure that students are ready to dive into the next grade, after a school year in which instruction for many kids was spotty, at best.

For a lot of schools, that means embracing “acceleration” or ensuring students can access content for the grade they are in, even if they haven’t mastered every concept in the previous grade. Figuring out what material to hit, for how long, is a tricky pedagogical tightrope, and one that technology companies are eager to help educators navigate.

But it can be a big challenge to find software that truly addresses acceleration—reviewing information from a previous grade only to the extent necessary to support learning new, grade-level subject matter—as opposed to remediation, which typically means relearning content from a previous grade in greater depth.

That’s because a lot of education technology isn’t designed for acceleration, said Bailey Cato Czupryk, a vice-president at TNTP, an organization focused on teacher quality.

“I think a lot of systems provide for remediation-based programs that stick kids on content that is well below their grade level and keeps them there for a really long time. On purpose. By design,” she said. “That will not accelerate learning.”

To make matters worse, it is often Black and Latino students and kids from low-income families who get stuck with these remediation programs that do not allow them to advance academically, she said.

One problem for districts trying to purchase software that will truly help students accelerate: Amid fears of learning loss during the pandemic, “acceleration” is rapidly becoming a hot buzzword that companies are using to reposition their products and services even if they are not necessarily effective for accelerating learning.

“Remember when the common core came out, a lot of publishers were like, there’s a sticker on top of our same old textbook, [saying] ‘it is aligned to the new standards’, we promise, please buy it?,’” Czupryk said. “Acceleration has the potential to become the ‘sticker’ word of 2021 through 2025, even though in reality the program [advertised] is no different than it was in 2019 or 2020.”

One way to grasp the difference between acceleration and remediation: Think of the “previously on” segments that play before new episodes of your favorite television drama. Those quick catch-ups help you understand enough about the characters and plot of the show to be able to follow the upcoming episode. But a viewer wouldn’t get nearly as much of the backstory as they would if they, say, binge-watched the past few seasons.

In a similar way, acceleration gives students the background information they’ll need to access a particular grade-level concept, as opposed to trying to catch them up on all of the information they may have missed the previous year. That way, students will stay on grade level, reviewing only the concepts that are most important to learning what comes next.

To help ensure students stay on track, states and districts received about $122 billion in federal relief funds, at least 90 percent of which will go directly to districts. About a fifth of that money is supposed to be directed toward “learning recovery” programs. That means there will be plenty of resources for acceleration, but districts need to be choosy about how they spend the money, Czupryk said.

So how can districts make sure that what they are getting are programs that embrace true acceleration? One tip from Czupryk: Don’t ask vendors directly if the program offers acceleration. (They will likely say it does, even if that’s not accurate, she said.) Instead, educators should find out what happens in a particular platform when a child demonstrates that they are working below grade level.

If the vendor says something like, “we fill in every single hole,” their program likely provides remediation, not acceleration, she said.

But if the answer is more like, “we prioritize the content that a kid would need to know to [understand] particular concepts or particular skills, and we spend time on that,” the program is more likely to include acceleration, Czupryk said.

Another tip: Ask education companies what percentage of time a particular program spends on grade-level content. If it’s not much, there probably isn’t a ton of acceleration going on, Czupryk said.

Embracing intensive tutoring

The Tennessee Department of Education has a multi-pronged approach to accelerating learning in which technology will play a key role. The Volunteer State is going big on intensive tutoring, offering every high schooler a live tutor for both math and writing. Kids in kindergarten through 8th grade will work with tutoring software, geared toward acceleration.
The state hasn’t yet selected tutoring software for elementary and middle school kids. But Tennessee has a long wish list. The program or programs must be able to tailor an approach to individual student needs. “We are not looking for something that is generic or one-size-fits-all,” said Penny Schwinn, the state’s education commissioner.

The programs must also offer interim checkpoints or assessments, be engaging for students, and provide reports for teachers and parents. Students must be able to access them at home, on demand.

Plus, they must be directly connected to the materials students are using with their teacher. “We’ve found that acceleration doesn’t happen” if there’s a mismatch between a program and what students are actually dealing with in the classroom, Schwinn said.

Tennessee is also facilitating groups of districts—sometimes as many as 100—to collaborate on instructional problems, including how to accelerate learning in specific subjects, like early literacy. The districts are even filming lessons to share with others in the state, complete with explanations of why the lessons are structured the way they are. Those lessons will also be broadcast on local PBS affiliates so that students (and parents) can access them from home.

“We know the whole country is going to see some declines in performance this year because of the disruptions,” Schwinn said. “But I think our goal is to say that, by the end of this recovery period, we will be better off. And I do deeply believe that.”

Tennessee isn’t the only state looking to use tech to accelerate learning. Nebraska has offered all its 200-plus districts the chance to use Zearn, an online math program geared toward acceleration that gets high marks from TNTP. Nearly half opted in, said Cory Epler, the state’s chief academic officer.

Zearn is an essential feature of many of the programs in Tennessee. All 100 districts are using it, and most parents are giving it high marks.

“Zearn is a game changer for our students,” said Luis Sanchez, the district’s chief academic officer. “It’s a great tool that helps us identify gaps in students’ knowledge and fill them in. It’s also easy to use and has a user-friendly interface.”

However, there are some challenges. “We need more resources to support teachers in using Zearn effectively,” he said. “And we need to make sure all students have access to the technology.”

For example, some students don’t have access to reliable internet at home, which can make it difficult for them to use Zearn. “We need to find ways to provide them with the necessary equipment and support,” Sanchez said.

In addition, Zearn is not a one-size-fits-all solution. “We need to make sure it’s tailored to the needs of our students,” he said. “We also need to provide professional development for teachers so they can use it effectively.”

The upside: If districts select high-quality programs and train teachers to use them, they could have a system for quickly ramping up a student’s background knowledge that could remain in place when the pandemic is just a distant memory.

“Acceleration ‘really does get at this idea of being most efficient with the time we have with our students,’” Czupryk said. “I think the best tech platforms can contribute to that, but I think there is a need for some human interaction in ways that tech platforms do not offer.”

The state is already seeing some positive results. “We’ve seen a lot of improvement in student performance,” Schwinn said. “I think this is a testament to the dedication of our teachers and the value of using tech to support learning.”

The state’s next step is to continue to refine the programs and provide more support to districts. “We need to make sure all students have access to the best possible education,” Schwinn said. “And we need to make sure we are using technology to support that education.”

The state will also continue to monitor student performance and make adjustments as needed. “We need to be flexible and responsive to the needs of our students,” Schwinn said. “And we need to be willing to make changes as necessary.”

The state is also looking to other states for guidance. “We are learning from what other states are doing,” Schwinn said. “And we are working with them to share best practices.”

The state is also looking to the future. “We need to think about how to use technology to support learning in the long term,” Schwinn said. “We need to make sure it is accessible to all students, and we need to make sure it is effective in supporting learning.”
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Educators Share Advice on Supporting Students With Learning Differences

By Hayley Hardison & Evie Blad

Students with learning differences may need extra support to thrive in school, engage in classroom discussions, and complete tasks. But all students bring unique strengths and needs to the classroom—whether or not they have diagnosed challenges with executive functioning or a learning disability like dyslexia—educators said.

Education Week asked teachers on social media to share the best advice they’ve received for supporting students with learning differences. They spotlighted flexibility, inclusivity, and clear communication as keys to success.

1. Provide flexibility and choices in the classroom

Many educators responding to our query cited the importance of flexibility, choice, or differentiation to best support students with learning differences.

Differentiated instruction—defined as “identifying students’ individual learning strengths, needs, and interests and adapting lessons to match them”—is a teaching approach that intends to help diverse groups of students learn together.

Critiques of differentiated instruction largely center around logistical concerns—including a lack of time or training for teachers to effectively implement the approach in the classroom. Check out this series of videos by veteran educators Larry Ferlazzo and Katie Hull to explore low-lift strategies to make activities “accessible for students with all types of gifts and challenges.”

In general, advocates of increased student agency in class say that it improves students’ motivation and academic performance. Here’s why these educators incorporate opportunities for student choice or differentiation to support students with learning differences.

“Recognize that each student has unique needs and abilities. Tailor your teaching methods, materials, and activities to accommodate their learning style, pace, and preferences. This personalized approach can greatly enhance their understanding, engagement, confidence and set them up for success in your classroom.”

— Stephanie R.

“Choice! Give students choice on how to best showcase their learning and it’s a win for all.”

— Jessica B.C.

“Easy! Self-paced learning! I never differentiated any better than when I moved to a model of self-paced, blended, mastery-based instruction where I was legitimately able to work with small groups and one on one most of my time in the classroom. My students were more engaged and I was able to better support each of them along their learning journey, whether through extra support or extension activities.”

— Dustin T.

“Letting students choose things for themselves gives them the ability to do something they are comfortable with, however sometimes we have to encourage them to choose something new. Choice is the key for all learners.”

— Tiffany N. E.

2. Ensure effective communication

Students with learning differences need to feel the confidence that they are being heard at school and the security that comes with clear expectations and feedback, educators said.

In a 2021 opinion essay on supporting students with learning differences, educator Elizabeth Stein wrote: “The best thing we can do to support students with disabilities is to hear what they have to say—and notice how they are perceiving and participating in learning experiences. We must … create experiences that embrace and embed student voice and perspective. And when in doubt of how best to support students—just ask them!”

Educators on social media agreed.

“Feedback is crucial. Build their confidence!”

— @MasonDillard

“Voice and choice help students feel a sense of control.”

— Lisa M.

“Talk to them about their data. Put it in terms that students can understand and form goals together. Help students gain ownership and eventually (eventually) pride in their progress.”

— @MissStreetSmart

3. Cultivate inclusive environments

Educators and advocates have long championed the value of inclusive classroom environments for students with disabilities, including deliberate strategies to include all learners in play, discussions, and activities.

“Research has shown that students with disabilities tend to perform better academically when integrated into general education classrooms, and their peers also gain an understanding and develop acceptance of people who are different from them,” wrote EdWeek reporter Caitlynn Peetz in a recent story about creating inclusive classrooms for blind students.

Educators on social media echoed the importance of welcoming classrooms.

“Have patience and most importantly GRACE”

— Dustin R.

“Accept them for who they are and meet them where they are.”

— Celeste G.

“This goes without saying, but patience, acceptance, and empathy goes a long way.”

— Johnson J.
5 Essential Ingredients for Effective Tutoring

By Lauraine Langreo

Many districts used their COVID-relief funds to put in place in-person, online, or hybrid tutoring initiatives to help curb achievement gaps made worse by the pandemic.

But some districts haven’t seen the benefits. Districts in Columbus, Ohio, and Santa Ana, Calif., have had to cancel contracts with an online tutoring company after not enough students used the service.

Research shows that high-impact tutoring works. But what makes a tutoring program effective, and how can it be scaled to change the academic outcomes of millions of students? In a SXSW EDU panel on March 8, experts listed five characteristics of an effective tutoring program.

1. It’s part of the school day

Tutoring that is integrated into the school day and provided as a supplement to core curriculum instruction to support the work that classroom teachers are doing will lead to “some of the greatest academic outcomes for kids,” said AJ Gutierrez, the co-founder and vice chair of Saga Education, a nonprofit that provides tutoring services to marginalized students.

How can schools do that? One way could be to replace intervention time that’s already embedded into the school schedule with tutoring sessions, said Shalinee Sharma, the CEO and co-founder of Zearn, a math learning platform.

2. It happens 3 to 5 times a week

Research has shown that tutoring works best if it’s high dosage, which means offered three or more days of the week for at least 30 minutes each time. Having a consistent schedule ensures that the student has the time they need to fully understand the content, and it also ensures that they continue to build a strong relationship with their tutor, the panelists said.

3. There’s high-quality curriculum and content

High-quality instructional materials are necessary to make tutoring successful, said Lisa Coons, the chief academic officer for the Tennessee Department of Education. If classroom teachers don’t have high-quality instructional materials, and if they don’t have clear expectations for students, it’s difficult to figure out whether a student is on track or off track. It’s also difficult for tutors to figure out how to support students. High-quality curriculum “provides a vehicle for connection” between classroom teachers and tutors, Coons said.

4. Tutor-student relationships are consistent

Tutoring is about relationships, panelists said. Tutors need to understand where a student is in their academic journey and they need to understand how to move them along. Tutoring can also become an opportunity for mentorship, Gutierrez said. It can connect kids with a caring adult, which could help them stay on track.

5. There’s professional development for tutors

Zearn, which is used for tutoring programs in some school districts, provides professional learning for tutors, Sharma said, because tutors can range from super experienced to absolute beginners. Tutoring could also become “an avenue to bring new teachers into teaching,” Sharma said. The differentiated learning opportunities for tutors are important, not only so they can deliver high-impact tutoring, but also so they can grow professionally, she said.

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What Does Successful Differentiated Instruction Look Like in the Classroom?

By Larry Ferlazzo

Differentiated instruction—both the term and the idea—can carry a lot of baggage in teaching circles. But I think it’s so important that we can’t talk too much about it, so today’s post kicks off another series on how teachers can implement it.

‘Give Each Student What They Need’

Andrea Castellano serves as an elementary teacher in New York City’s public school system. She also supports teachers as an instructional coach and PBL curriculum writer and staff developer:

Although traditional schooling relies on one-size-fits-all instruction where all students receive the same instruction and complete the same task, each student is totally unique. You’d be hard-pressed to find a group that shares the exact combination of abilities, needs, and interests. Differentiation is tailoring instruction to give each student what they need. It’s also the key to teaching diverse groups of learners; without it, someone will always be left out or left behind.

Even if they understand why differentiation is important, many teachers struggle to adapt lessons that include multiple learning goals, citing concerns with lack of resources, planning time, and support with classroom management. Here are some suggestions for getting differentiated instruction up and running in your classroom:

1. Establish a culture of learning through routines and clear communication.

When shifting away from the one-size model, it’s important to keep in mind that students may not have much experience working autonomously. That kind of independence has to be taught explicitly via modeling, practice, and maintaining clear and consistent expectations.

In my 3rd grade class, we mix it up between whole group, collaborative small groups, and stations. In September, after the “teach” part of the lessons instead of pulling small groups as I normally would, I walk around, observing and making suggestions. I make sure to answer all questions before I send them off and always post directions in a visible location in case they forget what to do. When we finish, we have a class circle to discuss how it went and to brainstorm solutions and strategies for next time.

Over time, they learn to hold themselves and their peers accountable. Doing this consistently every day means that by October, we’ve evolved from a single instructional small group to multiple small groups doing multiple things. Because I set my students up for independence, I am able to assign different tasks, offer a variety of resources, and trust them to do their work while I focus on the group that’s scheduled for the day.

2. Know your material and use your resources.

Knowledge of content is essential in order to differentiate instruction. But scaffolding instruction requires planning and preparation that sometimes goes beyond the parameters of the typical scripted lesson plan. Luckily, there are a plethora of resources available online, including curriculum maps, scope-and-sequence plans, and digital curriculum resources. I request access to 2nd and 4th grade resources for any program I’m mandated to teach. If students need remedial support, I should have familiarity with the prerequisite skills, including those from the grades below. If students have mastered the content and need a challenge, I have to have a deep understanding of the material as well as the ability to draw from advanced content and make it comprehensible for students as they become ready for it.

I also maintain connections with teachers in other grades in case there’s something I don’t know. Talking to other teachers about how they reinforce concepts in fun and engaging ways is actually one of my favorite things about lesson planning.

3. Get to know your students.

Regardless of class size, teachers should know their students well enough to anticipate and plan for differentiated activities. Learning about your students on a personal level can be done through beginning-of-year interest surveys, icebreaker activities, and one-on-one conversations whenever possible.

Getting to know your students on an academic level is done through a holistic series of formal and informal assessments designed to paint a picture of the individual as a learner. Once you start to notice trends, it will become easier to anticipate questions and misconceptions and choose activities that will support students in reaching the learning targets. In any given math lesson, for instance, if I know a student understands a concept but needs more practice, I’ll have a worksheet printed for them in advance. Fast finishers always have a basket of multistep word problems waiting for them, and students who need a reteach know to come straight to my table and I’ll have another example ready for them.
In my classroom, knowledge of my students as well as their knowledge of self is what drives the instruction throughout the lesson.

‘There Is No One-Size-Fits-All Approach’

Isabel Becerra is the multilingual-services consultant for Region 10 in Texas. She was born in Bolivia and has been an educator since 1992. She is a passionate advocate for emergent bilingual learners:

Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, every student has an individual learning style. It’s most likely that not all students learn in the same way or share the same level of ability. It is our job as educators to find ways to meet the different learning needs of our students in order to ensure that learning is happening.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that is used to adjust curriculum and instruction to maximize the learning of all students; average learners, English-language learners, struggling students, students with learning disabilities, and gifted and talented students. Differentiated instruction is not a single strategy but rather a framework that teachers can use to apply a variety of strategies. In other words, differentiated instruction is simply tailoring instruction to meet a learner’s needs. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for instruction.

Research says that “differentiated instruction is an instructional practice that involves a teacher who proactively plans varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and/or how they can express what they have learned in order to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as he or she can as efficiently as possible” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 151).

Teachers who practice differentiation in the classroom may modify assignments to meet the needs of the students, assess students frequently to determine their readiness levels, use data to adjust instruction, provide a variety of scaffolds (visuals, graphic organizers, sentence stems, word banks, etc.) to support student learning, strive to make lessons engaging and meaningful, implement different grouping formats for instruction (e.g., whole class, small groups, independent instruction), and use flexible grouping.

So, what does differentiated instruction look like in the classroom? When differentiation happens in the classroom, students have constant access to learning materials of varying levels of difficulty, and students can advance their learning at their own pace by having choice in assignments and using personalized learning methods. In addition, teachers build lessons around their students’ individual skills and customize teaching to suit multiple forms of intelligence. Everyone is learning in a differentiated classroom, including the teacher.

If you are like me and have a background in teaching English-language-learners in a dual-language or ESL classroom setting, you know how important it is to differentiate instruction for learning to happen. We must find effective ways to teach these emergent bilingual students in order to give them access to comprehensible content and develop English-language proficiency at the same time.

Some starting activities to differentiate instruction that are interactive, engaging, motivating, and make learning fun for students are:

1. Give instructions in several formats, such as books, videos with closed captions, worksheets, and projects. These options will accommodate their learning styles, and they will help them practice reading, writing, and listening in English.

2. Provide opportunities to use English as much as possible, such as through group work, classroom discussions, and partner sharing. The more they verbalize it, the more they will internalize the language and content.

3. Incorporate active learning with manipulatives, movement (TPR), gestures, and games. This will allow for students to remember words, concepts, and skills, as many are visual and kinesthetic learners.

4. Use leveled reading materials to help students explore the same content. You must be able to meet the students at their level to take them where they need to be by scaffolding what they need to learn.

5. Create learning centers that give students self-paced practice time in hands-on ways. Tell me and I forget; teach me, and I may remember; involve me, and I learn.

6. Form learning groups and use a tiered approach, with each group mastering content or skills at various speeds.

7. Foster a safe learning environment where students can feel included, cared for, and be open to new learning material.

8. Allow students to choose how they’ll present their work: Write a paper, give a presentation, create a video, etc. Giving students choice will help them engage in the learning process.

Implementing differentiated instruction can be challenging, but it is worth the effort. It may not be possible to apply differentiation all the time; however, what is important is to practice it often to incorporate it in daily instruction procedures so that with time, it can become second nature to all educators. Differentiated instruction in the classroom is one of the keys to success.

‘It’s the Approach...’

Kara Pranikoff is the author of Teaching Talk: A Practical Guide to Fostering Student Thinking and Conversation (Heinemann, 2017). She consults with schools to center student voices and ideas across inquiry-based social studies and literacy instruction:

Differentiating Instruction is a concept in education that sounds like it should have a special formula. As if you could plan a lesson, whiz it through a magical machine, and receive a plan that is ready for each individual student. Don’t let that official descriptor be a boundary. Even if you are at the very start of your career, you have already differentiated on instinct. You know that you have a room full of learners who have a variety of needs and that your instruction cannot simply be one-size-fits-all. Any time you make shifts and changes in response to the learners in front of you, you are providing differentiated instruction.

Every teacher aims to connect with their students. Have you ever considered sharing content in a range of ways (video, read aloud, independent reading, etc.)? Have you provided a choice about the method by which students share their understanding (written, illustration, etc.)? Have you planned strategically when making partnerships or seating arrangements? That is differentiation.

Differentiation is not just about the students in your classroom that have identified learning needs; it’s the approach you take for ALL students. It’s the foundation of equity in our teaching. Everyone gets the things they need to do their very best learning. Is there any other way to educate?
As you accumulate years in the classrooms and gain experience with a wide variety of types of learners, you develop a repertoire of shifts you can make so that all students find engagement with your content. There are also professional frameworks that can help you know what to consider when differentiating curriculum.

When coaching, I connect to the ideas of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As explained by Understood, a nonprofit that strives to explain and provide resources for students who learn and think differently, “The goal of UDL is to use a variety of teaching methods to remove any barriers to learning. It’s about building in flexibility that can be adjusted for every person’s strengths and needs. That’s why UDL benefits all learners.”

Whether we are sitting down to plan for a whole unit or we are preparing a single lesson, these three questions, based on the guidelines for Universal Design for Learning, can serve as a scaffold to develop a mindset for differentiation:

- What are the ways our plan allows all students to have agency?
- What are the ways our plan allows all students to access content?
- What are the ways our plan allows all students to express their understanding?

Remember, we are making plans that fit the needs of ALL students. So, what does this look like in action? Here is an example:

Differentiation provides students with the agency to learn, access content, and consider how they can best express their understanding. Our flexibility in these areas creates equity. By keeping differentiation as the norm in our planning, we can create a classroom where all students can thrive. Anything that you can do to help meet the needs of your students will help them meet their goals. That’s just good teaching.

**Universal Design for Learning**

Michelle Shory is a veteran language educator with 26 years of experience in five states. She is currently an ESL teacher and instructional coach at Seneca High School in the Jefferson County public schools in Louisville, Ky. Michelle also works as an adjunct instructor for Eastern Kentucky University and Indiana University Southeast for their ESL endorsement programs:

A few years ago, my interest in UDL sparked, significantly enhancing my understanding of student-centered differentiation. While differentiation and UDL both aim to address learner variability, I prefer UDL because of its proactive approach. By implementing UDL, I found that I was better able to plan lessons that offered choices in engagement, representation, and expression, empowering students to become proficient learners with specific goals—and flexible pathways to achieve them.

In terms of engagement, I brainstorm how to captivate student interest and establish the relevance of what they are about to learn. I incorporate various media such as images, videos, articles, or podcasts that provide background knowledge. Recognizing that each student has distinct needs and interests, I encourage them to choose the most intriguing formats and appropriate levels of complexity. One of the strategies I particularly admire, which I learned from Holly Clark, is the implementation of an Explore Board to build background knowledge. To illustrate, I’ve provided an example I developed specifically for English-learners.

Regarding representation, I thoughtfully assess the materials I utilize. I frequently incorporate images, translations, simplified directions, or audio to enhance accessibility. By planning for learner variability, I ensure that students can access the necessary support they require. This may involve simply providing videos or text—or spending more time modifying the text to make it comprehensible for all learners. The point is to offer the content in a range of formats and levels of complexity.

In terms of expression, I carefully consider how students with varying proficiency levels can demonstrate their learning. My approach includes modeling, providing support, and allowing space for creativity. While content knowledge is essential, I encourage students a choice of format to showcase their learning.

My interest in UDL has changed how I approach every unit and lesson. UDL has enabled me to adopt a proactive approach, planning lessons that empower students to become expert learners with clear goals and flexible pathways. I ensure that students’ diverse needs are met by incorporating choices in engagement, representation, and expression. Through strategies like Explore Boards and adapting texts for English-learners, I captivate student interest and provide accessible materials. Additionally, I prioritize student expression, allowing various proficiency levels and formats while focusing on mastery. UDL has genuinely made me a more inclusive educator.

Thanks to Isabel, Andrea, Kara, and Michelle for contributing their thoughts!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.
Seven Ways to Support ELLs in Online Content Classes

By Larry Ferlazzo

What are the best ways to differentiate online instruction?

Differentiation is a big challenge to all of us in the physical classroom, and it’s an even bigger one when we’re pushed into an online learning environment.

Today, I’ll discuss some additional specific ideas content teachers can apply in supporting English-language learners. Many content teachers find it challenging to scaffold instruction for English-language learners when they’re in a physical classroom, much less in a brand-new distance-learning situation.

“Try putting yourself in their shoes”

Here are a few suggestions (with links for accessing free additional resources) content teachers might want to keep in mind when differentiating instruction for ELLs during remote teach (and remember, good teaching for ELLs is good teaching for everybody!):

1. Providing simple graphic organizers to accompany assignments can help ELLs organize thinking and writing tasks. I’m emphasizing the word “simple” because I have seen quite a few graphic organizers that even I can’t understand. And, please, don’t put too many circles in your Venn Diagrams!

2. Model, model, model! Almost every lesson I’ve ever done that has flopped (and, believe me, I’ve done many!) can be traced back to me not taking enough time to model or provide models of how to accomplish tasks or of providing examples of what completed tasks should look like. Those examples don’t necessarily have to be ones of the exact assignment if you’re concerned students will just copy it but can be from similar ones.

3. Use closed-captioning to support comprehension, whether you’re showing videos, using a video-conferencing tool for a live class, or using Google Slides. All—or, at least, most—provide free closed captioning (admittedly, however, they can be flawed).

4. If you need to communicate directly with a Newcomer ELL in your class, I really like Microsoft Translator. It lets you easily “chat” with students who speak most other languages.

5. “Engineer the text” of your materials by providing white space, headings in bold, vocabulary definitions at the bottom, etc., to make it more accessible to students.

6. Use sentence starters, writing frames, and writing structures to support students doing assignments. Sentence starters are short fill-in-the-blanks (“The most important idea in this passage is ______________”), writing frames are basically longer sentence starters, and writing structures provide more limited guidance.

7. In addition to looking for opportunities for ELLs to access and highlight their background knowledge (for example, in math class, encourage ELLs to share the numbering systems from their home countries), provide background knowledge that will help them access your upcoming lessons. For example, when I plan a U.S. history lesson, I will often find a chapter from another textbook online that has a summary available to download in a student’s home language and give it to him/her a week ahead of time. Or a math teacher can do the same with a Khan Academy video in their language or a Brainpop one in Spanish.

These seven are just a drop-in-the-bucket in terms of ways to support ELLs—and all students—access lessons. Try putting yourself in their shoes to think of more!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.
Lincoln Learning Solutions, the non-profit driving student success across the United States, is proud to introduce its latest innovation: the Lincoln Content Bank. Developed in partnership with Amazon Web Services, this extensive, user-friendly resource helps educators save time while customizing learning experiences for each student.

**Purpose of the Lincoln Content Bank**

Designed primarily for EK to 12th-grade educators, the Lincoln Content Bank is an easily accessible content hub, housing more than 110,000 rigorously vetted, standards-aligned educational assets. This valuable resource empowers teachers by allowing them to tailor learning materials according to individual student needs, group dynamics, or even for entire classrooms.

**Efficient Learning Differentiator**

The Lincoln Content Bank makes learning customization easy and straightforward, smoothly integrating into your LMS. This extensive library of diverse, ready-to-use learning materials empowers teachers with:

- **Efficient Content Search**
  - Seamlessly search for content using various filters, such as keywords, topics, standards, subjects, grades, and types of assets. This reduces lesson planning time and elevates the relevance of each lesson.

- **Flexible Customization**
  - Easily adapt learning materials to suit the unique needs of individual students, small groups, or entire classes. This fosters student engagement and enhances comprehension.

- **Rich Resource Library**
  - Gain access to a broad spectrum of learning materials, catering to diverse learning styles and student interests.

- **Streamlined Content Organization**
  - Benefit from a system that easily organizes your learning resources, giving educators more time to focus on direct student engagement and instruction.

The Lincoln Content Bank is not just a tool but an integral educational partner promoting differentiated learning in numerous modalities. Previewing, populating, and saving content into collections has never been easier, helping teachers free up valuable time for other instructional duties.
Streamlining Education Thus Saving Precious Time: The Lincoln Content Bank Difference

Optimize your approach to education with the Lincoln Content Bank, an innovative tool designed for maximizing educators’ most valuable asset: time. This robust platform integrates curriculum content effectively, liberating teachers from the demands of generating materials from scratch and allowing them to enrich their classroom offerings exponentially.

With its extensive selection of carefully curated, malleable materials, the Lincoln Content Bank simplifies lesson preparation, creating more space for educators to direct their energy toward shaping a more engaging and tailored learning journey for their students.

Experience the simplicity offered by Lincoln Content Bank and bestow the boon of extra time to those committed to molding the minds of the next generation.

Investing in Differentiated Learning

The Lincoln Content Bank is an invaluable tool in helping educators close the gap in student understanding, aligning resources with educational accommodations, and promoting standards mastery. Embrace the future of differentiated learning and witness the transformative impact on student success.

Click Here to Learn More

or contact us for detailed insights at:

solutions@lincolnlearningsolutions.org

Experience the Lincoln Content Bank difference—Educating the Future, Today!
Five Ways to Differentiate Instruction in an Online Environment

By Larry Ferlazzo

What are the best ways to differentiate online instruction?

Today, Eugenia Mora-Flores and Sandra N. Kaplan share helpful ideas for all students.

Engaging “a diverse group of learners”

Eugenia Mora-Flores is a professor of clinical education and chair of the master of arts in teaching program, University of Southern California, focused on academic-language development and supporting English-learners.

Sandra N. Kaplan is a professor of clinical education, University of Southern California, focused on curriculum and pedagogy with an emphasis on advanced and gifted learners.

Learning online has multiple and relevant opportunities for both the teacher and the learner. The array of teaching/learning options, the readily available preparation and delivery of curriculum and resources, and the relevance to contemporary information and presentation formats capture opportunities for educators and educational needs. However, comments from teachers regarding the lack of consistent attention and enthusiastic participation from students and the inability of students to attain successfully the major outcomes for the online educational outcomes identify a concern about why online learning fails to satisfy all of its objectives.

One of the major reasons for the online educational curriculum and/or presentation to meet its goals may not be in the production of the online material; it may be in the alignment of the online learning expectations to the teacher’s instruction and the student’s participation. The primary reasons for this situation can be defined as the lack of recognition and responses to the differences among the learners. Selection of an online educational site and/or program must take into consideration the individual differences that identify learning needs, interests, and abilities. Teachers are working long hours selecting materials for students, meeting with their classes online, and answering messages via email, texts, phone calls at all hours. These efforts by teachers are commendable as they are learning to engage students in distance learning, for some, for the first time. What we can’t lose sight of is that many of these assignments are being generated for “the class,” not for individual differences. Without giving teachers more work to do, as they are already taxed, we offer some considerations for how to engage a diverse group of learners through the distance-learning experiences they are already engaged in.

1. What knowledge about interacting with technology do students bring to the online learning experience that potentially inhibit or activate their participation?

Family rules about the use and time allocated to technology and students’ skill sets developed to use a computer are indicators of varying levels of enthusiasm and abilities learners bring to engage purposefully and attentively to online learning. For example, teachers need to consider how to facilitate the transfer of students’ proficient skills at computer gaming to the skills needed for an online history lesson. Teachers should review norms of engagement when using technology for school vs. technology for play.

2. How do teachers accommodate a student who is not physiologically comfortable learning in a stayed position for a long period of time?

Teachers need to integrate physical and intellectual breaks in the online presentation that provide a productive time to “contemplate and jot down “a response to an open-ended relevant question or idea to share with peers, stand up and stretch, or take a thoughtful stroll around the home.

3. How does the teacher accommodate the diversity among learners as a consequence of academic, cultural, linguistic differences?

Consideration of instructional strategies that introduce and/or reinforce learning from the online program can include “prior viewing” techniques such as identifying key words to “look and listen” for during the program. Use a sentence frame that can be completed during and/or after viewing. Utilize a range of home experiences and contexts for thoughtful learning. For example, survey families about what types of activities the family engages in at home; students can summarize, analyze, problem solve, and think creatively about what they saw or experienced. These are English/language arts standards met through a student-centered context.

4. How do teachers plan to engage students in productive and active learning experiences during the online presentation?

Teachers can consider “stop and go” techniques during a presentation for the purposes of creating opportunities to debate an idea or statement derived from the presentation, to initiate a “what happens next” discussion, or to illustrate and share the interpretation of an idea that is presented. For example, the teacher might introduce some information on a topic. After a few minutes, stop and give the group a chance to think and talk about what they heard, think about things that are connected or related, challenge what they heard, and think creatively about what they saw or experienced. These are English/language arts standards met through a student-centered context.

5. How do teachers prepare students to attain assistance from peers without involving parents who may not be available to assist in the completion of assignments related to the online presentation?

Identifying “study buddies” based on appropriate criteria to work together during planned “teacher-in-attendance time frames.” Meeting with students in small
Differentiated Learning groups can help teachers target the unique needs of learners across content areas.

Thanks to Eugenia and Sandra for their contributions!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.