

The Five-by-Five Approach to Differentiation Success

By Katie Hull-Sypnieski and Larry Ferlazzo

Two 9th grade boys kept falling asleep while reading. "If you're sleepy," we told them, "you could ask for a hall pass to get a quick drink of water, stand in the back of the room and read, or sit on the desk behind you as long as you are reading." They perked up at the chance to sit on the desks and were soon engrossed in their books.

"What can I do to move this student forward? Is he processing the concepts? Is her thinking being stretched?" As teachers who differentiate, we try to keep these questions in mind at all times. If we didn't, then our "sleepy" students would have wasted valuable reading time. For us (and for many teachers), differentiation is a philosophy. We believe that all students can learn and be productive, and we recognize that our job is to build on what each student brings to the classroom.

The following "Five-by-Five" approach to differentiation contains ideas that we have found effective in our classrooms. It is not a road map: It doesn't offer step-by-step directions. Instead we think of it as a compass: It is a set of strategies that guide our work with students.

Our first five points are about "setting the stage" for effective differentiation, while the other five highlight actions teachers can employ daily.

5 Ways to Set the Stage

- **Assessing:** At the start of the year (and, in fact, throughout the entire year), we want to find out more about where our students' skills are, a process that informs our differentiation approach. Education researcher Robert Marzano has called formative assessment "one of the more powerful weapons in a teacher's arsenal." The word "assessment" comes from the Latin "assidere," which means "to sit beside." This origin is reflected in the process of [formative assessment](#), as teachers work alongside students, evaluating evidence and making adjustments to teaching and learning.

- **Building Relationships:** Marzano says positive relationships with students are a "keystone of effective teaching." Plenty of [other research](#) concurs, as do we. The knowledge and trust we develop with individual students can make or break our differentiation efforts. For example, if our students are writing persuasive essays, is it necessary for all students to write about the same topic? Instead, if we know a struggling student is a football fan, why not suggest that she write about why her favorite team is better than another one? Or let's say we are working with a reluctant reader who loves video games. When assigning reading, why not identify a challenging book on that topic that he will feel self-motivated to push through and enjoy?

- **Keeping Students Moving Forward:** This priority drives everything we do with students—even small moves like inviting sleepy readers to sit on top of desks. Studies

of ["The Progress Principle"](#) have found that a key to intrinsic motivation is feeling that you are making progress in meaningful work. We can reinforce intrinsic motivation by emphasizing small wins (and using catalysts like the ideas we include in this article).

- **Teaching Life-Skills Lessons:** Along with many of our colleagues, we front-load our school year with what we call "Life-Skills Lessons." These simple, engaging activities can help students see how it is in their interest (in both the short-term and long-term) to try their best at all times. For example, a lesson might highlight how the learning process physically alters the brain. (This particular lesson was eye-opening to a student who had claimed, "We're born smart or dumb and stay that way.") Other lessons might focus on self-control (including examining the famous ["Marshmallow Test"](#)) or goal-setting. The publisher of Larry's most recent book has made these lessons plans, including hand-outs, [available online for free](#) (click on "sample pages"). As important as the lessons themselves are the frequent opportunities throughout the year when teachers and students can refer back to the concepts and reflect on their applicability.

- **Creating a Community of Learners:** We do a [lesson](#) at the beginning of the year in which students decide if they want to be a "Community Of Learners" or a "Classroom of Students." Working in side-by-side columns on an overhead or whiteboard, a teacher and students work together to outline the differences between the two options. For example, in a "classroom," people might laugh when others make mistakes, but in a "community," people are supported when they take risks. We also discuss the fact that people learn at different speeds, and in different ways, and discuss the meaning of the title of Rick Wormeli's book, [Fair Isn't Always Equal](#). Time after time, our students have always chosen to be a "Community of Learners," and we refer back to this decision as we use differentiation strategies throughout the year.

5 Day-to-Day Actions

- **Applying The Zeigarnik Effect:** Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist, identified what came to be called the [Zeigarnik Effect](#): Once we start doing something, we tend to want to finish it. What can this teach us about differentiation? When we know a task will be challenging for some students, we can present a variety of ways to get started: a menu of questions to answer, the option to create a drawing or visual representation of a concept, the option to begin the assignment working with a partner, etc. We can also encourage students to get started by just answering the first question or the easiest one.

- **Differentiating Assignments:** Students can complete the same types of mental tasks while producing different end products. [Douglas Reeves](#) describes this as "not uniformity of work, but similarity of proficiency." The idea is that students can gain proficiency even when completing different types of assignments or a different number of assignments (one big project vs. five smaller assignments). This happens in our classrooms during free reading time, when students practice using similar reading strategies while reading different books. We have some students reading 300-page books while others read a series of much shorter texts. As long as the level of text is challenging and students are using reading

strategies to increase comprehension and drive analysis, then the length/genre/topic of the book doesn't need to be uniform.

- **Using Computers:** Computers can allow students to work at their own pace and ability level, make mistakes in private, and stay engaged and motivated. Of course we're not suggesting that teachers plop their students in front of a computer and call it differentiation. However, there are many [free sites](#) that allow students to work independently at their skill level and let teachers check on their progress. Some sites, such as the [Free Rice](#) game and [flash card](#) tools even use "adaptive learning" to adjust future questions based on student progress. A word of caution: automated "teaching" on computers should only supplement high quality curriculum and instruction, not serve as a replacement for it.

- **Praising Effort and Learning From Mistakes:** One way to encourage all students to work at their highest level of productivity and intellectual capacity is to [praise effort and not intelligence](#). Carol Dweck has published [research](#) on the benefits of praising students' effort versus their intelligence. She recommends teaching children the difference between a "growth mindset" (the belief that intelligence can be developed through effort and practice) and a "fixed mindset" (the belief that intelligence is innate). One way to develop students' "growth mindset" is to encourage them to risk making (and [learning from](#)) mistakes. Some students are afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed for it. We want to turn that attitude on its head, helping them learn that, as Dweck says, we should instead "celebrate mistakes."

- **Flexible Grouping:** Some confuse differentiation with the practice of grouping students by ability levels and teaching those small groups. While this is sometimes necessary and valuable, it is also important that students have the opportunity to participate in interest-based groups, mixed ability level groups, student-choice groups, and other variations. As [Carol Ann Tomlinson](#) explains, "In a sense, the teacher is continually auditioning kids in different settings—and the students get to see how they can contribute in a variety of contexts."

We've found that keeping this "Five-by-Five" strategy in mind has helped keep our students and us moving in the right direction—forward!

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In his Classroom Q&A blog, Larry Ferlazzo collects and offers advice on [differentiating instruction](#).