For many teachers, uncertainty about how to manage a differentiated classroom grows into a fear that stops them from attempting to provide instruction based on their students’ varied interests and needs. Many teachers don’t appreciate how skilled they are at attending to multiple signals and juggling a variety of roles. The same skills that help teachers succeed in the complex environment of a classroom can lead them toward success in a differentiated classroom environment, as well.

Benefits for Students and Teachers

As Piaget (1969) reflected, “The heartbreaking difficulty in pedagogy, as indeed in medicine and other branches of knowledge that partake at the same time of art and science, is, in fact, that the best methods are also the most difficult ones” (p. 69). Although managing a differentiated classroom is not always easy, progress in that direction tends to make school a better fit for more students. It also tends to make teaching more satisfying and invigorating.

Managing a Differentiated Classroom: The Basics

Worthwhile endeavors are often challenging—and usually worth it. Here are 17 key strategies you can use to successfully meet the challenge of designing and managing differentiated instruction for your learners.

1 Have a strong rationale for differentiating instruction based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile. Then share your thinking with your students and their parents—often. Just as teachers sometimes need help creating new mental images of classrooms as places that are fluid and offer many avenues to learning, so do students and parents.
If you help your students and parents understand and contribute to your new view of the classroom, they will be able to adapt. Without your help, they may feel that you are “violating the rules of the game,” and then they may become confused or resistant. This communication strategy is so important that the next chapter more fully describes a way to prepare yourself, your students, and their parents for a student-centered, differentiated classroom.

2 Begin differentiating at a pace that is comfortable for you. Some teachers already make frequent adjustments in curriculum and instruction to allow for student differences in their classrooms. With just a few additional guidelines, these teachers are ready to move ahead quickly in differentiating instruction. Others who are less experienced or confident need to move in smaller increments. There’s a strong parallel to students in a classroom here: Some leap like leopards through a given task, others move at a more measured gait. What matters most is that students—and teachers—make progress from their respective beginning points, not that they all work alike.

You may easily envision yourself working with varied learning resources, such as differing texts, multilevel supplementary materials, various computer programs, or peer tutors. You may, on the other hand, feel more comfortable using a single text with your class but allowing some students to move through it more rapidly, or differentiating activities so students gain—at their own pace—an understanding of ideas in the text. Perhaps you’d find it easiest to differentiate student products. Creating small-group tasks tailored to student readiness, interest, or talent may be more your style. Or you may want to begin by learning to use groups in your class—not varying the group tasks at first, but just gaining skill and confidence in directing groups. If you teach multiple subjects, you may want to try your hand first in the subject you enjoy most. If you teach different groups of students each day, you might find it advantageous to begin differentiating instruction for the group you find easiest to work with. Finding your point of readiness and beginning there is as important for you as for your students. Not beginning is a guaranteed way to avoid progress. Biting off too much invites discouragement and failure. Begin where you can and chart a time line for your own progress. Figure 6.1 (see next page) lists some approaches to differentiation that tend to take less preparation time from teachers—and others that are likely to require more preparation time. One approach to becoming comfortable with differentiation in a way that doesn’t overtake your life is to select a few low-prep strategies you’re comfortable using consistently during a year, and then selecting one high prep approach per unit or semester to add to your repertoire. During a second year, you can hone the low and high prep approaches from the previous year, and add one or two more high and low prep approaches. In that cumulative way, you can work your way to a highly differentiated classroom in four or five years, without feeling absolutely frenzied along the way.

3 Time differentiated activities to support student success. Some students can manage group or independent work for long periods of time. Others have less capacity to sustain group or independent tasks. When designing your tasks, remember two things: (1) time allotted for a task should be a bit shorter than the attention span of the students who work on that task, and (2) advanced learners often have extended attention spans. When designing tasks for students with strong interest and ability in a particular area, allow a longer chunk of time during a class, day, or week than the amount of time planned for tasks for students whose interest or talent in the same area is not as great. A goal to strive for, over time, is helping all
**Figure 6.1**
**Begin Slowly—Just Begin!**

**Low-Prep Differentiation**
- Choices of books
- Homework options
- Use of reading buddies
- Varied journal prompts
- Orbital
- Varied pacing with anchor options
- Student-teacher goal setting
- Work alone/together
- Whole-to-part and part-to-whole explanations
- Flexible seating
- Varied computer programs
- Design-A-Day
- Varied supplementary materials
- Options for varied modes of expression
- Varying scaffolding on same organizer
- Let’s Make a Deal projects
- Computer mentors
- Think-Pair-Share by readiness, interest, learning profile
- Use of collaboration, independence, and cooperation
- Open-ended activities
- Miniworkshops to reteach or extend skills
- Jigsaw
- Negotiated Criteria
- Explorations by interest
- Games to practice mastery of information and skill
- Multiple levels of questions

**High-Prep Differentiation**
- Tiered activities and labs
- Tiered products
- Independent studies
- Multiple texts
- Alternative assessments
- Learning contracts
- 4-MAT
- Multiple-Intelligence options
- Compacting
- Spelling by readiness
- Entry Points
- Varying organizers
- Lectures coupled with graphic organizers
- Community mentorships
- Interest groups
- Tiered centers
- Interest centers
- Personal agendas
- Literature Circles
- Stations
- Complex Instruction
- Group Investigation
- Tape-recorded materials
- Teams, Games, and Tournaments
- Choice Boards
- Think-Tac-Toe
- Simulations
- Problem-Based Learning
- Graduated rubrics
- Flexible reading formats
- Student-centered writing formats
Strategies for Managing a Differentiated Classroom

students sustain group and independent tasks—
for longer than what was initially comfortable
for them. The key to reaching that goal is their
sense of success in those tasks.

4 Use an “anchor activity” to free you up
to focus your attention on your stu-
dents. “Ragged time” is a reality in a differen-

tiated classroom. It is not your goal to have
everyone finish all tasks at the same time, so
some students will inevitably complete work
while others have more to do. Using specified
activities to which students automatically move
when they complete an assigned task is impor-
tant both to maintaining a productive work
environment and to ensuring wise use of every-
one’s time. In almost every classroom, all stu-
dents, from time to time, engage in activities
like reading, journal writing, managing a port-
folio, and practicing (spelling, computation,
learning math through using tubs of manipula-
tives, and vocabulary). These sorts of tasks can
become “anchor activities” that are options for
students after assigned work is completed at a
high level of quality. Begin by teaching your
whole class to work independently and quietly
on these tasks. Then move toward having half
of the class work on the anchor activity (which
can be adjusted to student readiness and inter-
est), while the other half engages in a different
content-based activity designed specifically for
their needs. This may help you feel less frag-
mented in the beginning, because a sizable por-
tion of the class will be engaged in work that is
largely self-directed, freeing you to guide stu-
dents in the newer and “less predictable” task.
Later on, you can flip-flop the class, having the
group that first worked with the anchor activity
switch to an appropriate content-based activity,
and vice versa. Then, when you feel ready, you
can have a third of the class working with an
anchor activity and two-thirds working with
two differentiated content-based tasks. All sorts
of combinations are possible. Do whatever feels
best to phase you and your students into an
environment where multiple avenues to learn-
ing are the norm. Ultimately, your aim is to
have all students understand that when they
complete a given assignment, they must auto-
matically move to an anchor activity and work
with that activity with care and concentration.

5 Create and deliver instructions careful-
ly. Giving multiple directions to the class
as a whole is confusing and calls too much
attention to who is doing what. A better alterna-
tive is creating and giving task cards or assign-
ment sheets to individuals or groups. Another
option is going over an assignment with a few
responsible students today so that they can
share directions with their groups tomorrow. It
is also helpful to tape-record directions, espe-
cially when they are complex, so students can
replay them as needed. Tape-recorded direc-
tions are also handy for students with reading
or sequencing problems. Be sure you’ve thought
through directions carefully, have anticipated
student problems, and have struck a balance
between clarity and challenge. When part of the
directions require students to move to another
place in the classroom, specify a time limit for
the movement to be complete (shorter is gener-
ally better than longer—but not so short that it
causes students to dash) with clear expectations
for what constitutes orderly movement.

6 Assign students into groups or seating
areas smoothly. It’s bulky and confusing
to call students’ names in order to send them to
various seating areas or to assign them to partic-
ular groups. You’ll find it’s smoother to list
names by color or group on an overhead trans-
parency that also indicates where the colors or
groups should report. Wall charts work well
also, especially for groups that will have a some-
what extended duration. For young students,
peg-boards and key tags with students’ names
on them allow you to “move” students to a
learning center or section of the room flexibly and with ease.

7 Have a “home base” for students. Beginning and ending a class or lesson from a “home base” or seating chart enables you to organize students and materials more effectively when there will be student movement during the class or lesson. In middle and high school classes, assigned or home base seats also allow you to check attendance without “calling the roll.”

8 Be sure students have a plan for getting help when you’re busy with another student or group. You can help students learn to work collegially by suggesting that they ask a peer for clarification when they get “stuck.” Some classrooms have an “expert of the day” desk where one or more students especially skilled with the day’s task sit and serve as consultants. (Astute teachers ensure that many students serve as “experts”; students also assist by checking answers, proofreading, answering questions about directions or texts, and helping with art or construction tasks.) Or students may try to get themselves “unstuck” by “thinking on paper” in their learning logs. Be sure students know when it’s okay to come to you for help—and when it’s not—and that they know and use several options if they need help when you are unavailable. For you to successfully manage a differentiated classroom, your students must know that it’s never okay for them to just sit and wait for help to come to them, or to disrupt someone else.

9 Minimize noise. When students are active in a classroom, there will be some noise. There is no need for the noise to become oppressive or distracting. From the beginning of the year, work with students on working with peers quietly. Teach them to whisper or talk softly. Use a signal (such as turning the light on and off quickly) to remind them to reduce the conversation level. Assign a student in each group to monitor the noise level and remind peers to talk softly. Some students are especially distracted by noise. Finding a section of the room somewhat removed from the noise may be helpful for them. If that is not adequate, using a plastic headset with ear cuffs (common items in rooms with listening stations) can be a help. Ear-plugs such as those used on airplanes can make a difference as well. Remember to involve students in conversation about balancing their needs for conversation and concentration, and let them help you find other ways to retain both.

10 Make a plan for students to turn in work. There are times in a differentiated class when multiple tasks are going on at once, and when various students may turn in several different assignments in a relatively short time span. It is distracting for each student to come to you with the finished piece. Two strategies can eliminate the distraction. First, use an “expert of the day” who can check over a piece of work a student believes she has finished to see if it is both complete and of good quality. If the “expert” concurs that the work is ready to be turned in, have the “expert” sign the paper and have the student place it in a box or file labeled with the name of the task or an appropriate icon in a predesignated place in the room. If the “expert” feels the work is incomplete or lacking in quality, the student must continue working on the piece.

11 Teach students to rearrange the furniture. You can draw three or four floor plans with furniture arranged differently in each one and teach the students how to move the furniture quickly and quietly to correspond with the floor plan you designate (by name, number, or color). That makes you feel freer to be flexible with room arrangements than if you
personally must move all the furniture each time it’s rearranged. Be clear about your expectations for orderly movement, and also help students understand how the variety from their work will contribute to their classwork.

12 Minimize “stray” movement. Kids need to move around, regardless of their age. It’s not necessarily a goal to keep everyone glued to her chair. On the other hand, an undue amount of idle roaming isn’t likely to come to a good end either. Think through the amount of movement you will be comfortable with, and let your students know what they can and can’t do. For example, it may be fine to go to an “expert of the day” if you’re stuck on a math problem—but only as long as there is only one person at a time with the expert. Or, it may be that you want to designate a “gopher” for each work group who will get materials needed for the day’s work, noting that only the gopher should be up from the table—and perhaps that only one group’s gopher can be up at any one time. The directions need to apply as much structure as is needed to keep you and the students feeling productive—but no more structure than is necessary.

13 Promote on-task behavior. Help your students understand that you value on-task behavior because it helps them do better, helps you concentrate on what you need to do to help them, and eliminates distractions for others. Be sure to clarify what you mean by on-task behavior. If your standards are different, students may feel they are working just fine when you think otherwise. You may want to let students know that you will be giving them a daily check on how well they are using their time. You can make a list of students who are working with extra concentration and put a plus by their names. Similarly, you can make a list of students who find it very difficult to stay on task, even after coaching from you and reminders from peers, and put a minus beside those names. Most students most days will do fine. Later, you can fill the pluses and minuses into a gradebook or daily worksheet, then add checks by everyone else’s name. Most days, there will be mostly checks. Letting your students look at their pattern over a period of a week or month can help them see how you’re assessing their concentration. Also importantly, seeing patterns in the students’ concentration provides good assessment information for you. It may indicate a student who is frustrated because work is too hard or too easy, a student who needs a different seating arrangement, or a student who is really taking off with their work.

14 Have a plan for “quick finishers.” Students who consistently complete their work early, and do so with competence, are providing a diagnosis of tasks that are insufficiently challenging. (Some bright students will lollygag so you don’t notice the work is easy. That’s safer than signaling a need for something more complex.) Sometimes, however, the task is right for the student, but their goal is simply to be the first one finished. In instances like this, it’s important for the student to know that you understand their competence, but that what you’re interested in is “knock your socks off” quality. Ask them to tell you several indicators or characteristics of superior thought and craftsmanship on the piece of work. Feel free to contribute some indicators yourself. Don’t accept work that doesn’t bear those hallmarks.

15 Make a plan for “calling a halt.” While you will want to use time flexibly in a differentiated classroom, the time will come when you simply need to bring closure to a lesson sequence or unit. There may still be students not yet finished. It’s important to think through how you will handle that. Some helpful approaches include: giving students advance warning (a day or two ahead of time, for exam-
differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms

Give your students as much responsibility for their learning as possible. Not only does fostering student responsibility make classroom management far more effective, it also helps young learners become independent—an important learning goal on its own. Students can pass out folders and other materials, critique one another's work, move furniture for group work, keep records of their own work, chart their progress by using established goals, help design some of their own tasks, and make suggestions for smoother classroom operation. We often underestimate the capacity of students to be self-sufficient.

Engage your students in talking about classroom procedures and group processes. Your “metacognition,” or thinking aloud about your thinking, helps students understand your expectations as well as rationales for those expectations. It also helps them develop ownership in their classroom. Having ongoing conversations about what you’re all experiencing individually and collectively is a great investment in the future—saving much more time and stress in the long run than these conversations require at the time. Besides, you’ll be amazed at how many times the students can spot and think of a solution to a problem before you can figure it out. Use their eyes and minds to make the class work smoothly and comfortably.

There are many other effective ways to develop a classroom in which students engage in a variety of interesting and engaging activities. Share your management-of-differentiation strategies with colleagues and ask them to share with you what works for them.