

# *Differentiated Instruction in the English Classroom*



CONTENT, PROCESS,  
PRODUCT, AND  
ASSESSMENT

*Barbara King-Shaver  
and Alyce Hunter*

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new unit, but it is time well spent when the goal is helping all students learn to the best of their ability. Taking the time to find out what students know, what their interests are, and what their learning styles are helps teachers know their students better both academically and personally. These activities benefit both the students and the teacher.

## Getting to Know Students: Their Interests

One way for teachers to get to know their students' interests better is to use ice-breaking activities. These activities have been tried with students from elementary school through graduate school, and students consistently respond positively to them.

For example, "Find-Someone-Who" is a strategy that asks students to get up and mix with their classmates to find someone who has the interests described on a prepared interest sheet (Kagan 2000). At the end of the activity, the teacher can collect the sheets and read them in order to learn more about the students' interests. Figure 4.1 shows an adaptation of this activity: Getting-to-Know-Me.

Another icebreaker combines personal and academic information: Getting-to-Know-You Vocabulary Icebreaker (Figure 4.2). The teacher prepares this sheet ahead of time by listing Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) vocabulary words on a prepared sheet and asking the students to introduce themselves by identifying which words describe their likes and their dislikes. The students use these statements to introduce themselves to the whole class. The teacher can collect all sheets and review them to learn more about his/her students.

Interest inventories, as we suggested earlier, are an additional way to obtain the likes and dislikes of students. Many published interests surveys are available, or a teacher may create her own, such as the one presented in Figure 4.1. Additionally, visual learners may

## Getting to Know Me

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Nickname \_\_\_\_\_

1. My three favorite pastimes are  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. My pet peeve is \_\_\_\_\_
3. The best book I ever read was \_\_\_\_\_
4. The music I prefer to listen to is \_\_\_\_\_
5. My favorite subject is \_\_\_\_\_
6. The subject I struggle with the most is \_\_\_\_\_
7. One goal I have is to \_\_\_\_\_
8. As a student, I \_\_\_\_\_
9. The best movie I ever saw was \_\_\_\_\_
10. In the summer you would most likely find me \_\_\_\_\_

prefer to represent their interests by creating a collage or by bringing a favorite item to class and explaining its significance to them. For students who prefer writing, a journal entry can provide an open-ended way for students to introduce themselves. Another way to learn more about students is to have them interview each other and then introduce their partners to the whole class, stressing their partner's likes and dislikes.

Figure 4–2

### Getting-to-Know-You Vocabulary Icebreaker

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### PART ONE

Read over the following list of words and choose two that describe you and two that do not describe you. Explain how each word does or does not pertain to you. The brief explanation must show that you know the meaning of the word.

For example:

I am very *gregarious*. I can start a conversation with complete strangers while waiting in line to buy groceries.

I am not *lackadaisical*. If anything, I work too hard.

You will be introducing yourself to the whole class using two of the four words you selected. By the end of the week, everyone will be responsible for knowing all of the words listed here.

diffident	intransigent	munificent
judicious	insouciant	circumspect
petulant	belligerent	perspicacious
lugubrious	impervious	intrepid
tenacious	supercilious	laconic
sagacious	altruistic	indigent
dejected	demure	ebullient
impecunious	unassuming	benevolent
insolent	discreet	fastidious
decorous	ingenuous	

#### PART TWO

Complete the following sentences with information that describes you. You are also responsible for knowing the italicized words.

I have a *propensity* toward \_\_\_\_\_

I have an *affinity* for \_\_\_\_\_

I have an *antipathy* to \_\_\_\_\_

I have been known to be *remiss* in \_\_\_\_\_

## Getting to Know Students: Their Readiness

Teachers should also obtain information on the students' academic readiness when beginning a new unit of study. Consider how often a topic, including a work of literature, is taught as if everyone in the class knew nothing about it. For example, consider how many times Shakespeare's life and the Globe Theater are taught in English classes between grades 6 and 12. It is no wonder that students roll their eyes when a senior English teacher begins to draw a diagram of the Globe Theater on the chalkboard. If there are 25 students in a class, there are 25 people with different prior knowledge. It is important to find out what that knowledge is. When this is obtained, teachers can plan lessons that build on that knowledge and differentiate lessons as needed. English teachers can ascertain readiness in general areas such as writing and reading early in the school year. An effective way to identify student differences in writing is to obtain a writing sample at the beginning of the school year. This may be a timed writing on an assigned writing topic or a piece of writing completed outside class. One advantage of a timed writing topic is that students have the same writing topic and the same time frame for writing. Another advantage of a timed writing sample is that the teacher knows that the student alone is solely responsible for the writing. The disadvantage is that a timed sample may not represent a student's best work. A learner may not know anything about a particular topic or be able to relate to it and therefore find it difficult to write about. Teachers can begin the process of differentiation by providing a variety of topics for these timed writings. Some teachers, to obtain a more comprehensive view of a learner, collect both types of writing at the beginning of the year. The writing topic might commonly be connected to a book read over the summer.

Obtaining evidence of differences in reading ability early in the school year is not as easy as it is for writing. One way to obtain this information is to check the students' scores on a recent standard-

ized test, but the information included there may be outdated or inaccurate, based as it is on a one-time snapshot of the students' performance. Students can self-report their past experiences as readers (see Figure 4.3). This is, by nature, subjective, but it provides insights into how students see themselves as readers. Even if it is not academically accurate, it provides a good starting point.

Two effective prereading strategies for assessing prior knowledge involve using a KWL chart (Ogle 1986) and a Prereading List. On a KWL chart, the first two of three columns are completed before reading about or studying a given topic. In the first column, students identify what they know about a certain topic (K). In the second column, they brainstorm what they want to know about the topic (W). After reading or studying the topic, students return to the KWL chart and complete the third column, what they learned (L). Figure 4.4 presents a sample K-W-L chart for students' pre- and poststudy of *The Great Gatsby*.

A Prereading List is a similar strategy that can also be used with any genre (Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7). The students are given a list of terms and asked to identify those they know well enough to teach, those they know fairly well, those they have heard of but are not quite sure of, and those that are unknown to them. Reviewing the students' responses to this list can help teachers decide whether some students are already familiar with the material to be studied. Differentiated lessons and assignments can then be made based on the information obtained.

## Getting to Know Students: Their Learning Styles

“Learning style is a gestalt that tells us *how* a student learns and prefers to learn” (Keefe and Jenkins 2002, 443). Knowing their students' learning styles helps teachers plan instruction and assessment that are meaningful to each individual.

**Figure 4–3**

### English Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. My favorite author is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The best book I ever read was \_\_\_\_\_.
3. *Please circle as many as apply to you:*  
When I have to write an essay, I  
put it off until the last minute.                      write it as fast as I can.  
get help revising and editing.                      take time to plan it out.
4. *Please circle as many as apply to you:*  
When I am reading, I  
need it quiet around me.                      predict what comes next.  
stop and reread many times.                      give up when it is too difficult.
5. I prefer to read (circle as many as apply to you)  
novels                      short stories                      plays                      poetry.
6. When I am asked to read aloud I am (circle one)  
confident                      embarrassed                      angry
7. If given free choice, I would like to write about \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
8. If given free choice, I would like to read about \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
9. One goal I have is to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
10. As a student, I \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
11. The best movie I ever saw was \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
12. In the summer you would most likely find me \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**Figure 4–4**

<b>Sample KWL Chart for <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by F. Scott Fitzgerald</b>		
Student's Name _____	Unit/Text <u><i>The Great Gatsby</i></u> by F. Scott Fitzgerald	
<p><b>What I Know</b> (About the 1920s)</p> <p>The Roaring Twenties were wild People danced the jitterbug. There were speakeasies.</p>	<p><b>What I Want to Know</b> (About the 1920s)</p> <p>Was everybody partying? Was it the same everywhere? Why did it end? Who were the famous people? What else did Fitzgerald write?</p>	<p><b>What I Learned</b> (About the 1920s)</p> <p>Music was important. People danced the Charleston. The Depression started. Not everyone was partying. Fitzgerald was a spokesperson for his generation. Fitzgerald wrote <i>This Side of Paradise</i> as a young man. Fitzgerald captured the American Dream—its good and bad points.</p>

**Figure 4–5**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Prereading List for *The Scarlet Letter***

Place a “T” next to the terms you know well enough to teach to someone else.

Place an “H” next to the terms you have heard of.

Place a question mark “?” next to terms that are new to you.

- \_\_\_ Puritans
- \_\_\_ Massachusetts Bay Colony
- \_\_\_ symbolism
- \_\_\_ Nathaniel Hawthorne
- \_\_\_ theme
- \_\_\_ blank verse
- \_\_\_ setting
- \_\_\_ characterization
- \_\_\_ morality

Write a sentence that includes one term you know from the list. Make certain that your sentence shows that you know the meaning of the term.

When a signal is given to move from your seat, find someone in the class who can tell you what a term you are uncertain of means. Write that explanation down.

**Figure 4–6**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Prereading List for Poetry**

Place a "T" next to the terms you know well enough to teach to someone else.

Place an "H" next to the terms you have heard of.

Place a question mark "?" next to terms that are new to you.

\_\_\_ meter

\_\_\_ rhyme

\_\_\_ rhythm

\_\_\_ free verse

\_\_\_ imagery

\_\_\_ blank verse

\_\_\_ personification

\_\_\_ onomatopoeia

Write a sentence that includes one term you know from the list. Make certain that your sentence shows that you know the meaning of the term. If you do not know any of the terms, write one question you have about poetry.

**Figure 4–7**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Prereading List for *Romeo and Juliet***

Place a "T" next to the terms you know well enough to teach to someone else.

Place an "H" next to the terms you have heard of.

Place a question mark "?" next to terms that are new to you.

\_\_\_ Shakespeare

\_\_\_ monologue

\_\_\_ aside

\_\_\_ couplet

\_\_\_ Globe Theater

\_\_\_ Stratford-Upon-Avon

\_\_\_ soliloquy

\_\_\_ iambic pentameter

Write a sentence that includes one term you know from the list. Make certain that your sentence shows that you know the meaning of the term. If you do not know any of the terms, write one question you have about reading a play.

Various frameworks have been developed by psychologists and educators to consider formally the concept of how a student learns. The simplest place to begin is by learning about students' modality preferences (Saphier and Gowee 1997). Do students learn better when they see, hear, feel, or combine impressions? Chances are that middle and secondary English students either already know their personal preferences or simply need prompting to discover them. The prompt may take the form of a formal learning style inventory to discover their modality preferences. Another framework to consider is Gardner's multiple intelligence definition and theory that helps all learners to identify how they relate to knowledge and knowing (1983). Do they remember better when they sing a jingle about their assignment? Do they like to work with others? Do they have to see to believe?

It does not matter whether teachers who plan to differentiate instruction are formally cognizant of any or all of the formal frameworks. Rather, to begin to differentiate, it is most important that teachers acknowledge that individuals do learn differently and that it is their role and obligation to learn about these differences and also to help the students discover their own unique learning styles through any of the suggested strategies in Figure 4.8.

## **What Does Classroom Management Look Like in a Differentiated Classroom?**

The maxim that good teachers lead from behind is especially true in a classroom in which lessons are differentiated. Students may be busy writing, reading, and talking, but to the casual visitor, it may appear that the teacher is not really teaching. Direct instruction, only one of many ways to deliver instruction in a differentiated classroom, may not always be apparent.

Because classes in which differentiation is practiced are student centered, the teacher may be seen moving from group to group or

**Figure 4–8**

### **Suggested Strategies for Getting to Know Students**

1. Getting to Know Me
2. Getting-to-Know-You Vocabulary Sheet
3. Interest Surveys
4. Visuals: Collages, Show and Tell
5. Journal Writing
6. Interviews
7. Timed and Untimed Writing Samples
8. Standardized Test Scores
9. Self-reported Reading Survey
10. K-W-L
11. Prereading List
12. Learning Style Inventories

providing direct instruction for a small group of students or for an individual. At times the teacher may be addressing the class as a whole, or students may be presenting their work to the entire class. Having a class such as this operate smoothly does not happen by chance. Leading from behind means that the teacher must plan carefully. After the lesson or unit is planned, the managing of the day-to-day process of learning is as important as the delivery of instruction. Concern with classroom management can stop teachers from trying new approaches to teaching and learning.

Basic classroom management for differentiated classrooms is similar to management in traditional classrooms. Students need to

**Figure 4–9**

### **Classroom Agreements**

As members of this class, we agree to:

Check the board daily for instructions

Maintain records in our work folders

Complete all work on schedule

Help move desks when needed, quickly and quietly

Listen and share when working in groups

Talk quietly when working in groups

Wait our turn and not interrupt the teacher or other students

Do the best work we can

know the class expectations and the consequences for not adhering to these expectations. In addition, the teacher must explain clearly the procedures for working independently and for working cooperatively. All of these expectations and procedures should be posted in the room for students to refer to as needed (see Figure 4.9).

In addition to the procedural rules for an effective classroom, teachers can include expectations for the affective behavior of students as well. Karen O’Holla, a teacher at South Brunswick High School in New Jersey, asked her students to brainstorm behaviors and attitudes they would like to see in their classroom. These are posted on a bulletin board in her room (Figure 4.10).

Organizing resources for differentiated instruction ahead of time can help students use the class time more efficiently. For example, if students are moving from station to station during a class period, all

**Figure 4–10**

### **Behaviors and Attitudes**

In our class students are:

Respectful  
Courteous  
Attentive  
Positive  
Helpful  
Interested  
Supportive  
Inquisitive  
Patient  
Complimentary  
Industrious  
Creative  
Reliable

the materials they need to complete the task at each station should be set up ahead of time. In schools in which teachers move from room to room, this preparation can be accomplished in other ways. The teacher can assign management tasks to students in the class. For example, at the beginning of the class, students can distribute the materials needed at each area. At the end of class, students can help in the cleanup process.

The workshop model for student-centered classes works well for differentiated instruction. In this model, the unit or lesson begins with the teacher and students exploring a topic or skill

together. Students then break into groups or begin independent study. During the class, small groups of students or individual students may meet with the teacher for direct instruction or to review work they have done. At set times, the whole class comes together again to share their ideas, ask questions, or have closure. This pattern of whole-class work, to group and individual work, to whole-class work continues until it is time for the students to present their final products. Although students work independently and in small groups, there is still a time frame within which the work must be completed. For this model to work smoothly, the teacher has to plan carefully, monitor the students' work, and revise the plan as needed.

### ***Anchor Activities***

Because students work at different paces, the teacher needs to have anchor activities prepared for those who finish early. Anchor activities, tasks that have been designed for students to work on independently, are not busywork but tie into the topic and the skills being studied. In English classes, anchor activities might include silent reading, journal writing, essay drafting, revising, editing, grammar worksheets, and prereading activities. Anchor activities must be announced at the beginning of the unit so that the students will know how to move to these activities without interrupting the teacher, who may be working with another student or group. For example, one activity might be for students to take their writing folders out and revise a paper they have been drafting. Another anchor activity might be to practice a skill such as editing by reviewing grammar rules and then applying them in editing a paper. Practice editing sheets for punctuation and usage may be completed at a student's own pace.

## How do Teachers Keep Track of All of These Students Doing Different Things?

Record keeping is a challenge for the teacher in a differentiated classroom, but it does not have to be overwhelming. Successful record keeping actually begins with the planning stage. When teachers use a planning guide, such as one of those discussed in Chapter 6 (see Figure 6.1), they have already identified the areas of the curriculum that can be differentiated. After preassessing the students and ascertaining their learning needs, the teacher can complete a differentiated learning plan for students when needed (Figure 4.11). After students have reviewed the plan, it is their responsibility to keep a record of the work they complete. The plan should contain the goals, a timeline, a student record-keeping system, a schedule for meeting with the teacher, and a defined conclusion or final product. At times, the differentiated plan may be for pairs or small groups of students as well as individuals.

One form of student record keeping that is familiar to many English teachers is a work folder or portfolio of student work. Students are responsible for keeping their work folders complete. In the folders are student work samples, peer or teacher feedback on work, a notation of any conferences held, and a calendar or timeline. Strickland and Strickland (2002) offer a model of record keeping that can be adapted for many language arts activities (Figure 4.12). Teachers do not have to complete a record for each student each day; they can select specific students to watch on any given day, but it is essential that all students be monitored consistently and evenly.

**Figure 4–11**

**Differentiated Learning Plan**

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Unit of Study \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to complete the following assignment:

  
  

The product(s) I will submit are:

  
  

My time frame for completing this work is:

  
  

My work will be assessed based on:

  
  

The consequences if I do not fulfill my contract are:

  
  

Signature of Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 4-12 Model of Record Keeping**

Student Name (Title of Work)	Conf date	Focus Thesis	Open- ing	Organi- zation	Develop- ment	Transi- tions	Sentence structure	Conclu- sion	Usage Issues	Comments
Ashley (med. art)	3/21	+	+	✓	✓	-	-	-	✓	Strong intro, Needs an ending, work on tians.
Tara (Sopp opera)	3/21	✓	-	-	-	NA	NA	NA	NA	Just draft. discussed. notice. suggest outlinis
Benjamin (acting)	3/23	+	+	+	✓	+	✓	✓	-	almost ready. needs to clean up some coc's edit
Jason (security)	3/23	+	-	+	+	+	+	✓	✓	Still needs a catchy opening to draw reader
Kim wnt. led	3/23	-	-	-	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Struggling to find a topic or focus
Alicia (Reporting)	3/23	+	+	✓	✓	✓	+	-	NA	grabs reader but loses steam; suggest freewriting
Kelly (Health care)	3/25	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	Could work on variety of sentences a begin new

Symbol Explanation:

- + well developed
- ✓ satisfactory
- needs attention
- NA not applicable