

Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Social Studies: Where Do Teachers Begin?

Kay A. Chick
Barbara S. S. Hong
Penn State Altoona

This paper presents the philosophy and goals of differentiated instruction in the social studies. Children's literature is incorporated to highlight five practical and easy-to-implement strategies for differentiating instruction. These strategies are presented to assist teachers in meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Differentiated instruction is emphasized in ways that help students experience the benefits of a democratic social studies classroom where the responsibility for learning is shared.

Key words: Differentiated instruction, social studies, democratic classrooms, instructional strategies, diversity, children's literature

Introduction

Effective teachers adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual learners. Differentiated instruction, otherwise known as responsive instruction, is a philosophy that encourages teachers to modify curriculum, instructional strategies, and student products based on the readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of individual students. Effective teachers of social studies incorporate a variety of techniques in the instruction, assessment, and grouping of students because not everyone learns the same thing at the same time with the same approach (Tomlinson, 1999). By proactively identifying the needs of each student, teachers are better able to make decisions regarding curriculum adaptation, instructional design, instructional tools integration (e.g., computer, graphic organizers, visual aids, and cues), and data interpretation (Lovin, Kyger, & Allsopp, 2004). The ultimate goal of differentiated instruction in the social studies classroom is to help all students experience success, regardless of their learning capabilities.

A secondary goal of differentiated instruction in the social studies is for students to experience a democratic classroom where the responsibility for learning is shared. In such a classroom, students have choices and discover strategies that will help them to become more independent learners. They begin to ask important questions, collaborate with teachers on big ideas to pursue, and become classroom leaders who provide insight into their interests, abilities, and learning styles. Some of the responsibility for meeting students' needs shifts to the learners themselves (Waterman, 2007). The shift brings increases in motivation, independence, and opportunity for democracy in action, where students are members of learning communities (Westphal, 2007).

Creating successful learning opportunities for all learners can be a daunting task. In many social studies classrooms there are students who represent a wide range of ability and reading levels. Students with disabilities often are included in general education classrooms for social studies instruction and may require significant adaptations in curriculum, instruction, assessment,

and classroom organization. Such adaptations require constant reflection, as teachers talk to themselves and get feedback from their students about what works and what doesn't. Some teachers, especially novices, are so focused on the basics of curriculum and instruction that they fail to reflect on the overall learning environment of the classroom, the specific needs of learners, or the value of shared responsibility. They may be concerned about students who are passive learners with less than stellar memories and limited learning strategies, but are hesitant as to how to help students meet learning targets (Bender, 2008). If lessons are planned according to the standard grade curriculum, the results limit opportunities for authentic learning and student choice.

Another concern of teachers is that with time constraints and curriculum mandates, social studies instruction often is forgotten. Integrating children's literature into the social studies allows teachers to promote literacy skills while teaching to social studies standards. Children's literature can enrich opportunities for differentiation in student products based on learners' interests, abilities, and learning styles. While picture books are ideally suited for students in the primary grades, they also are useful for increasing learning opportunities for intermediate grade students, beyond those who are reading below grade level. Picture books can easily "climb grade levels" by offering students the opportunity to critique, analyze from multiple perspectives, and springboard into discussion of complex issues (Shea, 2010, p. 35). According to Shea, "picture books beg to be used up and down the grades and across the curriculum, and even the simplest picture books can be profound when examined through the various lenses of literary criticism" (Shea, 2010, p. 34).

Strategies for Differentiating Instruction

The following five practical and easy-to-implement strategies can help teachers of the social studies to meet the needs of all students, while also allowing learners to experience the benefits of a democratic classroom. To demonstrate methods for creating differentiated learning opportunities and questioning strategies, we base our examples on the picture book, *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010), a National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) trade book selection for 2011. This book highlights great moments in African American history that took place at the Lincoln Memorial and describes the impact these events had on the civil rights movement. The book includes illustrations encouraging students to make meaning from visual sources, in addition to the text. The differentiated learning activities presented here are designed for students in grades three through five but can be adapted for other grades.

Big Paper: Building a Silent Conversation

The Big Paper strategy helps students use writing and silence to explore significant topics and issues by providing time to think deeply and consider the views of others. After reading aloud *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010), the teacher assists students in forming mixed-ability groups with three to four students per group. Each group is provided with a sheet of poster paper and enough markers for each student. Students use the poster paper to have a 15 minute silent conversation by making written comments about the issues in the book and asking questions of each other. They respond in writing to each other's comments and questions and all group members write at the same time. Lines can be drawn to connect comments and questions and the silent conversation can go in any direction of the

group's choosing. When time is up, groups move around the room and react silently by writing reactions on other groups' Big Papers. Each group then meets back at their own Big Paper and the silence ends. Group members are encouraged to have conversations about the book, the written comments, and any issues or questions that arise. Wrap-up can include large group conversation about the book, the strategy, and what they learned (Facing History and Ourselves, 2012).

Identity Charts

An alternative to Big Paper (Facing History and Ourselves, 2012) is Identity Charts, graphic tools that allow learners to consider the identity, personality, and contributions of historical figures (Facing History and Ourselves). The names of all the historical figures in *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010), such as Abraham Lincoln, Marian Anderson, and Barack Obama, are placed in a container. After students get in flexible groups of three to four students, each group selects a name from the container. The group places that name in the center of a large piece of poster board. Students then brainstorm to discover who this person is, what words describe the person, and what role he or she played in history. Each group can include drawings and quotations from the book or other sources. Wrap-up can include sharing of the charts and information about any other sources that were referenced (Facing History and Ourselves).

The Big Paper strategy and the Identity Chart strategy are designed to ensure that all students experience success. They are examples of strategies that, when adapted, can meet the needs of learners in mixed-ability settings. In these strategies all students respond and participate fully, rather than just those who are willing to raise their hands. Students who are quiet, or who lack self-confidence, can participate without verbal discussion. The strategies can be differentiated further by allowing students to draw instead of write, or to use invented spelling. In the Big Paper strategy, when groups move around the room to react to the other Big Papers, a student in each group can break the silence by reading the comments and questions so students who have difficulty with reading are able to respond in meaningful ways. When students write about their historical figure in the Identity Charts strategy, a group member can read information as it is written.

Tiered Learning Experiences

Tiered learning experiences allow teachers to differentiate by students' readiness levels through helping them acquire important content and skills, within an appropriate level of challenge (Tomlinson, 1999). Using this approach, the teacher first selects the objectives or learning targets for the lesson. Then students are divided into flexible groups based on their readiness levels, learning abilities, needs, or strengths. Next, the teacher employs the analogy of a ladder with three or more rungs and designs the lesson based on three levels of learning abilities. First, a basic lesson is designed for the middle rung. From there, the lesson is cloned and adapted up a rung for more advanced learners and cloned and adapted down a rung for students who are struggling (Tomlinson, 1999). Throughout the lesson, it is important to skillfully incorporate innovative and hands-on activities at all basic and cloned lessons to ensure optimal student engagement.

Tiered learning experiences can be implemented in a variety of ways. Workcards, for example, provide students in each group with directions and a description of products they need

to create to demonstrate their learning outcomes (Heacox, 2002). Table 1 shows an example of how Workcards can be used with students following the reading and discussion of *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010). Students are divided into the green team (struggling learners), the blue team (on grade level learners), and the red team (accelerated learners). The activities for the Workcards are based on the lesson objectives or learning targets. The way in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the learning target is based on each team's strengths, needs, or abilities. The goal is to provide each team with activities falling within an appropriate level of challenge, what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development (1978). Evaluating a song or writing a newspaper article (red team), for example, are more challenging for most students than making a list or creating a diorama (green team). Teachers and students decide together whether students will do all of the activities created for their group or choose an activity based on student interests. The teacher circulates among the groups, providing as much guided instruction as necessary, while also encouraging students to be independent and build team consensus.

Table 1
Tiered Learning Experiences with Workcards

Workcard 1: Green Team	Workcard 2: Blue Team	Workcard 3: Red Team
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Choose one person from the book and complete the following: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make a list of the ways your person had a positive impact on civil rights. Think of a person in your school or community who has some of these same qualities. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use a shoebox to make a diorama showing this person doing his/her good works. Be ready to share your diorama with the class. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Read pages 21-22 and discuss why change happens slowly. Choose three people from these pages and interview a teacher in your school to find out how these people had a positive impact on civil rights. Be ready to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Identify the reasons why you believe these individuals were able to have a positive impact on civil rights. Present your findings in a creative way. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create a timeline of key events and accomplishments in the fight for civil rights. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create an open-minded portrait of one of the people in this book. On one side of the portrait draw the person's facial features and on the opposite side use words and pictures to describe this person's personality and character. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use library resources and the Internet to find more information about people who had a positive impact on the civil rights movement. Choose one person and complete the following: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Find a song that you think reflects this individual's life. Be prepared to play the song and discuss the relationship between the lyrics and melody and the changes this person brought to society. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Write a newspaper article that describes an important event in this individual's life 20 years from now. Where has life taken this person and why? (If this person has passed away, imagine that they are still living.)

<p>share your findings with the class.</p>		<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create a multimedia presentation that highlights this person's accomplishments and provides guidance to your classmates on how they can continue the good work of this individual.</p>
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Tiered learning experiences differ from traditional ability grouping in that the teacher uses flexible grouping. Students are permitted, and even encouraged, to move in and out of groups based on their needs or strengths on a particular day or during a specific lesson. As Tomlinson explains it, “In a sense, the teacher is continually auditioning kids in different settings- and the students get to see how they can contribute in a variety of contexts” (Hull-Sypnieski & Feriazzo, 2012, p. 3). A student who is struggling in reading, for example, may find that he or she is more musically inclined and would be more engaged in the red team, in which the group chooses and performs a song. A student who is academically advanced, but also enjoys artistic expression, may prefer to be involved with the green team, so he or she can help create a diorama. Decisions on student movement from one group to another always are ultimately made as a result of changes in need (Radencich & McKay, 1995), with both teachers and students acting as decision makers. The teacher’s role is to ensure that any group to which a student is moving will have the necessary knowledge and skills to complete the assigned task, the desire to provide a sense of belonging to any student who enters the group, and the power and skill to allow all group members to participate in the decision making process (Ford, 2005). Table 2 provides steps to follow in planning and implementing tiered learning experiences.

Table 2

Ten Steps for Planning and Implementing Tiered Learning Experiences

<p>Step #1: Determine objectives or learning targets. Be clear about what you want your students to learn and make sure all the tiered learning experiences you design align with these learning targets (Dobbertin, 2012; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). A sample learning target for the tiered learning experience: Students will be able to identify individuals who had a positive impact on the civil rights movement and discuss the ways these individuals made a difference.</p>
<p>Step #2: Select a book that will help your students reach the learning targets. Also consider that social studies trade books should be historically and factually accurate in content and illustrations, free of stereotyping, representative of diversity, respectful of cultural diversity, appealing to students, and developmentally appropriate (Beaty, 1997).</p>
<p>Step #3: Create flexible groups based on students’ readiness, abilities, strengths, or needs. Keep in mind that flexible groups are never static. There is considerable movement in and out of groups and groups change between learning experiences and subjects. In addition, there is no stigma attached to working directly with the teacher if <i>all</i> students participate in direct instruction on a regular basis.</p>

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Step #4: Create a tiered learning experience by designing activities for the middle rung of your ladder first. Think of this as the lesson and activities you would design if you were creating an experience that would meet grade level standards.
Step #5: Clone the lesson down a rung for students who struggle academically, work below grade level, or need help with the concepts or skills being addressed in your learning targets. Keep in mind that this experience needs to be just as active, interesting and engaging as your basic lesson.
Step #6: Clone the lesson up a rung for students who work above grade level, need extra challenge, or demonstrate strength in the concepts or skills being addressed in your learning targets.
Step #7: Implement the lesson by reading and discussing the book with the entire class. Provide each student with a Workcard that includes his or her team color. Allow teams to discuss their activities and make decisions on what activity(ies) they will do, how they will begin, and who will perform each task. Move from team to team to answer questions, provide direction, and ensure that <i>all</i> students are successfully engaged and contributing.
Step #8: As teams begin to work consider whether any students might benefit from moving to another group. This decision might come at a student's request, or because of a student's needs for more or less challenge or decision making power.
Step #9: Encourage teams to share work products and give each other feedback and encouraging suggestions. Assess each team's products using performance based evaluation methods. For example, rubrics might be developed to assess art projects or writing samples, and students can participate in their development.
Step #10. Engage students in reflecting on their team experiences and performance. Teams can discuss and share what they learned, what worked well, and what they might improve upon. Encourage individual students to consider what they might do differently to improve their performance during their next team experience.

Role of Writer; Audience; Format; Topic (RAFT)

The second approach to differentiated instruction is known as Role of Writer; Audience; Format; Topic (RAFT). Table 3 shows each component of the RAFT (Breux & Magee 2010, p. 132). The goal of RAFT is to differentiate according to students' interests and help improve social studies and language arts skills in ways that foster creativity, motivation, self-regulation, and higher order thinking. After discussing the book, *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010), the teacher explains the RAFT process to the students. Table 4 provides an example of RAFT components for this picture book.

Students may be encouraged to choose all four components of the RAFT process or the teacher may select one or more of the components for students. A student might choose, for example, to be Sasha Obama (Role) writing a thank you note (Format) to Abraham Lincoln (Audience) to thank him for his role in ending slavery (Topic). Students can be provided with a blank RAFT chart and, as a class, brainstorm options before they begin to write. When students share in the responsibility for their learning they take charge and feel more in control of the

desired outcome. Democratic decision-making results in increased motivation and a sense of empowerment. Brainstorming the RAFT options also gives students who struggle academically the opportunity to suggest ideas with which they have a higher level of comfort and skill. Students who might have difficulty with standard RAFT procedures can be encouraged to work with a buddy or share in a small group project led by the teacher. When in a small group, learners collaborate to choose their RAFT components and the teacher provides as much direct instruction and assistance as the group requires.

Table 3
RAFT - Role, Audience, Format, Topic

R	Role of the Writer	Who are you?
A	AUDIENCE	Who is the reader?
F	FORMAT	What is the student writing?
T	TOPIC	What is the student writing about?

Table 4
RAFT Components for Climbing Lincoln's Steps

Role of the Writer	AUDIENCE	FORMAT	TOPIC
Abraham Lincoln	Crowd at the Lincoln Memorial	Thank You Note	Freedom
Marian Anderson	Abraham Lincoln	Email Message	Civil Rights
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.	The American People	Obituary	Slavery
President Barack Obama	Children in 2011	Poem	Change Makers
Rosa Parks	President Barack Obama	Diary Entry	Racism

President Obama's Daughters (Sasha and Malia)	Your Class in School	Song	Life in 2011
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Open Questions

After reading aloud *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010), a teacher might ask questions to check for understanding. Questions typically are closed-ended with one correct answer. This type of questioning, though appropriate for recalling information, may not create opportunities for all diverse learners to respond. Those students who have short-term memory difficulty or who lack focus in remembering detailed or factual information may not easily respond. Open questions allow for many correct answers and encourage higher-order thinking. Students may be asked to generate questions instead of answers, develop deeper understanding of the materials, and learn to think critically (Small, 2010). Table 5 provides examples of both close ended and open-ended questions for *Climbing Lincoln's steps: The African American journey* (Slade, 2010).

Table 5
Examples of Close Ended and Open Ended Questions

Close Ended Questions	Open Ended Questions
Who signed the Emancipation Proclamation?	The answer is the Emancipation Proclamation. What might the question be?
Why wasn't Marian Anderson allowed to sing in Constitution Hall?	How are Abraham Lincoln and President Barack Obama alike? How are they different?
Who gave a speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963?	Create a sentence using the words <i>civil rights, Rosa Parks, and American people.</i>
Where is the Lincoln Memorial located?	Pretend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is still alive. What might be different?

Open questions are important in differentiating instruction for diverse learners in social studies classrooms. Through open questions, teachers can draw on the strengths of different students by encouraging varying responses and letting students know that there is no one absolute answer to every question. The key to this approach is to frame questions enabling students to sort out the facts, explore simultaneous issues, and support their arguments with the most plausible explanations (Gopnik, Sobel, Schulz, & Glymour, 2001). The use of open questions is an excellent way of cultivating critical thinking in students (Willingham, 2007).

Open questions allow learners to develop logical reasoning skills and take the risk of raising their hands in class, even if their perspective is different from others. No student is put on the spot to try and "guess" the answer the teacher is seeking. Open questions encourage learners to question the question itself and to think beyond the surface of what is being asked (Willingham, 2007). More importantly, open questions promote creativity, challenge students of all levels, and revitalize the learning atmosphere for everyone (Small, 2010).

Conclusion

Although most teachers consider it appropriate and necessary to modify curriculum, instructional strategies, and student products based on students' readiness levels and abilities, interests, and learning preferences, translating that philosophy into practical classroom strategies can be difficult. Incorporating easy-to-implement strategies such as Big Paper, Identity Charts, tiered learning experiences, RAFT, and open questions can help teachers begin to meet the needs of diverse learners in the social studies while allowing students to experience a democratic classroom where the responsibility for learning is shared.

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Author Bios

Dr. Kay A. Chick is a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Penn State Altoona. She obtained her doctorate from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and is a former elementary/special education teacher and school psychologist. Her research interests include social studies, children's literature, gender issues in education, and differentiated instruction. E-mail: kxc19@psu.edu

Dr. Barbara Hong is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Penn State Altoona and a Fulbright Scholar. She obtained her doctorate from Columbia University and holds three Master's degrees. Her research interests include teacher quality, learning disabilities, and self-empowerment. Dr. Hong is certified as a principal and special education teacher.

This is where differentiated instruction and assessment comes in. Teachers need to create a variety of entry points to ensure that student differing abilities, strengths, and needs are all taken into consideration. Students then need varying opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge based on the teaching, hence differentiated assessment. Differentiated instruction and assessment IS NOT NEW! Great teachers have been implementing these strategies for a long time. What does differentiated instruction and assessment look like? The assessment rubric should contain descriptors for both social skills and knowledge skills. As you can see, you have probably already been differentiating your instruction and assessment in much of what you're already doing. Teachers also must work with students who enter high school classrooms with literacy and numeracy skills that range from elementary to postsecondary grade levels. Combining all of these differences within each class-room forces teachers to seek strategies that enable them to teach all students effectively in mixed-ability classrooms. The foundation's evaluation of its high school initiatives has found that, among other teaching strategies, differentiated instruction has emerged as one important practice for addressing these challenges. As is true with the entire array of instructional practices available to teachers, differentiated instruction is not a silver-bullet remedy.

1. How do teachers use differentiation?
2. How can the perceived challenges to differentiated instruction be overcome?

A qualitative research method using a grounded theory approach to inquiry was used to investigate teachers perspectives on differentiated instruction. The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers perceptions about differentiated instruction in the foreign language classroom. A secondary purpose is to add to the knowledge base of differentiated instruction in the language classroom, since there are limited studies on this topic in foreign language classrooms at the compulsory level. This study will give us a little insight into foreign language classrooms in Iceland.