

Newsletter

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FOCUS ON DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

From rural one-room schoolhouses that served students of all ages to 21st century schools in which students represent diverse cultures and often speak many different languages, teachers have faced the challenge of addressing a wide range of needs and interests within a single classroom. Attempts to “track” students into classes by test-determined ability levels are often not only undemocratic and discriminatory, but they also continue to fail children. No matter how refined or sophisticated the tracking system, each group of students reflects an infinite variety in background knowledge, learning styles, interests, and preferences. If the goal of teaching is to maximize growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, whole-class, lockstep instruction isn’t the answer.

One of the most effective approaches to matching just-in-time teaching to the needs of each student is widely known as **differentiated instruction**. Carol Tomlinson, a leading authority on the subject, identifies three elements of curriculum that teachers can adjust to meet the needs of students of differing abilities within the same class: content, process, and products. Her web site at <http://www.caroltomlinson.com/> offers free resources for fulfilling the promise of differentiation.

AUTHOR FOCUS: Laura Robb

Formerly Curriculum Coordinator and teacher of eighth-grade reading-writing workshop at Powhatan School in Boyce, Virginia, Robb continues to coach teachers in grades K to 8. She also works with students throughout the year in public schools where she does long-term consulting. She’s also a frequent speaker at conferences and keeps extremely busy providing professional development at workshops around the country. A prolific writer, Robb has authored twelve Scholastic professional resources and teaching tools.

In her latest work, *[Differentiating Reading Instruction: How to Teach Reading to Meet the Needs of Each Student](#)* with foreword by Carol Tomlinson, Laura invites you into her classroom to see differentiated reading instruction in action. She shows you how to teach and manage whole-class reading where each student reads a different book while you provide targeted support working with small-groups, build comprehension through

student-centered journal writing, and tier assignments to maximize the learning potential of each student. The book includes lessons, strategies, assessment ideas, management tips, and samples of student work.

DIFFERENTIATED READING INSTRUCTION Q&A WITH LAURA ROBB

Where do I start with DI Reading Instruction? Which structures and concepts are fundamental?

LAURA: Start by building your background knowledge of DI, which includes understanding tiering, assessment, the role of conferring and self-evaluation, writing to improve reading, creating plans for units, and the research that supports DI. Consider forming a study group with colleagues to read and discuss my book as well as the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson, Judith Dodge, and Rick Wormeli. Fortified with theory and examples of practice, you'll be ready to plan and implement one unit of study. You can plan a unit of study for two to three weeks using picture books. This way you start small and experience the instructional read-aloud, instructional reading at school, teacher-student conferences, to name only a few. The more you self-evaluate and invite student feedback during and after a unit, the smoother the units will run.

Do very bright students—such as those who've been designated as gifted—suffer from low expectations in a class where DI is the norm?

LAURA: Actually, bright students benefit with DI because you are offering them challenging materials that relate to the genre, issue, and theme you're studying. With one-size-fits-all, these students receive little to no instruction because the work is easy for them and they can complete it independently. They are usually reading materials at their independent reading levels and not moving forward with analyzing, connecting, and synthesizing.

Because a student struggles with reading does not necessarily mean that student is not bright or gifted. The key to differentiation is to match students to instructional texts so they can improve their reading skill. But all students, no matter what their instructional reading levels are, need to think and apply reading and analytical strategies appropriate for their grade level. So, a sixth grader reading at a third grade instructional level uses that material to think and write about texts at the sixth grade level.

How does writing support DI and improve comprehension?

LAURA: Writing about reading improves students' comprehension by helping them to compare and contrast within a text or between texts; to clarify hunches and thinking; to make connections, analyze, form hypotheses and prove them; and synthesize ideas across texts. I see writing about reading as an extension of reading and thinking. In my classes, journals are always on students' desks, poised to receive a reaction, thought, questions, and other feedback.

Does DI have a role in classes other than reading or language arts?

LAURA: Absolutely! Let me start with a true story. A group of ninth graders reading three to five years below grade level were placed in a special reading class that met five mornings a week. Students read books at their instructional levels and used their texts to do the high level thinking expected of ninth graders. They experienced much success and made one to two years' progress. However, back in science, English, and social studies classes, these students had to read grade level or above texts. *Animal Farm* was one of the English texts. Students became angry and frustrated because they failed or received D's in other subjects. Though administrators developed this kind of remediation with the best intentions, these students needed to read at their instructional level in all subjects in order to improve. This is one reason why we continue to leave so many students behind.

Multiple texts—texts related to a topic in any subject at diverse reading levels—need to be a part of all instruction. Publishing needs to change to meet the realities of teaching. No more huge textbooks that students can't read. In their place we need small texts that relate to different aspects of a topic, written at diverse instructional levels. All subjects—not just language arts—need reading resource rooms with books on a wide range of reading levels.

NEW SCHOLASTIC RESOURCES FOR DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

By **LAURA ROBB:**

[*Teaching Reading: A Differentiated Approach*](#) is the comprehensive resource for research-based reading instruction. In it, Laura Robb has compiled classroom-tested lessons and strategies that help students activate prior knowledge, monitor comprehension, make inferences, write in response to fiction and nonfiction texts, and so much more. The big 3-ring binder contains rubrics, assessments, graphic organizers, step-by-step strategy lessons, transparencies of selected lessons, **reproducible practice pages leveled for differentiated instruction**, and special sections for language arts and content-area teachers. (Grades 4 and up)

[*Reading Strategies Toolkit: Nonfiction, Grades 4-5*](#) provides everything you need—including **differentiated practice pages**—to teach key nonfiction strategies. Key components are 9 full-color picture books, 9 teaching guides, 9 teaching transparencies, a professional book, as well as folders and a box for easy storage and ready access. (Grades 4-5)

OTHER NEW DI RESOURCES

[*Visual Tools for Differentiating Reading & Writing Instruction*](#) by **Roger Essley**, with **Linda Rief** and **Amy Levy Rocci**, shows how visual tools that make ideas more accessible help students at all levels make giant strides in composing stories and revising

them, taking notes on difficult text, remembering and retelling complex stories, and mastering content knowledge. (Grades 3–8)

Veteran teacher and staff developer **Margo Southall**'s [*Differentiated Literacy Centers: 85+ Leveled Activities—With Reproducible Planning Sheets and Student Pages—to Support Centers in Fluency, Reading Comprehension, and Word Study*](#) provides management tools along with hundreds of leveled activities that she has fine-tuned over the years. The result is an invaluable collection of research-based activities that enable teachers to match independent practice with students' needs in reading comprehension, fluency, word study, and writing. (Grades K–3)

In [*Differentiating Instruction in Kindergarten: Planning Tips, Assessment Tools, Management Strategies, Multi-Leveled Centers, and Activities That Reach and Nurture Every Learner*](#) master kindergarten teacher **Cindy Middendorf** shares her strategies for creating a nurturing, choice-based learning environment where all learners thrive. Packed with research-based tips, model lessons, photos, and student samples, this guide shows how to teach the kindergarten curriculum in a way that engages varied learning styles and taps multiple intelligences. Middendorf also shares expert advice on how to establish an effective classroom management system that supports differentiated learning. (Kindergarten)

[*Strategies for Differentiating in the Content Areas: Easy-to-Use Strategies, Scoring Rubrics, Student Samples, and Leveling Tips to Reach and Teach Every Middle-School Student*](#) by **Beverly Strayer** and **Troy Strayer**, a master teacher-administrator team, shows how middle school teachers in ALL subject areas can reach ALL learners. Strayer and Strayer present eight surefire strategies teachers can use to a) provide assignment choices that motivate different kinds of learners and b) teach all students the content they need to know. They provide helpful examples of each strategy in practice along with student work samples in language arts, math, and other subject areas. (Grades 5 and up)

NEW BOOKS/RESOURCES FOR THE SCHOOL YEAR

[*Teaching Smarter With the Brain in Focus: Practical Ways to Apply the Latest Brain Research to Deepen Comprehension, Improve Memory, and Motivate Students to Achieve*](#) by **Sarah Armstrong** shows you how to use simple research-supported, brain-boosting strategies in any lesson to improve students' engagement, productivity, and capacity to learn. (Grades 3–8)

[*Launching the Writing Workshop: A Step-by-Step Guide in Photographs*](#) by **Denise Leograndis** features full-color photographs with clear descriptions to show you how you can transform your classroom into a well-organized workshop that supports writing growth. Follow the link to download a free, stunning 19-page sample from the book. (Grades 1–6)

[*Exceeding the Standards: A Strategic Approach for Linking State Standards and Best Practices in Reading & Writing Instruction*](#) by **Margaret Moustafa** shows you how to

align your state standards with research-proven best practices such as the read-aloud, shared and guided reading and writing, reading and writing workshop, literature circles, directed reading and thinking activity, language experience, and Readers Theater. (Grades K–5)

[*The Complete Year in Reading and Writing*](#) by **Pam Allyn** and colleagues **Laurie Pastore, Karen McNally, Jaime Margolies, Patty Vitale-Reilly, and Abi Gottself**, comprises six books, one at each grade level, K–5. Each book includes a detailed, developmentally sound curricular calendar that correlates with standards. Monthly units of study—organized around process, genre, strategy, and conventions—integrate reading and writing. Ready-to-use lessons are easily adapted to meet the needs of all learners. (Grades K–5)

Using his own original comic strips to engage students, in [*Writing Extraordinary Essays: Every Middle Schooler Can! Strategies, Lessons, and Rubrics—Plus Proven Tips for Succeeding on Tests*](#) David Lee Finkle demonstrates a variety of ways to teach young writers how to organize an essay, create vivid details, make effective word choices, and revise and proofread effectively. (Grades 5 and up)

[*Look Who’s Learning to Read*](#) by **Shelley Harwayne** offers early childhood educators and anyone involved with providing daycare 50 creative ways to instill a love of reading and writing in young learners. It’s the author’s belief that learning to read and write is as natural a process as learning to walk and talk. (Preschool–Kindergarten)

[*The Essential Spanish Phrase Book*](#) by **Luise Pérez-Sotelo** and **Eileen Hogan** help you communicate with your Spanish-speaking students and their families with this indispensable guide that covers typical situations in any school day. (Preschool–Grade 6)

[*Using Picture Books to Teach Comprehension*](#) by **Joanne Zimny** provides elementary educators with 30 literature-based lessons that teach students to become strategic readers who actively engage with text and read for meaning. (Grades 2-5)