

# Differentiating Instruction: As Easy As One, Two, Three

Dr. Carol Shepherd, Professor, National University, Sacramento, USA  
Dr. Enid Acosta-Tello, Associate Professor, National University, Costa Mesa, USA

## ABSTRACT

*Using the “Three Phase Lesson” model, teachers identify prior knowledge that the student must possess in order to be successful in learning the new concepts. Teachers then delineate specific components inherent in the concepts that need to be mastered and identify tasks which will enable the student to practice these new concepts.*

**Keywords:** Three Phase Lesson; Differentiating Instruction

## INTRODUCTION

When learning does not occur, the teacher typically adjusts the instructional methods to meet student needs (Camilli & Wolfe, 2004). This is known as differentiating instruction. Differentiation implies that a teacher, based on an assessment of a student’s learning, changes the manner in which the instruction is presented in order to optimize the individual’s learning (Heacox, 2002). In order to meet the needs of the students, therefore, differentiating instruction needs to become an automatic strategy utilized during the lesson planning process (Romano (2012). Though it is acknowledged that there are multiple factors possibly involved in influencing a person’s learning (Tomlinson, 2001), teachers typically approach a student’s lack of understanding from an academic perspective. The academic perspective assumes that if an individual is not learning it is because the person is unable to understand, assimilate, utilize and/or adapt the instruction being presented. When learning does not occur, some type of intervention is warranted. This intervention may be as simple as re-teaching the same material in the same way to the same student, or as complex as providing specialized, individualized instruction based on extensive assessment, or any variation along this continuum.

Any type of intervention, however, demands the one resource teachers are always lacking: time; the time it takes to assess, re-plan, and reteach. Time is a realistic factor limiting a teacher’s ability to provide all required instruction in general, and to differentiate instruction specifically. An informal, localized survey of classroom teachers indicated that teachers understand the need for differentiating their instruction, but are unclear as to how to accomplish differentiation on a daily basis (Acosta, 2005). Oftentimes, this results in rewriting lesson plans or continually reforming student groups (Wilson, 2009). Instructors, therefore, continue to rely on methods of differentiation proven effective in the past: three-group rotation; one-on-one follow up remediation at a later time; and learning centers (Acosta, 2005). These methods provide the teacher the time to initially assess students; access to students as they interact with the material; time to conduct ongoing, informal assessment; time to diagnose student work; and time to appropriately design and assign classroom work and individualized remediation (Acosta-Tello, 2005). To simplify the process, it is convenient to have a template which can be used to plan, present, and organize differentiated instruction in reading for all learners of all ages at all levels.

## THREE PHASE LESSON

The Three Phase Lesson is a practical strategy that will help teachers analyze their lessons as they plan them and identify methods of remediation and enhancement while the initial planning is being done. In other words, while the lesson is initially being written, the instructor highlights what may be problematic or simplistic for students, and identifies appropriate accommodations while still planning the lesson. Differentiated instruction, therefore, ceases to be a separate, specialized procedure addressed when learning does not occur, or for acceleration

when it is learned instantly, but becomes a logical component of instruction and curriculum that is identified initially during lesson planning.

**The Three Phase Lesson Explained**

Every lesson, from the teaching of colors at the preschool level to the application of algebraic multiplicity of eigenvalues at the university level, is based on the assumption that the individual brings previously learned concepts to the instruction. However, students come to school with differing skills, abilities, and experiences. If an individual has not mastered the basic concepts upon which a new lesson is based, instruction either is poorly or partially learned, or not learned at all. When the teacher realizes that the student is not learning, either through observation or other methods of student feedback, then the next logical step should be to determine if the individual is lacking the basic concepts or skills upon which the lesson is based, and teach those. When these basic concepts are mastered, the new instruction becomes a logical progression of learning for the student. When the instructional foundation is solid, building up from the foundation is possible and reliable. Since teachers logically review and reemphasize new instruction after its initial delivery in order to solidify its learning, the individual who had gaps in basic concepts now has the opportunity to “catch up” and attach the new learning to what has now been mastered.

In the Three Phase Lesson, instructors are asked to consider the foundational assumptions inherent in their instruction when they present new concepts. Teachers identify the prior knowledge, the basic skills that the student must have mastered in order to be able to learn the new concepts. Instructors are asked to be as specific as possible in identifying these underlying concepts and then to identify tasks and activities that provide instruction and practice in these basic skills. This requires a certain level of creative and critical thinking on the part of the educator (Romano, 2012). Any student who is unsuccessful in acquiring the new concepts will receive further instruction in identified, required prior knowledge. The teacher, therefore, differentiates instruction by addressing identified foundational areas first. Though this model may seem to be a technique, it is more conceptual than methodological, and can easily become part of an instructor’s thinking when planning lessons. Differentiating instruction, therefore, becomes a simpler task to accomplish since it is part of the original lesson design and not something to which an instructor must return to at a later time.

The Three Phase Lesson is a way to write a lesson plan so that all students and their needs are addressed. Planning is the key and covers all phases of need at the initial writing. The three phases of the lesson are the “Core Lesson,” the “Basic Lesson,” and the “Enrichment Lesson.” Inherent within this design are the following educational tenets: high standards are held for all students; all students can learn; and learning is developmental

The Core Lesson instruction is given to the entire class so that all students are presented with the objectives of the lesson and its corresponding instruction and equal access to instruction is available to all individuals. The Basic Lesson allows students who have demonstrated a need for intervention by their inability to fully grasp the lesson or their lack of success in accomplishing tasks directly related to the instruction, to receive additional input. It provides opportunities for review, remediation, and/or reteaching immediately (or as soon as possible) after the presentation of the new concepts. During the Enrichment Lesson, challenging tasks are set forth for the students and can be assigned to specific individuals or can be available on a voluntary basis. This Three Phase Lesson is visually presented in Figure 1.

Objective:		
BASIC LESSON	CORE LESSON	ENRICHMENT LESSON
	Prior knowledge required: - -	
	Concepts to master: - -	
Basic Tasks: - -	Core Tasks: - -	Enrichment Tasks: - -

**Figure 1:** General Chart For Three Phase Lesson

### **Steps to Writing a Three Phase Lesson Plan**

The writing of the Three Phase Lesson plan begins with the stating of the objective. Once the objective is identified, the first section to be addressed would be the Concepts to Master section in the very center of the chart. The instructor needs to specifically identify the concepts for the student is expected to master. Once these are listed, the next step is not planning the tasks, but the determination of the prior knowledge that the student needs to have mastered in order to be able to successfully understand, use, and apply the new concepts being presented. The teacher must determine what prior skills are essential for the understanding and mastery of the new concepts. This prior knowledge list may be used at the beginning of the lesson to activate prior learning by reviewing “old” concepts.

The next section to be addressed would be the Core Tasks. These are the tasks and activities in which the instructor engages students in order to provide practice of the new instruction and in which students demonstrate the ability to understand and use it. These tasks address the objective and demonstrate student understanding and mastery, but should be sufficiently diverse and specific in nature so that if the learners show that they have not understood the new material, the task would provide some indication of which of the prior knowledge skills is lacking.

Once these two sections are addressed, the instructor would focus attention on the Basic Tasks, tasks in which to engage students if they demonstrate they are unable to grasp the new material. Since the teacher has identified all of the prior knowledge necessary for the new material to be learned, the Basic Tasks would then consist of activities which would provide instruction in and practice of any and all of the necessary foundational skills. Direct instruction in these skills and the student’s successful internalization of this learning will provide the learner with the foundational mastery necessary for learning the new material. Students are identified as members of this sub-group by the teacher; however, it is recommended that this small group instruction be preceded by an open invitation to all students in the class who feel they might benefit from further detailed instruction. This invitation gives permission to any student in the class to join the group, and oftentimes students the teacher did not realize needed extra instruction come and join. Once the group instruction has begun, volunteers may realize they have grasped the teaching and often dismiss themselves to go to work with the rest of the class; or the teacher may compliment the students on their accomplishments and guide them to work away from this smaller group. Instruction in this small group needs to be systematic, reinstructing the learners in the prior, foundational skills necessary for mastery of the new material. The instructor may work through the tasks quickly, determining who is in need of which reinforcement, , making links as appropriate to the new instruction. Since this instruction follows immediately, or soon after, the core instruction, the connection between the basic and core tasks is highlighted and children learn to use and apply both the basic and new concepts. This is an excellent example of applying Zygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978), widely practiced by educators.

The final section to be addressed is Enrichment Tasks. Enrichment should not just be more of the same. Enrichment activities should ask learners who have mastered the concepts to utilize this new knowledge at higher levels of thinking, applying, comparing, and creating with this new understanding. These enrichment tasks should be designed to challenge the individual and should be available to all students. These tasks ask the student to stretch and reconfigure the new learning and, thereby, expand previous knowledge and strengthen mastery.

### **Example of the Three Phase Lesson**

A completed Three Phase Lesson for a lesson in reading on phonics, specifically initial sound manipulation, is provided in Figure 2.

Objective: to develop the concept of initial consonant substitution (ran, fan, tan, can, pan)		
<b>BASIC LESSON</b>	<b>CORE LESSON</b>	<b>ENRICHMENT LESSON</b>
	<p><b>Prior knowledge required:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- phonemic awareness</li> <li>- sound/symbol correspondence</li> <li>- permanency of symbol/sound relationship</li> <li>- basic ability to blend sounds</li> <li>- exposure to segmentation</li> <li>- able to read one syllable words</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Concepts to master:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identify onset (initial consonant/cluster)</li> <li>- identify rimes (rest of word/word families)</li> <li>- ability to segment words (separate onsets and rimes)</li> <li>- ability to substitute onset</li> <li>- blending of new word with fluency</li> <li>- reading by analogy (f-an not f-a-n)</li> <li>- schema activation/connection (acknowledgement that the words have meaning)</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Basic Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- phonemic awareness songs such as “Down by the Bay” and “Wallaby Wallaby Woo”</li> <li>- orally blend sounds into words</li> <li>- “Wikki Stix”</li> <li>- chalk/dry erase boards</li> <li>- orally segment words</li> <li>- flash cards – letters/sounds</li> <li>- use letter tiles to write words they hear</li> <li>- use letter tiles to create words</li> <li>- “Make a Word” activity with group (Cunningham &amp; Hall, 1994)</li> <li>- fluency games</li> <li>- flash cards</li> </ul>	<p><b>Core Tasks:</b></p> <p><b>During instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- letter tile manipulation</li> <li>- oral reading of “old” word and “new” word after initial consonant substitution</li> <li>- chalk/dry erase boards</li> <li>- reading lists of words with same rime</li> <li>- manipulate flash cards in teacher pocket chart</li> <li>- manipulate flash cards in individual pocket charts</li> <li>- sing phonemic awareness songs</li> </ul> <p><b>Independently</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reading “flip” charts with onsets and rimes</li> <li>- read lists of words</li> <li>- find words with same rime in a newspaper, in literature books, around the room</li> <li>- word sorts (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, &amp; Johnson, 2004)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Enrichment Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- write rhyming poems and illustrate them for a class book</li> <li>- create lists of actual words using the same rime</li> <li>- create flip charts with rimes</li> <li>- create lists of nonsense words with target rime and then define and illustrate them</li> <li>- play a modified “Boggle” game in which only letters from the lesson are provided</li> <li>- independent “Make a Word” activity, concentrating on words using the same rimes</li> </ul>

Figure 2: Three Phase Lesson Chart For Phonics Lesson

Based on the objective of developing the concept of initial consonant substitution (ran, fan, tan, can), the teacher identified seven concepts that needed to be taught and mastered within this one objective. Even though this appeared to be a singular, simple objective, it is actually composed of multiple parts. It is important to realize that this is true of most objectives. These new concepts are based on six specific foundational concepts (Prior Knowledge) which the student needed to have mastered prior to the lesson in order to fully understand how to change initial sounds to create new words. The teacher then listed seven activities (Core Tasks) to use during direct instruction, all of which provide opportunities to observe the children and determine how much they have understood the new concept and if they can apply it in new situations. The instructor has also identified four separate independent tasks the students should be able to accomplish if they adequately learned what was taught.

The Basic Tasks address the prior knowledge previously identified. The teacher does not have to engage in all the tasks if the students in the smaller, chosen group show understanding of the specific skill being addressed; however, since planning for this phase of the lesson had occurred prior to the lesson presentation, all materials to engage in these tasks are readily available and so time is not wasted searching for the one more item which will help the individual learn. The Enrichment Tasks all require use and application of the new learning. They are challenging, yet directly related to the objective and the new learning.

### CONCLUSION

Learning is developmental, a process in which new learning is built upon and attached to what has previously been learned. When individuals are unable to understand new concepts, or are unable to assimilate new instruction, the teacher should first determine if this inability stems from a student's inadequate or missing foundational skills upon which the new learning is predicated. In the Three Phase Lesson, teachers actively identify prior knowledge necessary for learning the new concepts and equip themselves by planning tasks for reinforcing or teaching the basic concepts while preparing to teach the new material. When this is done, then differentiating instruction is not an additional task, an added step to providing instruction; but becomes a part of initial planning and instructional delivery. Once automatically incorporated, the process would save time and allow instructors to be prepared to provide for the learning needs of all their students.

Although the focus of this article is on the Three Phase Lesson for reading, the template and the process work equally well for other subjects, particularly math. With such a tool in their arsenal of aids to support student learning, educators can be more effective in less time, thus simplifying differentiated instruction. This is an excellent example of best practices for educators.

### AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Carol Shepherd**, Professor, Ph.D., National University, Sacramento Campus, School of Education, Sacramento, California, USA. Email: cshepher@nu.edu

**Enid Acosta-Tello**, Ph. D., Associate Professor, National University, Costa Mesa Campus, School of Education, Costa Mesa, California, USA. Email: eacostat@nu.edu

### REFERENCES

- Acosta-Tello, E. (2005, January). *Classroom teachers and differentiated instruction: First year findings of a study of implementation of differentiated instruction in elementary classrooms*. Paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Education, Honolulu, HI.
- Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2004). *Words their Way* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson, Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Camilli, G., & Wolfe, P. (2004). Research on reading: A cautionary tale. *Educational Leadership*, 61(6), 26-29.
- Cunningham, P., & Hall, D. (1994). *Making words*. Torrance, CA: Good Apple.
- Heacox, D. (2002). *Differentiating instruction in the regular classroom*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
- Romano, M. (2012). Accommodating differences. *The Science Teacher*, 79(4), 14-16
- Tomlinson, C. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, S. (2009). Differentiated instruction: How are design, essential questions in learning, assessment, and instruction part of it? *New England Reading Association Journal*, 44(2), 68-75.

**NOTES**