

# Differentiated Learning Experiences



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*“In a diverse classroom, no single method can reach all learners. Multiple pathways to achieving goals are needed.”*

– From “Providing New Access to the General Curriculum: Universal Design for Learning” by Chuck Hitchcock et al., *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 35, 2002, p. 12. Copyright 2002 by The Council for Exceptional Children. Reprinted with permission.

Creating differentiated learning experiences involves proactively ensuring that students are engaged in a variety of meaningful activities and contexts. In an environment of flexibility and choice, classroom roles are altered. The teacher’s role focuses on creating and selecting learning opportunities for students, guiding them and working with them to assess their progress. The student’s role becomes one of an independent, self-motivated and confident learner.

Key elements of differentiated learning experiences include meaningful activities, flexible grouping, scaffolded instruction and choice.

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## Meaningful activities

Decisions about grouping, scaffolding and choice all must be built on a belief and a proficiency in designing activities that are meaningful for students.

Meaningful learning activities are:

- developmentally appropriate
- connected and relevant to life experiences
- authentic
- engaging
- respectful and fair to all students.

Meaningful activities are built on an understanding of both individual students and good instructional practices. Activities should actively engage students in exploring, questioning, applying and reflecting on concepts and skills. This may include opportunities for:

- identifying similarities and differences
- summarizing and note taking
- using and creating visual representations
- generating and testing hypotheses
- using cues, questions and advance organizers to make sense of learning.

### Implementing meaningful activities

Consider the following guidelines for creating meaningful, respectful activities:

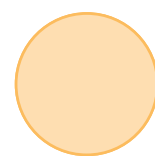
- explicitly discuss the activity’s purpose and importance with students
- provide clear directions and expectations to reduce uncertainty, surprise and disappointment
- challenge students of all ability levels to work to their full potential

- use learner profiles, pre-testing and other information to tailor activities and resources to student interests, backgrounds and learning preferences
- anticipate any challenges or barriers to learning and build in supports to reduce these barriers
- share or develop assessment tools with students (e.g., criteria, rubrics, exemplars) to clarify expectations
- provide learning resources students will need for the activity that are accessible, engaging and build understanding
- plan for efficient delivery to create momentum and keep the focus on learning
- assess and refine activities and tasks to maximize learning.

### **Best practices related to meaningful activities**

Consider the following examples of what creating meaningful learning activities can look like.

- Use different types of materials and mediums when discussing and sharing ideas and information with students; e.g., visual, narratives, objects, music, literature, poetry.
- Provide students with multiple sources of information for their research activities and projects.
- Encourage the use of learning logs as a way for students to track their own learning, reflect on what they have learned and make connections, as well as apply and practise skills such as predicting, organizing and evaluating.
- Offer and model questioning strategies that address differing student abilities and readiness.
- Provide opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in contexts beyond the classroom setting.
- Provide problem-based learning contexts in which students actively solve problems in the same ways that professionals do in their jobs. Problem-based learning tasks can be structured individually, in small groups or as a class.
- Offer tiered activities to have students work on the same concepts or skills, but with varying degrees of complexity, abstractness and open-endedness.
- Model the use of graphic organizers to present information. For example, use a mind map to show and discuss connections between different ideas or concepts. Use a bubble map to present alternatives. Use a flowchart to discuss and work with sequence.
- Provide supports for recording and synthesizing information, such as guidelines for creating a summary, advanced organizers and templates for summarizing.



- Identify opportunities throughout the year for each student to take on the role of expert. The sharing of expertise builds both individual self-confidence and classroom community.
- At the start a new unit, find out about relevant student interests, then follow up on these during the course of the unit. For example, in a unit on classroom chemistry, a student might identify an interest in organic farming and the chemistry involved in certifying different kinds of food as organic. Follow-up activities might include:
  - having the student complete a unit project on organic certification and share the results in a presentation
  - forming a small study group of students interested in organic food and having them conduct research and report back to the class
  - inviting a guest speaker to talk to the class about organic products and discussing afterwards what was learned and how it connects back to the chemistry unit’s learner outcomes.

## Flexible grouping

In effectively differentiated classrooms, all students have opportunities to work in a variety of contexts through thoughtfully planned, flexible groupings that incorporate both student choice and teacher-assigned roles. Students are grouped and regrouped over the course of the school year according to their own learning and social needs, rather than just the needs of the task.

Flexible grouping:

- provides opportunities and supports for students to create and construct their own understandings and to actively develop skills
- allows for targeted instruction for groups with different needs, interests and preferences
- is based on a recognition of individual student differences
- promotes positive peer relationships and discourages cliques
- minimizes the negative social and emotional effects of homogeneous grouping strategies by ability
- promotes and develops social interaction skills
- promotes a sense of community, as students get to see their peers’ strengths, not only their weaknesses, and this engenders respect for one another.

Typical types of grouping include:

- whole class
- small groups; e.g., three to seven students
- partners
- individual.

Groupings can be based on student learning preferences and interests, background experiences, academic level and readiness. These varying group structures provide options to target different learning outcomes for individual or specific groups of students.

Flexible grouping can include cooperative learning strategies, but does so in a way that emphasizes the individual needs of students who are placed into cooperative groups. All grouping structures have merit for all students as they can provide students with different experiences and contexts in which to work.

### **Implementing flexible grouping**

Grouping decisions should consider learning outcomes, assessment data and student needs to determine how students will be moved in and out of different groups. Various types of assessment data should be used to determine how groups should be formed and what the purpose or task of each group should be. Specific understandings and skills can be established as a target or task that each group of students should accomplish at the time they need to.

It is important to consider student needs, interests and learning preferences, while also ensuring that all students have opportunities to work in group settings that they are comfortable with as well as those that challenge them to learn and grow.

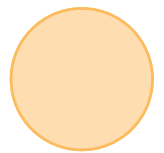
Consider the following tips for managing flexible groups and moving students in and out of appropriate learning contexts and tasks.

#### ***Structure groups for success***

- Limit group sizes. Smaller groups are easier to manage and encourage each member to contribute. Four to six members is often optimal for completing tasks.
- Promote classroom community by bringing students together for large group discussion or activities at the beginning or end of the learning activity.

#### ***Respond to student needs***

- Establish an atmosphere that shows students that everyone's work is valued.
- Allot the time you spend with each group based on the group's learning needs. Time spent with each group does not have to be equal.
- Plan more independent activities for groups who are capable of working without close guidance; provide more structure and supervision to those groups that need it.
- Plan for ways to manage varying time-related needs of individual students.
- Provide students who finish early with additional meaningful and relevant activities. Discuss processes and steps for students who need extra time to complete their work.



### *Create structure*

- Provide clear, focused directions. Checklists, menus and picture prompts can help groups manage tasks on their own.
- Make it clear what you expect of students. Provide rubrics, samples or examples to illustrate what quality work looks like.
- Make sure groups know that all members are expected to contribute and stay on task. Outline what evidence you expect to see of the groups' progress.
- Offer guidelines for student behaviour, including how to work in a group, how to ask for help and how to show respect for other groups in the classroom.
- Organize the classroom environment to facilitate group work. Designate accessible places for materials to be kept, work-in-progress to be stored and completed work to be submitted.

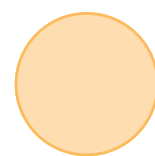
### **Best practices for flexible grouping**

Flexible grouping involves varying instruction between individuals, partners, small groups, large groups and whole class. It also involves considering a variety of options within these basic groupings, such as whether to establish groups randomly or purposefully. The chart that follows describes each of these basic contexts and offers specific examples of instructional activities that make the best use of them.

## Individual Learning Experiences

Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide structured opportunities for metacognition and self-reflection.</li><li>• Individual learning experiences can be structured within other types of groups; e.g., small group, large group and whole class.</li><li>• Provide clear directions to encourage independence.</li><li>• Combine with larger group structures to emphasize collaboration and cooperation.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>“Learning logs”</b> and <b>“journals”</b> are ways for students to track and reflect on their learning. Learning logs focus on more objective details of learning and encourage students to make connections, and practise skills such as predicting, organizing and evaluating. Journals, such as an opinions journal, encourage students to articulate their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions about what and how they are learning.</li><li>• <b>“Interactive notebooks”</b> use a specific notebook format<sup>1</sup> to scaffold student interactions with information and text. On the right page of the notebook, students record notes during lessons, discussions, reading, viewing, group work and research activities. On the left page, they record their individual interactions with the information, including reflecting, processing, making connections, doodling ideas or posing questions. Teachers may provide suggestions but do not direct the content of the left page.</li><li>• <b>“Agendas”</b> are personalized lists of tasks that students must complete in a specific period of time. Tasks can be assigned, negotiated with students or selected independently. Agendas should include both the task and the directions for completing it.</li><li>• <b>“Think pad brainstorming”</b> is a strategy for combining independent and group work. Students brainstorm individually on paper before sharing their ideas with a partner, group or whole class.</li></ul>

1. The interactive notebook format was first introduced in the *History Alive* program produced by the Teachers’ Curriculum Institute.



## Paired Learning Experiences

### Best Practices

- Provide opportunities to develop and practise communication skills, make comparisons and share learning in a non-threatening context.
- Assign partners based on learning needs, interests and preferences.
- Consider when students should work with the same partner or switch partners for different learning contexts.
- Encourage students to reflect and self-assess as a regular part of paired learning experiences.
- Use paired grouping strategies to encourage students to challenge and support each other. Provide students with opportunities for peer teaching and mentoring.
- Use paired grouping structures to introduce, teach and extend use of graphic organizers.

### What This Can Look Like

- **“Study buddies”** or **“learning partners”** can be established as a regular part of classroom routines.
- **“Discussion breaks”** are an opportunity for students to discuss ideas, questions and information. Schedule three to five minutes into daily activities. Encourage students to record discussion points in their notebooks to help them stay on task.
- **“Exit cards”** can provide opportunities to have students self-assess and reflect on their partnering activities and discussions by writing on an index card and handing it to the teacher as they leave the classroom.
- **“Mind maps”** or **“bubble maps”** are a good way for partners to synthesize their understandings. Each student records ideas on sticky notes. Then together partners make connections, identify similarities and differences, and represent content by creating pictures and symbols.
- A **“resident expert”** is a student who has received extra instruction in a topic or skill (or has expert knowledge and interest in a topic). Reteaching peers in a partner context can deepen the “resident expert” student’s own knowledge and skills.
- In **“team-pair-solo”**, students complete problems first as a team, then with a partner and finally on their own.
- In **“say and switch”**, partners take turns responding to topics at signaled but unpredictable times. The person listening must pick up from their partner’s train of thought before adding new ideas.

## *Small Group Learning Experiences*

### Best Practices

- Make intentional decisions about when and how to organize small groups.
- Structure focused tasks based on content or skill development, learning interests or preferences and readiness levels.
- Consider grouping students based on both similarities and differences. Students benefit from opportunities to work with individuals whose interests and/or learning preferences differ from their own.
- Use cooperative mixed-ability groupings to provide students with opportunities to rehearse information, learn from one another, build individual accountability in a group, engage in a high degree of activity and receive support.
- Build in strategies to ensure that every group member is involved in tasks, including answering questions, solving problems or completing an activity.

### What This Can Look Like

- Organize students into small groups for specific and focused instruction on concepts or skills they are experiencing difficulty with. The other students in the classroom can work on independent or paired groupings appropriate to their understanding or skill development. These groupings are fluid and change as student needs change.
- In the “**jigsaw strategy**,” students are organized into groups of four or five. Each student in the group is assigned unique material to learn and then teach to his or her group members. Students working on the same material get together to decide what is important and how to teach it to their small group. After practising in these “expert” groups, the original groups re-form and students teach material to each other. By assigning the same material to those students who are challenged with concepts or skills, you can spend additional, focused time with this group.
- “**Learning centres**” or “**stations**” allow students to work on specific tasks designed to target concept or skill development. Every small group does not necessarily have to complete all tasks at each learning centre. Time spent, tasks completed and degree of choice can vary for each group of students.
- In Spencer Kagan’s “**numbered heads together**” strategy, each group member is given a number. The teacher poses a problem and all group members discuss it. Each group member is accountable for ensuring that every group member can complete the task. The teacher then calls a number and that student is responsible for sharing the group’s solution to the problem.

## *Small Group Learning Experiences* (continued)

### What This Can Look Like (continued)

- In “**round robin brainstorming**”, the class is divided into small groups with one person appointed as the recorder. An open-ended question is posed and students are given time to think about answers individually. Then members of the group share responses with one another, going around the circle, one after another, and the recorder writes down the answers of the group members.
- In “**pass a problem**”, the teacher creates problems for teams to solve and writes or attaches them to envelopes. Teams read the problems, place their solution in the envelope and then exchange with another team to check their solutions and to determine if they solved the problems in different ways.
- In “**send a problem**”, one student writes a problem on a card and asks group members to solve the problem. Group members solve the problem and the question writer determines if they have come up with a good solution.
- In “**three stay, one stray**”, three group members work together to solve a problem, while one group member “strays” to another group to compare and discuss their ideas.
- A “**gallery walk**” encourages students to learn from each other in small group settings. Groups record their work on a piece of chart paper. Each group appoints a docent to stay with their work, while the remaining members rotate around examining other groups’ ideas and asking questions of the docents. Members then regroup to discuss and add to their information.
- In a “**visible quiz**”, the teacher poses questions with multiple choice responses and students discuss the responses in a group. At a signal, each group displays its answer written on a large card. A group also can be called upon to explain the group’s reasoning to the rest of the class.

## *Whole Class Learning Experiences*

Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively as a whole class. Encourage students to build on each others’ ideas and strengths. This builds a sense of community in the classroom as students learn that everyone has something to contribute.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use a cooperative learning strategy such as Kagan’s “<b>board share</b>” to involve student groups in a whole class activity. Each group brainstorms responses related to a question or task. One member of each group is the ‘runner and recorder’ and writes the group’s ideas on the board. The class then discusses and reflects on the whole class effort.</li></ul>

## Whole Class Learning Experiences (continued)

### Best Practices

- Use cooperative learning strategies to involve smaller groups in a whole class activity.
- Model and teach skills through student interactions with each other.
- Introduce different questioning strategies to help students learn to ask meaningful questions and understand what effective responses can provide.

### What This Can Look Like

- **“Think-pair-share”** and **“Think-pair-square”** encourage students to share their learning and thinking processes with the whole class. In think-pair-share, individual students think silently about a question posed by the teacher. Students share thoughts with a partner, then partners share responses with the whole class. In think-pair-square, partners combine into a small group before the whole class discussion.
- In **“carousel brainstorming”**, the teacher posts charts on the wall with key questions or ideas at the top. Groups are formed and one person scribes for the group and adds to the chart as they brainstorm. Groups then rotate to a new chart, read the other groups’ responses and then add to the chart.
- An **“inside/outside circle”** strategy encourages interaction and conversation between all class members. Divide the class in half. One half forms a circle facing outward, the other half finds one person in the circle to stand opposite, so there are two circles of students facing each other. Students discuss a question or topic with the person facing them. On a signal, the outer circle moves one person and the conversation begins again.
- Use a **“three-minute pause”** to stop at any point during an activity and encourage students to review what has been discussed, ask clarifying questions or reflect on their learning.
- A **“socratic seminar”** poses a thoughtful question to students to help them understand ideas, issues and values in their text readings. Students develop questions for classmates in order to dig into a text they all have read. This strategy encourages involvement of all class members, develops critical and creative thinking, emphasizes respect for others and for differing viewpoints, encourages students to support their arguments with textual evidence, and reinforces effective communication skills.

## Scaffolded instruction

Learning always proceeds from the known to the new. Good teaching recognizes and builds on this connection through **scaffolding**. Consider this construction metaphor, “A student learning new skills and concepts is like a carpenter building a house.” The construction starts from the ground up, on the foundation of what is already known and can be done. The new is built on top of the known. The teacher has to provide this scaffold to support the construction .... The scaffold is the environment the teacher creates, the instructional support, and the processes and language that are lent to the student in the context of approaching a task and developing the abilities to meet it” (adapted from Wilhelm, Baker and Dube, 2001, p. 18).

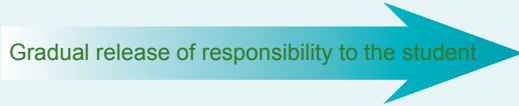
### Elements of scaffolded instruction

Effective scaffolding recognizes that students need to:

- learn in multiple and variable contexts
- engage in challenging, developmentally appropriate and concrete activities
- construct understandings based on prior experiences and knowledge
- be supported in learning what they cannot achieve on their own.

This type of supported learning occurs in what Vygotsky (1986) calls the zone of proximal development—the space between those contexts in which students perform tasks independently and those contexts in which students need adult or peer guidance and collaboration.

### The Zone of Proximal Development<sup>2</sup>

Zone of actual development	Zone of proximal development		New zone of actual development
STUDENT	TEACHER	JOINT	STUDENT
What the student can already do independently	Assistance from teacher, peer or environment	Transition from receiving assistance to working independently	What the student can do independently or in peer-led groups
			
<b>Independent</b>	<b>Instructional Approaches</b> <b>Modelled      Shared      Guided</b>		<b>Independent</b>

2. Reproduced from Ontario Ministry of Education, *Combined Grades: Strategies to Reach a Range of Learners in Kindergarten to Grade 6* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), p. 20 and adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education, *Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4 to 6: Volume One* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), p. 79. © Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2006, 2007. Reproduced/adapted with permission.

Effective scaffolding strategies encourage students to continuously grow and develop to a level that is just above their current level of development. When you assign a task the students can already do, they are taught nothing. One way of thinking about the zone of proximal development is to consider the general rule that most people are comfortable with—a “10 percent stretch” when they are attempting a new task or learning a new skill. This means that for most learners, the optimal degree of challenge is provided by activities and materials that are about 10 percent beyond the current level of what they can do independently.

When planning for scaffolding, ask the following types of questions.

- What do students currently know and what can students currently do?
- What do they need to know and be able to do?
- How big is the gap?
- How do I ensure the gap is just right so that students are supported but also are challenged in a way that maximizes learning?

The process of scaffolding then becomes continual and cyclical, as new scaffolds are put into place to encourage students to continue to reach for new learning. When students are able to complete a task successfully, they are in, what Vygotsky calls, the zone of actual development.

### **Implementing scaffolded instruction**

Implementing scaffolded instruction includes considering the ways that students recognize, process and engage with information. It involves providing options for supported group and individual learning, and opportunities to develop skills that are relevant and meaningful to the tasks at hand. It also involves planning multiple opportunities and options for students to use, apply and process the information they are working with.

The range of planned activities should reflect tasks that students can learn with the support of adults, peers and the instructional environment. The original concept of scaffolding was an interaction between a teacher and a student that provides support in learning. However, in recent years, the concept of scaffolding has expanded beyond just interactions between individuals. Scaffolding is now understood to include artifacts, resources and environments themselves. These scaffolding tools include technology and peer support and broaden the concept of scaffolding to address more complex and diverse learning environments. These resources and tools provide support to larger groups and help establish a learning environment in which peers can interact with and teach each other.

Effective scaffolding supports are continuously reviewed and replaced as student learning needs change. The design of scaffoldings considers that there are multiple levels of understandings, interests and learning preferences in the classroom, and incorporates the key elements of ongoing assessment and variable levels of support.

Consider the following questions.

- How can activities be designed to provide scaffolding that moves students from teacher-directed to student-directed learning experiences?
- How should activities provide a scaffolded sequence of instruction that starts with modelling or multiple examples?
- Does the sequence of planned activities have an explicit progression—from easy to difficult, concrete to abstract, personal to societal—that supports the learning needs and background of students?
- How can scaffolding activities help separate or organize information or processes into manageable chunks or steps?
- What types of modelled or guided examples should be included? When should these be provided?

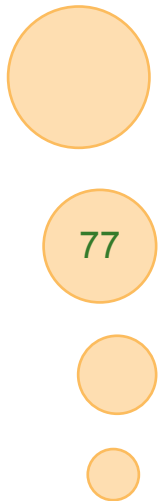
### Best practices in scaffolded instruction

The following chart summarizes best practices and sample strategies for effectively implementing scaffolded instruction.

<i>Scaffolded Instruction</i>	
Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
<p>Develop shared learning goals to engage and motivate students. Shared learning goals must be accomplished on two levels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between individual students and teachers. Students need to see the point of the task, beyond simply following the teacher’s directions.</li> <li>• Within the whole classroom environment. Scaffolding strategies should support the learning of groups of students working together. Such groups facilitate shared discussion and expertise, and collaborative discovery and inquiry, which builds the classroom as a community of learners.</li> </ul>	<p>“<b>Launcher units</b>” (Holbrook and Kolodner 2000) are introductory learning experiences that help introduce students to background knowledge, and build skills and processes that they need to engage in a larger, more independently or constructively structured unit of study. The launcher unit was originally designed for the Learning by Design™ curriculum (Kolodner et al. 2003), which approached science learning by engaging students in the design of a car to learn about the physics of forces and motion. Launcher units can focus on specific content or skills that prepare students for more independent study or project work.</p>

*Scaffolded Instruction* (continued)

Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
	<p>“<b>Modelling</b>” provides an opportunity for students to watch, to practise, and then to take responsibility for learning tasks. Teachers initially model and explain the learning task, and then share the process with students. Eventually, students take on nearly all or all responsibility for the task. Assessment strategies, such as observation and checklists, can assess student readiness and placement in the modelling process. Effective modelling includes thoughtful planning of the roles that teachers and students can take including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• teacher modelling of task and process</li><li>• student imitation and practice</li><li>• teacher moving away from instructional role</li><li>• student guiding or leading others.</li></ul>
<p>Recognize how different backgrounds and experiences influence and inform student understandings. Create structured opportunities to link prior knowledge with new learning.</p>	<p>“<b>Pre-assessment</b>” strategies such as pre-testing can help you to identify students who need additional help with concepts, terms and background information.</p> <p>“<b>Questioning</b>” that is used as a scaffolding activity provides support and assesses progress, and is adjusted according to student needs as they emerge in discussions or interactions. Questioning approaches can include cues, hints, prompts and partial solutions. The level of specificity in questions can be increased to provide additional support to students working their way through a process or problem, or decreased as students gain competence and skills.</p>
<p>Provide opportunities for students to develop decision-making and leadership skills.</p>	<p>“<b>Staging</b>” activities are investigations that prepare students by providing them with smaller or chunks of learning experiences early in the instructional sequence. These enable students to prepare to take on larger tasks or to understand complexities. Staging activities are sequenced in a process that moves from teacher modelling and proceeds with increasing transfer of the responsibility for learning to the student.</p>



*Scaffolded Instruction* (continued)

Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
<p>Make processes explicit and visible to students through activities such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• visualization</li><li>• role-play</li><li>• simulations</li><li>• analogies and comparisons</li><li>• graphic organizers.</li></ul>	<p>“<b>Structuring</b>” can provide students with tools and templates to help them structure and organize more open-ended tasks. “<b>Graphic organizers</b>”, such as Venn diagrams or flowcharts, can provide multiple formats to help students organize thinking and research.</p> <p>“<b>Think-alouds</b>” provide opportunities for students to engage in metacognitive activities while being provided with support and guidance. Think-alouds encourage self-talk within an interactive context.</p>
<p>Use flexible grouping structures as a means of providing scaffolding for students. As the learner becomes more capable, explicit support is reduced. This process is referred to as “fading.”</p>	<p>“<b>Peer group structures</b>” can be used to provide scaffolding support that encourages dialogue, collaborative exploration of concepts, motivation and encouragement. Peer groups can be structured to provide <b>reciprocal teaching</b>, an interactive process that involves students in a teaching role.</p> <p>“<b>Small group instruction</b>” involves direct participation of the teacher and includes ongoing and continuous assessment and adjustment of scaffolding supports. “<b>Direct instruction</b>” is often an instructional component used in small groups. Direct instruction focuses on explicit teaching and modelling of skills and processes.</p> <p>“<b>Cooperative learning</b>” emphasizes the development of social interaction skills as well as cognitive development. Cooperative learning structures can incorporate scaffolding in heterogeneous groupings that focus on providing peer and resource supports. Cooperative learning processes also can move students in homogeneous groups through a learning environment that provides varying levels of teacher support.</p>

## Variety

Variety is an essential component of differentiated instruction. Using a range of teaching styles and activities allows you to reach more students. However, the goal is not simply variety-for-the-sake-of-variety. All learning activities need to be meaningful, manageable and directly support learner outcomes. For example, a puppet show might be a novel way to show learning about a particular science or social concept, but the logistics of finding or making the puppets, setting up a stage, developing a script and finding time to practise and perform for others might absorb inordinate instructional time and overshadow the actual learning related to the outcome it was intended to demonstrate.

Teaching to student strengths makes them feel more comfortable in the classroom and this translates into greater motivation. So, paying attention to the content's best modality and, at times, addressing student learning preferences will set the stage for greater achievement. At the same time, while individuals do have learning preferences with regard to modalities (sensory learning style), research shows that teaching all students in their best modality does not necessarily equal greater achievement. The content's best modality is often more important for achievement.

### Sample strategies for creating variety

- Use the learning preference information that you identified in learner and class profiles to plan multiple entry points for each unit. Gardner (1993) suggests encouraging students to enter or explore a topic through a learning preference. He identifies five entry points:
  - narrative (presenting a story)
  - logical-quantitative (using numbers)
  - foundational (examining philosophy and vocabulary)
  - aesthetic (focusing on sensory features)
  - experiential (hands-on).

- Consider combining different pedagogical approaches to expand a learning activity. For example, Judith Dodge (2005) proposes linking multiple intelligence-based activities to higher levels of thinking, in what she calls “Gardner in Bloom.” See the example below.<sup>3</sup>

Multiple intelligence-based activity	Expand to address critical thinking
Write three journal entries of a Canadian war bride in the 1940s ...	... that compare three ways of life in London that were different from life in a rural community in Atlantic Canada
Write three headlines that you would find in the Renaissance Times ...	... that show your understanding of how life has changed since the Middle Ages

- Use a grid to record and assess the strategies that you develop from student profiles. Each square in the grid can list an instructional strategy that responds to elements in a learner or class profile. Within a unit plan, aim to have one or two rows complete. Over a yearlong plan, aim to cover all or most of the instructional strategies.

#### Instructional strategies tracker

Unit \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Case scenarios	Current events	Debate	Drama	Field trip
Games	Guest speaker	Imagery	Internet search	Investigative interviewing
Lecture	Literature connection	Mapping	Music	Panel discussion
Picture study	Poetry	Problem solving	Role-playing	Small group work
Student presentations	Videos			

3. Adapted from Judith Dodge, *Differentiation in Action* (New York, NY: Scholastic Inc., 2005), p. 96.

## Choice

**S**tudent choice is often thought of as the most obvious and straightforward aspect of differentiated instruction. To be effective, however, the choices provided must be thoughtfully and purposefully considered, and aligned with learning outcomes and learner needs, preferences, interests and readiness. Providing choice does not necessarily mean offering a wide menu of divergent options that students can select from. Rather, it involves carefully considering the alternatives that students can be offered in both the learning process and the ways they will demonstrate what they have learned. It includes considering when structured activities should be offered and when freedom of choice can be provided.

In a differentiated classroom we address ... needs by creating opportunities for students to express themselves individually or to work with others, by allowing students to choose activities of interest that are playful yet challenging and by empowering students through active learning and decision making. When you allow students the choice of working alone or working with others, you address their need for belonging. When you put students in charge of choosing which activity to complete, you address their need for power and freedom. When you offer students creative ways to show-what-they-know, you address their need for fun. The more we address these needs, the more we foster intrinsic motivation in learners (Dodge 2005, p. 51).

### Implementing choice

The following guidelines can help you construct thoughtful, relevant and beneficial choices for students.

- **Provide authentic and meaningful challenges to students.** Every choice that is offered should take into account the ideas discussed in the Meaningful Activities section of this chapter.
- **Ensure that students have the skills needed to accomplish the choices you offer.** These skills may be taught through the process of exploring and learning content or as part of the process of making the choice itself.
- **Explicitly teach students how to make effective choices.** Learning how to consider alternatives and select options is part of becoming an independent learner. Learning skills of negotiation and compromise in selecting a product to complete with group members or how to consider pros and cons when making an individual choice encourages students to make meaningful choices.

- **Provide opportunities and strategies to help students get to know themselves as learners.** Building self-awareness allows students to take calculated risks, and to communicate their interests and preferences when asked to make a choice.
- **Teach students how to approach open-ended projects.** Provide students with strategies such as prioritizing, breaking choices down into tasks, organizing, sequencing and planning how to complete a project. These processes need to be modelled and guided as students learn how to judge what is involved in the choices they make.
- **Teach students how to evaluate their choices.** Evaluation of choices involves making decisions before committing to a project or path, as well as learning to reflect on what was done, how it was done, what worked and what could be changed and improved.

Students can be provided with choices in terms of the way they learn new concepts and skills (process) or the way they demonstrate that learning (product).

#### **Choice board<sup>4</sup>**

A “choice board” is an example of a skills-based set of practice tasks from which students can choose. All activities in the following example are designed to explore and to practise new skills related to a particular topic in a language classroom. Students choose an assigned number of tasks (usually three). Each task is completed in the language of instruction.

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4. This section adapted with permission of SEDL. Theisen, Toni. “Differentiated Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Meeting the Diverse Needs of All Learners.” *Communiqué*, 6 (April 2002), p. 4.

### Choice Board: Food Unit

Choose three boxes to form a tic-tac-toe row.

The boxes I choose are # \_\_\_\_\_, # \_\_\_\_\_, # \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

<p>1 <b>Verb Practice</b> Play a game of charades using 10 new verbs you learned this week.</p>	<p>2 <b>Question Practice</b> Develop a survey to find out favourite foods of your classmates.</p>	<p>3 <b>Vocabulary Practice</b> Write a 7–10 line composition using your new food vocabulary.</p>
<p>4 <b>Question Practice</b> Create 10 questions you can ask in order to get details about someone’s favourite meal.</p>	<p>5 <b>Vocabulary Practice</b> Design a crossword puzzle using vocabulary related to food.</p>	<p>6 <b>Verb Practice</b> Design a 10-question quiz using the verbs in this unit.</p>
<p>7 <b>Vocabulary Practice</b> Watch a video clip and make a list of 10 key words used in the video.</p>	<p>8 <b>Verb Practice</b> Draw a picture to represent each of the new verbs.</p>	<p>9 <b>Question Practice</b> Create a song that will help you remember the question words.</p>

Choice boards can be based on a specific activity, such as a “R.A.F.T assignment.” It is designed around unit objectives and provides an effective, meaningful way to incorporate writing into content-area instruction. Four key ingredients are included in every R.A.F.T. writing assignment:

- R: Role of Writer (Who are you?)
- A: Audience (To whom is this written?)
- F: Format (What form will it take?)
- T: Topic + strong verb (What is your topic?)

Most R.A.F.T. assignments are written:

- from a viewpoint other than that of a student
- to an audience other than the teacher
- in a form other than the standard essay.

The choice board that follows provides samples of writing assignments students can choose from to demonstrate their understanding of the unit, “Travelling in France.” Learners select one row and create that written product. What makes the R.A.F.T. such a popular activity with students is the variety and creativity involved. For each of these writing tasks the same scoring rubric can be used regardless of which row is selected.

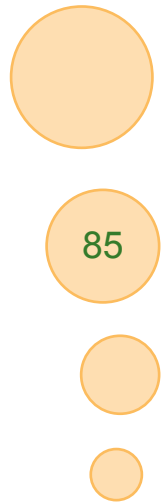
### R.A.F.T. Choice Board (Travelling in France)

Choose one R.A.F.T. assignment. Pick up copies of individual tasks from the teacher. Use the Internet and other texts to research information you need to make your work authentic.

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
Customer	Hotel employee	Letter	Make a reservation for several nights. Include all details.
Hotel Employee	Customer	Reply letter	Confirm reservation details and include changes.
Customer	Hotel manager	Complaint	Demand compensation for problems and poor service.
Parisian real estate agency	Prospective renters	Real estate ad	Describe details of the apartments available for rent.
Students who want to study abroad	Study abroad organization	Application form for the program	Apply for a study abroad program.
Students who stayed with a family	Family members	Thank-you note	Thank the family for the home stay and tell them about your return back to Canada

## Best practices to provide choice

Best Practices	What This Can Look Like
Provide options for students to create products based on their learning interests, preferences and readiness. Products should be related to real problems, concerns and audiences, and they should synthesize rather than summarize information.	Product choices could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a written report</li> <li>• an oral presentation</li> <li>• a group discussion on key concepts</li> <li>• a short book in which the key concepts are explained and described</li> <li>• a game centred around the characters and theme of a book</li> <li>• an event planned within a specified budget.</li> </ul>
Combine choice with flexible grouping to let students explore concepts in a variety of ways. Students also can be provided with choices regarding the context in which they create the product; e.g., as individuals, with partners or in small groups.	Grouping strategies such as self-selected learning centres can accommodate student choice.
Structure choices within varying contexts, such as research, reinforcement, application and extension.	“All students listen to the same guest lecturer and take notes in the same style modelled by the teacher. For homework, students choose one of the five options for reflecting on the speaker’s message .... They can write a poem, write and perform a skit, create a mind map of content, share the content with mom or dad and get their responses to it, or list the speaker’s main points and categorize them according to similar attributes.” <sup>5</sup>
Encourage students to use their choice of different tools to perform the same task.	Students could use paper and pencil, manipulatives or the computer to create a visual representation of a concept.
Use flexible pacing to allow for differences in student ability to master the key concepts.	Learning contracts provide an agreement between the teacher and student that focus on independent learning skill development. Goals are established collaboratively with the teacher and structures are provided to help students manage and organize their time and tasks. Students who complete certain tasks before classmates could be given time to work on projects in their learning contract.



5. From *Meet Me in the Middle: Becoming an Accomplished Middle-Level Teacher* (p. 70) by Rick Wormeli, copyright © 2001, with permission of Stenhouse Publishers.

