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BUT THEY ALL READ AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Are your students all over the reading map? Expert Laura Robb answers teachers' questions on how to differentiate reading instruction.

Not too long ago, on a visit to two sixth-grade classrooms, I saw very clearly the challenge teachers have before them when they try to differentiate reading. In both classrooms, 11-year-olds who read like fourth graders shared tables with classmates who read like the average ninth grader—a five-year span. How you approach this challenge can make a huge difference for all levels of readers.

In the first classroom, where the students were learning about biography, the teacher asked them to read the first two chapters of *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* by Walter Dean Myers. But only half the class read the chapters. A few students just looked at the photographs, two students wrote notes to each other, one put her head on her desk, and several others began doodling. Roughly five minutes into the silent reading period, the teacher gathered the non-reading students and read the chapters aloud to them. When class ended, she sighed. "What else can I do? They can't read the book, so I read it to them." This is one way to manage whole-class reading. But there is another way.

In the second classroom—in the same school—the teacher read aloud a passage from *Wilma Unlimited* by Kathleen Krull. As she read, she modeled cause/effect strategy by thinking aloud and answering students' questions about her thinking process. Next, she gave students instructions for silent reading: They were to read the next two chapters of their book, jotting down tough words on self-stick notes. Each student was reading a biography at his or her own level. Some pairs read the same title, but most students had their own specially chosen books. As the group read, the teacher held individual conferences. When she met with Josh, she focused on making inferences. Keisha and Carla practiced using context clues. With David, she focused on causes and effects. Each conference lasted no more than a few minutes.

You're probably thinking that you'd have a much better chance of reaching all your learners if your classroom looked more like the second one. But maybe you don't know how to do it. Here are the 10 most frequently asked questions I get from teachers on differentiating reading instruction. I hope they'll help you diversify, too!

Q HOW DO I GET STARTED WITH DIFFERENTIATION?

The first step is to move away from organizing your teaching around single books. Instead, choose a genre from which all books will be drawn, and pick a topic or theme. You can then focus on a particular issue that is present in all the texts. Students studying realistic fiction, for instance, might discuss what constitutes a family, and what determines whether their relationship is smooth or rocky. If you have students read different books on the same topic, they'll be able to bring a variety of ideas and perspectives to their discussions. Besides, using different texts means students will be able to advertise great books to one another!

Q HOW DO I FIND BOOKS AT EACH STUDENT'S READING LEVEL?

I ask students to use the "three-finger method" to see if a book is just right for them. Have students open their book to a page near the middle and read it. Using the fingers on one hand, students should count the number of words they can't say or don't understand. If students get past three fingers, the book is too hard. The book is "just right" if students understand and can say all but two or

three words and if they can retell what they read. Of course, as you get to know your students better, you will be able to predict what kind of books will be just right for each one. Then you can gather books from your local library, school library, or reading resource room. Also, check out book club offerings or host a book fair at your school. Keep a small monthly allowance for searching local yard sales, and collect reading material from friends, family members, and neighbors, too.

Q WHAT DOES A UNIT PLAN LOOK LIKE? HOW MUCH PLANNING DO I NEED TO DO IN ADVANCE?

I suggest making an overall plan for each unit, including the theme, your choice of reading and vocabulary strategies for modeling and student practice, the selection of read-alouds, a variety of independent texts for students to choose from, journal entry assignments, and tiered projects that meet the varied reading and writing levels of students in your class, as well as their particular interests. You know your class best.

Q SHOULD I HAVE INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES WITH STUDENTS? WHAT SHOULD I COVER?

Meet with students individually while the group is doing silent reading. You might talk about a reading strategy you're working on or discuss specific aspects of text structure. For students who read far below grade level, you'll want to check their general comprehension before talking about these topics. Ask them to retell part of the text. You can also work with students on using context clues or discussing how your theme connects to the text they're reading. Students who can work independently can have partner conferences and then turn in a paper showing what they discussed.

Q HOW DO I KEEP CONFERENCES TO ONLY FIVE MINUTES?

The key is to focus the conference on a single topic. For example, if you're holding a conference on a specific reading strategy, first have the student explain the strategy and tell how it helps her understand what she reads. Then, have the student open her book and read one page aloud to you, doing a think-aloud to show how she applies the strategy to her independent text. Take notes on the student's performance, and provide scaffolding as needed. To make sure you don't lose track of time, use a kitchen timer!

Q HOW DO I ASSESS STUDENTS WHEN THEY HAVE DIFFERENT ASSIGNMENTS?

Try using journal entries. If I want to grade students on their comprehension of realistic fiction, I might ask them to write journal entries that tell how they

Tiered Activities: Give Students Choices

Give students a choice of literacy-related activities that each one can meet at his or her own level.

Posters

Students can design posters to advertise the book they are reading and its author. Have them include bulleted reasons why the book is a terrific read.

Cartoons

Invite students to turn a scene from their book into a cartoon, putting all the dialogue into speech bubbles.

Timelines

Have students illustrate four to six key events in their book. They can either focus on a particular character or showcase important settings.

Book Talks

Organize students into small groups, giving each student a chance to talk about his or her book. Rather than asking them to merely retell the plot, encourage them to discuss their answers to meaningful, open-ended questions. Consider asking, *What did your book teach you about the issue we've been discussing? Did the book change your mind about the issue?*

Dramatic Monologues

Have students choose a character and imagine what it is like to be him or her. Ask students to write about two important events in the character's life, including the character's thoughts and feelings, using the first person. Students can then perform their monologues for the group.

Moviemaking

Have students choose a scene that they can act out and film with a video camera. Students get to know their characters as they translate them onto the "big screen." Share the videos with the class.

PowerPoint Presentations

Have students choose four to five important events in a character's life and create a PowerPoint presentation. Students can include both images and text.

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drew conclusions about a character's personality, what changed from the beginning to the end of the book, what the conflict was, and so on. Also try using tiered activities; that is, give students a menu of activities at different levels. Tiered activities can help you discover students' levels because students will usually choose activities they know they can complete successfully. (For more information on tiered activities, see the sidebar on page 49.)

Q SHOULD I ORGANIZE STUDENTS INTO GROUPS SO THEY CAN DISCUSS THEIR READING?

Absolutely! I like to take some of the week's class time to meet with small groups for a 10- to 15-minute discussion. During these discussions, ask group members to talk about an open-ended genre question (for biography, *Do you feel the person's accomplishments were positive or negative? Why?*), or you can ask them to connect their book to an issue you've been discussing. Holding these conferences reinforces the social aspects of reading, and moves interaction beyond you and the student to the whole group.

Q MY STUDENTS ARE READING SO MANY DIFFERENT BOOKS. DO I NEED TO READ THEM ALL?

The answer is—fortunately—no! You can try to skim several books before a unit starts, but don't be discouraged if it's not possible to get to know them all. You'll be able to determine whether a student has read a book by the amount of detail he offers in his discussion. When you get a response such as, "The main character is a detective, and she's really smart. She solves the whole mystery," you should definitely probe further. Ask the student to give examples of why he thinks the character is smart and how she solves the mystery. If the student can't do this, he may not have read the book or he may have found it too difficult. Ask gently, "Why is it tough for you to remember the details?" If the book was too hard, give the student a few other choices.

Q DOES EVERY STUDENT NEED TO READ THE SAME NUMBER OF BOOKS?

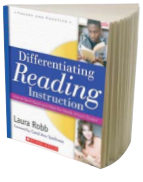
No. Your stronger readers may choose longer texts, which means they will read fewer books. Meanwhile, struggling readers may read shorter texts but read more of them. Negotiate with your class the minimum number of books they should read in a unit. Prepare a schedule with reading and writing due dates, and remind students of the dates often. Help students budget their time by scaffolding the process. For example, break down a writing assignment into chunks (drafting, revising, publishing) and give a due date for each step. This way, you can offer students feedback between each step, further scaffolding their final outcomes.

Q WHAT DO I DO IF STUDENTS DON'T COMPLETE THEIR READING ASSIGNMENTS?

This situation must be handled with care in order to build trust and help students develop a passion for reading. One of my students, Zach, arrived at school announcing that he disliked reading and hadn't done any of the summer reading. "Are you going to call my mom?" he asked. I told him we would try to work it out together. We had several lunch meetings during which I found out more about Zach's reading struggles and about his personal interests. After we found books that suited his needs, Zach began to enjoy reading and did a lot of it. By the time he asked me if he still had summer reading to make up, I told him that he already had!

As teachers, our most basic goal is to reach each and every one of our students. By implementing differentiated instruction, you can meet your students where they are and provide the scaffolding and inspiration they need to move forward. □

Laura Robb is a teacher, consultant, and sought-after speaker who leads professional development workshops throughout the country. This article was adapted from her newest book, *Differentiating Reading Instruction: How to Teach Reading to Meet the Needs of Each Student* (Scholastic, 2007).



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