

STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR DIFFERENTIATION MUST BE

Made to measure

BY KELLY A. HEDRICK

Responsive teachers interpret multiple signals from students and adapt curriculum and instruction.

Responsive staff development should do the same for teachers. A one-size-fits-all approach to professional development will not help teachers develop their expertise.

Effective professional learning requires that staff developers thoughtfully plan to meet varying teacher needs and be responsive to differences — that they model the differentiation teachers will practice in the classroom.

ESTABLISHING A VISION

Unlike some initiatives that may require more limited knowledge and skills (e.g. learning a single new instructional strategy), high-quality differentiation necessitates that teachers understand both the theory and

related practices, as well as develop skills. Staff developers helping teachers learn to differentiate must be prepared to:

- Clearly explain the rationale for and philosophy of differentiation;
- Outline what the school district considers acceptable practice for addressing varied learner needs;
- Provide a systematic plan for teachers to develop expertise;
- Create multiple paths to expertise so all teachers and administrators develop their understanding and a defensible practice related to varied learner needs;
- Allow teachers time to develop expertise, understanding that

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many educators begin their journey toward responsive teaching as novices; and

- Acknowledge and respond to educators' needs through staff development.

THE CONTINUUM

Developing expertise is a continuum, a journey with no final destination other than continually and gradually refining knowledge, understanding, and skills where both attitudes and habits of mind support ongoing

growth. At each stage, one can look behind and see others who are not as far along. And everyone can look ahead on the continuum and see educators who are more advanced.

Changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind occur slowly when teachers are provided consistent expectations, specific feedback, and ongoing support. Staff developers must be mindful of participants' current learning needs and plan according to their readiness, interest, and learning styles. Learners rarely move through the stages in a linear fashion, but often regress in the face of the new and the uncomfortable. Staff developers should not misinterpret teachers' regression as failure, but as an opportunity to provide support. Like the children they teach, educators are entitled to progressive challenges and scaffolding en route to expertise.

THE NOVICE

Staff development for novices, therefore, must focus on addressing their current limits of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind to provide successful experiences, valuable feedback, and encouragement.

The biggest challenge at any level, but particularly critical with novices, is finding low-risk experiences. Staff developers must offer experiences just above the easy grasp of all participants, but not so challenging that high expectations are paired with high risk.

Staff development for the novice must focus on:

- **Clearly defining differentiation:** Provide case study and lesson plan examples; use videos, books, and journal articles to help teachers see the philosophy in action.
- **Sharing models of high-quality differentiation:**

Have teachers who are successfully differentiating lead or participate in training; provide unit and lesson plans

that demonstrate the tenets of high-quality differentiation.

- **Demonstrating how best practices in the field can be used in different ways:**

Use examples of instructional and management strategies that participants are comfortable with, but show how these techniques are used in a responsive classroom.

- **Distinguishing between good curriculum and instruction and that which is differentiated:**

Use case studies and video examples; provide opportunities for discussion, reflection, and questioning.

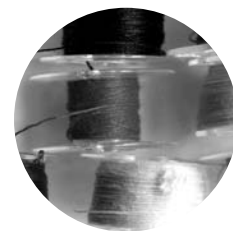
Begin small with staff development for the novice, using presentations, discussions, and opportunities for reflection that focus on participants grasping the nonnegotiable elements of differentiation (i.e. assessment, flexible grouping, and respectful tasks).

The staff developer who works with the novice must consistently refocus the learner on low-risk and low-prep differentiation. Low-prep strategies are those instructional techniques that require minimal changes to the structure and routine in the classroom, but can make a big impact in learning experiences. They require minimal preparation from the teacher, but provide opportunity for the teacher to modify curriculum and instruction in response to learners' needs. For example, Lawrence Harrell, the novice described on p. 38, might start out by developing several levels of questions focused on the same content that may be asked in a class discussion.

THE APPRENTICE

With increasing challenges, appropriate feedback, and incremental success, novices' responses give way to those of the apprentice. The apprentice understands that high-quality differentiation is not simplistic, but even

Size up the learners, p. 38.



with that understanding, the apprentice lacks confidence in differentiating curriculum or instruction. Apprentices recognize their limited knowledge and skills, where novices are stuck in the “I already do that” rut.

THE PRACTITIONER

The practitioner has worked through many of the challenging aspects of differentiation by developing and adapting curriculum and instruction in a variety of contexts and has learned to avoid the quick-fix approaches that provide short-term benefits at best. Avoiding quick-fix approaches to differentiation isn't as easy as it sounds. Despite exemplary work by experts in differentiation, there is an abundance of material promoting a variety of simplistic quick fixes to differentiation. Instructional strategies without regard to student assessment, quality curriculum design, and individualization of teaching and learning are frequently touted as differentiated.

While the practitioner is likely to effectively and efficiently differentiate curriculum and instruction, the educator at this stage needs staff development experiences that help push thinking and practice through the remaining challenges. These chal-

For the expert, all planning begins with goals just above the easy reach of the highest level of learner in a classroom.

lenges may include planning for assessment and evaluation, clearly communicating the philosophy of differentiation with other educators, parents, and students, refining management techniques within a responsive classroom, reflecting on students and refining assessment techniques, and improving collaboration with resources within and outside the school that can support differentiated units. Staff developers who work with practitioners must avoid treating them as though they have completed their journey.

THE NOVICE

Characteristics

- Unsettled by the ambiguous and organic nature of differentiation.
- Seeks algorithmic processes and expects “mastery” of differentiation.
- Focuses on the challenges instead of the benefits/necessity.
- Seeks solutions that are already part of a repertoire of strategies instead of redefining the nature of curriculum and instruction.
- Identifies the challenges inherent in high-prep differentiation (grading major projects) instead of focusing on low-prep possibilities.
- Lacks a big-picture understanding of the philosophy due to misperceptions about good curriculum/instruction (e.g. assessment and evaluation).
- Lacks persistence and a willingness to work at understanding/application.

Professional development needs

- Clarification on both the big picture of differentiation and the foundational components.
- Focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts and principles.
- Frequent and specific feedback on perceptions, questions, and ideas.
- Opportunities to build on the characteristics of good instruction as a bridge into differentiation.
- Specific and clear examples of differentiation.
- Analysis of curricular and instructional examples.
- Focus on the benefits and necessity despite inconvenience and discomfort.
- Opportunities to experience, with support, the organic nature of the philosophy.
- Low-risk experiences.

At this stage on the continuum, the practitioner may have specific areas for growth that are not likely to be addressed through workshops. Suggestions for the practitioner's staff development include: book studies and book talks with other practitioners and an expert in differentiation, participation in conferences that focus on the areas the practitioner needs in order to grow, peer observations with other practitioners and experts, and graduate level coursework in differentiation, curriculum design, and assessment.

THE EXPERT

The target for all teachers on the differentiation continuum is develop-

ing expertise. To be an expert in differentiation means embracing the philosophy, using the guiding principles of differentiation to drive teaching and learning, and organizing curriculum and instruction according to the needs of all learners. For the expert, all planning begins with goals just above the easy reach of the highest level of learner in a classroom. The teacher then establishes multiple paths for teaching and learning across all levels of readiness, areas of interest, and varied aspects of learner profiles (Tomlinson, 1999).

Responsive staff development for the expert creates opportunities to test assumptions, expand on successful

THE APPRENTICE

Characteristics

- Tolerates the ambiguous nature of differentiation.
 - Understands the differentiation philosophy, but lacks confidence in applying it.
 - Acknowledges gaps in personal understanding and skills with differentiating curriculum and instruction.
 - Makes surface connections between differentiation and other models/strategies inherent in good curriculum/instruction.
 - Demonstrates a willingness to work through challenges with some persistence.
 - Is able to distinguish between good curriculum/instruction and that which is differentiated.
 - Asks thoughtful questions about both the philosophy and the application.
 - Can accurately explain differentiation as a concept.
- studies, videos, books on differentiation, journal articles, lesson and unit plans that are differentiated) and practitioners experienced in differentiation.
 - Opportunities to critically analyze curriculum and instruction to identify the degree and areas of differentiation.
 - Problem solving with increased challenge over time.
 - Opportunities to articulate the rationale, principles, and methods of differentiation.
 - Discussion and problem solving (with support) in the areas of tasks, flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, and adjustment.
 - Focus on differentiating curriculum and instruction through studying the topics needed for low-prep differentiation (e.g. assessment, content goals, respectful tasks, flexible grouping).
 - Opportunities to make connections among curricular and instructional models as means to differentiated curriculum and instruction.

Professional development needs

- Continued study and discussion with a variety of tools (e.g. case

experiences, and learn new techniques for improving understanding and skills. Like practitioners, experts are capable of identifying their own areas for growth on the continuum of expertise. The expert understands that there is no final destination on this journey and that staff development can increase knowledge, understanding, and skills if the expert is clear on his or her personal goals. Activities likely to assist the expert include: conference opportunities that build upon high-quality curriculum; mentoring

novices and apprentices in differentiation; conducting book talks with practitioners; attending seminars and conferences with experts in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and differentiation; participating in action research in an area related to differentiation; developing differentiated units of study at the district level; and field-testing and assessing differentiated units of study at the district level or in collaboration with a university conducting research in differentiation. The expert seeks collegial dialogue

and original ideas, because those experiences create dissonance. To be stretched is to grow.

While the goal of staff development in differentiation is to develop expertise over time, it is important to cultivate the work of the experts as well as everyone else along the continuum. Cultivating expertise begins by knowing who your experts are and knowing the individual strengths and limitations among all. For this group, staff development needs to be the most individualized. Cultivation of expertise also means giving experts the opportunity to mentor others, model for colleagues, and lead staff development sessions.

EN ROUTE TO EXPERTISE

Understanding educators' levels of proficiency is essential to strategically planning differentiation across a school district. At each stage of proficiency, the learner needs appropriately challenging experiences and relevant support that leads to continuous improvement.

For the novice

Staff development for the novice is focused on the essential elements of differentiation delivered in a low-risk environment. The message of support on the journey must be embedded in the staff development opportunities:

- Differentiating staff development opportunities by readiness (levels) and interest (topics) so that participants can begin where they are comfortable or have identified a need for understanding;
- Differentiating staff development sessions to model assessment, flexible grouping, and respectful tasks; think-alouds on each area where the facilitator describes the thought processes involved in developing differentiated lessons;
- Providing models of differentiated lessons that incorporate the tools of the regular curriculum;
- Viewing videos on differentiation

(short vignettes on various topics) with debriefing and clarification led by a facilitator;

- Reading and participating in a book talk on *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (ASCD, 1999), by Carol Ann Tomlinson; and
- Training through classroom observation and feedback; assistance in developing a plan for “first steps” based upon observation information.

For the apprentice

Staff development for the apprentice is directed at developing skills that will help the participant increase knowledge and understanding. The apprentice typically asks of the staff developer, “OK, I get the philosophy, but I need to know how to do it.” Staff development activities that can assist the apprentice in the journey to expertise include:

- Using models of differentiated lessons that incorporate the tools of the regular curriculum, gifted curriculum, and special education methods so participants can analyze the blending of techniques;
- Viewing videos on specific techniques (e.g. tiered assignments, scaffolding, flexible grouping) with related activities that promote discussion, questioning, and analysis;
- Organizing a team of apprentices to develop differentiated lessons with guidance from a trainer;
- Reading and participating in focused discussions on *How to Differentiate in Mixed Ability Classrooms*, 2nd edition (ASCD, 2001) by Carol Ann Tomlinson;
- Opportunities to develop differentiated lessons with specific feedback (from administrators, curriculum specialists, and differentiation experts) in discussion and in writing; and
- Coaching with specific feedback from administrators, differentia-

THE PRACTITIONER

Characteristics

- Accepts the ambiguous nature of differentiation.
- Demonstrates accuracy and confidence in explaining differentiation of curriculum and instruction.
- Makes connections among various methods within a discipline (e.g. best practices within a discipline; scientific inquiry and technical writing are examples within science) to facilitate differentiation.
- Understands the connections among content, process, product, and learning environment when differentiation is achieved in the areas of readiness, interest, and learning profile (or any combination of the areas).
- Exhibits a belief in differentiation, but lacks confidence at times in addressing challenges.
- Recognizes and avoids the quick fixes to differentiating curriculum and instruction.

tion trainers, and/or building-level practitioners (peer observation).

For the practitioner

For the practitioner to move along the continuum toward expertise, staff development must respond to the primary question on the practitioner’s mind, “What else is there for me to learn?” With significant levels of success in the area of differentiation, it is critical that the practitioner finds staff development helpful in fine-tuning his or her craft and reach-

Professional development needs

- Collaboration with varied curriculum and area specialists in differentiating curriculum and instruction.
- Specific feedback on differentiating curriculum and instruction.
- Discussion and problem solving (with feedback) about the challenges of differentiation (e.g. grading, classroom management, fairness).
- In-depth study of topics associated with high-prep differentiation (e.g. tiered assignments, flexible grouping, assessment, and evaluation).
- Opportunities to explain both the philosophy and the practices associated with differentiation to a variety of audiences (e.g. teachers, administrators, colleagues, parents, and students).
- Observations and analysis of differentiated curricula and instruction.
- Practice and ongoing support in differentiating curriculum and instruction.

ing new depths of understanding and skill in the area of differentiation. This stage poses significant challenges, but may incorporate the following:

- Mentoring novice teachers in differentiation with guidance from experts;
- Presenting staff development sessions with guidance from staff developers and experts in the area of differentiation;
- Reading and participating in focused discussions on *Fulfilling*

THE EXPERT

Characteristics

- Skillfully differentiates curriculum and instruction.
- Models differentiation with fluency and flexibility in staff development and teaching situations.
- Problem solves in situations where differentiation is both necessary and difficult.
- Articulates the rationale, philosophy, and how-to of differentiation to a wide variety of audiences (e.g. parents, teachers, students, administrators).
- Uses various methods from a variety of disciplines to facilitate differentiating curriculum and instruction.
- Exhibits an unyielding belief that differentiation is necessary for all students.
- Seeks new methods that will help refine differentiation of curriculum and instruction.
- Understands there is much left to learn in the area of differentiation.

Professional development needs

- Practice and ongoing support in differentiating curriculum, instruction, and staff development.
- Opportunities to work

collaboratively with specialists to differentiate curriculum, instruction, and staff development with colleagues in a variety of disciplines and areas of specialty (e.g. regular education, special education, gifted education).

- Participation in conferences, staff development, and book studies focusing on differentiation and subsequent sharing of experiences/knowledge/skills with colleagues.
- Opportunities for discussion and problem solving in areas of concern associated with differentiation with an emphasis on growth.
- Opportunities to work with teachers, administrators, and colleagues in refining knowledge, understanding, and skills in the area of differentiation.
- Ongoing dialogue about the status of differentiation in the discipline and/or area of specialty with a focus on growth and developing expertise.
- Support in developing and monitoring policies and procedures that promote the differentiation of curriculum, instruction, and staff development.

the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom (ASCD, 2003) by Carol Ann Tomlinson;

- Attending presentations by experts inside and outside the school district;
- Participating in book talks on topics related to high-quality differ-

entiation (e.g. curriculum design, concept-based curriculum, assessment and evaluation) with a focus on making connections;

- Leading model classrooms where novice and apprentice teachers and administrators observe and debrief with the practitioner;

- Participating in video productions and assisting in the development of facilitators' guides; and
- Coaching with specific feedback from administrators, differentiation trainers, and/or building-level experts (peer observation).

For the expert

For most experts, staff developers need to know them as individuals in order to tailor staff development to meet their needs. In most cases, the expert needs the staff developer to listen, assist in developing an action plan, make opportunities for professional development available particularly in the areas of time and funding, and provide open access to other experts. The greatest opportunity for experts is the collaboration with other experts who are likely to push their thinking and open new avenues for growth. Online coursework, reading and discussion, attendance and presentations at conferences, and the development of differentiated curriculum with curriculum experts will likely assist the expert in continuous learning.

Staff developers must continually assess and craft learning experiences that will engage and challenge each learner, setting goals for each level of proficiency that are just beyond the easy grasp of these experts-in-the-making. With support and feedback, the goals are achieved. This is the essence of movement toward expertise.

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REFERENCE

Tomlinson, C.A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD. ■

Thoughtful and responsive staff developers use the concept of increasing intellectual demand along a continuum of learning to plan high quality staff development. The following fictitious characters represent personalities working at each stage from novice to expert. Staff developers can use these stages to learn to identify the characteristics and needs of learners along the continuum.

NOVICE



APPRENTICE



SIZING UP LEARNERS ALONG THE

The novice
LAWRENCE HARRELL

Lawrence Harrell has taught middle school civics for 12 years and is a novice in differentiation. In his district, all teachers are expected to differentiate instruction regularly for students. Harrell has attended several professional learning sessions on differentiation, where he spent most of his energy defending his current practice as differentiated.

As a novice, he has grasped the basic concept that it is ineffective to treat all students the same, but he struggles with the ambiguity of the philosophy. Like most novices, Harrell wants step-by-step procedures that will help him continue his current practices with which he is comfortable and avoid struggle and failure.

When staff developers try to lead him into aspects of the philosophy that challenge his knowledge and skills, Harrell quickly becomes unwilling. One learning session focuses on

flexible grouping to support varied pacing of instruction. Harrell would have to shift from his mode of lecture and whole-group instruction to a more student-centered climate. He is intimidated by the idea and responds, “Let me get this straight. You want me to let the students get up and walk around?”

Harrell is typical of most novices in differentiation. While they understand the basic philosophy, novices focus on the challenges for them as teachers and not the potential rewards for students. Novices focus on defending current practice.

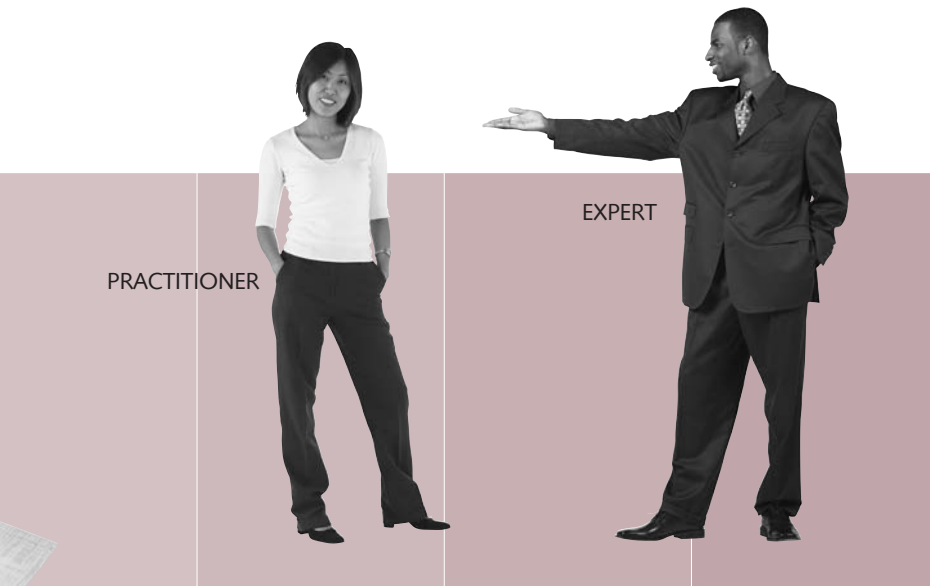
Harrell, for example, decided to use Bloom’s Taxonomy to create a set of tiered assignments. His critical mistakes were selecting an inappropriate tool to differentiate for readiness and attempting high-prep differentiation before mastering low-prep techniques. Harrell, while well-intentioned, chose Bloom’s Taxonomy because he was familiar with it. He attempted to differentiate by using tiered assignments because he wanted to be successful. As a novice, he needed clarification on

translating the philosophy into sound practice, honest and supportive feedback correcting his misperceptions, and guidance in reorganizing his focus. He might be told that in developing tiered assignments, we want all students engaged in the same thinking skills, but some students may need more support with the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy than others. The staff developer can assist Harrell either by helping him redesign his tiered assignments or introducing a low-prep strategy for differentiating by readiness since that is his goal. One example of a low-prep strategy that Harrell may find helpful is adjusting questioning. Using this technique, teachers develop several levels of questions focused on the same content that may be asked in a class discussion and use assessment data to match questions to students.

The apprentice
SUSAN LEWIS

Susan Lewis is a curriculum coordinator who has been working for several months on a new elementary





CONTINUUM

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science curriculum for her district. Her early drafts embedded best practice in science, and she was quite pleased with the initial work. After attending several professional development sessions on differentiation, she realized that while she had created good curriculum, none of it was truly differentiated. She also recognized that high-quality differentiation requires a deep knowledge of content, and her teachers were trained as generalists with limited science understanding. Her challenges were clear: embed differentiation into her new curriculum to facilitate a shift from the traditional to the differentiated, and align staff development to teach science content.

Lewis began by reworking some traditional whole-group activities in her curriculum guide. She asked colleagues for feedback on the revised tasks. Like most apprentices in differentiation, she was able to reorganize content and create low-prep, differentiated tasks with minor flaws. Her misperceptions about differentiation became clear to her colleagues as they

reviewed the redesigned lessons. For example, she included opportunities for student choice and saw this as differentiation by interest. The problem was that the choices were not guided. The students were told to pick any topic, instructions which could have resulted in them not moving toward the learning goals defined for the study unit. Lewis' discussions with her colleagues led her to refine the tasks, correcting her misunderstanding, and pushing her to make new connections in her thinking. To refine the work, teachers identified appropriate options for the students that would be both engaging and aligned with the unit goals. Then they developed an interest inventory for the unit. Lewis left the collaborative session with several new ideas.

The practitioner
RENEE ALLAN

Renee Allan has taught almost every grade at the elementary level. She is known among her colleagues for never letting the grass grow under her feet. She has been focusing on dif-

ferentiation to design new learning experiences for her students, and her knowledge of the elementary curriculum across multiple grade levels has been an asset in her work. She plans each unit, identifying learning outcomes by asking herself, “What is it I want all students to know, understand, and be able to do?” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Allan accepted long ago that if she wants all students to achieve the goals, she first must define what stretches her brightest learners and then create multiple paths that move all students toward the goals.

One of Allan’s greatest strengths as a practitioner is unyielding belief in differentiation as a philosophy of teaching and learning (Tomlinson, 1999). She accepts even aspects of the pedagogy that she struggles with, such as grading and product differentiation, because she is persistent and open to challenges. Staff development for Allan must be different than that of her novice or apprentice colleagues because her needs are different.

The expert

DAVID LINDSEY

Colleagues describe David Lindsey as the differentiation “guru.” He feels humbled by their praise and openly acknowledges those areas he is still working to improve. As he works

with new teachers in his department, Lindsey often anticipates their questions and concerns before they have voiced them.

Supporting other teachers developing their expertise in differentiation has become almost as much a vocational calling as teaching students. Lindsey has designed his school’s staff development plan in the area of differentiation. He has worked collaboratively with all department heads to design staff development experiences for a range of educators on the continuum to expertise. It is not unusual to find

other teachers sitting in his classroom during their planning time observing differentiation in action.

On one occasion, a veteran teacher stopped by because she was struggling with ongoing assessment. She had listened when Lindsey discussed it in a department meeting, but she just couldn’t envision how it worked. On the day she observed, Lindsey opened the class session by telling his students he was not satisfied with the work everyone, including himself, had done in the last class. “I feel like we missed the mark somehow,” he told the class. “I need to get a handle on what we still don’t understand.” He gave each student group a stack of sticky notes and told each to write down the most important thing he or she had learned about the topic, one thing that had puzzled that student, and one question that if answered, would help the student tremendously. Lindsey did the same. He had the students put the notes on large chart paper in the front of the room. This took about eight minutes.

He had two groups analyze the puzzling items, two groups analyze what students had learned, and Lindsey worked with two groups to analyze the questions. He told the class, “We need to figure out the next steps in this process together.” The students and Lindsey figured out there were three major areas where clarification was necessary from the previous class session. They also determined that students had a variety of levels of misunderstanding, and that some students just didn’t find the topic interesting. Overall, Lindsey discovered that the majority of the students had grasped more of the content than he had realized, but room for greater depth of understanding among most was evident. Five students felt comfortable with the information and were ready to move on. This analysis lasted for about 20 minutes.

The visiting teacher was amazed

at how clearly and openly students communicated their knowledge, understanding, skills, and lack thereof. “What an amazing conversation,” she told Lindsey. “Now what happens?” Lindsey divided the students into four groups. One group comprised students ready to move on. He gave them the next day’s lesson and had them work together to continue the material. “Won’t they get ahead of everyone else?” asked his colleague. Lindsey responded, “They already are. Don’t worry, we’ll catch up, but I don’t want them to sit and spin while I work with the others.”

Lindsey taught a minilesson with the other three groups, but began with a real-world example of the content in action. He hoped to engage the students more than he had done the day before. Then two groups went back to the content of the lesson the day before and worked in pairs to respond to several of the questions classmates had posed on the chart paper notes. Lindsey divided the questions among the pairs with attention to learner readiness. Lindsey worked with the final group because he wanted them to avoid becoming frustrated by the lesson. They worked until the end of the class period in these groups. The homework assignment for each person in the classroom was a K-W-L chart in which students were to tell Lindsey what they now knew about the topic and what they still wanted to know. He told them they would complete the chart with what they’d learned at the end of the next class period.

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Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD. ■

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