

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 12: Intentional Step Three



Chapter 12

Intentional Step Three: Differentiate Product

Products often ask students to apply or extend what they've learned through tests, projects, reports, papers, presentations, or creative work. When teachers differentiate the product, they offer students choices for the type of assignments they can complete. These choices present options for different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, analytic, creative, practical) and can be completed alone or in a group. For example, if the class just finished reading a book, the teacher could provide the following list of options to students: write a book report, complete a graphic organizer, give an oral report, or build a diorama (Weselby, 2014).

When differentiating the product, the teacher still retains control of learning by maintaining high levels of rigor and ensuring students meet the required learning targets and standards (IRIS, n.d.c). Each assignment should be appropriately challenging and connect to real-world applications. Teachers can use Bloom's Taxonomy to help differentiate based on student readiness levels. Also, students shouldn't always be allowed to choose the same product every time. Encourage them to try new products and stretch their abilities.

Strategy 1: Learning Menus

Learning menus give students a range of options for completing a final product. These options are presented as a dinner menu where students select an entree (the main task that all students need to complete) and side dishes (additional tasks that expand on student learning) from the list. They might also choose to complete appetizers (warm-ups) and a dessert (enrichment tasks) (NSW, 2022). To create this menu, the teacher must decide which content and skills are essential for students to master and which are extensions of that learning. Each task is

appropriately challenging and takes about the same amount of time to complete. This strategy can be used for a single lesson or extended unit.

When working with a learning menu, students get to decide what they will do to meet the requirements. They can work with their learning styles and preferences and have options for extending their learning. This can help ensure a higher degree of perceived task value (.46) and encourages students to practice self-management skills such as taking the initiative, setting goals, and applying various learning strategies.

Strategy 2: Tic-Tac-Toe Boards

Like the tic-tac-toe game, students are given a table with nine different options for learning products. These choices address vital concepts or skills the teacher wants students to demonstrate. Often, the choices are divided into three categories and presented across the three columns or rows. For instance, if students are reading *Romeo and Juliet*, the teacher might create assignments for character, setting, and theme. Students then choose three products from the table that form a horizontal, vertical, or diagonal line (like tic-tac-toe) (IRIS, n.d.c). There are several variations for this:

- Students can choose one item from each column or row
- Students can complete any three tasks
- The teacher assigns tasks based on student readiness
- The teacher assigns one required task (at the center of the board)
- The teacher creates different boards for different readiness levels or learning preferences

While students are given a variety of options for this kind of choice board, teachers should be mindful of the quality of the options. The choices should be engaging, relevant, and require appropriate levels of rigor. Look for research-based strategies to use on the Tic-Tac-Toe Board, such as summaries, jigsaws, concept-mapping, and cognitive task analysis.

Tic-tac-toe boards help teachers differentiate according to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences. Choice boards are also helpful for demonstrating or extending student learning and are flexible enough to work for any subject area (NSW, 2022). This strategy helps students tap into their interests and a sense of purpose. It can also help motivate them to achieve learning goals and set new ones.

Strategy 3: Cubing

The teacher creates a cube (or uses the concept of a cube) to help students consider a topic from different perspectives (NSW, 2022). For example, a teacher might give students a familiar object, like a pencil, and ask students to examine it from six different angles:

1. Describe it - what does it look like?
2. Compare it to something else.
3. Associate it - what does it make you think about?
4. Analyze it - how is it made? Can you describe its parts?
5. Apply it - how can you use it?
6. Argue for or against it.

Teachers can use flexible grouping when applying this strategy, placing students together according to readiness levels. Cubing can also be a useful after-reading strategy.

Cubing helps students consider different sides of a topic. It pushes them to engage with higher-level critical thinking and problem-solving skills and apply information in new ways. This strategy can also encourage students to examine their prejudices and biases and empathize with others. It is a scaffolding technique, which Hattie assigns a .82 effect size.

Strategy 4: Students Propose Ideas

Students can also propose their own ideas for projects. First, the teacher should outline the minimum standards and criteria for the assignment. Then students can pitch their ideas to the teacher and show how they will meet those requirements. The teacher can make suggestions to help students refine their ideas to better meet the standards. Teachers might also use learning contracts to identify the goals of the assignment and what students must do.

Students usually know their learning styles and strengths best, so allowing them to design their own products can help increase engagement and motivation. They will also practice initiative, creativity, and self-efficacy skills.