Using Tomlinson’s Equalizer to Scaffold Learning Tasks

The Equalizer, below, is a tool developed by Carol Tomlinson to support teachers in thinking through ways to scaffold tasks so that all tasks guide students toward the same learning goals while addressing individual needs for challenge or support. The following pages provide a tutorial on how this tool can be used to determine scaffolds for a task in response to student needs determined by assessment information.
TUTORIAL: USING EQUALIZER TO SCAFFOLD TASKS

First, map out your learning goals. It would ineffective to design this whole task when you aren’t clear about what understandings, skills, and knowledge all students will need to develop through this activity. It is also helpful to determine how you will evaluate this task. A rubric is a useful tool because it will also set the stage for feedback you can give to students later. Remember that a rubric will evaluate what you determine is acceptable evidence of mastery for all students, regardless of the variation of their tasks. Again, this is because all tasks should be designed to get students to the same worthwhile goals, regardless of the scaffolds or challenges you build in to attend to varying learning needs. You will then need to use pre- or formative assessment information to help you determine precisely what students will need for this activity.

Always begin with the most sophisticated or challenging activity, the task intended for students with the highest starting point. This ensures that you are “teaching up” and not “dumbing down.” Then you’ll consider how to support other students in reaching those same goals. What learning experiences would students who need the greatest level of challenge require for meaningful, engaging learning?

Next, consider what types of scaffolding or modifications are needed to support students who need more support. Remember that these modifications and supports should enable the students to more effectively master the learning goals through the learning experience provided in the task.
STEP 3

Take a look at the Equalizer. What “knob” makes the most sense to adjust? Depending on the task, one may seem to be more appropriate than another at a given time. Or you can adjust two or three “knobs” if think it would support the needs of your students. Think about how the task would look if the “knob” were adjusted toward the left side, or the side that prompts us to think about how we can support learners who need additional support or modifications to develop the deep understandings and skills? How would that change the original activity?

STEP 4

After you’ve planned your final task, check to make sure your tasks are aligned to the learning goals. Do the tasks require all students, regardless of the task they are assigned, to develop the same deep and transferable understandings stated in your learning goals? Will all students have the opportunity to develop the same skills stated in your learning goals (although some may be asked to develop a more sophisticated level of these skills)? And acquire the same content knowledge? Adjust as needed.