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A LOOK AT DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION
Tips for Teachers

Mr. Richardson is preparing a reading lesson for his first-grade students. The objective: Students will associate appropriate sounds with the paired consonants, th, sh, ch, and ph. Based on classroom assessments and observations, Mr. Richardson knows that the challenge will be to accommodate the differing levels of ability in the classroom. While the majority of students are ready to move forward with this new skill, six students continue to experience confusion with single letter sounds. Further, several students are already proficient with this skill and are ready for greater challenges.

Ms. Whitfield is organizing a unit on chemical equations for her tenth-grade students. Due to her prior experience teaching this unit, Ms. Whitfield believes that students with strong algebra skills will have an easier time with the material. She is searching for organizational and instructional strategies that can help to increase the number of students who are able to master the concepts, as well as motivational strategies to engage reluctant learners in the topic area.

All teachers face the challenge of assisting students with varying degrees of prior knowledge, ability, and interest to master academic concepts. Differentiated instructional practices provide strategies that teachers can use to better support the variety of learners present in their classrooms.

The Center's January 2007 newsletter, *A Teacher's Guide to Differentiating Instruction*, summarized the following four planning stages teachers can use to effectively differentiate instruction:

- A thorough understanding of content

- Use of preassessments and regular formative assessments

- Use of curricular materials and instructional strategies that meet the diverse needs of students

- Use of summative assessments that evaluate students' mastery of subject matter

This newsletter builds on that information by detailing specific, practical strategies for formative assessment; organizing for differentiated group work; and providing tips for managing a differentiated classroom.

Differentiated Instruction: What It Is and Is Not

According to Hall (2002), differentiated instruction is:

> …a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process. (p. 2)

Noted educator Carol Ann Tomlinson further defines differentiated instruction by addressing common misconceptions. She writes that differentiated instruction does not require a teacher to develop unique lesson plans for each individual student in a class. Rather, the practice focuses on meaningful learning for all students (Tomlinson, 2001). Tomlinson also cautions that asking more complex questions of advanced students or grading students who struggle more leniently is insufficient. While these practices acknowledge differences in learning, they do not adequately challenge or support students (Tomlinson, 2001).

There is no single set of strategies that constitutes differentiated instruction. Instead, the practice rests on a set of principles that requires teachers to continuously assess students and adjust instruction. In a class where differentiated instruction is successfully implemented, teachers frequently rotate students into small groups based on demonstrated knowledge, interest, and/or learning style preferences. Instruction is targeted to the needs of each group with the aim of moving all students toward high levels of achievement.

In her book, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners,*

Tomlinson (1999) lists the hallmarks of a differentiated classroom (pp. 9–13):

- Teachers begin instruction at the students' instructional levels. Assessment is inseparable from instruction.

- Teachers focus instruction on essential skills and knowledge.

- Teachers address student differences.

- Teachers begin with an engaging curriculum designed to accommodate varying student needs and levels.

- Teachers work to modify curriculum content, learning processes, and products for assessment according to student needs and interests.

- Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies, often simultaneously.

- All students participate in meaningful work.

- Learning is a collaboration between teachers and students.

Classroom Assessment for Differentiation

Effective differentiation requires that the teacher know each student's achievement level in relation to the learning goals (Bender, 2002; Gregory & Chapman, 2006; Tomlinson, 2000). Classroom assessment can provide data about students' readiness to learn and level of mastery to support differentiated instruction. Classroom assessment also can enable the teacher to plan for preteaching and/or reteaching and to modify curricular materials or instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual students.

Classroom assessment can take many forms. Assessment might be a formal test, a homework assignment, an in-class activity, or a class discussion. A weekly mathematics skill test is an example of classroom assessment. In a classroom that utilizes differentiated practices, the teacher can administer a skill test based on the mathematics objectives taught that week. The

teacher could use the results to plan whole class lessons that focus on skills not mastered, or small-group differentiated activities that provide further opportunities for students to learn new skills, apply skills already learned, and revisit skills not yet mastered.

Another classroom assessment might be a daily "admit slip." An admit slip is a quick and brief assessment of student understanding—typically consisting of a few questions or problems to solve. At the beginning of a lesson, the teacher assigns an activity based on the skills, facts, and/or concepts that students were expected to learn on the previous day. The teacher reviews the admit slips to see which students need additional help. Groups are formed for that day's lesson based on student responses. This same activity can be done at the end of a lesson. This time, an "exit slip" can evaluate the lesson objectives, and the information can be used to develop the next day's lesson. Admit slips and exit slips can be used to plan meaningful activities for students who have fully grasped the lesson and need to move on, as well as for students who need additional teaching or practice.

Assessments also can be differentiated by interest (Tomlinson, 2001). In a social studies lesson related to forms of government, a teacher might allow groups of students to choose from a list of countries and conduct a research project on the government and political system of the selected country. The teacher states the expectations for the learning objective explicitly at the beginning of the lesson and reinforces them when students present their research findings. To further appeal to student interest, the teacher might differentiate this same activity by learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, tactile). Students might choose a product or performance (oral, dramatic, visual) to demonstrate their learning from the activity.

Classroom assessment is a vital component of differentiated instruction. Therefore, teachers in a differentiated classroom can benefit from having an effective system for recording and tracking student performance. Such a system can be as sophisticated as a schoolwide computer software system or as simple as a file box or three-ring binder.

Organizing for Differentiation

A differentiated classroom is a dynamic environment where students move in and out of learning groups based on achievement data, interest, and/or preferred learning modalities. Students are sometimes permitted to choose materials or activities, and teachers move among groups to facilitate learning.

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping occurs after students have been assessed and after the teacher has used direct, whole-group instruction to introduce the content or skills. Students are then grouped for review, reteaching, practice, or enrichment. Groupings can be for a single lesson or objective, a set of skills, a unit of study, or a major concept or theme. Flexible grouping creates temporary groups for an hour, a day, a week, or longer. Group activities can incorporate peer tutoring/support if groups are heterogeneously formed by skill level, or they can offer intensive small-group reteaching or practice if they are homogeneously formed (Heacox, 2002).

In an elementary classroom, an assessment may reveal that some students have mastered multiplication facts, others are near mastery, and a small group of students needs further instruction. The teacher groups students who have mastered the facts with those students who are near mastery and initiates a peer teaching activity during which students take turns "teaching" one another a multiplication concept or drilling the group on a set of facts. This strategy benefits both groups. Students in the mastery group develop a deeper understanding of the content by having to explain the concept to their peers. The students in the near mastery group profit in two ways: They hear the material explained several times, and they must articulate the concept to their peers. Both the proficient

students and the near proficient students gain understanding. Meanwhile, the teacher uses class time to work intensively with the group of students who need reteaching.

Tiered Instruction

Tiered instruction, also called parallel tasks at varied levels of difficulty (Tomlinson, 2001) can be another useful differentiation strategy. Based on the existing skills and knowledge of the learner, tiered instruction provides students the opportunity to gain required skills at a pace better matched to their instructional level (Richards & Omdal, 2007). Student placement within a tier is based on a preassessment score that measures background knowledge and the level of the skills required for the content application. Tiered instruction helps learners with low skills and minimal prior knowledge to experience meaningful academic growth. It provides learners who have high skill levels and above average background knowledge with the opportunity to go beyond the basics and add depth, complexity, and new applications to the content.

Tiered instruction is beneficial when there is adequate professional development support for the teacher. It is also beneficial when the teacher possesses a strong background in the subject matter and can plan for a thorough range of learning activities. Finally, there should be commitment to change in classroom organization and pedagogical principles (Richards & Omdal, 2007).

As an example of a tiered activity, consider students who are studying multiple meaning words in their language arts class. An assessment shows that some students have mastered the concept and can use the same word to give different meanings. Some students are gaining a good grasp of the concept, and others clearly need additional instruction. The teacher plans three different activities that focus on multiple meaning words. The activities are matched to the three levels and are concurrent for 25 minutes. The teacher provides meaningful practice and application for two groups while working with

the group that needs reteaching. The other two groups might be using multiple meaning words to compile a picture dictionary, writing a short story with a self-developed list of multiple meaning words, or identifying words in an article that have multiple meanings and compiling a list of possible meanings for each word.

Physical Environment

A classroom's physical environment can be arranged for maximum flexibility of instruction. For instance, desks can be pulled together in pairs to facilitate peer instruction and information sharing. Clustering desks in groups of four frees up space in the classroom for centers, group instruction, reading areas, or computer centers. It provides opportunities for peer support and cooperative learning, working space for projects, and flexibility for grouping students for various instructional needs. Clustering allows for extended interaction among students and with the teacher. For example, seven clusters of four in a classroom of 28 students in a 60-minute class period allow the teacher more than eight minutes per cluster, rather than two minutes per individual student. More time with the teacher and increased peer interaction during meaningful activities also can help to reduce student discipline problems.

Classroom Centers

Classroom centers can provide students with choice in their learning. Centers are typically considered to be unique to primary-level classrooms where they are set up as permanent fixtures (e.g., house center, book center, block center). However, in an upper elementary, middle, or high school classroom, centers can be sets of materials that provide differentiated routes to the same learning outcomes. For instance, a mathematics center might include folders with games and/or skill practice activities on fractions, decimals, and percentages. Some centers can provide advanced problem-solving activities, some can provide manipulatives, some can involve computer-based drill programs, and some can include problem-solving activities presented

with visuals or graphics rather than verbal instructions. Students in a high school language arts classroom might be assigned a persuasive essay, but they might be allowed to choose their topic. A middle school or high school social studies assignment on the causes of the Civil War might offer students a choice between working with a group, reading alone, or working with the teacher to have materials scaffolded for learning (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007).

Tips for Managing a Differentiated Classroom

A differentiated classroom takes thoughtful planning and execution of plans (Forsten, Grant, & Hollas, 2002). Often, educators raise concerns about the potential decrease in student engagement and time on task when implementing small-group work. Tomlinson (2001) notes that teachers must have a strong rationale for differentiating instruction, a plan for managing time and pacing the lesson, and a plan for keeping students focused and on task. When these strategies are implemented effectively, disruptions to classroom instruction are minimized.

Tomlinson (1999) offers some suggestions for giving directions in a differentiated classroom:

- Start class with a small task, such as a review question or skill practice, and then meet with one small group at a time to provide specific directions for each group.

- Write out directions for each group. Have the directions on the group's table or cluster at the beginning of the class or include the directions at a learning center or with a packet of learning materials that the students select.

- Put directions on the board, dividing the directions by task or group.

- Use group lessons, activities, or graphic organizers to introduce concepts to the entire class before expecting small groups to work independently with a new concept or skill.

Conclusion

One of the greatest challenges for a teacher is to address the learning needs of all students in a classroom while moving them toward high levels of achievement. Differentiated instructional strategies can be employed to serve students at all levels of interest, readiness, and mastery. Successful differentiation requires continuous assessment, frequent grouping and regrouping of students, careful attention to the physical environment, and effective classroom management.

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NEWSLETTER

Additional Resources

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Differentiated Instruction

http://www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_diffinstruc.html
http://www.frsd.k12.nj.us/rfmslibrarylab/di/differentiated_instruction.htm
http://www.internet4classrooms.com/di.htm
http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/teaching/differentiate/planning/

Learning Centers

http://www.teachingheart.net/LC.htm
http://www.busyteacherscafe.com/learningcenter/main.htm

Universal Design for Learning

http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html
http://www.cec.sped.org/am/template.cfm?section=Home

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