Over the past two years, this column has focused on implementing the high yield strategies as described by Robert Marzano. As presented in these columns, Marzano’s work outlines nine instructional strategies that are proven to demonstrate significant gains in achievement for students. Copies of past issues as well as the support materials can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (CCSE) Web site (http://luc.edu/ccse/nceanotes.shtml).

In the year ahead, this column will shift focus and explore the topic of Differentiated Instruction and the work of Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson. As with the previous columns, a specific aspect of differentiated instruction will be presented in each column. Additionally, support materials to help implement these approaches will be located at the Center for Catholic school Effectiveness website.

Differentiated instruction: Realities and misconceptions

Introducing a new approach to instruction often generates some fear or apprehension. With differentiated instruction, or DI, these concerns are largely unfounded. Differentiation in its most basic form is “simply a teacher attending to the needs of a particular student or a small group of students, rather, than teaching a class as though all individuals in it were basically alike” (Tomlinson and Allan, 2000). Through this approach, teachers create diversity in instruction —mixing lesson formats, instructional arrangements, and supports to address the needs of all students.

When implementing this approach, it can be helpful to think about DI as set on four pillars: 1) learning environment, 2) content, 3) process, and 4) product. Attending to each one of these pillars when planning for DI will yield unique and specific strategies. Subsequent issues of SOS will address DI related to each of these pillars.

Planning for DI

Prior to implementing DI, Tomlinson suggests that the instructor use a process of pre-assessment in order to plan how the differentiation will occur. Pre-assessment ensures that “what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning” (Tomlinson, 1999).

Some examples of these three types of pre-assessment can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness website.

Steps for explicitly using pre-assessment

Using pre-assessment, instructors can identify some critical factors that will potentially increase achievement for students.

First, identify ways that students can become aware of their own learning styles. There are a number of learning style inventories that are available that can help assess students’ learning preferences. In addition to this, identify ways to teach students about learning styles and the learning strategies that might be useful for them. It is also important for teachers to take time to identify their own learning style. This can provide some valuable insight into the learning process. Individuals tend to use their primary learning style when teaching others. For example, a teacher who has a strong preference for auditory learning will tend to use auditory strategies such as telling and explaining. This might be great for those auditory learners in the class but will not work so well for other learning styles.

Second, identify the most important learning. Once learning styles are identified and students have been given learning strategies that match and/or complement their preferred styles, the next two types of pre-
assessment can be accomplished. In order to pre-assess readiness and interest, teachers need to identify the most important learning for the upcoming units. Teachers should explicitly define what students should be able to know, understand and do by the end of the unit. Some sample K-U-D (Know, Understand, and Do) charts are also available at our Web site. When teachers create this explicit definition of "important learning", they can distill the essential elements of the unit's content to a form that can focus instruction. Only after identifying the important learning, can teachers then develop measures to assess readiness and interest.

**Third,** pre-assess readiness.

"Readiness is a student’s entry point relative to a particular interest or skill" (Tomlinson, 1999). By gathering information on students’ experiences and skills, the teacher can identify a good course of instruction. In assessing readiness, it is important that the teacher assess what the student already understands to determine what further instruction is needed to master new material. Assessing readiness before instruction creates a nice benchmark to assess the learning that occurs throughout the instruction. A well known method to accomplish this is to use the K-W-L chart. By having students state “what they know” and “what they want to learn”, teachers will gain some important insight about the readiness level of their students. Completing the K-W-L chart may suggest that some students may not possess the prerequisite skills for the upcoming unit. Instead of plunging ahead with the instruction, the teacher may need to build skills to ensure that students have the necessary prior knowledge to be successful in the unit. There are some additional examples of readiness assessments which are available at the CCSE Web site.

**Fourth,** pre-assess student interest. The last type of pre-assessment Tomlinson recommends is the assessment of student interest. "Interest is a student’s affinity, curiosity or passion for a particular topic or skill" (Tomlinson, 1999). As with readiness, identifying the level of interest in a given topic can provide important information to the teacher for planning and developing lessons. Information about student interest helps teachers create “hooks” that will help engage students in the lesson. Identifying those students who may not be “as excited” about a particular topic also helps the teacher think about ways to connect students to it. To assess the level of interest in the upcoming unit or topics, teachers can develop measures such as simple surveys or open-ended questionnaires asking students to provide their ratings of interest on units that will be presented. This simple pre-assessment technique can provide invaluable information to the teacher that can help to shape how the unit will be presented. Some examples can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness Web site.

**Pitfalls to avoid**

When considering implementing DI in the classroom, there are pitfalls to avoid. Students’ learning style, interest, and readiness should not be assessed unless teachers are prepared to respond to these factors. If you are not ready to change your instruction based on this information, it will be frustrating to all parties involved.

Sometimes, considering using DI can be an overwhelming prospect. Start small! Identify what you are currently doing in your classroom to address the needs of students. This is the basis of differentiation. Next, take some small steps to further your work in differentiation – pre-assess in one area (interest, perhaps) and begin using that information in your lesson planning. This is a process and does take some time. As Tomlinson suggests, “if you think everyone is going to differentiate instruction in a year or two, it would be better to not ask them to do anything.”

**Implementing together**

Suggestions for schools:

- Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings.
- Share examples of how the pre-assessment is currently used by teachers – be very specific. Make suggestions for how to use the strategy more effectively. Share specific measures or tools that teachers use to gauge readiness or interest or learning style.
- In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls in planning for DI. Agree on and clearly identify one concrete thing you will all do to use pre-assessment in the areas of learning style, interest, and readiness. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observing each other at least once. Arrange with the principal and/or department chair to observe as well.
- Share observations about using these assessments and its impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.
- Share actions taken and observations of impact at next faculty meeting.

**References:**
