

## THE How To's OF Planning Lessons Differentiated BY Interest



A wise teacher knows that a key feature of artful teaching is having a plan to engage or “hook” students on

the topic at hand. Engagement is a nonnegotiable of teaching and learning. Two powerful and related motivators for engagement are student interest and student choice (Bess, 1997; Brandt, 1998). If a student has a spark (or better still, a fire) of curiosity about a topic, learning is more likely for that student. Similarly, a sense of choice about what or how we learn is also empowering, and thus an enhancement to learning. The trouble is, of course, that not all students in a class have the same interests, thus the need for differentiation again.

Content, process, and product can be differentiated according to student interest. One time in the year when Mr. Elkins differentiates content in response to student interest occurs during a standards-based unit on reading and writing nonfiction. While there are key under-

standings and skills on which all his students will focus, he has learned that the required skills and principles are more engaging to his students when what they read and write about is of genuine interest to them. When the unit begins, he guides students in selecting reading materials and topics they care about. He then builds the unit around their selections.

Ms. Bella likes to use Jigsaw, a cooperative learning strategy, as one way of differentiating process in response to student interest. As she and her students explore a broad topic, she asks each student to select a facet of the topic that is intriguing to him or her. At some point or points in the unit, Mrs. Bella creates Jigsaw teams that ask students to specialize on the facet they selected with other students who selected the same interest area. They then share what they learn with students in another group comprised of representatives of each of the facets explored.

Mrs. Gomez finds products an ideal way to tap into student interests. She does that some-

times by offering students varied ways of expressing what they learn through their product. Sometimes she gives students elements of understanding and skill that their products must contain and then guides the students in developing their own product assignments. Often she encourages students to add their own product goals to ones she has developed for the whole class. She finds that products allow her many ways to give her students choice and voice.

There are two ways for a teacher to think about student interest. First, of course, teachers who care about their students as individuals accept the difficult task of trying to identify the interests students bring to the classroom with them. Second, dynamic teachers try to create new interests in their students. When a teacher is passionate about a topic and shares the passion with his classes, similar interests are likely to emerge in many of the learners as well.

### **Drawing on Existing Student Interests**

Among goals of interest-based instruction are (1) helping students realize that there is a match between school and their own desires to learn, (2) demonstrating the connectedness between all learning, (3) using skills or ideas familiar to students as a bridge to ideas or skills less familiar to them, and (4) enhancing student motivation to learn. When a teacher encourages a student to look at a topic of study through the lens of that student's own interest, all four goals are likely to be achieved.

There are many strategies for drawing on student interests and linking them to the curriculum. Here are three approaches.

#### **"Sidebar" Studies**

During the unit, she will be emphasizing concepts of culture, conflict, interdependence, and change—concepts that guide much of the year's study. As part of the unit, students will read and discuss the textbook, as well as supplementary and primary source materials. They will visit a battlefield, have speakers visit their class, and see videos on the time period. Mrs. Janes asked her students to list things they like to think and learn about in their own lives. Among topics they generated were music, sports/recreation, people, families, reading, transportation, heroes/villains, medicine, food, travel, humor, clothing, books, unsolved mysteries, cartoons, and teens.

The teacher suggested to her 7th graders that they could learn a great deal about the time period by exploring it through their own interests, as those interests were manifest during the Civil War period. She helped them set up "sidebar" investigations that would go on throughout the unit. Their job was to see what their topic showed them about life during the Civil War in general, and about culture, conflict, change, and interdependence during that time. Students could work alone or with a partner on their sidebar study.

To support student success, Mrs. Janes helped students develop planning calendars, set goals for their work, and establish criteria for quality. She set check-in dates to monitor student progress along the way, and occasionally conducted minilessons on research for students who wanted help with information finding. Sometimes students had class time to work on their sidebar investigations. When they finished daily work, they could always work with the sidebar study. Sometimes it was homework.

Mrs. Janes found that class discussions throughout the unit were punctuated with insights the students were developing about

everyone. Motivation was high and learning was connected both to past units and to students' own lives.

### Interest Centers or Interest Groups

In Mr. Nickens's primary classroom, there are always times when students can meet in interest groups. For whatever his students are studying, Mr. Nickens creates an interest center to allow his young learners to find out more about what they are curious about. For example, while students studied animal habitats, there were interest centers on habitats of varied animals such as badgers, beavers, and polar bears. In those centers, students could learn about particular habitats as a way of expanding the unit's understandings. Ultimately, students who wanted to do so could form an interest group with one or more peers to create an interest center on the habitat of another animal for their peers, as well as students next year. In interest groups, students sometimes read together, sometimes had book discussions, sometimes shared what they were finding out from their own research, planned the interest center they would design, and did the work necessary to create the interest center.

The habitat study for the whole class continued at the same time. For some students whose interests in the topic were enduring, the interest groups continued to meet on the animal and habitat they were studying well after the unit on habitats ended. The combination of interest centers and interest groups encouraged students to both develop and expand interests.

### Specialty Teams

In a literature unit, Ms. Bollinger wants her 4th graders to explore ways authors use descriptive language to help readers "see" what they are writing about. Ms. Bollinger believes, however, that students will be more interested in the

language exploration if she allows them to look for effective and varied examples of description in the kinds of writing they most like to read. Students will form specialty teams to look at effective description in several kinds of writing: short stories, novels, fantasy, science fiction, nature writing, poetry, lyrics, and action comics. Teams will consist of three to four students with a common interest in a particular kind of writing. Task guidelines will focus students on looking for elements central in powerful description (use of figures of speech, role of verbs and adjectives, use of slang or regional language, wordplay, words created by authors, originality, and so on). Students will need to be ready to use what they learn in their specialty teams in a class discussion. Each group will also decide on passages to nominate for the Descriptive Hall of Fame, present those passages to the class, and defend their choices. In the end, the teacher's goal of analyzing powerful description should be more dynamic and memorable by virtue of tapping student interest than if everyone read the same materials.

In each of these instances, the teacher has helped students use existing interests as a vehicle for learning more about and becoming more invested in important ideas delineated by the curriculum. In no instance did the interest-based approach detract from essential understandings and skills, but rather made them more accessible, relevant, and memorable to students with varying interests.

### Expanding Student Interests

One of the great pleasures of teaching is the chance to introduce students to a world full of ideas and opportunities they've not yet discovered. Interest-based instruction can not only draw on and expand already existing student interests, but can help them discover new interests as well. Once again, there are many routes

to helping students discover new interests. Here are two examples.

### **Real-Life Applications of Ideas and Skills**

Ms. Paige is eager for her students to discover links between math and the adult world of work. Her 6th graders know little about what most adults do in their daily work—including, she has discovered, what their parents' jobs are like. She has asked each of her students to interview someone whose job seems interesting to them to find out how that person uses fractions and decimals in their occupation. Students will ask some preliminary questions to determine whether a potential interviewee does, in fact, use fractions and decimals in important ways. If not, a student will continue the search for someone whose job is of interest to the student and who does use fractions and decimals as an occupational tool. Students observe or shadow their interviewee, if possible.

Ms. Paige wants students to see that math is central to many kinds of work. She also knows that this exploration will help students develop an increased awareness of and interest in ways people earn a living and make a contribution to society. She and the students develop interview questions and develop a range of ways in which students can show what they learn. Some requirements are common to all students, including specifications for showing precisely how the person uses fractions and decimals.

Last year, students found out about the usefulness of fractions and decimals in jobs such as anesthesiology, auto repair, media specialist, secretary, pilot, pharmacist, composer, and business owner. Ms. Paige finds that math becomes "new" and exciting as students connect it with new and exciting insights about the world of work.

### **New Forms of Expression**

Mrs. Landis was tired of seeing the same four or five formats for history projects. Her students, she decided, were "stuck" on posters, dioramas, papers, and time lines as a way of showing what they learned. She invited six adults to visit the class to show students ways they expressed ideas. One man presented a captivating performance as a traveling medicine man. Another demonstrated the art of story telling. A third visitor talked about photojournalism and ways in which students could take or use pictures to reflect insights about history. A fourth visitor combined drama, mime, and music to present ideas. A fifth visitor talked about her use of symposium format to communicate. A final visitor demonstrated effective use of Web sites as a vehicle for sharing ideas. Each presenter left the students with descriptors for a quality presentation in his particular mode of expression.

Mrs. Landis challenged her students to avoid the "favorite four" ways of expressing their learning. Instead, she challenged them to use some of the new formats, or to propose options of their own—with their own proposals for appropriate quality in whatever they proposed. Her goal, she told them, was not so much to have the students try something in which they already knew they were good, but rather to take a chance on forms of expression that would help them see both themselves and history in a new light.

### **A Few Guidelines for Interest-Based Differentiation**

Interests are, in a way, windows on the world. A developed interest in one area is almost inevitably a route to learning about many other things. It's helpful to think about some interest areas that students may have, and to help them

**Figure 9.1**  
**Focus on Interest**

**Interest Areas**

**Fine Arts**

- Photography
- Painting
- Sculpture

**Literature**

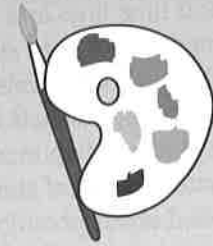
- Poetry
- Prose
- Fiction
- Nonfiction

**Technology**

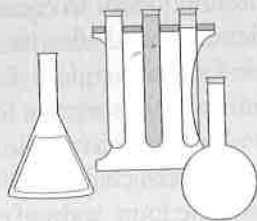
**Athletics**

**Sciences**

- Life
- Physical



$$E=MC^2$$



Mathematics  
History  
Social Sciences  
Journalism  
Politics/Government  
Business  
Music

- Song
- Dance
- Composition
- Performance

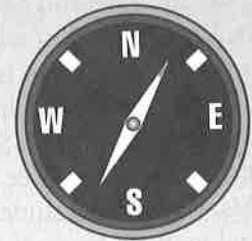
Theater/Film/TV

Travel/Culture

People

- Heroes
- Villains
- Young People

Sports/Recreation  
Crafts



**Mode of Expression**

**Oral**

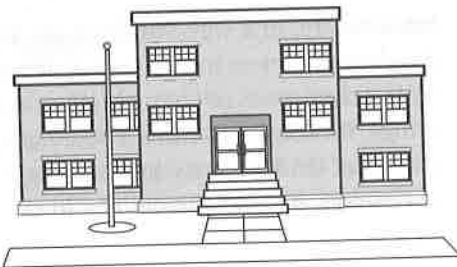
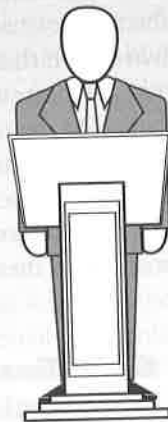
- Speech
- Seminar
- Drama
- Symposium

**Written**

- Creative
- Expository

**Designed/Built**

- Display
- Model



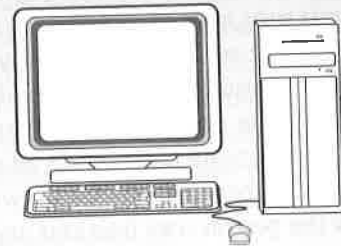
**Artistic**

- Graphics
- Painting
- Photography
- Illustration

**Abstract**

- Ideas
- Plans
- Theories

Service in  
Community



own awareness of other ways in which people express their ideas, feelings, and skills. Figure 9.1 provides a beginning framework for a teacher to consider options she might present to students for interest-based learning. There's much more that could be added to the figure, however. Feel free to expand it as you go.

There's no single recipe for tapping or expanding student interests, but here are a few pointers to consider. They should make interest-based differentiation more effective.

- **Link interest-based exploration with key components of the curriculum.** There's nothing wrong with an opportunity for students to meander about in an area of interest. In general, however, it's wise for the teacher to provide a bit of focus for the interest-based study. It's likely the curriculum specifies certain concepts, categories, understandings, and skills that students should acquire. If the teacher can help students see how those essential curricular elements are revealed through learning about an interest area, then both the student's goals and the goals of the curriculum can be served simultaneously. Further, common class discussions are much easier if all students explored common understandings and used common skills—even though the interest-based explorations differ.

- **Provide structure likely to lead to student success.** There's often an element of student independence required for interest-based differentiation. That's the case because different students will be pursuing different interests, as opposed to everyone in the class moving lock-step through the curriculum. Some students are highly independent, even at an early age. Others need much more guidance to succeed. In every case, it's the job of the teacher to provide the sort of scaffolding that helps a student

setting goals, rubrics, time lines, checkpoints, peer critiques of drafts, miniworkshops on conducting research, or other structures you can develop to ensure that your students work smarter in their interest-based work.

- **Develop efficient ways of sharing interest-based findings.** It's often not the best use of time for each student in a class of 30 to present their work to every other student. That's particularly true if we've not invested time in teaching students how to be compelling presenters. Sharing quads, in which each student presents to three others, may be more effective than whole class sharing. The quads are sometimes most effective when all students in the quad share a common interest. At other times, however, students learn more by sharing with students who explored different interests. You may want to think about having students share interest-based products with adults who have a similar interest. (In that case, have the student find her own audience as part of the product requirements.) Students can create exhibits for perusal by others rather than oral presentation.

- **Create an open invitation for student interests.** One way to contribute to an open and inviting classroom environment is to let students know that you welcome their ideas and want them to let you know what they are interested in. When students know they can propose ideas for tasks and projects and believe you'll help them find a way to expand their own interests, there is a much greater sense of shared ownership of learning. Fortunate students hear teachers say, "Here's an idea I had. How can we make it better?" Or, "Here's something important to learn about. How would you like to come at it?" Or, "What would make this interesting for you?"

time to time, there's a student who is on fire to learn about something that's just not part of the curriculum. You may well be the best teacher for that student if you can find a way to let him pursue that passion—even if it means giving up some of what you had in mind. For some students, the greatest gift a teacher can give is permission to explore a topic, time to do it, and an interested ear.

Chances are that such a student won't become an academic wreck because she missed one class project or a week of homework or some class discussions. Your affirmation that the student's hunger to learn is worthy of nurturing and trust may count for much more in the long run than a carefully prescribed and rigid curriculum. Besides, you can often embed your agenda in the student's agenda if necessary.

- **Remember that interest-based differentiation can be combined with other types of differentiation.** It's often possible to have a task or product that combines common elements for a whole class, some readiness-based components, some interest-based components, and some learning profile options. Although it's convenient to think about differentiation according to the categories of readiness, interest, and learning profile, it's not necessary to separate the categories in planning or in instruction.

### **A Glimpse at Strategies That Support Interest Differentiation**

There are many instructional strategies that are ready made to support interest-based differentiation. Figure 9.2 lists a number of them. While this book does not afford the opportunity to explore each of the strategies, information is available in educational resources on all of them. Here is a brief overview of a few of the strategies.

**I-Search.** This process encourages students to be an inquirer on a topic of personal interest based on their experience. The I-Search format helps students learn to uncover their own curiosity, find and use sources (including interviews) helpful in answering their questions, write what they find, and judge the rigor of their own work (Joyce & Tallman, 1997; Macrorie, 1988).

**Orbitals.** This strategy encourages students to raise questions of interest to them individually, figure out how to find answers to their questions, and devise ways to share their findings with peers. The questions may vary in complexity. The duration of the finding-out process will also vary. Thus students with quite different levels of academic or research sophistication can develop interests with this approach (Stevenson, 1992).

**Design-A-Day.** Students decide what to work on for a class period or several class periods. They specify goals, set time lines, work toward their goals, and assess their own progress. This strategy is useful when students have a particular interest to pursue or when they'd like to do something they've seen a classmate do during a differentiated class. The strategy is also a good early step in preparing students to succeed with longer and more demanding formats such as learning contracts.

**Group Investigation.** This cooperative learning strategy is excellent for helping students decide on a topic of personal interest, find out about the topic in defensible ways, work collaboratively, and present findings with confidence. The strategy details the role of the teacher and students in each phase of the investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992).

**WebQuests.** The WebQuest is a teacher-designed Internet lesson developed with specific

**Figure 9.2**  
**Strategies That Support**  
**Interest-Based Differentiation**

-  Exploratory studies
-  Studying concepts and principles through the lens of interest
-  Student choice of tasks
-  Independent study
-  Orbitals
-  Design-A-Day
-  I-Searches
-  Mentorships/Apprenticeships
-  Group Investigation
-  Interest groups
-  Jigsaw
-  Literature circles
-  WebQuests
-  Negotiated criteria for tasks and products
-  Student-selected audiences

learning goals in mind, some specified and relevant Internet links, and guidelines that support students in the research or finding out process. The teacher designs a WebQuest to give individuals or small groups of learners the opportunity to use research, problem solving, and basic skills—as they move through a process of finding out, drawing conclusions about, and developing a product on a topic or question. WebQuests can easily be differentiated by readiness, but are also very well suited to differentiation according to student interest (Kelly, 2000).

**Jigsaw.** In this cooperative strategy, students work with peers who study one facet of a topic. They then return to a “home-base” group for sharing what they have learned. The home-base group is composed of a student specializing in each facet of the topic. Students in the home-base group are responsible for reporting to the group on their specialty topic and for learning what other students report (Clarke, 1994).

**Literature Circles.** This student-led discussion format provides excellence guidance that allows students to read on topics of interest and share readings with others who read the same material. It allows teachers to break away comfortably from the sense that all students must read the same materials in order to have meaningful discussions (Daniels, 1994).

**Negotiated Criteria.** In this format, a teacher may specify some whole-class requirements for product or task success. The student also contributes some criteria of personal interest to her. Finally, the teacher may specify one or more criteria for an individual student.

There's lots of talk in educational circles about creating lifelong learners. It's easy to argue for schools as places where students come to believe that learning is fulfilling, consuming, and deeply satisfying. It's more difficult to realize the goal. Our chances of doing so are greatly enhanced if, as teachers, we cultivate and affirm student interests.



The next “how to” chapter goes beyond student interests to encompass learning profiles—styles and intelligences.