EDITOR’S NOTE
Tailoring teaching methods and materials to meet the individual needs of students improves their academic achievement. This Spotlight will help you evaluate the various approaches to differentiated instruction; design effective tutoring programs to individual students; equip educators with strategies for better literacy instruction for students with impaired vision; learn how to create more equitable gifted and talented programs; and more.

Differentiated Instruction: A Primer .......................................................... 2
5 Essential Ingredients for Effective Tutoring........................................... 4
Braille and Language Development: What Teachers Should Know ........ 5
A Formula for Creating More Equitable Gifted and Talented Programs .................................................. 7

OPINION
Five Ways to Differentiate Instruction In an Online Environment............... 9
Seven Ways to Support ELLs In Online Content Classes.........................10

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In this 2014 photo, 6th graders Willyum Oliver and Michael James (from left) discuss a math performance task during class at Whittemore Park Middle School in Conway, S.C.. The software students are using helps teachers at Whittemore Park differentiate instruction.
Differentiated Instruction: A Primer

By Sarah D. Sparks

How can a teacher keep a reading class of 25 on the same page when four students have dyslexia, three students are learning English as a second language, two others read three grade levels ahead, and the rest have widely disparate interests and degrees of enthusiasm about reading?

What is Differentiated Instruction?

“Differentiated instruction”—the process of identifying students’ individual learning strengths, needs, and interests and adapting lessons to match them—has become a popular approach to helping diverse students learn together. But the field of education is filled with varied and often conflicting definitions of what the practice looks like, and critics argue it requires too much training and additional work for teachers to be implemented consistently and effectively.

Differentiation has much in common with many other instructional models: It has been compared to response-to-intervention models, as teachers vary their approach to the same material with different students in the same classroom; data-driven instruction, as individual students are frequently assessed or otherwise monitored, with instruction tweaked in response; and scaffolding, as assignments are intended to be structured to help students of different ability and interest levels meet the same goals.

Federal education laws and regulations do not generally set out requirements for how schools and teachers should “differentiate” instruction. However, in its 2010 National Education Technology Plan, the U.S. Department of Education lays out a framework that places differentiated teaching under the larger umbrella of “personalized learning,” instruction tailored to students’ individual learning needs, preferences, and interests. This framework assumes that all students in a heterogeneous classroom will have the same learning goals, but:

- **“Individualization”** tailors instruction by **time**. A teacher may break the material into smaller steps and allow students to master these steps at different paces; skipping topics they can prove they have mastered, while getting more help on those that prove difficult.

This model has been used in iterations as far back as the late Robert Glaser’s Individually Prescribed Instruction in the 1970s, an approach which pairs diagnostic tests with objectives for mastery that is intended to help students progress through material at their own pace.

- **“Differentiation”** tailors instruction by **presentation**. A teacher may vary the method and assignments covering the material to adjust to students’ strengths, needs, and interests. For example, a teacher may allow an introverted student to write an essay on a historical topic while a more outgoing student gives an oral presentation on the same subject.

That distinction is accepted by some, though far from all, in the field.

The ambiguity has led to widespread confusion and debate over what differentiated instruction looks like in practice, and how its effectiveness can be evaluated.

For example, a 2005 study for the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, which tracked implementation of “differentiation” over three years, found that the “vast majority” of teachers never moved beyond traditional direct lectures and seat work for students.

“Results suggest that differentiation of instruction and assessment are complex endeavors requiring extended time and concentrated effort to master,” the authors conclude.

“Add to this complexity current realities of school such as large class sizes, limited resource materials, lack of planning time, lack of structures in place to allow collaboration with colleagues, and ever-increasing numbers of teacher responsibilities, and the tasks become even more daunting.”

Evolution of the Concept

Differentiated instruction as a concept evolved in part from instructional methods advocated for gifted students and in part as an alternative to academic “tracking,” or separating students of different ability levels into groups or classes. In the 1983 book, *Individually Differences and the Common Curriculum*, Thomas S. Popkewitz discusses differentiation in the context of “Individually Guided Education, … a management plan for pacing children through a standardized, objective-based curriculum” that would include small-group work, team teaching, objective-based testing, and monitoring of student progress.

Carol Ann Tomlinson, a co-director of the Institutes on Academic Diversity at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and the author of *The Differenntiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, 2nd Edition* (ASCD, 2014) and *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2013) argues that differentiation is, at its base, not an approach but a basic tenet of good instruction, in which a teacher develops relationships with his or her students and presents materials and assignments in ways that respond to the student’s interests and needs.

Differentiated Instruction Strategies

In theory—though critics allege not in practice—differentiation does not involve creating separate lesson plans for individual students for a given unit.

Ms. Tomlinson argues that differentiation requires more than creating options for assignments or presenting content both graphically and with hands-on projects, for example. Rather, to differentiate a unit on Rome, a
teacher might consider both specific terms and overarching themes and concepts she wants students to learn, and offer a series of individual and group assignments of various levels of complexity to build those concepts and allow students to demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways, such as journal entries, oral presentations, creating costumes, and so on. In different parts of a unit students may be working with students who share their interests or have different ones, and with students who are at the same or different ability levels.

During the 1990s, teachers were also encouraged to present material differently according to a student’s “learning style”—for example, visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. But while there have been studies that show students remember more when the same material is presented and reinforced in multiple ways, recent research reviews have found no evidence that individual students can be categorized as learning best through a single type of presentation.

Rick Wormeli, an education consultant and the author of Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom, instead suggests in a 2011 essay in the journal Middle Ground that teachers differentiate based on “learner profiles”: “A learner profile is a set of observations about a student that includes any factor that affects his or her learning, including family dynamics, transience rate, physical health, emotional health, comfort with technology, leadership qualities, personal interests, and so much more.”

Impacts of Technology

Differentiated and personalized instructional models have also evolved with technological advances, which make it easier to develop and monitor education plans for dozens of students at the same time. The influence of differentiation on school-level programs can be seen in “early warning systems” and student “dashboards” that aim to track individual student performance in real time, as well as initiatives in some schools to develop and monitor individualized learning plans with the student, his or her teachers, and parents.

Advocates of hybrid education models, such as the “flipped classroom”—in which students watch lectures and read material at home and perform practice that would normally be homework during class time—have suggested this could help teachers differentiate by recording and archiving different lectures that students could watch and rewatch as needed, providing more one-on-one time during class.

Professional Development

By any account, differentiation is considered a complex approach to implement, requiring extensive and ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators.

In the 2005 longitudinal study that found no consistent implementation of differentiation, researchers noted that “many aspects of differentiation of instruction and assessment (e.g., assigning different work to different students, promoting greater student independence in the classroom) challenged teachers’ beliefs about fairness, about equity, and about how classrooms should be organized to allow students to learn most effectively. As a result, for most teachers, learning to differentiate entailed more than simply learning new practices. It required teachers to confront and dismantle their existing, persistent beliefs about teaching and learning, beliefs that were in large part shared and reinforced by other teachers, principals, parents, the community, and even students.”

In the 2009 book, Professional Development for Differentiating Instruction, Cindy A. Strickland notes that most schools do not provide sufficient training for new and experienced teachers in differentiating instruction.

Ms. Tomlinson said that teachers can begin to differentiate instruction simply by learning more about their students and trying to tailor their teaching as much as they find feasible. “Every significant endeavor seems too hard if we look only at the expert’s product. . . . The success of all these ‘seasoned’ people stemmed largely from three factors: They started down a path. They wanted to do better. They kept working toward their goal.”

Including students of disparate abilities and interests also requires the teacher to rethink expectations for all students: “If a teacher uses flexible grouping lesson by lesson and does not assume a student has prior knowledge because he is a ‘higher’ student but really assesses and groups, based on need sometimes and other times by interest, the students will get what they need,” Melinda L. Fattig, a nationally recognized educator and a co-author of the 2008 book Co-Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom, told Teacher magazine that year.

Critiques

In practice, differentiation is such a broad and multifaceted approach that it has proven difficult to implement properly or study empirically, critics say.

In a 2010 report by the research group McREL, author Bryan Goodwin notes that “to date, no empirical evidence exists to confirm that the total package (e.g., conducting ongoing assessments of student abilities, identifying appropriate content based on those abilities, using flexible grouping arrangements for students, and varying how students can demonstrate proficiency in their learning) has a positive impact on student achievement.” He adds: “One reason for this lack of evidence may simply be that no large-scale, scientific study of differentiated instruction has been conducted.” However, Mr. Goodwin pointed to the 2009 book Visible Learning, which synthesized studies of more than 600 models of personalizing learning based on student interests and prior performance, and found them not much better than general classroom instruction for improving students’ academic performance.

Both in planning time and instructional time, differentiation takes longer than using a single lesson plan for a given topic, and many teachers attempting to differentiate have reported feeling overwhelmed and unable to reach each student equally.

In a 2010 Education Week Commentary essay, Michael J. Schmoker, the author of the 2006 book, Results NOW: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning, says attempts to differentiate instruction frustrated teachers and “seemed to complicate teachers’ work, requiring them to procure and assemble multiple sets of materials” leading to “dumbed-down” teaching.

Likewise, some advocates of gifted education, such as James R. Delisle, have argued that advanced students still are not challenged enough in a differentiated environment, which may vary in the presentation of material but not necessarily in the pace of instruction. He argues that “differentiation in practice is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.”

“There is no one book, video, presenter, or website that will show everyone how to differentiate instruction. Let’s stop looking for it. One size rarely fits all. Our classrooms are too diverse and our communities too important for such simplistic notions,” Mr. Wormeli said in an interview with Education Week blogger Larry Ferlazzo.

“Instead, let’s realize what differentiation really is: highly effective teaching, which is complex and interwoven; no one element defining it.”

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In today's hyperconnected world, K-12 students are surrounded by more entertainment options than ever before. There's Netflix. YouTube. Spotify. Instagram. Twitch. On and on, the list could go, but the essential point remains the same — content is abundant and easy to find. And with research showing that more than half of U.S. children own a smartphone by age 11, access to this content is often as simple as a swipe or tap of their fingers.

With these readily available distractions everywhere, the practice of reading can get lost in the shuffle. But, as many parents and educators are discovering, audiobooks just might offer a viable solution to capturing students’ attention, providing an effective compromise between entertainment and education.

AUDIOBOOKS: INITIAL SKEPTICISM YIELDS TO INCREASING POPULARITY

For years, the popular misconception surrounding audiobooks was that compared against print books or even ebooks, they weren’t “real” books. Reading an audiobook wasn’t perceived as “real” reading, and opting for an audiobook in lieu of a text edition was akin to entering a cheat code for literary achievement. Maybe you finished the book, maybe your overall comprehension of the story was the same — but the experience was ultimately unearned.

Fortunately, the past few years have net some compelling research against these claims, and audiobook popularity is steadily on the rise. In 2019, a study from Pew Research revealed that 20 percent of U.S. adults had read at least one audiobook over a 12-month period, up from 14 percent in 2016.

When it comes to K-12 students, gathering data about their listening habits is a more complex undertaking, but the existing body of research indicates a similar — and perhaps even sharper — trendline. Survey results from the Audio Publisher’s Association (APA) found that in 2020, 49 percent of parents with children aged 17 and under reported that their children had listened to audiobooks in the past year, up from 35 percent in 2019. Additional survey data from the APA indicated that audiobooks were particularly popular with respondents as a way to reduce screen time.
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
Braille and Language Development: What Teachers Should Know

By Sarah D. Sparks

The overwhelming majority of vision-impaired children attend regular public schools, rather than specialty schools for the blind, and few have teachers who are trained to understand differences between tactile and visual language, experts say.

That can be problematic because understanding these different language modes can be critical for teachers to boost literacy skills for their visually impaired students, according to researchers at the American Association for the Advancement of Science conference here earlier this month.

About 3 percent of U.S. children are blind or have low vision even with corrective lenses, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Many of them read and write using braille, a tactile language that uses small raised groups of raised dots.

Braille has been used to represent more than 50 world languages, as well as math and scientific figures and musical notation. (The tactile writing system was created in France in 1829, building off military codes developed to allow soldiers to communicate in the dark.) While visually impaired readers recognize braille through touch, those with normal vision often learn to recognize braille patterns by sight instead.

There are no national data on how many children with low vision are learning or fluent in braille; often-cited estimates of about 1 in 10 blind students who are fluent in braille in grades K-12 are more than a decade out of date.

“We’re in a constant battle of trying to keep up with the need,” said M. Cay Holbrook, a special education professor at the University of British Columbia.

Holbrook and her colleagues found that only 26 teacher-education programs in North America include training in braille and its connection to print and oral literacy. This leaves many districts, particularly those in rural areas, with little professional development support for educators working with low-vision readers.

“Often paras with no knowledge of braille become the primary teachers of reading to visually impaired children,” Holbrook said. “In my almost 40 years of preparing teachers, fewer than 10 percent are native tactile readers [meaning they grew up reading the language tactiley, usually because they or a family member has low vision]. Ninety percent read braille visually.”

Teachers who only receive training in reading braille visually often mistakenly consider the tactile language just a “code” for print, Holbrook said. That’s a problem, because differences in the two language modes can be invisible to those reading braille visually instead of by touch.

Differences in print and braille

Braille uses a two-by-three matrix of raised dots (called a “cell”) to represent individual letters as well as 180 contractions representing groups of letters or words. Researchers have found that differences in the way words are broken up in braille and print can lead to misunderstandings for visually impaired students taught by sighted teachers.

For example, braille contracts “ER” into a single cell which represents the two letters. In a word like “runner,” where the “-er” is a suffix, this contraction doesn’t change how a student with regular or low vision would naturally break up the word.

By contrast, look at the word “redraw.” In braille, it is made of five cells including a contraction: “r-ED-r-a-w.” In this case, the
braille contraction bridges the natural break between the prefix “re-” and stem word “draw” in print. The student reading braille tactiley could mistakenly pronounce the word “red-raw.”

“Reading and writing braille is not simply a matter of ‘decoding’ or ‘encoding’ contractions to and from print,” said Robert Englebrotson, an associate professor of linguistics at Rice University.

In two related studies, Englebrotson and his colleagues looked at how visually impaired readers recognized morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of a word. In both a study of adults and a separate one of students in grades 1-4, the researchers found that readers were slower and made significantly more mistakes when writing words that included a morpheme that bridged a contraction in braille—like “ED” did in “redraw.”

Visually impaired children made more than 40 percent more errors in reading the word “mistook”—which in braille includes a contraction “ST” that bridged the prefix “mis-” and stem word “took”—than the mistakes they made when reading “crystal,” which does not include a bridging “ST” contraction.

Similarly, adults were slower and 15 percent more likely to make mistakes when reading words with bridging contractions in braille.

“If teachers who are usually visual readers of braille primarily understand and have experienced braille as a code that represents print, then they may unconsciously or not teach students to use a more print-like reading strategy,” said Englebrotson. “But if teachers intentionally conceptualize braille as a writing system that represents spoken language parallel to, equal to, and not dependent on print, then they may better enable students to achieve reading fluency.”

Emerging technology—from braille translation software and keyboards to portable electronic braille displays—can help support students with low vision in a general education classroom. Audio books and read-along software availability also grew significantly for sighted and blind students during the pandemic, when school library systems like New York City’s moved to provide more virtual access to text.

But Englebrotson and Holbrook also said teacher education programs should incorporate different modes of language—not just to better serve blind students—also to to develop a deeper understanding of the elements of how all readers develop understanding of language.
A Formula for Creating More Equitable Gifted And Talented Programs

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds remain underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, which offer academic enrichment beyond grade level.

In Virginia’s Manassas City public schools, Anthony Vargas, 33, the supervisor of gifted and talented and advanced programs, has worked hard to ensure that students identified and enrolled in the district’s gifted program are representative of the larger student body.

In the last four years, the proportion of students in the program who come from families living in poverty jumped to 41 percent from 22 percent, and the share of Hispanic students increased to 41 percent from 26 percent.

Vargas, a 2023 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, spoke to Education Week about his efforts to create greater equity in his district’s gifted education program.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

In just four years, you have vastly increased the percentage of the district’s Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students to better match the district’s overall student demographics. What was your first step toward this goal?

I focused on fostering a growth mindset of all stakeholders as it relates to talent development. Parents, teachers, administrators, school counselors, and other educational leaders worked together to build the new GT plan. This plan really drives our work. It took this stakeholder team the entire school year to revise our old plan. This included many meetings so we all could build common language and understanding.

Why was this GT plan so critical, and what preparation did it require on your part?

Unlike special education or ESOL [English for speakers of other languages], gifted education does not have many federal/state laws with specific mandates. Instead, each district basically creates a plan for servicing gifted students that will help them succeed. Before I could effectively communicate with the stakeholders the new GT plan I had in mind, I had to dive deep into our district’s current programming, share the disparities in our demographics [between GT students and the district’s overall student population], show what the research is saying, and seek out other school districts with similar demographics to see how they are tackling the many challenges of creating a more equitable GT program.

What barriers needed to be addressed before creating more equitable GT programming?

Most of the work revolved around identifying barriers to GT access and breaking them down. One example is “harsh cutoff scores” or accepting students based solely on a set test score. There must be some flexibility to ensure we are making appropriate decisions, especially considering that historically excluded students have testing biases stacked against them.

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ANTHONY VARGAS
Supervisor of Gifted and Talented Programs, Manassas, VA
How did you educate stakeholders about these barriers?

I turned to research that would support my efforts at highlighting how educators’ mindsets may play into challenges with identification of certain historically excluded groups. A major barrier supported by research is teachers’ inability to see potential in particular groups of students. When looking at our own data, we realized that this study can be directly applied to our district, as we were getting overreferrals for students who were Asian/white middle and upper class and underreferrals from Hispanic and economically disadvantaged groups.

Once you had the stakeholders on board, what went into the actual act of identifying talent on a more equitable basis?

The first thing we had to do to expand invitations for participation in GT programming was to get more referrals from stakeholders, particularly classroom teachers. To do this, we increased professional development to educate teachers on how to identify gifted students on a more holistic basis and redesigned our programming. It also involved working closely with the teachers, providing in-class enrichment lessons by a gifted resource teacher, all while the classroom teacher has a list of “look-fors” to spot potential in the students, such as creativity and critical-thinking skills. Here’s an example: Do the students present a given idea in an intricate or complex way? Did they elaborate on details or show evidence of solving a problem in a sophisticated way beyond that of a typical student [at that grade level]?

What was your approach to securing additional financial resources required to expand the program?

We were practical and used a slower rollout process over a longer period. Instead of asking for four brand-new teachers, which is a big ask in a budget for a year, I just asked for two. An important piece was showing the goals for those positions and how they will lead to better identification practices. Once we secured the two positions and I could show the positive shift, it was even easier to ask for the other two positions.
DECODING THE APPEAL OF AUDIOBOOKS TO STUDENT READERS

Beyond parental concerns about screen time, there are a few reasons some K-12 students might be drawn to audiobooks. In an interview with Tech & Learning, Melissa Jacobs, Director of The New York City Department of Education School Library System, shared her thoughts on why students respond positively to audiobooks.

“I think that they comprehend at a much higher level listening than they do when they're reading text,” she said. “I find that a lot of kids have a very difficult time decoding text. And they lose out on the comprehension of a story, of a book, of a title because they're spending so much time focusing on decoding it.”

This is especially true for developing readers, struggling readers, visually impaired students and students with learning disorders like dyslexia. Listening to audiobooks can help students expand their vocabularies and build skills like fluency and reading comprehension — skills that can eventually transfer over to reading print books and ebooks as well. Absent much of the pressure of interpreting inaccessible text, students are free to absorb themselves in the stories and enjoy their reading experience, creating a foundation for continued engagement with books and better overall literacy.

This school of thought is at least partially validated by the results of a 2010 study that compared the impact of audiobook usage against print book usage in students with dyslexia. Over a five-month period, researchers found that the group of students that used audiobooks demonstrated “a significant improvement in reading accuracy, with reduced unease and emotional–behavioral disorders, as well as an improvement in school performance and a greater motivation and involvement in school activities.”

WHERE AUDIOBOOKS FIT INTO THE CLASSROOM

For educators, the fact that students are tilting increasingly toward audiobooks to fill their reading needs has had a corresponding impact on classroom priorities. According to a 2020 School Library Budget & Spending Survey conducted by School Library Journal (SLJ), 27 percent of respondents reported plans to spend more on audiobooks during the 2020-2021 school year than in the year prior.

How do they plan to use these audiobooks? According to teacher and SLJ contributor Melanie Klet-ter, some educators are leveraging audio titles for whole-class reading assignments and discussions, while others have co-opted them as a social-emotional tool that can help students listen, relax and focus during class.

Audiobooks are also a crucial tool for English language learners and bilingual students, as listening is an essential component of language acquisition. Educators can use Read-Alongs or pair the audiobook and ebook/print book version of a title so that students can listen and follow along with the text, creating an impactful way for students to absorb lessons in pronunciation and overall language fluency.
Finally, audiobooks are a great way to get older students who are behind on reading interested in books nearer to their grade level, which can in turn help build their confidence so that they’re encouraged to try increasingly complex texts.

LOOKING AHEAD

As is often the case in K-12 schools, one of the major roadblocks to more widespread audiobook adoption is resources — or rather, lack thereof. However, educators looking for low- or no-cost options do have some avenues available to them. Platforms like the Sora student reading app offer hundreds of premium simultaneous use ebooks and audiobooks at no cost. And programs like SYNC (a summer reading program targeted at teen readers) or online libraries like Project Gutenberg (classic titles in the public domain) offer free audiobook access, albeit for a more limited range of texts.

Whichever ways schools manage to deliver audiobooks to students, it’s clear that they’re not going anywhere anytime soon — nor should they. In the wake of two school years disrupted by closures and upheaval due to the COVID-19 pandemic, audiobooks — indeed, any kind of reading that piques students’ interest — will be a critical tool in fostering reading engagement and preserving literacy in the years ahead.

As a result, educators might want to overcome any lingering doubts or hesitancies they have and embrace audiobooks for what they are: another way to read.
Five Ways to Differentiate Instruction in an Online Environment

By Larry Ferlazzo

Today’s question is: 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 outlined 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 program 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. 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, engage in critical discussions about the information. This can continue throughout the presentation to build depth of understanding rather than just coverage of material.

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 groups can help teachers target the unique needs of learners across content areas.

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

Today’s question is: 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.