

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Deeper, Simpler Differentiation in the Classroom

The pandemic affected every student differently. Some thrived; many fell far behind. That makes differentiation an even more important topic in your school than ever before. But teachers are overworked and stressed out!

How can we meet the needs of all students without overworking our teachers? Help your teachers thrive by sharing these simple, elegant solutions to level up the differentiation in your school!

Low Floor, High Ceiling

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“Low-Floor, High-Ceiling” experiences can help teachers enhance differentiation. These are activities that naturally facilitate meaningful participation from struggling students, but which are structured to challenge high-performing students as well.

Your teachers can use low-floor, high-ceiling activities in your classroom in three main ways:

1. Adopt broad pedagogical approaches that lend themselves to these types of experiences.
2. Use quick, straightforward, flexible activities that can be used in many different content areas.
3. Weave this philosophy into your assessment--even tests are great places to differentiate!

Check out the following ideas to make low-floor, high-ceiling activities work in your school.



Differentiate in Pedagogy

There are certain learning experiences which really lend themselves to differentiation. Every student can stretch themselves, no matter their achievement level. The acronym PEWC can help teachers remember four powerful ways to differentiate deeply and simply.

- **Project-Based Learning** — In PBL, students use their learning to solve a challenge they really care about. The way they solve the challenge will be determined by their interests and their level of understanding, making PBL an ideal method of differentiating. To help your school integrate PBL into classrooms, visit [Blue Apple](#).
- **Engineering** — When students think like engineers, they design solutions to challenges. Every student can come up with something, but no solution is ever perfect... so there's always a challenge, no matter what!
- **Writing** — In any subject area, teachers can have students explain their thinking through writing. Encourage your staff to ask them what they think and why. When students write about their thinking, their learning will automatically be differentiated, since students will articulate the specific way that they've constructed their understanding.
- **Creation** — When teachers integrate creative challenges, differentiation becomes automatic. For instance, students might create a picture or a 3D mascot that represents the topic they're studying. As they collaborate on and discuss their creations, they'll be wrestling with unique approaches to the subject and will be pushed to stretch themselves in a differentiated way. Consider having staff members share student creations for use on your school's social media pages!

Differentiate in Activities

Your teachers can use IDEAs (Innately Differentiated Educational Activities) to differentiate any content area at any time. Here are a few simple, practical strategies to share with your staff:

- **Brain Dumps** — Before, during, or after a unit of study, students can simply create a list of everything they know about the topic. Students without much understanding of the subject will be challenged to get a short list created, while students with a deeper understanding can push themselves to add to a longer list — but both will need to think flexibly and to think deeply as they work.
- **How Many Whys?** — Young children are always asking, “Why?” Because they're curious about the world around them. Teachers can encourage curiosity in an innately differentiated way by asking students those same “why” questions. If students can explain why something is true, teachers can ask them to explain why that explanation is true... and why THAT explanation is true, to see how deep they can go!
- **Another Path** — There's always another way to think about things. By encouraging students to come up with alternative explanations or hypotheses, teachers can challenge learners to think more flexibly. This strategy differentiates easily; teachers can always ask students to come up with one MORE path.
- **MAWNs — Most, Always, Worst, Never** — These words describe extremes and can use them to challenge your students, no matter their level, by stretching their thinking to go to extremes as well. If a class is learning about forms of government, they can describe the MOST anarchic environment they've ever been in. If students are learning about cartography, they can identify how many things a good map must ALWAYS have. Every student will be pushed to their own personal extremes.

“Some learning experiences allow every single student to engage, but challenge all learners, no matter how advanced they are.”



Differentiate in Assessment

Have your teachers check their “assess-mental health.” Are they keeping differentiation in mind when they implement assessments? Here are some simple twists your teachers can make to traditional tests, so that students know they’ll get to think deeply and challenge themselves.

- **What Else Do You Know?** — Your teachers can conclude tests by asking students what else they know about the topic — learning which wasn’t on the test. This gives students a chance to show off their knowledge in a deeply differentiated way.
- **Teach Me Something** — Your school can cultivate independent learning by finishing every test with a “Teach Me Something” challenge. Throughout units of study, learners can conduct research to discover interesting truths that fit their own interests and aptitudes. Consider having teachers share the most interesting things their students taught them, and publicizing them to the school!
- **Own the Test** — Teachers can allow their classes to contribute to assessments by writing their own test questions. This encourages students to reflect on what’s important in their studies in a differentiated way. Teachers can cultivate student ownership by selecting several of the best questions and including them on the assessment.
- **Mismark the Test** — This one is simple and ingenious. As teachers grade an assessment, mark one question wrong that is actually right. Teachers can tell students that there are a few mismarked questions in the room, and that if they find them, they can get full credit. Students will look at their tests in a whole new way — and they’ll think about their specific mistakes in a deeper way. (Note: make sure that teachers mark the correct score in grade book to ensure accurate reporting of student understanding — but sometimes, a little trickery can be used to serve a noble purpose!)



Food for Thought

Want a PBL experience that lets your students do things their way, and to make their own discoveries? Check out [Food for Thought!](#) Students learn about nutrition, then use what they've learned to create, test, and share their own healthy recipes. The project integrates standards from ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and culminates when students share their recipes with the world!



- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson-by-lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 Content Standard Connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

Conclusion

Differentiation doesn't have to be painful or time-consuming. With a few simple, straightforward adjustments, we can cultivate a school culture where curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking thrive in all our students, regardless of their interests or aptitudes. Get started today!

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:
Deeper, Simpler Differentiation in the Classroom**

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