CONTENTS

LIST OF REPRODUCIBLE PAGES vii

LIST OF FIGURES viii

FOREWORD x

INTRODUCTION 1

Critical Elements for Success in a Differentiated Classroom 2

About This Book 2

How to Use This Book 4

Chapter 1: Identifying Your Learning Goals 6

Differentiation and Content Standards 6

Know Your KUDo's 6

Thinking Through the When and How of Differentiation 8

Chapter 2: Examining Your Professional Practices 11

Know Yourself as a Teacher 11

Know Your Students 19

Chapter 3: Applying Practical and Doable Assessment Strategies 25

The Role of Preassessment in Differentiation 27

Formative Assessment 37

Summative Assessment 44

Should I Differentiate Assessments? 48

Assessment Modifications for Special Needs Students 55

Differentiated Grading on Differentiated Assessments 56

Chapter 4: Using a Differentiated Learning Plan 57

The Nine Phases of Using the Differentiated Learning Plan 59

When and How to Differentiate Using a DLP 62

Chapter 5: Motivating Learning Through Choice Opportunities 71

Offering Choices in Content, Process, and Products 72

Formats for Choice Opportunities 72

Using Choice Opportunities with Primary Students 83

Shopping for Ideas for Choice Opportunities 84

Chapter 6: Prescribing Tiered Assignments and Using Flexible Grouping 85

Tiered Assignments 85

Grouping in a Variety of Ways for a Variety of Purposes 99

Chapter 7: Maintaining Flexibility in Planning and Teaching 107

Flexibility in Lesson Routines 107

Flexibility in Delivering Differentiated Activities 115

Chapter 8: Developing Student Responsibility and Independence 118

Your Management Profile 118

Routines to Make Everyday Events Go Smoothly 120

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LIST OF REPRODUCIBLE PAGES

Chapter 9: Using Ethical Grading Practices 130
What Is Fair? 130
The Purposes and Problems of Grading 130
Grading in the Differentiated Classroom 131
Grading Is Personal 135

Chapter 10: Differentiating for Gifted and Talented Learners 136
How Is Differentiation Different for the Gifted? 136
Strategies for Differentiating for Gifted and Talented Learners 136
Differentiation for Gifted Learners Is Different 148

Chapter 11: Using Differentiation Strategies in Response to Intervention 153
The Fundamental Beliefs of RTI 153
A Three-Tier Model 154
A Problem-Solving Process 155
Universal Design for Learning 155
The RTI–DI Link 156
How to Use This Book for RTI 156

Chapter 12: Providing Leadership for Differentiated Classrooms 158
Teacher Leaders 158
Developing a School-Based Action Plan for Differentiation 159
Reflecting on Teaching Practices 164
Strategies for Keeping Differentiation at the Forefront 165

CONCLUSION 168

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES 170

INDEX 174

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 179

Teacher Inventory on Differentiation Practices and Strategies ... 13–14
Continuum of Levels of Teacher Development in Differentiation ... 15–18
Survey of Students 20
Class Diversity Profile 21–24
Differentiated Learning Plan 58
Checklist of Six Essential Features of Differentiated Choice Boards 73
Criteria for Well-Designed Tiered Assignments 87
Three-Tier Task Planning Framework 96
Tiered Assignment Design Template 100
25 Formats for Differentiation 116–117
Classroom Management Continuum 119
Assignment Check-In Sheet 124
Criteria for Well-Designed Anchor Activities 128
Differentiation for All Students vs. Differentiation for Gifted Learners 137
Guidelines to Develop Curriculum Depth and Complexity 141
Bloom's Taxonomy 144
Template for Designing Tiered Assignments ... 149
School-Based Action Plan for Differentiation ... 160
The 20 Foundational Beliefs of Differentiated Classrooms 162
Walkthrough Indicators of Differentiation in Action 166
Tips for Keeping Differentiation Alive in Your School 167
The Habits of Differentiation 169

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LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: The Cycle of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment....2

FIGURE 2: From Standards to Summative Assessment....9

FIGURE 3: Systematic Unit-Level Assessment Procedures....26

FIGURE 4: Preassessment Strategies....28

FIGURE 5: Preassessment Strategies for Specific Curricular Areas....29

FIGURE 6: Five Learning Preferences for a Math Task: Computing Percentiles....30

FIGURE 7: Sample Topic Web....32

FIGURE 8: Sample Walkabout Chart....33

FIGURE 9: Knowledge Bar Graph Template....33

FIGURE 10: Sample Knowledge Bar Graph....33

FIGURE 11: Sample Check-in Slips....34

FIGURE 12: Sample Frayer Diagram....35

FIGURE 13: Common Frayer Diagram Templates....35

FIGURE 14: Formative Assessment Strategies....39

FIGURE 15: Sample Graphic Organizer: Events in the Civil War....40

FIGURE 16: Sample Graphic Organizer: Positions on an Environmental Issue....41

FIGURE 17: Sample Exit Slip....43

FIGURE 18: Sample Preview/Review....44

FIGURE 19: Independent and Teacher-Facilitated Assessments....45

FIGURE 20: Assessing English Language Learners in Teacher Facilitated Assessments....47

FIGURE 21: Task-Application Continuum....49

FIGURE 22: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #1....50

FIGURE 23: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #2....50

FIGURE 24: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #3....50

FIGURE 25: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #1....51

FIGURE 26: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #2....51

FIGURE 27: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #3....52

FIGURE 28: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #1....53

FIGURE 29: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #2....53

FIGURE 30: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #3....53

FIGURE 31: More or Less Scaffolding: Example #1....54

FIGURE 32: More or Less Scaffolding: Example #2....54

FIGURE 33: Task Involving Student Choice: Example #1....54

FIGURE 34: Task Involving Student Choice: Example #2....55

FIGURE 35: Totally 10 Example....56

FIGURE 36: Ideas to Hook Students into Learning....60

FIGURE 37: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #1....63–64

FIGURE 38: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #2....65–66

FIGURE 39: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #3....67–68

FIGURE 40: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #4....69–70

FIGURE 41: Nonfiction Book Tic-Tac-Toe....74

FIGURE 42: Fiction Book Tic-Tac-Toe....75

FIGURE 43: Math Review Tic-Tac-Toe....75

FIGURE 44: Spelling Tic-Tac-Toe....76

From *Making Differentiation a Habit: How to Ensure Success in Academically Diverse Classrooms* by Diane Heacox, Ed.D., copyright © 2009. Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

FIGURE 45: Mythology Questions Tic-Tac-Toe.....76
FIGURE 46: Learning Preference Tic-Tac-Toe Template 77
FIGURE 47: Basic Order of Operations Choice Board 77
FIGURE 48: Advanced Order of Operations Choice Board 77
FIGURE 49: Solar System Tic-Tac-Toe: Basic Version 78
FIGURE 50: Solar System Tic-Tac-Toe: Advanced Version.....79
FIGURE 51: Informational Text Two-by-Two Board 80
FIGURE 52: Sports and Clothing Two-by-Two Board 80
FIGURE 53: Technical Writing Show-and-Tell Board.....81
FIGURE 54: Civil Rights Movement Show-and-Tell Board.....81
FIGURE 55: Fractions RAFT 82
FIGURE 56: American History RAFT 83
FIGURE 57: Primary Choice Board 83
FIGURE 58: Choice of Primary Book Projects.....84
FIGURE 59: Tiering by Readiness: Example #1 88
FIGURE 60: Tiering by Readiness: Example #2 89
FIGURE 61: Tiering by Level of Challenge/Complexity: Example #1.....89
FIGURE 62: Tiering by Level of Challenge/Complexity: Example #2.....90
FIGURE 63: Tiering by Degree of Structure Example.....91
FIGURE 64: Tiering by Degree of Abstraction Example 91
FIGURE 65: Tiering by Level of Support Example.....92
FIGURE 66: Ecosystems Word Bank.....93
FIGURE 67: Ecosystems Chart.....93
FIGURE 68: Ecosystems Graphic Organizer 93
FIGURE 69: Tiering by Learning Preference Example.....94
FIGURE 70: Three-Tier Task Example 97
FIGURE 71: Sample Three-Tier Task Planning Framework 98
FIGURE 72: Tiered Assignment Design Template: Example #1.....101
FIGURE 73: Tiered Assignment Design Template: Example #2.....102
FIGURE 74: Math Lesson Routine.....108
FIGURE 75: Sample Math Lesson Routine: Fraction and Decimal Equivalents.....108
FIGURE 76: Differentiated Math Lesson Routine: Fraction and Decimal Equivalents.....109
FIGURE 77: Lesson Routine Scenario A.....111
FIGURE 78: Lesson Routine Scenario B 111
FIGURE 79: Lesson Routine Scenario C.....112
FIGURE 80: Lesson Routine Scenario D.....112
FIGURE 81: Reading Readiness: Story Maps 113
FIGURE 82: Student Choice: Deserts.....114
FIGURE 83: Classroom Management Jigsaw 118
FIGURE 84: Clock Buddies 122
FIGURE 85: Sample Writing Project Menu 127
FIGURE 86: Tiered Assignment for Gifted Learners 139
FIGURE 87: Developing Advanced Standards for Gifted Learners 140
FIGURE 88: Sample Guidelines to Develop Curriculum Depth and Complexity.....142
FIGURE 89: Trigger Words for Critical Reasoning.....145
FIGURE 90: Sample Tiered Assignment Using Critical Reasoning Trigger Words.....145
FIGURE 91: Trigger Words for Creative Thinking.....145
FIGURE 92: Sample Tiered Assignment Using Creative Thinking Trigger Words.....146
FIGURE 93: Trigger Words for Problem Solving 146
FIGURE 94: Sample Tiered Assignment Using Problem Solving Trigger Words.....146
FIGURE 95: Complexity-Rigor Matrix.....147
FIGURE 96: Template for Designing Tiered Assignments: Energy Sources 150
FIGURE 97: Template for Designing Tiered Assignments: Simple Machines.....151
FIGURE 98: Template for Designing Tiered Assignments: Citizenship 152
FIGURE 99: RTI's Reflective Process 155
FIGURE 100: The RTI–DI Link 157

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FIGURE 1: The Cycle of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment....2

FIGURE 2: From Standards to Summative Assessment....9

FIGURE 3: Systematic Unit-Level Assessment Procedures....26

FIGURE 4: Preassessment Strategies....28

FIGURE 5: Preassessment Strategies for Specific Curricular Areas....29

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FIGURE 7: Sample Topic Web....32

FIGURE 8: Sample Walkabout Chart....33

FIGURE 9: Knowledge Bar Graph Template....33

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FIGURE 11: Sample Check-in Slips....34

FIGURE 12: Sample Frayer Diagram....35

FIGURE 13: Common Frayer Diagram Templates....35

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FIGURE 15: Sample Graphic Organizer: Events in the Civil War....40

FIGURE 16: Sample Graphic Organizer: Positions on an Environmental Issue....41

FIGURE 17: Sample Exit Slip....43

FIGURE 18: Sample Preview/Review....44

FIGURE 19: Independent and Teacher-Facilitated Assessments....45

FIGURE 20: Assessing English Language Learners in Teacher Facilitated Assessments....47

FIGURE 21: Task-Application Continuum....49

FIGURE 22: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #1....50

FIGURE 23: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #2....50

FIGURE 24: Basic to Challenging Tasks: Example #3....50

FIGURE 25: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #1....51

FIGURE 26: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #2....51

FIGURE 27: Simple to Complex Applications: Example #3....52

FIGURE 28: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #1....53

FIGURE 29: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #2....53

FIGURE 30: Structured to Open-Ended Tasks: Example #3....53

FIGURE 31: More or Less Scaffolding: Example #1....54

FIGURE 32: More or Less Scaffolding: Example #2....54

FIGURE 33: Task Involving Student Choice: Example #1....54

FIGURE 34: Task Involving Student Choice: Example #2....55

FIGURE 35: Totally 10 Example....56

FIGURE 36: Ideas to Hook Students into Learning....60

FIGURE 37: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #1....63–64

FIGURE 38: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #2....65–66

FIGURE 39: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #3....67–68

FIGURE 40: Differentiated Learning Plan: Example #4....69–70

FIGURE 41: Nonfiction Book Tic-Tac-Toe....74

FIGURE 42: Fiction Book Tic-Tac-Toe....75

FIGURE 43: Math Review Tic-Tac-Toe....75

FIGURE 44: Spelling Tic-Tac-Toe....76

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CHAPTER 5

Critical Element: Motivating Learning Through Choice Opportunities

In many classrooms, the first step in differentiation is the use of student choice.

Indeed, choice opens up opportunities and provides students with varied experiences.[1] Curriculum expert Robert Marzano suggests that students' intrinsic motivation is linked to their interests. Students are simply more motivated to do the work if they are able to act on their interests through choice. But for choice to truly reflect differentiated instruction, teachers must be both analytical and planful in the design of choice experiences. Choice is not haphazard, random, or uncontrolled. In a differentiated classroom, choice is "controlled choice." You determine when student choice may occur, you design the activities students may choose from, and you control which choices students may make.

Choice provides students the opportunity and power to act on their interests; and the key to motivation is interest. Not only does choice motivate students to learn but also to actively engage in their learning. Choice "hooks" students into learning and doing the work. Whether your students are kindergartners or high school seniors, they want power. Choice is a way to enable students to gain a real measure of control over their learning.

Choice opportunities are also an easy and time-saving strategy for designing and facilitating multiple tasks in your classroom. Multiple activities are planned ahead, therefore, saving you some day-to-day planning time. Another time-saver is to develop "generic" choice opportunities, for example, a choice board presenting spelling activities that can be used repeatedly with each new list of words.

> Nothing should be offered as a choice unless *all* students have previously worked with the process or product.

Creating choice boards with broad themes such as historical events or genres of literature enable you to reuse choice boards, thus decreasing your planning time.

In designing choice opportunities, the most critical rule to follow is: Nothing should be offered as a choice unless *all* students have previously worked with the process or product. If a choice is offered to students to create a Web page, a tri-fold display board, or an artifact box to convey family history, and the students have not been introduced to these products previously, you have a management problem. Given their lack of experience with these products, you would need to teach each small group how to do the project of their choice. Why do that to yourself? Teach your whole class how to conduct a process or create a particular product *before* you use it as a choice option. This potentially

1 Robert J. Marzano, *The Art and Science of Teaching* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).

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means that at the beginning of a school year you offer fewer choices than at the end of the year, when you have introduced your students to many processes and products.

Offering Choices in Content, Process, and Products

Students may be offered choice in content, process, or products. Choice in content reflects opportunities for students to select *what* they might learn. While guided by learning goals or academic standards, you can offer students opportunities to act on their interests or go into greater depth on particular topics. At its simplest level, students might choose from a list of amphibians and engage in more in-depth research on the animal. At more sophisticated levels, you might assemble a collection of historical fiction books related to a social studies topic that represent a variety of reading-readiness levels (based on, for example, Lexile scores). Then, you organize the books into collections by readiness levels and ask students to choose any book of interest to them from specific collections of books based on their reading-readiness levels. In another example, students may be working on the same learning goal related to writing summaries, but the materials to summarize may be open to controlled student choice. You provide reading materials representing a variety of topics reflecting your students' interests. Choice in content enables students to act on their interests and motivates them to complete the assignment.

When you enable students to choose *how* they learn, you are using choice in process. This kind of choice can be implemented as easily as telling students that they may read their science textbook pages alone, with a buddy, by listening to an audio recording of the textbook reading, or in a small group with your guidance. Following the reading choices, all students complete a graphic organizer to record their facts. Another example of choice in process may involve students exploring their family's immigrant history. You could allow your students to choose to either do print or online research or to interview family "historians" to gather information. In each of these examples, the students have choice in how they will learn about something.

> Choice boards are differentiated *only* if they are designed with learning differences in mind.

Students may also engage in choice of products. This kind of choice enables students to choose how they will *demonstrate* what they have learned. It is important with this kind of choice that you represent a variety of learning preferences based on Multiple Intelligences. For example, students creating an invention to solve a household problem may construct a working or nonworking model (Bodily/kinesthetic learning preference) or create a labeled diagram (Visual/spatial learning preference). Allowing students to choose the way they demonstrate their learning enables them to capitalize on their strengths.

Formats for Choice Opportunities

There are a variety of formats teachers use to offer choices to their students. Choice boards, tic-tac-toe boards, RAFTS, two-by-two's, and show-and-tell boards are examples of formats teachers use to present choices to their students in motivating and manageable ways. Each is described in the following sections.

CHOICE BOARDS

Choice boards are collections of curricular problems, questions, assignments, projects, or activities from which students may choose. However, choice boards are differentiated *only* if they are designed with learning differences in mind. A random collection of tasks tossed on a choice board does not represent differentiated learning experiences for students. Creating a differentiated choice board requires reflection and planning. Page 73 provides a checklist to consider when designing differentiated choice boards.

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Checklist of Six Essential Features of Differentiated Choice Boards

1. ____ Presents activities clearly focused on learning goals or academic standards

2. ____ Presents activities involving a process or product that all students have previously experienced

3. ____ Presents activities reflecting multiple learning preferences

4. ____ Organizes tasks in ways that control choices to benefit students

5. ____ Offers engaging, interesting choices for all students

6. ____ Represents a variety of tasks purposefully differentiated by learning preference, readiness, and challenge and/or complexity (one board for all students)

or

____ Represents tasks specifically differentiated and prescribed to respond to the needs of a particular group of learners (several boards, each assigned to a group based on learning needs)

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Making Differentiation a Habit

"The thinking teacher's manual for differentiation."
—Rick Wormeli, author of *Fair Isn't Always Equal*

"An important book that makes differentiation doable for all teachers in academically diverse classrooms."
—Carolyn Coil, Ed.D., educational consultant and author

"A wonderful synthesis of several well-respected and current resources . . . immediately usable in classrooms. Diane Heacox makes differentiated instruction almost *fun* for teachers!"
—Karen B. Rogers, Ph.D., professor of Education, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN

If you're a teacher with an academically diverse classroom—and what classrooms *aren't* these days?—you need this resource. Framed around the critical elements for success in today's classrooms, this book provides you with specific, user-friendly tools to help you seamlessly integrate differentiation practices into your daily routine.

Look inside to find:

- An easy-to-follow structure that helps you experience immediate success in your classroom
- Cutting-edge research connecting differentiation and Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Practical and insightful surveys, templates, and checklists
- 100 illustrative figures and diagrams representing all curricular areas and levels
- Valuable information on assessment and grading, tiered assignments and grouping methods, student choice and independence, differentiation for gifted learners, teacher leadership, and school-wide action plans
- A CD-ROM with dozens of useful reproducible forms and templates

As you implement the best practices in this book, you will be making differentiation a regular part of your teaching.

Diane Heacox, Ed.D., is an associate professor of Education at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She also actively serves as a consultant and professional development trainer for both public and private schools on a variety of topics related to teaching and learning.

"The habit of differentiation results in students enthusiastically engaged in learning, experiencing increasing levels of success, and gaining confidence in themselves as learners," writes Heacox, "and in teachers who welcome and celebrate the diversity of lives, talents, interests, and passions of their students."

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