Differentiating Output Helps Clawson Students Show What They Know

By Kaitlin Shawgo, Writer/Editor at the Center for Educational Networking, and Lisonn Delcamp, ASD Teacher Consultant

After assigning a campaign poster project to his sophomore civics class, Clawson High School teacher David Starlin noticed something unusual about one of his students.

Each day, Starlin watched the student work diligently on his poster. But every time the student completed one piece of the poster, he threw it in the trash and started over. Starlin asked the student what he was doing and learned that the student had made a mistake on his project. The student found it extremely difficult to continue working on the poster knowing it had an error.

When the day came for the students to give campaign speeches and present their projects, Starlin knew that one student never finished his poster. After the other students made their speeches, the student raised his hand.

“I know I don’t have a poster, but do you mind if I present?” Starlin recalls the student asking.

Starlin felt uneasy, but he told the student to go ahead.

“Sure enough, the student gets up there and hits all the issues,” says Starlin. “He nailed every single thing I wanted him to understand in the assignment. Even though he didn’t have a poster, he was able to verbally identify everything.”

Throughout his teaching career, Starlin has made a point to differentiate instruction for students who perform at varying levels. In one class alone, he had a handful of students who were at grade level, a handful who were at a third grade reading level, and another 10 or 11 who had an individualized education program (IEP).

But the experience with this particular student showed Starlin that it was also important to differentiate students’ “output”—how students show teachers what they know.

Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) has promoted and explained differentiation practices as part of its intensive training programs for years, says
Maureen Ziegler, START’s Autism Intervention Specialist. For students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), differentiating assignments helps in particular.

“For students with autism, part of the disability is that they have a hard time with reciprocity and theory of mind, which means that they don’t always have the motivation to show you what they know,” says Ziegler.

Many students with ASD also have difficulties expressing themselves, she adds, so if a student with limited or no verbal skills is unable to give a presentation, his teacher can provide an opportunity to complete the assignment in a different way.

Although teachers are interested in differentiation, Ziegler says many often find it difficult to actually put it to practice. This is where Lisonn Delcamp came in.

When Starlin began working at Clawson High School six years ago, he was paired in the classroom with Delcamp, a teacher consultant in the district who had started compiling materials to help teachers differentiate assignments. Together, Delcamp and Starlin created materials for subjects that students with ASD often have trouble with—and some that can be difficult for teachers to differentiate—such as math, language arts, science, and history.

There are five levels of assignment differentiation, ranging from most complex to least complex.

- **Open-ended question:** Just like it sounds, an open-ended question allows students to answer questions in their own words. Students who have trouble with written language skills or processing spoken language may have the most trouble with these types of questions. These students may benefit from a different differentiation strategy.

- **Visual organization strategy:** This type of strategy helps students visually process how to answer a question. For example, a teacher may list directions instead of providing them in paragraph form, or draw a circle around important information he or she wants the student to pay attention to.

- **Closed strategy:** This type of strategy helps students use their recognition skills instead of their recall skills to answer a question. For example, a teacher may ask a student to answer by filling in the blanks. The teacher may also include a page number the student can reference in his or her textbook to help answer the question.

- **Choice strategy:** This type of strategy, which should be used in combination with another strategy, also gives students a visual way to recall information. The choice strategy allows students to choose an answer from a range of options.
• Yes/no strategy: The yes/no strategy is least complex; it changes the format of an open-ended or multiple-choice question to a yes/no question.

Although the strategies allow teachers to tailor assignments to meet students’ needs, says Ziegler, the goal is to help students perform at the closest level possible to their peers.

“As you move through the hierarchy, it’s going to gradually get more and more different from what the other students are doing,” she says. “But you want to try to keep them as close as possible to the typical curriculum expectations.”

Teachers should start with a strategy that works well for a student, such as a yes/no question, but once the student is comfortable with that strategy and gains understanding, teachers can begin working in a more challenging strategy, such as multiple-choice questions.

Another thing to keep in mind is that teachers don’t have to use the same differentiation technique for the same student across all subjects, says Ziegler. If a student does well in math, he may not need differentiation in that subject area. But if he finds language arts more difficult, he may need some level of differentiation.

At Clawson High School, Starlin has a lot of respect for the support staff he works with, but he likes that differentiating assignments allows students to stay in the general education classroom with their peers—and he has a little more control over how students are learning.

In addition to keeping students in the general education classroom, Starlin says differentiating assignments helps decrease behavioral issues and other disruptions in his class.

“When you put a task in front of a student and they can understand it, they can interact with it themselves with minimal supervision by an adult, you’ll get more out of them,” he says.

Starlin noted that the process has also helped strengthened his collaboration with special education teachers and support staff in the school. Because general education teachers have several classes and often more than a hundred students per day, it helps to have special education teachers on hand who understand a disability and how to help specific students.

Principal Ryan Sines is passionate about the benefits of differentiating assignments for students. When he first observed Starlin’s classroom, he was struck by the fact that no one would know certain students had differently formatted assignments unless they took a close look at them.

To get started, Sines says, try differentiating one assignment for students.
“You have to see that it works,” he says. “David’s classroom is where we always send teachers to go observe. It is successful here, and they need to know that it can work and does work. And this is one model for doing it.”

We know that differentiating output for students leads to increased engagement in the classroom. Even more, students are now learning alongside their peers from teachers who have the richest expertise and passion for the content.

For more information, visit START’s Differentiated Output Hierarchy page including the Research and Legal Background document and Differentiated material examples