

Essay 6

Differentiation in the IB

Tim Pruzinsky

Almost a decade ago, I remember having to teach *Othello* in a 10th grade English class. That didn't bother me: I love teaching *Othello* and think it's one of Shakespeare's most topical plays. The jealousy and deceit, the lies and manipulation, the ways women and minorities are treated are all-engrossing. Iago is also one of my favourite characters in all of literature. He's awful, and I can't get enough of him. But teaching *Othello* to a group of mostly Japanese students who were clearly struggling with the English language was not the right approach to help them improve. It was, as Vygotsky would say, outside their zone of proximal development.

I'm not going to suggest that second-language learners should not read Shakespeare or that it's not appropriate for them to study it. Everyone can love his plays and, in this situation, most teachers know how to differentiate to help students understand it. What I am suggesting is that it wasn't the right text for this group of students at that time in their development as English language learners. I wanted them to fall in love with words and images, the language itself. Deciphering Shakespeare wasn't getting me to that goal.

I tell this story because I'm thinking about the IB Language and Literature course. What most excites me is the opportunity to make decisions – with my colleagues – about what is best for our students in our context. Because the syllabus is wide open, and it really is very flexible, I can work with my colleagues to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of our students. For some of us, that might be constructing a course with second-language learners in mind. Others have to contend with 35 or more students in a class, while some teachers work in very conservative areas of the world that have strict rules on what types of texts can be taught.

Yet the joy of the IB Language and Literature course is that the IB has placed the power to make decisions in our hands. It's a bottom-up approach that allows us to experiment and innovate without the burden of too many assessments looming over our heads. In that spirit of experimentation and innovation, I want to offer several paths forward as we teach this exciting syllabus. Even with all the other restrictions that you may find in your teaching life – from parents to administrators to local or national standards you

must consider – I want to argue that you still have the power to create the course that's right for you and your students in your particular context.

Part 1 of this essay explains the various options available to you when differentiating your texts in the literature portion of the course, while Part 2 focuses on the variety and range of formative and summative assessments that are available to IB Language and Literature teachers.

Part 1 – Differentiation through text selection

The teacher in the differentiated classroom thoughtfully uses assessment data to guide modifications to content, process, product, or learning environment. (Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom*, p. 18)

What you will find below are three options for differentiating through text selection or the content you teach. You can choose texts for English language learners, texts to study independently and/or texts to study in a literature circle or book club. While I want to provide several ways to differentiate through text selection, I think it's possible to do all three options. You don't have to limit yourself to one of them and you don't have to take any of the options presented. The IB has given us the power and ability to choose. I love that flexibility, autonomy and choice! We need to use this power responsibly – to help our students learn and not to game the system for higher exam scores. In doing so, and in ensuring that students have met the syllabus requirements, we can individualise their learning in amazing ways. Tomlinson states at the start of *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom* that 'teachers must take into account *who* they are teaching as well as *what* they are teaching' (pp. 1–2). Differentiating what you read over the two-year programme allows you to do just that: focus on your students as learners.

Option A: differentiation for English language learners

When four adult second language acquirers became fanatic Sweet Valley Kids readers, they made clear gains in vocabulary and reported increased competence in listening to and speaking English. (Kyung-Sook Cho and Stephen D. Krashen, p. 1)

Many teachers, especially but not exclusively Standard Level language and literature teachers, work with second-language learners. If English is the medium of instruction but a majority of your students are still learning the language, what do you do? Do you teach *Othello* as I did (or had to), or make a different choice in the literature you study as a whole class?

You are required at Higher Level to study six literary works. Four must come from the Prescribed Reading List or PRL. Two of those four must be in translation. And, here's the important part, two of your works may be free choice. This doesn't mean you are going to study the *Sweet Valley Kids* series as in Cho and Krashen's study quoted above. You and I both know it doesn't pass the sniff test for a work of literary quality. But that doesn't mean there aren't great works of literature out there that can and will engage your students, at a level that pushes them but doesn't turn them off reading.

I'm thinking of Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See* or Mohsin Hamid's Booker Prize shortlisted literary thriller, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or *Exit West*. Maybe historical fiction that is heart-breaking but also quite funny, such as David Benioff's *City of Thieves*, would work or the inventive novel *Room*, by Emma Donohue. There are so many award-winning adult novels – novels that other literary adults have deemed excellent – that match the language levels of our students.

You might also choose a graphic novel such as Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or the Japanese manga *A Distant Neighborhood*, by Jiro Taniguchi. These texts present complex ideas about death, ethics, memory, family and more. I'm also considering teaching Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* because I think it inspires students. It's not self-help nonfiction. It was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 2016 and was on the 'best of' list of almost every major US publication. It's an excellent memoir and is worthy of study. Other nonfiction that excites students – such as Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* – carry enough literary weight to make the case for their inclusion in your syllabus.

If all of these texts are still too difficult for the group of students you teach, consider something else. You know them best! You know what Tomlinson calls their 'readiness' or their 'entry point relative to particular knowledge, understanding, or skills' (*The Differentiated Classroom*, p. 18). The IB has given us the chance to choose texts that match the needs of our learners and it's up to us to use that power in the decisions we make about the texts students read.

Option B: differentiation through independent study

On the one hand, feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writing as representations of the experience of women. On the other hand, feminists

undertake a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman. (Culler, p. 128)

You might find yourself with an amazing class of self-directed learners, keen lovers of literature who do amazing things when you free them from any constraints. Your students might also look nothing like what I have described above, but you want to foster a sense of independence, a critical thinking skill set, in these students. Differentiating your text selection through independent study is one possible way forward – and it doesn't have to be your free choice text as you can require students to pick a text from the PRL. I envisage three ways of doing this, although I'm sure there are many more ways to look at it. You can have students independently study a text through a thematic or topical approach, through a literary theory lens or through studying the same genre.

In the thematic or topical approach, you – or your students – choose a topic or theme that will guide their learning. It might be something about race relations, social justice or government abuse, or even sports or nature writing. It might be a larger word or phrase, such as power, authority, oppression, destiny or family. Once you have figured out your organisational structure, and of course your learning outcomes in relation to your assessment in relation to anything else you must consider given your context, select a text to study independently. You might provide students with a list of 10–20 authors or texts that fit the criteria you've set and let them choose. You might give them the entire PRL and let them research an author or text they might want to study independently. This depends on how you want to differentiate based on the needs of your students.

In the literary theory approach, you teach a theoretical approach to literature – feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, new historical and so on – to your students. While you read, discuss, analyse and learn a critical approach to literature, students read an independent text, using that lens to shape their reading of the text. In this approach, students will learn about a literary theory and demonstrate that understanding through their independent reading of a text.

Finally, in the genre approach, you might ask students to 'pick your poet' or 'pick your essayist' to study. You might even divide the genre approach into sub-genres, such as 'pick your graphic novel', 'pick your dystopian text' or 'pick your science fiction novel'. Once you have your genre, and once students have selected their texts, you teach the elements of that genre in class. Science fiction has certain distinct elements to it. Instead of working through this as a whole class, by differentiating your science fiction

texts, some students might be reading *The City and the City* by China Miéville while another student is reading a text by Isaac Asimov, all while learning how science fiction functions.

Tomlinson writes that ‘teachers are the chief architects of learning, but students should assist in essential ways with the design and the building’ (*The Differentiated Classroom*, p. 21). All students do not need to study the same six literature texts at Higher Level, and they can be part of the process in deciding what they learn. You have the flexibility to differentiate your content, or what you teach. I’ve suggested three different approaches – for English language learners, for teaching literary theory or for approaching a specific genre, and I hope you find this flexibility not only rewarding but also liberating.

Option C: differentiation through literature circles or book clubs

Our students were reading lots of good books, thinking deeply about them, writing notes and journal entries and joining in lively, informed literature discussions. (Daniels, p. 2)

Take Option B, but instead of students independently studying a text, let them do this in small groups of three to five students. You set the parameters for the unit, including the learning goals and time to complete the work, but students are in charge of how they learn and the pace at which they learn it within that framework you’ve provided. You can call this a literature circle, a book club, reading group or something else, but the idea is to give students autonomy and independence in their learning. As Harvey Daniels states in *Literature Circles*, be ‘dazzled by what the kids [can] do when given choices, time, responsibility, a little guidance, and a workable structure’ (p. 2).

Experiment. Take risks. Innovate. Find what works and improve on it. Learn from what fails – and I know I will fail in some spectacular ways the first time I try this. But after two or three or even five tries later, I will have figured out a system that allows me, in my context, to guide students on their way to being independent and confident adult readers.

While I have used Part 1 to explain how you can differentiate your literature texts, this applies just as easily to the language texts you study. Swap your independent study of post-colonial works of literature for independent study of post-colonial language texts, for example.

Finally, I'm not abandoning whole class study. My last two texts will most likely be used in preparation for their Paper 2 examination, and we will study them as a whole class. But that's not the only way to study literature. And this is too exciting not to try!

Part 2 – Differentiation through assessment

'Product' is 'how students will demonstrate and extend what they have come to know, understand, and be able to do'. (Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom*, p. 75)

The IB now requires students to keep a learner portfolio. It sounds like a huge unwieldy thing. Is it electronic? A notebook? How do we get students to keep it all together? What is it used for? Teachers are going to be confronted with all of these complications and more. It's daunting. It also doesn't have to be. The IB is leaving it up to individual teachers and schools to figure out how best to manage this. I like this approach: mandate that we track the learning journey of our students, but don't require that we submit any paperwork or laborious forms. It allows for a bottom-up form of innovation that is already happening in many classrooms. I know that as I figure out how to implement this in my language and literature classroom, I will inevitably fail. Student records – of their formative work and summative assessments – will be lost, thrown away or crumpled in a backpack. They won't update their portfolios often enough. Not enough work will go into it or too much will go into it. It'll be unorganised and a mess.

And that's OK. Because over time, I am committed to this because I am committed to differentiating my assessments. This was much more difficult in previous iterations of the course. Now I think I can find a way to make it work for me and my students. Creative writing can take centre stage if I want it to. I will be able to take a unit of study or a scheme of work and create an authentic differentiated assessment that allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of what we've been learning. And this learner portfolio will allow students to track their development, in real time, helping them see their progress and areas for improvement.

It is that point about differentiating assessments that I want to flush out in this section. Let's say I am teaching – and students are studying or learning – about a huge topic: language and gender. And I've provided them with all kinds of materials over several weeks: #MeToo speeches, opinion editorials and tweets; stereotypes in print and commercial advertising; economic analysis of the gender pay gap, and more.

In the past, I might have forced all students to complete the same assessment, usually a required IB assessment that set hard parameters of what could and couldn't be done. Now I don't have to and I love this! Now I can – through the learner portfolio – let students show me what they've learnt in any way they want. I'm not constrained if I am most interested in assessing whether they have understood the guiding concepts at the beginning of the unit.

My plan is to create differentiated assessment tasks coupled with what Tomlinson states about 'culminating products' in *The Differentiated Classroom*. They 'clearly define what students should demonstrate', 'provide students with one or more modes of expression', 'communicate precise expectations for high-quality work', 'provide support and scaffolding' and 'allow for meaningful variations in student readiness, interest, and learning profile' (pp. 73–4). Here's what it might look like for that language and gender unit:

- A single student creates a recorded video – an eight-minute speech in the style of a TED Talk – about a specific topic dealing with language and gender.
- A group of three students create an awareness campaign combating sexual harassment in the workplace.
- A pair of students – live, in front of the class – conduct a mock debate about the language of the #MeToo movement or a different contemporary topic.
- Three students get together to conduct a letter writing campaign – to GAP and other retailers, for example – asking them to stop gender stereotyping in their advertising for children's clothes.
- A student writes a short story or a series of poems about language and gender.

The list can go on, of course, and students may even come up with a better option of their own. The point is that I can ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the content of the course through various means. I can then use the learner portfolio to encourage students not only to think about what they want to do, but to expand on those ideas. And I can find a way – at this point, most likely electronic – of collecting final products that showcases them as learners. I'm even imagining showing this at parent–teacher conferences – this is what your child has been learning and this is how they've been showing me what they've learnt.

Because the IB no longer mandates so many assessment tasks in the Language and Literature course, I – along with my colleagues – can decide how to formatively and summatively assess student learning. The students will keep a record of all they have done in their learner portfolio. We will use the learner portfolio to help us differentiate the process and final products in the course. Tomlinson ends *The Differentiated Classroom* by stating that the 'spirit of the book' is neither to mourn what we have not

done nor to rest on our victories but rather to look at all the reasons we have to show up again tomorrow at the classroom door, ready to join our students – every one of our students – in learning genuinely important things (pp. 182–3).

Although the Language and Literature syllabus is not the only reason nor the most important reason I show up every day, the choices and possibilities it presents do inspire me as a teacher. I'm pumped about what I get to teach, how I get to teach it, and in doing so, most importantly, connecting with young adults as they become confident, capable, enthusiastic, lifelong readers, writers and thinkers.

Works cited

Cho, Kyung-Sook, and Stephen D. Krashen. 'Acquisition of vocabulary from the Sweet Valley Kids series: Adult ESL acquisition'. *Journal of Reading*, vol. 37, no. 8, 1994, pp. 662–7.

Culler, Jonathan D. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2002.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, 2nd edition. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2014.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann, and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom: Strategies and Tools for Responsive Teaching*. Cheltenham, VIC: Hawker Brownlow Education, 2003.