

Teacher Vignette #1

Ms. Silbernagel

2nd Grade Classroom

From: *High Impact Instruction, Knight,*

I spent two days watching Sandi teach, and it was very evident that she carefully plans each lesson to create a learner-friendly culture. For her lesson on Tynia Thomassie's Cajun tall tale about a young girl's adventure in the Louisiana swamp, for example, Sandi arranged stuffed alligators and crabs around the room so she could refer to them during the reading of the story. She also scanned the book to display it on her Smart Board so that all students could see it and interact with it on the big screen.

Sandi's plans helped her create a powerful learning experience for her students. She asked the children to gather on a colored carpet for the reading of the book. As Sandi guided her students through the book, she prompted them to demonstrate on the Smart Board how they used their reading strategies (right there clues; search and check; prediction) to deepen their understanding. She also showed students a YouTube video of a swamp so they could get a vivid picture of where the heroine was going. Sandi even shared pictures of her great-grandmother, who lived in a home very much like the home of their hero. Every student was locked in as Sandi guided them through the story,

When they were done reading, Sandi played Johnette Downing's song "Felician LeRoux" about the very story they had just read. Then, as a cup de grace, she gave each child a chance to eat some alligator sausage, just like the alligator in her story. Literally, the children saw, heard, touched, and even tasted what they were learning about.

Much of what Sandi did doesn't get written down in a lesson plan, but the learning experience her students had would not have been possible if Sandi hadn't attended to culture. Yes, the students read from the book and held up the pictures rather than pointing to the large image on the Smart Board. Yes, she didn't need to play the song in order to teach the reading strategies. And yes, she didn't need to cook up alligator sausage. But years from now, even if students forget the actual words or events of the story, they will remember how they felt in the classroom created by Ms. Silbernagel, and many will remember and apply the reading strategies they learned in her class. Such is the power of learner-friendly culture!

Teacher Vignette #2

Ms. Jeffries

8th Grade History

From: *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, Tomlinson

Ms. Jeffries is determined to help her students understand that history is alive and well, so her students often work on investigative projects that help them explore themes common to history over time and place. She has designed a project to help them explore what went on in their Virginia town during the Civil War. All students begin this project by reading material available in class, viewing videos, and doing some library research. During these activities, they note in their individual learning logs information they will use for background material. Next, they make individual selections of resources from a menu of references and other sources that Ms. Jeffries has prepared. In individual conversations, she often adds one or two additional resources to a student's list based on her assessment of that learner's interests and reading/comprehension levels, as well as her sense of topics they might enjoy. Students also have to find at least one source of information that is not in their classroom or school library (Ms. Jeffries's source list includes possibilities such as talking with teachers in the school, interviewing students who have completed the study in previous years, or going to a nearby public library or museum).

As they do their in-class or library research, Ms. Jeffries encourages students to share with one another in round-robin discussion both sources and ideas they find interesting. Students also keep a running class list of topics that they might explore for their investigations, such as medical practices in their town during the Civil War, disease patterns, the economy, the architecture and buildings in the town then and now, roles of local citizens in the military, local politics during that period, and schooling or education during the Civil War. Within two to four days, students decide on a first and second choice for their investigation, which they submit to their teacher.

Ms. Jeffries then assigns students to groups by their topics and strengths. Sometimes she constructs mixed-ability groups of five or six students; other times she pairs students of relatively similar ability who have common interests and work well together. This flexible grouping strategy allows her to tailor projects for advanced students or for students who need more structure and guidance.

A key principle in her class, however, is the importance of working as colleagues, so students in one group are free to call on students in any other group for advice or assistance with a specific task, such as computer work, drawing, or editing. She also pairs students across groups every few days so they can share ideas that might benefit other students doing similar investigations. The tone is one of cooperation for mutual success, not competition for scarce rewards. Ms. Jeffries negotiates with her students to determine the criteria for the content, format, and quality of final products. Some criteria apply to the class as a whole, while others are specific to a group or individual task.

Ms. Jeffries designed this project carefully; it has both clearly defined "custom-fit" responsibilities for each student, and vague, unassigned components that each group must work out how to handle. Every student has an opportunity to make a clear, individual contribution to the whole that is personally challenging and interesting. And all students engage in tasks that help them improve their negotiating and group-work skills.

Teacher Vignette #3

Mr. Rake

High School Math

From: *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, Tomlinson

Mr. Rake has found that by the time students enter Algebra II, their levels of math skill are quite varied. Some students seem to grasp the principles in a chapter almost before they read it; others look squint-eyes and genuinely puzzled as their peers put homework answers on the board. Somewhere in the middle are students who grasp the ideas, but more slowly or only after repeated explanations.

When Mr. Rakes used whole-class instruction to address everyone's needs in only one way, he found that he was unsuccessful with most of his students. So he began thinking of his class different. Now, when beginning a new chapter, he offers students a chance to 'compact out' of the chapter either before the class begins working on it, or after three days of work with the entire class. "Compacting out" works like this: Prior to or early on in studying a chapter, students take the chapter post-test. Those who demonstrate competency then do an ongoing, independent investigation that explores the uses of mathematics in the world. Mr. Rakes gives those students guidelines for developing the independent studies, but the students get to choose the specific exploration and design the project. Sometimes students work alone on their investigations, and sometimes in small groups. Mr. Rakes works with them to tighten or focus plans, as needed.

Students like the "compacting out" option because it gives them a chance to work with many topics that interest them, but that they seldom have a chance to examine in-depth, during high school – topics such as computers, astronomy, architecture, medicine, and economics. Students working on independent studies can work in class (if the don't distract others), request library time (if they use the privilege appropriately), or even do another assignment during math class to free up time for work on the independent study after school. Each student creates a time line of project tasks and is accountable for meeting deadlines and keeping a process log of project work and thought.

When the other students have completed working through the chapter, all students take the end-of-chapter tests. This practice assures that those who compacted out of the chapter stay fresh with the skills; it also assures Mr. Rakes that everyone understands the material. Prior to this test, Mr. Rakes often takes two days for peer review, which he does by constructing mixed-ability groups in which all students work together to complete review problems.

By the time the second semester starts, a few students who weren't advanced enough for compacting during the first semester will have progressed to the point where they can opt for compacting and the math application independent study. Sometimes, a few students who had compacted out the first semester fell more comfortable if they work along with the class during the second semester. And a few students who had compacted during the first semester will again do so during the second semester. They often design independent projects that are extensions of their earlier independent studies.

When Mr. Rakes works with the students who have not compacted out, he uses a two-part study plan. First, he uses whole-group instruction to teach key principles. Next, he creates cooperative groups so students who seem able to apply the ideas somewhat independently can practice doing so. Students who are still struggling then work directly with Mr. Rakes during the first

part of each class period so that he can assess their thinking and help them focus on missing concepts and skills. During the last portion of the class, while this group is working in pairs on application tasks, Mr. Rakes checks in with the cooperative groups that have been working without his guidance.

Mr. Rakes has found this three-part approach to his class manageable for him and productive for his students. He has also begun to encourage all of his students to do math application studies as a part of their individual portfolio work. Although some students' individual projects may not be as complex or time-consuming as others, the projects give all students a chance to see math in a different light and to explore their interests. Some students, for example, learn about how math is used outside the textbook and the classroom by visiting and interviewing people in their community who use math in their work.