

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Deeper, Simpler Differentiation in the Classroom

The pandemic affected every student differently. Some thrived; many fell far behind. That makes differentiation a topic that's more relevant today than ever.

But teachers are overworked and stressed out!

How can you meet the needs of all your students in a way that works for you?

Low Floor, High Ceiling

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

You 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 in your assessment--even tests are great places to differentiate!

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



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 us 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. If you would like help integrating PBL into your classroom, [Blue Apple](#) can help.
- **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 that meets students where they are!
- **Writing** — In any subject area, you can have students explain their thinking through writing. Ask them what they think and why, have them write about it, and you'll automatically be differentiating, as students articulate the specific way that they've constructed their understanding.
- **Creation** — Have your students create a picture or a 3D mascot that represents the topic you're studying. Have them collaborate with others to explore what they can create, and why it represents the topic. As they do, they'll be wrestling with their unique approach to the subject and will be pushed to stretch themselves in a differentiated way.

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



Differentiate in Activities

Use IDEAs (Innately Differentiated Educational Activities) to differentiate any content area at any time, no matter where your students are. Here are a few simple, practical strategies you can use:

- **Brain Dumps** — Before, during, or after a unit of study, simply ask your students to 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. Encourage that curiosity in an innately differentiated way by asking your students those same “why” questions. If they can explain why something is true, 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 your students to come up with alternative explanations or hypotheses, you challenge them to think more flexibly. The beautiful thing about this strategy is that it differentiates easily; you can always ask students to come up with one MORE path.
- **MAWNs — Most, Always, Worst, Never** — these words describe extremes, and you can use them to challenge your students, no matter their level, by stretching their thinking to go to extremes as well. If you’re learning about forms of government, ask them to describe the MOST anarchic environment they’ve ever been in. If you’re learning about cartography, ask how many things a good map must ALWAYS have. Every student will be pushed to their own personal extremes.

Differentiate in Assessment

Check your “assess-mental health.” Are you keeping differentiation in mind when you implement your assessments? Here are some simple twists you can make to your traditional tests where students know they’ll get to think deeply and challenge themselves.

- **What Else Do You Know?** — Finish every test by asking students what else they know about the topic, but which wasn’t on the test. This gives students a chance to show off their knowledge in a deeply differentiated way.
- **Teach Me Something** — Encourage curiosity and independent learning by finishing every test with a “Teach Me Something” challenge. Make sure students know in advance, so that they can research the topic you’re studying and discover interesting truths that fit their own interests and aptitudes. Best of all, you’ll learn new things, too!
- **Own the Test** — Have your class contribute to your assessments by writing their own test questions. You’ll encourage them to reflect on what’s important in your studies, and you’ll do it in a differentiated way. Select several of the best questions and include them in your assessment.
- **Mismark the Test** — This one is simple and ingenious. As you grade an assessment, mark one question wrong that is actually right. 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: you can mark the correct score in your 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 curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking 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**

HAVE YOUR TEACHERS START PBL TODAY WITH BLUE APPLE PROJECTS!

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