

On the Road to Differentiated Practice

Why reinvent the differentiated instruction wheel? One district offers advice on the basis of its five years of experience.

To say that there is a single, perfect example of differentiated instruction is a contradiction in terms. Differentiated instruction has as many faces as it has practitioners and as many outcomes as there are learners. Every day, teachers struggle to meet the needs of many learners who have individual needs. In some cases, this struggle yields a patchwork of strategies that merely “make do” from September until June. In other cases, that struggle leads to frustration and a sense that meeting so many needs is unrealistic.

Fortunately, differentiated instruction is a reasonable alternative to making do. It is not a trendy quick fix, a new set of blackline masters, or a ready-to-go kit. Differentiated instruction represents a proactive approach to improving classroom learning for all students. As clearly articulated by Carol Ann Tomlinson (1995, 1999), differentiated instruction requires a change in teaching practices and an evolution of classroom culture. Experience tells us that this kind of change is a long, but thoroughly rewarding, journey.

Five years ago, I began to guide teachers along the road to differentiated instruction. I was one of six educators hired by our district to help guide and support faculty as they redesigned classroom instruction on the basis of students' abilities, needs, and interests. We approached our task through the key elements of differentiating classroom activity: modifying the content, sense-making activities, and products of student learning. The complexity of that mission continues to define itself as we progress.

Some Advice

From the beginning, we knew that we did not need to reinvent the differentiated instruction wheel; we needed to learn how to roll it. Then we needed to learn how to help our teachers roll it. As it has turned out, we have been learning together, making mistakes together, supporting one another, and rejoicing in our collective progress. In these five years, we've identified some common practices that lead to growth—our own and

our students' growth.

Get a buddy. Peer collaboration is essential. Find a kindred spirit with whom you can share this learning experience. With a buddy, you will share packages of antacids, boxes of tissues, and late-night anxiety attacks. Together, you will plan, replan, then replan again to bring forth your ideas. The very act of discussing your ideas with a peer is as crucial to your learning process as it is to your students' learning. Teachers have spent far too much of their professional lives thinking about, preparing for, and delivering their curriculum in isolation.

Align your objectives. My colleagues and I spent hours trying to create quality learning opportunities to fit various student needs, only to be mired by mushy goals and unclear objectives. This forced us to return to the drawing board to ask the big, hard questions: Why are we really teaching this? What goal does it satisfy? Is it a key part of the curriculum? What do we truly want the students to gain? Will the clever and creative activities we planned lead to significant learning?

To answer some of these questions, we needed to be sure that the tasks were leading to the desired outcomes. In one instance, we developed a multigrade-level project for creative writing that directly responded to district and state objectives. These objectives are assessed by new statewide tests, so the alignment of tasks and objectives was essential. With the mandate clear, we collaboratively wrote activities that would result in assessable learning. These activities offer students progressively complex writing options from a sequential menu. The resulting continuum is a built-in path to differentiate both content and process for a class with diverse needs.

In a typical lesson, each student selects a picture from a file of newspaper, magazine, and journal photographs to provide a writing stimulus. Then the teacher offers different writing options to different students, allowing each student to work on the same overall objective but at an appropriate readiness level. The materials for this project, called *A Picture is Worth . . . Many Words*, includes at least six creative writing activities in each of ten separate writing categories: setting, character, dialogue, tone and mood, personal response, action and sequence, main idea, simile and metaphor, contrast and compare, and picture composition. Additionally, the materials include several

short- and long-term writing ideas that link to language arts genres other than creative writing.

Implementing a project such as this, one begins to address the curricular twin demons of gaps and redundancy. Sequentially complex tasks can begin to remedy the problem of appropriate challenge in an academically diverse class. An objectives-driven menu makes it much easier to find that crucial next step in learning for a student. For example, if the writing lesson is focused on dialogue, one student might be ready to create a single dialogue exchange between two characters, and another student might be ready to write four or five exchanges. The sequential menu of writing options provides for this kind of differentiation.

Find out what students know.

Shortly after we began our differentiated instruction efforts, we all heard the same questions from teachers attempting to implement their first differentiated activities: How do we manage multiple and simultaneous tasks within the classroom, and what do we do with the students who finish early? In our heads and hearts, we knew the answer: Complex learning requires complex planning. So off we went into the classrooms with our learning contracts, anchoring activities, tiered tasks, cooperative and flexible groupings, multistep task cubes, progressive centers, and a host of other techniques. Some things worked, some didn't. Some kids engaged while others were confused by the changes. What did we do right and what did we do wrong? We reflected long and hard before arriving at our next key practice.

Meaningful pre-assessment leads to successful differentiation. You need to have more than a gut feeling of what students know or can do before deciding how to take them farther. This assessment can be as simple as interviewing younger students or surveying interests in the older grade levels. It can also be a performance assessment task, such as writing a business letter or a most-difficult-first assessment (Winebrenner, 1996) on a discrete topic such as converting improper fractions. Use whatever technique fits the situation to guide planning. Instructional decisions must flow from some level of actual

assessment. Otherwise, you will be offering a menu of ideas and creating scaffolding for needs, abilities, and interests that exist in the abstract but not necessarily in your students.

In a second language arts project, Idiom Fun, we designed sense-making activities differentiated by learning modalities. After we pre-assessed students' knowledge of idiomatic phrases, we created tasks that gave students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning through a preferred modality, such as artistic, verbal, kinesthetic, or visual and graphic. Armed with an idea of what the students knew and were expected to know, we developed paired or small-group tasks. We created materials that covered three grade levels of reading ability, using the more than 600 idioms and origins found in the *Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms* (Terban, 1996). The three-grade range allows the teacher to meet diverse readiness levels; the depth of resources allows for process and product differentiation. Currently this project has more than 16 different activity options that support objectives for the interpretation of idiomatic phrases.

For example, one activity choice reads: "If you like to sketch and draw, choose an idiom such as 'my cup of tea' and create two illustrations. One drawing should be its true meaning and a second drawing should illustrate the word-by-word meaning. Present them side-by-side on a small poster labeled with the idiom." Another activity asks pairs of students to write four to six lines of dialogue exchange that include at least four idioms that make sense and that can be shared with the class.

Plan flexible grouping. The other features that we consider essential for successful implementation are not always easy to see in projects designed for differentiating instruction. These are the everyday, every-lesson basics built into the core of this approach. One basic feature is how we expect the students to interact. As with most of our projects like A Picture is Worth . . . and Idiom Fun, flexible grouping strategies are crucial. Even though teachers always allow time for individuals to tackle the tasks, teachers should encourage students to brainstorm ideas with classmates and then pair-share them.

Frequently, teachers hold whole-group discussions of the big ideas before small-group work begins. Along the way, teachers guide small groups or pairs to resolve ambiguities, fill in missing information, or share roadblocks they encounter. We are just beginning to appreciate the value of student-to-student discourse in the learning cycle. Ideally, students present the end products of group work in class and receive feedback from their peers. Regardless of whether the differentiation is based upon student readiness, interests, or needs, the dynamic flow of grouping and regrouping is one of the foundations of differentiated instruction.

Encourage student responsibility.

Another idea integral to differentiated instruction is that students should assume more responsibility for their learning. Throughout these projects we design activities to support the development of that attitude. We facilitate group-to-group and student-to-student interactions during tasks, provide guidance or redirection through questioning, and encourage the use of outside-the-classroom resources. As a consequence, we anticipate that students will learn to negotiate with peers to accomplish a goal, learn to find some of their own answers by reposing the questions, and discover that authority can be found in sources other than the teacher and the text. Differentiating tasks for students requires students to work harder and become more responsible to uncover their own learning.

Provide choice. Choice is a highly motivating feature implicit in differentiated lesson designs. Choice validates a student's opinion and promotes self-efficacy. Consequently, in at least one of the key aspects of each lesson—content, activity, or product—we try to give the student a choice. When we use photographs in creative writing, the students select photos themselves. When interpreting phrases, the students select their own idioms as well as an end-product that utilizes their preferred creative modality. In this way, the student has explicit permission to shape some of the learning and influence the final results.

Flexible grouping, student responsibility, and choice aren't the only implementation features needed for success-

ful differentiation. Classroom management and fair grading issues are also critical. Chaotic activity must not masquerade as engaged learning and group grading should not hide incomplete effort. However, we have found that effective grouping and development of student responsibility and choice play an important part in shaping the tasks that help students pursue their learning in a differentiated classroom.

Are We There Yet?

After traveling on the road to differentiated instruction for five years, our teachers rightfully ask: Are we there yet? With several years of memorable missteps and wrong turns behind us, we feel confident in saying, Yes, with only one caveat: Think small. The changes you are about to make are not add-ons; they are systemic. They speak to the very heart of what you believe about learning and teaching. These changes present new ways to engage in your profession and facilitate a student's growth. You need to take small steps and give yourself time to assimilate these steps. Eventually, you will be differentiating more of your year's curriculum with enthusiasm rather than indigestion. But, to start, choose a content area where you feel the most engagement, interest, and ability. You are not unlike your students in this respect.

If you are an elementary teacher, you might begin differentiating in the area of language arts or social studies. Differentiating mathematics or science is exciting, doable, and highly productive, but it is better as a second or third choice rather than as a maiden voyage. Consider trying some of the ideas from the projects shared here or use them as a format to develop ones that specifically align with your curriculum. We found that self-selected literature or locally situated social studies are rich with opportunities for differentiation.

We also discovered that it was much easier to differentiate the content, activity, or products of such topics if you use broader and deeper domain concepts. For example, instead of using an objective that says "the students will be able to name the members of a community," change it to reflect the conceptual learning: "the students will

demonstrate an understanding of why community members have different roles." Now the students can engage in a complex process that requires an integration of knowledge rather than the more limited skill of naming. This allows you to offer differentiated activities that access the students' real-world experiences.

If you are a subject-area teacher, you might begin with just one objective from a favorite unit. Choosing a lesson or unit that frustrates you or is uninteresting is a challenge best left for later. We found that when you begin to differentiate learning opportunities, you need to feel maximum confidence and competence with the subject's content. For example, in middle school social studies you might start with a familiar objective such as "the students will memorize the names of the state capitals." To bring depth and interest to this activity, you can escalate the objective to ask students "to find and represent the comparative geographic and/or historic features among the states' capital cities." Doing so allows for a wider differentiation of products and creates the possibility for flexible grouping and student choice.

Likewise, a mathematics teacher might choose an introductory objective, "name the Platonic solids," and change it into an objective to require students "to demonstrate knowledge of the essential attributes of Platonic solids by constructing both examples and non-examples." Activities that support this new objective will likely result in deeper and more durable learning and be more accessible to a diverse range of student abilities. Research tells us that experimenting with manipulative forms during the initial study of geometry is both an engaging and effective strategy for most learners. Classroom activities like these take more time to plan and implement; however, when more students have the opportunity to "get it," the results compel our effort.

If the journey of differentiating classroom instruction was such a simple, well-marked route, we'd all be there by now. Differentiated instruction requires from us a persistent honing of our teaching skills plus the courage to significantly change our classroom practices. From our experience, my

colleagues and I are convinced that we can slowly shift from the one-size-fits-all paradigm and adopt a differentiated instructional approach. Crucial to this shift is a view of where we are going, the opportunity to try (and stumble a bit), and the long-term support from administration to get there. Truthfully, tackling the challenge of students with many different needs is not easy; it is a career-long pursuit. By sharing our experiences as we move toward a practice of differentiated instruction, I hope that you will be encouraged to join us on that journey. ■

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