by Deborah Scigliano and Shellie Hipsky
Focus on practical ways to spotlight one area at a time so you can differentiate for students’ interests, learning profiles, or abilities.

Circus music blares in the background as the flamboyant ringleader announces the astounding sights soon to be seen and heard. The action will take place in three rings. Everywhere your eyes land will be a new spectacle to behold. The lion’s roar fills the tent with energy and unpredictability. The clowns act out silly scenes that cause the audience to laugh with glee. The trapeze artists—very sure of their abilities—swing gracefully back and forth. To the crowd’s amazement, the tightrope walker dares to balance overhead, above all the rings.

As your classroom’s ringleader, trying to fulfill the needs of all of your learners, at times, can seem like a three-ring circus. Under the big top, amazing sights, sounds, and activities are everywhere you look. Every place your eyes land is a new spectacle to behold. There is so much to absorb that it can be overwhelming.

Just as enjoyment comes from the frenetic activity of the circus, benefits can stem from differentiating instruction for your learners. These benefits include a sense of self-efficacy, increased content understanding, learner empowerment, increased academic achievement, and inclusion of each child in the learning process (Chapman and King 2005; Lewis and Batts 2005; Tomlinson and McGuire 2006; Anderson and Algozzine 2007; Richards and Omdal 2007). Of course, you want the best outcomes for your learners. Yet, just as it is difficult to watch three rings of a circus all at once, it also can be daunting to differentiate instruction.

If you focus on one ring at a time, though, your enjoyment and appreciation of your circus experience is enhanced. Similarly, you can develop effective differentiated instruction experiences by focusing on one ring at a time. Start with what you are comfortable doing, and then add on from there. After all, you are the ringmaster, and you set the stage for your learners.

Three Rings: Differentiated Instruction

You can differentiate the way you present the content, process, and product. Content is the subject matter as specified by the curriculum. It is the heart of the lesson. Process is how the student learns or takes in the information. Product is the end result of the lesson, such as a culminating paper or activity.

The three rings, or factors, for presenting content, process, and product in your differentiated classroom include your students’ learning profile, ability, and interests (see figure 1). Let’s shine the spotlight on each ring separately.

**Figure 1. Three Rings of Differentiated Instruction**

**Ring One: Learning Profile** (Strong Man)

Appearing in our first ring is the strong man of the circus. This is the ring where your students’ individual strengths, preferences, and learning styles are highlighted. Assessing each student’s learning profile will give him or her an opportunity to shine. One of the ways to determine your students’ strengths is by using Gardner’s (1999) multiple intelligences. These include verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential.

You can assess your students’ multiple intelligences using several means. Observation, student interviews, and multiple intelligence surveys lend themselves well to determining learning. One self-assessment survey is located at www.ldrc.ca/projects/miinventory/mitest.html; and the Multiple Intelligences Development Assessment Scales (MIDAS™), which is endorsed by Howard Gardner because of its research validity, can be accessed at www.miresearch.org (Thousand, Villa, and Nevin 2007).

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A learning contract provides activities that are individualized based on the students’ learning profile. Learning contracts offer a way to let your students’ strengths, as assessed through their learning profiles, take center stage. You can use multiple intelligences to design contracts that highlight their preferred intelligences as well as the intelligences they do not use as often (Brualdi 1998).

Figure 2 is a sample multiple intelligence learning contract for a literature unit. This contract is designed for a student who is strong in verbal-linguistic and interpersonal intelligences. Specific ways of demonstrating content understanding also might be added to the contract for this student.

My Learning Contract

1. Write a poem about the main character in the story. (verbal-linguistic)
2. Keep a journal about your reactions to the story as you read it. (verbal-linguistic)
3. Interview three other students to find out their reactions to the story. (interpersonal)
4. Create a literature circle with other students and discuss the story. (interpersonal)
5. Enact a scene from the story. (bodily-kinesthetic)
6. Design a diorama of your favorite part of the story. (visual-spatial)

This learning contract example provides four activities that are geared to the student’s strengths and gives the student two opportunities to engage in learning outside of his or her preferences. The contract should spell out what accommodations the student needs to complete the learning contract—for instance, access to the computer during independent work time—and what is expected to demonstrate mastery of the concept. Once there is agreement on it, the contract can be signed by both the teacher and the student. When using multiple intelligences as a basis for a learning contract, it is important to include both the preferred strengths of each of your students as well as learning opportunities that will strengthen the student’s other intelligences.

Ring Two: Ability (High-Wire Act)

Your focus is now on ring two, where your students will perform—each to his or her ability—learning feats that will amaze and astound. You, as the ringmaster, determine the height of the wire—that is, the levels of expectation. When you are differentiating, tiered instruction gives each student the opportunity to learn at his or her ability level. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006, 107) defined tiering as “a readiness based instructional approach in which all students work with the same essential knowledge, understanding, and skill, but at different levels of difficulty based on their current proficiency with the ideas and skills.”

One approach to getting the wire to the right height for your students’ abilities is to follow the taxonomy of critical thinking skills (Bloom 1956; Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). These thinking skills—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—range from lower level to higher level. All levels are important to include for each learner (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006; Thousand et al. 2007). Though you will focus on providing the most appropriate levels according to your students’ content knowledge needs, it is important to remember to incorporate some higher levels for your learners who are struggling and some lower levels for your learners who need enrichment.

For any lesson you want to tier, assessment of each student’s prior knowledge of the content is an important first step (Richards and Omdal 2007). One way to do this is to administer a pretest, formally or informally. You can pose questions orally to ascertain the content familiarity, or you can choose to prepare written items concerning your specific content that access the level of knowledge your students already possess.

Once you have discovered your learners’ prior knowledge, you can start to set the height of the wires for each group. The students’ level of ability when acquiring knowledge of the content determines the height. You can form two, three, or even four groups of students according to their familiarity with the content (DelliCarpini 2006). You determine how many wires (groups) to have your students use in this ring.

Remember to provide a net for your learners as they walk their high wires. This safety net is the scaffolding that you will provide as they practice their new learning. Some ways you can scaffold your learners include: (a) modeling the correct task performance; (b) helping your students...
develop a plan to accomplish a task; (c) dividing complex
tasks into several simpler activities; and (d) giving fre-
quent feedback (Ormrod 2007).

For your students who demonstrate a need for a
more basic understanding of content, give more learning
choices that include the levels of knowledge, comprehen-
sion, and application. Those students who already have
a good understanding of the content should complete
activities that use higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and
evaluation. These activities will provide the differentiation
that is most appropriate for their successful learning.

Action verbs correspond with each level of the tax-
onomy classification (Tomei 2001). These verbs (see the
samples in table 1) can be beneficial when charting the
path your high-wire walkers take.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Action Verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>arrange, define, list, memorize, relate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>classify, explain, locate, report, discuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>demonstrate, solve, illustrate, dramatize, choose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>appraise, categorize, examine, distinguish, compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>collect, develop, create, organize, design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>appraise, defend, select, support, argue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Action Verbs Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy

You can use these verbs to construct meaningful ac-
tivities so that your learners may fully engage in learning the
content. Keep in mind that each of these levels should be available to all of your learners. When using the tax-
onomy to differentiate your learning according to ability,
remember that learners who struggle also need to engage in higher-level thinking skills, and learners who engage in enrichment opportunities also need to know and under-
stand the basic content.

One way to incorporate the thinking skills into your tiered lessons is to offer a menu of choices for your learn-
ers. After all, at a circus, food is an important part of the experience! Instead of cotton candy and fried food on a
stick, load the menu with enriched thinking skills that cor-
respond with the student’s prior knowledge and include a
side order of a new proficiency.

Let’s look at the students who, according to your pre-
assessment tool, have a good grasp of the content in your
science lesson on insects. Their menu might look like the
one in figure 3. The beverages and sandwiches address the
higher-level thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and
evaluation. The snacks address the lower-level skills of
knowledge, comprehension, and application.

Figure 3. Thinking Skills Menu

Directions: Please select one beverage, two
sandwiches, and one snack.

**Buggy Beverages**
- Compare insects and spiders.
- Create a super insect that has never been seen before.

**Crawly Sandwiches**
- Defend the benefits of mosquitoes.
- Distinguish the features of a beetle and a butterfly.
- Make an insect collection and identify each specimen.

**Creepy Snacks**
- List all of the insects you know.
- Illustrate an insect alphabet book.

Including all of the thinking skills for each of your students will help their performance in this ring. They will be walking their high wires with grace and ease thanks to your carefully selected, well-balanced diet of learning.

**Ring Three: Interest**
(Parade of Performers)
Ring three presents a wide variety of circus performers for
your enjoyment. Your attention may be on the juggler,
the clown, or the horses as they circle the ring. Where
you focus your attention depends on your interest at that
moment.

This focus of attention applies to your students as well. This is the ring where they get to decide, depending on what captures their interests at the time, what they want to do. Providing opportunities to engage in learning that interests your students will motivate them to learn (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006).
One of the first steps is to give your students an interest inventory. You can design one yourself or search for a prepared inventory. A prepared interest inventory can be found below the reference section at www.isec2005.org.uk/isec/abstracts/papers_r/ritter_s.shtml (Ritter and Morris 2005). Once you know your students’ interests, you can provide them with a variety of learning choices.

Podcasting is another way to capture your students’ interest. Podcatching is just one way to provide your students learning activities that interest them (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006). Figure 4 shows a board that might be used in a social studies unit on colonial life.

**Figure 4. Colonial Times Tic-Tac-Toe Board**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make a diorama.</th>
<th>Report on colonial apparel.</th>
<th>Write a news broadcast on life in the colonies.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a “Come to the Colonies” vacation brochure.</td>
<td>Free-Choice Activity</td>
<td>Learn a dance from this time period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress in colonial costume and talk about your life.</td>
<td>Cook a dish that was popular during colonial times.</td>
<td>Sketch a colonial home.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Providing a choice of activities also allows you to differentiate instruction for your gifted learners. One useful technique advocated for advanced students is curriculum compacting (Reis 2007). You identify and eliminate content already mastered by gifted students and then provide learning experiences that challenge and enrich them. Offering a choice of enriching opportunities promotes the interest and engagement of your gifted learners.

Podcasting is another way to capture your students’ interests. Teachers are now creating their own podcasts for their students to use (Patten and Craig 2007). This is a great way to tailor learning to your students’ interests and incorporate technology into the learning. Podcasts also have been found to be an empowering method for engaging English Language Learners (Patten and Craig). You can have your students create their own podcasts, giving them another means to express themselves (Gatewood 2008).

WebQuests are inquiry-based learning activities that provide organization for students who are exploring the Internet. They provide an interesting research task, structured environment, specific steps, and directions for completing the task, along with a list of appropriate Web sites and instructions for compiling data for the research project (Skylar, Higgins, and Boone 2007). When creating a lesson that requires students to research on the Internet, this technique can guide them toward appropriate Web sites in their interest areas.

Tapping into your students’ interests will allow them a range of motivational learning. One day, the choice may be to play lion-tamer; the next day, it might be the sword-swallow. Each day brings new and engaging learning in this ring.

Let the **Circus Begin!**

Shine your spotlight on one ring at a time. By choosing to start with one ring, the circus won’t seem so overwhelming to you. You will feel confident in your ability to differentiate instruction for your learners. Your learners also will gain confidence as they learn according to their learning profiles, abilities, and interests.

Before you know it, your three-ring circus of differentiated instruction will be featuring acts in all three rings at the same time. You will enthusiastically cry, “Ladies and gentleman, step right up to the greatest learning on earth—our differentiated classroom!”

**References**


