Bridging the Gap: Teaching Students Who Fall Far Below or Far Above Grade Level

On February 26, 2015, Scholastic and University of Phoenix® College of Education brought together education experts Michael Pfeiffer, Jeanne Muzi and Laura Robb to discuss strategies to help educators teach, reach and engage students who fall far below or far above grade level. The presenters explored tips for implementing differentiated instruction to accommodate varied learning abilities in today’s classrooms.

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Webinar highlights

**The Key to All Students Learning** — Engaging students in instructional activities that maximize learning is paramount to student success. Student engagement includes four key components:

- **Relationships:** Building a relationship with students that demonstrates defined roles, trust, respect and support will help students learn. It is important to establish a safe, nurturing environment for all students, and to establish what is negotiable and what is not.

- **Structure:** Make your expectations known. Use cooperative learning groups, and allow students to interact and talk. Reward on-task behavior and good decisions.

- **Relevance:** If lessons aren’t relevant, kids won’t connect. Provide learning goals and expectations, help students track their growth, celebrate success and offer support when needed.

- **Fun:** Make your lessons exciting, provide variety and challenge students. Involve students — try project-based learning to support leadership and exploration. And be sure to have fun teaching so that your enthusiasm extends to students.

**Watch for Trapdoors** — Factors that can inhibit engagement include boredom, fear, breakdown of relationships, subject matter that is too difficult or too easy, students’ past experiences and variables outside of school, among others. Monitor these factors to adjust your approach as needed.

**Offer Opportunities** — To teach students with varied learning abilities, offer variety. Create experiences that are engaging and meaningful, including a wide range of teacher-guided and independent learning opportunities that enable students to understand, practice and extend learning in different ways. Facilitate differentiated discussions, build metacognition, develop questioning skills and create a variety of graphic organizers that can be adapted for a range of levels, skills and concepts.

**Promote Classroom Conversations** — Use higher-order thinking skills to differentiate instruction — from whole class to small groups to partners to individual conferencing. Encourage purposeful student discussions focused on ideas, possibilities, concepts and questions. Incorporate conversation starters designed to spark discussion and promote
communication skills and listening comprehension. Try using pictures or poems to prompt conversation, and use Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide.

**Build Metacognition** — Provide students with opportunities to strengthen their metacognition, such as with “stop and think” activities, which can help students clarify ideas and comprehension and recognize confusion.

**Develop Questioning Skills** — Integrate a wide range of questions into discussions, including student-generated, open-ended and higher-order questions. Higher-order questions challenge students, stimulate curiosity and encourage reflection. Plan questions for all student levels.

**Capture Student Thinking** — Help students learn how to examine their thinking process by modeling skills and allowing them to practice these skills using various strategies and tools, such as customized graphic organizers.

**Differentiate Reading Instruction** — To help develop reading skills, students need three layers of reading: interactive read-alouds, instructional reading and independent reading. To differentiate reading, organize a four- to eight-week unit of study around a genre in which students choose and read different books at their instructional reading level.

- **Eight elements for planning a unit of study:**

  1. **Genre:** Select a genre and determine what you want students to know about it, such as identifying text features.
  2. **Issues and essential questions:** Determine questions. Students can help develop them.
  3. **Reading strategies:** Establish strategies students will practice, like inferring and identifying main idea and purpose.
  4. **Vocabulary lessons:** Students use context clues and other language to improve vocabulary and comprehension.

  5. **Interactive read-aloud:** Use an excerpt for teaching.
  6. **Assessments:** Students can help create and choose assessment tools, like poems, persuasive writing, video interviews and visual designs. Assessments may be the same for all students, although books differ.
  7. **Students’ materials and reading goals:** Students should have goals, such as read at least two books and two articles.
  8. **Unit goals:** Help students read fiction and nonfiction with depth and engagement and share their learning.

- **Selecting books:** Offering choice enables teachers to differentiate reading and engage students. Gather books of varied reading instructional levels. Let students choose books and have them note points where they will stop, think and discuss the book with a partner. Partners should be no more than one year apart in instructional reading level. Reading levels may differ, but the thinking skills you focus on can be the same.

- **Monitoring reading:** Students should read instructional books for 30 minutes three to four times a week. Check comprehension after the first two chapters and prepare to suggest students change books if the original is too difficult. Predetermine points when partners will discuss essential questions, share information and take notes. Teachers should listen in on discussions, confer with individual students and negotiate reading and writing goals.
You wanted to know

Teachers attending the webinar had some questions on the topic of teaching students who fall far below or far above grade level. Check out what your peers wanted to know and responses from the presenters.

**Q** How do I get those students who are reluctant to speak to share their thoughts?

**A** The first thing to implement when trying to involve all learners in rich classroom conversations is response strategies beyond just raising hands (often reluctant participants will not volunteer their responses). Pose questions, provide wait time and then call on a student by pulling a stick, spinning a wheel, using hand signals or with color cards. You can also try providing reluctant students with support by having them respond with a partner. Use Think Pair Share, Clock Partners or Look Lean Whisper so students can work together, come up with ideas and gain experience sharing their responses. As teachers, it is important to model how to answer a question and to understand what uncertainty looks and feels like. Create a classroom environment that is thoughtful and not merely focused on students responding to questions as quickly as possible. — Jeanne Muzi

**Q** Could you provide some examples of favorite graphic organizers?

**A** My favorite graphic organizers are the ones that can be easily adapted for a range of student abilities and that provide me with information about what each student has learned, and what needs to be revisited and reinforced. KWLs can be quickly differentiated into a K & H (What do I know and How do I know it) or a CWQ (Connection, Wondering and Question). Venn diagrams can be turned into tri-diagrams or simplified to an In & Out Circle. By teaching students how to think and work with one kind of graphic organizer, then showing the students how to customize the organizers for different tasks, goals and challenges, teachers can help students access a range of tools to utilize. Graphic organizers provide structure for students to organize their thinking and are easily differentiated by modifying the tool based on student needs. — Jeanne Muzi

**Q** How are you able to keep track of all the books that students are reading?

**A** All students have a reader’s notebook that stays at school and contains a record of instructional reading that occurs during class. Students write their instructional reading texts in their notebooks because they write about their instructional reading to test and clarify hunches, to explore themes, etc. In the back of their notebooks, students tape a reading log and keep a list of completed or abandoned independent reading. Teachers need to provide students with a few minutes twice a week to log in their independent reading books. The student keeps the records, and the teacher can check notebooks and logs. — Laura Robb

**Q** Is there a value in having students who are below grade level read to younger students in school?

**A** Yes, if the planning of this buddy system is intentional. The younger student chooses the book the pair will read, and this usually fits the instructional needs of the older student. The older student can teach the younger about predicting, stopping to think and ask questions, making inferences, using text evidence, etc. I've used this strategy — its success depends on having enough time to meet and the older student's ability to refine skills and strategies so he or she can teach the younger buddy. This can result in progress for both students, but it impacts positively on the self-confidence and self-efficacy of the older student. — Laura Robb
You wanted to know (continued)

Q I have seen so many different types of classroom arrangements during my observations. It is difficult to say which one works best. Are there any suggestions you can provide to a first-year teacher on how to set up the classroom at the start of the year?

A There is no single best classroom arrangement, as your room arrangement should reflect your instructional activities. I will tell you that rows scream boring lecture and lack of engagement. Decorate your room with student projects and writing, and let students be proud of their accomplishments! Create areas for centers and/or collaborative learning groups to promote discussion, research and peer interaction. Use a blended classroom, so as you differentiate instruction and work with small groups using mini-lessons, other students can engage in other learning activities independently or collaboratively.

— Michael Pfeiffer

Q Time is our greatest enemy. Do you have any suggestions for finding the time to incorporate the fun activities with the other material we need to teach?

A The answer to this is effective planning, not more time! Any material a teacher teaches can and should be fun to teach as well as fun to learn. Incorporate collaborative groups, group research, presentations, movement, technology, video clips and academic games. But the teacher must do research, plan accordingly and be willing to try new instructional strategies!

— Michael Pfeiffer

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