

# Classroom materials

Jeanne McGlinn

doi:10.1598/JAAL.48.4.9

Materials for review should be sent to Jeanne McGlinn, University of North Carolina–Asheville, One University Heights, Asheville, NC 28804, USA. Comments about the column may be sent to [jmcglinn@unca.edu](mailto:jmcglinn@unca.edu).

## Differentiated Instruction in the English Classroom: Content, Process, Product and Assessment

Reviewed by Barbara K. Strassman, The College of New Jersey, Ewing, New Jersey, USA.

Your school's curriculum states that students will read classic texts such as *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles (2003, Scribner). As you pull out your file on this novel, you can already hear the moans and groans from your third- and fifth-period classes. Before even opening the book, most of the students will complain that it "is awful" and most will dislike the thought of writing an essay, even though you give a choice of topics. How will you ever engage your students—among whom you have three students with disabilities as well as four ESL students who have just been added to your roster?

*Differentiated Instruction in the English Classroom: Content, Process, Product and Assessment* by Barbara King-Shaver and Alyce Hunter addresses exactly these concerns. The book provides an excellent operational definition of differentiated instruction as well as many examples from the middle and high school level English curricula. The authors do not shy away from the issues teachers face such as grading, state-mandated tests, and classroom management. Through specific examples King-Shaver and Hunter clearly demonstrate that differentiated instruction has the potential to reach all learners.

It [differentiated instruction] should focus teaching and learning around commonly accepted and tested goals and objectives—the requirements of high-stakes testing. In addition, differentiated instruction has the power to unite levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles with appropriate yet individualized and differentiated content, process, product, and/or assessment to foster student success on these goals, these tests, and in all learning. (p. 39)

The first part of the book answers basic questions about differentiated instruction such as what it is and how it works in an English class. Each chapter is supported with examples from the authors' school district's curriculum, giving the reader models of how to differentiate the content (what students are to learn), the process (how students will learn that content), and the product (how students will demonstrate that they have learned). For example, a class might be studying *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1993, Bantam) for which each student is required to independently do a report on the book. While all students are working on the same content and by the same process, the product can be individualized to engage and motivate each student, thereby enabling every learner to show mastery of the content. Thus, the reports on *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* could range from a written paper giving a historical analysis of the book to an oral presentation of poetry created by children in the concentration camps.

In the second part of the book the authors list popular teaching strategies such as flexible grouping, learning contracts, or literature circles. Each strategy is annotated, showing how it could

be put into practice in middle or high school English classes that employ differentiated instruction. For example, the authors use the jigsaw strategy in the study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this case, the class is divided into teams to discuss the characters in the play. Team members are assigned to expert or breakout groups, each of which is asked to study a different character in the play. Students are assigned to expert groups based on their capability, motivation, or experience. The most advanced expert group is given the most challenging character, Hamlet. While the expert groups are all doing the same assignment, a character study, the work or content is differentiated because some characters are more easily studied than others. When the teams reconvene, members present the character explored in their respective expert groups. In this activity, all students in the class engage in the same process and product while given content commensurate with their individual abilities.

The authors also provide several case studies of how teachers use a differentiated approach in units as diverse as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Anchor, 1994). Teachers can create a student-centered classroom in which "student differences and needs are clearly identified and lessons are planned based on individual readiness, interests, and learning styles" (p. 25) by looking at issues of how to manage the curriculum content goals, planning and record keeping, diversification of teaching-learning strategies, and individualization of assignments. In the case study on Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (Penguin, 2003), one teacher set up six learning stations to differentiate the processes by which her students would study the play and the products they would use to demonstrate their knowledge. All students had to complete three designated stations and then choose

one additional station. The stations varied from writing a poem or paragraph using specified vocabulary from the play to assuming the persona of one of the play's characters when writing a letter to explain his or her actions.

The authors relate differentiated instruction to broad educational philosophies, theories, and practices. Teachers will be able to see how differentiation is not a teaching formula but rather a philosophy about the teaching-learning process that invites creativity and respects the diversity of the individuals (both students and teachers) who make up the societies living in respective classes. Differentiated instruction, like Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, constructivist activities, balanced literacy practices, or a brain-based perspective "charge[s] and challenge[s] the teacher to find and adapt content, process, product, and assessment to fit the unique and diverse needs of each learner. Employing differentiation strategies and activities helps teachers answer this charge and challenge" (p. 129). For example, in the case study of *The Crucible*, learning stations enabled students to link the play to their respective knowledge bases, interests, and learning styles. Such structures acknowledge that meaning and learning are unique due to individual student variables and are keys to a brain-based learning approach.

This short book is a primer on differentiated instruction as well as an in-depth discussion on how to implement differentiation in English classes. English teachers, as well as all teachers seeking to more actively engage their students in learning, will find this book useful as they work to enable all learners to achieve their maximum potential.

Barbara King-Shaver and Alyce Hunter. 2003.  
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 136 pp. ISBN 0-325-00577-X. US\$13.60.

Copyright of Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.