

Differentiated Instruction: Flexibility Without Breaking

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Abstract

Teachers are often challenged by the wide variety of student's ability levels and backgrounds. This essay reflects on the practical strategies for classroom teachers to differentiate lessons to meet the needs of all students. Suggestions and approaches include: tiered instruction, flexible grouping, anchor activities, and learning contracts.

Introduction

Many teachers in today's classrooms strive to differentiate instruction to address each student's interests, ability levels, and learning profiles. They attempt to adapt their content (what will be taught), process (how it will be taught), and product (the assessment of the content through culminating projects). Teachers who engage in the practice of differentiated instruction plan curriculum and instruction that honor each student's learning strengths and needs in order to maximize the learning capacity of all the students (Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). As teachers attempt to take on this task, it can seem daunting at times to meet the needs of the variety of students in their classrooms. In fact, when I was an assistant principal, I overheard a teacher grumble, "I feel like I have to be so flexible that one of these days I might break!"

We know that "Flexibility is a teacher's responsibility; and it demonstrates respect for the students as well as supports their efforts" (Heckendorn, 2006, p.153). However, like a dancer or a sports star, in order to keep flexible one must warm up and stretch correctly. If you jump into differentiating without a plan, you could end up feeling discomfort with the process. This article will provide some "stretches" that you can do to perform your best in the classroom and help your students to find success through differentiated instruction.

Static Stretching: Take it Slow

Static stretching involves lengthening a muscle slowly, holding the stretch for 15-30 seconds, and then trying to go deeper with the stretch. To apply this principle to your teaching, you need to create a plan for differentiating in your classroom instruction and assessment. A great place to begin preparation is with evaluation of your students by providing the class with interest inventories, determining their learning styles and needs with checklists, and pre-assessing their learning abilities.

Learning profiles can be based on Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1999). According to Gardner, students typically have some capabilities in each of the following areas, yet they naturally have strengths in one or more of the descriptors in his framework. Gardner's multiple intelligences include verbal/linguistic,

logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential (Gardner, 1983; Gardner, 1999).

Another resource for appraising a student's modality preferences for the learning profile is the VARK Questionnaire, which can be found at <http://www.vark-learn.com/>. If the teacher hones in on what the student brings to the classroom through listening and assessing, the best way to teach the student standards for growth can be determined.

Because it has been recognized that students need to learn the same knowledge and skills, many teachers begin slowly by "tiering instruction." Tiered assignments are engaging lessons that are designed for one level of student. Accommodations are then made to meet each of the student's needs.

When working with students on different levels it is important to be proactive on the "fairness issue." Explain to the students from the beginning that everyone learns at their own pace and that everyone has their own strengths to bring to the classroom. They will each be working on an assortment of tasks and assignments as unique individuals.

Passive Stretching: Collaboration and Cooperation

Passive stretching occurs when a partner helps you get the stretch you desire by carefully pushing your body part into the deep stretch. Once the students' strengths and needs have been established, it is important to decide how the classroom can be best managed. At times whole group instruction may be the best way to present instruction; small group instruction will also play an important role.

When dividing into flexible groups, it is not necessary to pair homogeneously, based strictly on the ability level. Instead, vary the groupings according to similar and dissimilar interests, learning profiles, and abilities. For instance, groups can be based on discussing types of books (e.g. science fiction) that students love regardless of the reading level (Willis & Mann, 2000; Hall, 2002). It is important that in differentiated instruction, that the teachers witness learning in various groupings and that students try working in different contexts with multiple partners. If the teacher notes at some point in the lesson that more than one student needs remediation or if the teacher wants to scaffold learning on a particular concept, a mini-workshop can be formed in a classroom area with small groups (Tomlinson, 2003).

Teachers who practice differentiated instruction may have concerns regarding productively filling downtime for students who complete all activities quickly. Anchor activities are standards-based, engaging, on-going projects that are utilized when the student has finished the class assignment. They can be completed independently because they are on the student's level. Examples of anchor activities are learning packets, listening stations, journaling, learning and interest stations, independent studies, and research questions. Prior to assigning the anchor activities, decide how they will be assessed (e.g. rubrics).

Isometric Contractions: Individual Parts, Individual Children

Isometric contractions are created by tensing only one body part and not the others. When differentiating instruction it is important to focus on the individual needs of each student and what they can accomplish. Teachers can mentor students through the creation and implementation of a learning contract. Students can generate questions and projects once parameters have been determined by the teacher. Learning contracts are agreements on the students' responsibilities to learn the standards, the timeframe, the process, and how they will demonstrate their learning. Gregory & Kuzmich (2005) created a sample of some of the items that a student could mark on a learning contract for differentiated instruction,

How I need to show what I learned:

- Record work
- Use a computer
- Work with a partner

What type of time and work would help me to finish the assignment:

- Extra time
- Fewer items
- New work

What kind of resources and materials do I need:

- Extra help from my teacher
- Use the internet
- Different materials

What else I need to be successful: (Write or draw what you need).

(p. 47).

Learning contracts can provide students with individualized choices. Teachers sign the contract when the student and the teacher have decided that it is appropriate.

Contortionist Conclusion

A contortionist is a person who is flexible and coordinated enough to be able to contort into extraordinary poses. Find ways to coax yourself into new positions by identifying and embracing the needs and strengths of your students. Utilize the proven methods of differentiated instruction: flexible grouping, learning packets, listening stations, journaling, learning and interest stations, independent studies, research questions, and learning contracts. Set the ground rules of fairness. Discover your balance through anchor activities. Before you know it, you will be twisting and bending to meet the needs of every student in your class through differentiated instruction!

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