

Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom

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Acknowledgments

In the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*, Anna sings a simple line that is profoundly true, “If you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught.” That, of course, is one of the prime perks of teaching.

I’ve been reminded of that truth virtually every day of a 30-plus-year career in teaching. It was true when I taught high school students, preschoolers, middle schoolers—and no less so in my more recent years of teaching adults. On my best days as a teacher, I learn more than I teach.

Much of the impetus for this book has come from the excellent work two of my doctoral students have done with me over the last three or four years. I don’t mean they’ve done excellent work *for* me (although they have, of course). I really do mean the work they have done *with* me—or perhaps *within* me. In other words, *they* have been *my* teachers.

Whether because of personality, modeling, setting, or some combination of those elements, it has been a given to me throughout my career that good teaching begins with good relationships between and among teacher and students. Said another way, positive affect has always been for me the foundational ingredient in effective teaching—the “mother sauce” for whatever would be “served up” in the classroom. Likewise, the learning environment has always occupied a sizeable portion of my teacher mind. How do I make this place work for the child who can’t sit still? How do I arrange time so I can make meaningful contact with 150 individuals in some reasonable span of time? How do I help students develop the same kind of pride I have in this classroom and its inhabitants?

Positive affect and learning environments became automatics for me somewhere along the line—and pretty early in my career, as I recall. It’s not, to say the least, that I had all the answers or always did the right things. I just always understood the need to keep at it. Later, I did what all of us do when we reach a stage of automaticity of performance in any arena: I worked with affect and learning environment without articulating what I did.

Enter two doctoral students at the University of Virginia. Cindy Strickland and Ellen Hench have a passion for the role of affect and learning environments in effective classrooms. For them, it is unthinkable that these two elements might not be articulated as central to any educational endeavor. In their own quiet (and persistent) ways, they continued to say to me, “You can’t take it for granted that everyone understands the role of those elements in classrooms.”

Cindy and Ellen were reminding me that my work on differentiation was incomplete if it did not squarely and unambiguously address the role of positive affect and learning environment in responsive teaching. About the same time, I was working with a group of teachers in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. One day, we were examining the need to be very specific when crafting product assignments for learners. At lunch, a veteran teacher said to me, “I had one of the most important ‘ah-has’ of my teaching career today.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“I’m embarrassed to tell you,” she responded. “It sounds so silly.”

I assured her that an insight that was important to her was not likely to sound silly, and so she took the chance. “What I figured out today,” she explained, “is

that it’s the teacher’s job to make explicit that which we hoped was implicit.”

She’s right, of course. It’s a brilliant insight, and a tough one to practice. Surely the students know what we teachers mean. We’ve been talking about “it” for so many years. And besides, wouldn’t anyone just know to do those things?

It’s what Cindy and Ellen were saying to me. “It’s your job to make explicit those things about differentiation you assumed were evident to everyone. They are not always evident!” This book, then, finds me laying out the role of learning and environment in differentiation more fully than I have done before. The book also is my opportunity to show how those two elements direct and shape everything else that we value in the classroom. They are, in effect, the catalysts for effective differentiation.

So, along with my enduring gratitude to the folks at ASCD for continued support in developing the concept of differentiation, and colleagues who nurture, challenge and support me, my thanks go to two of my most excellent teachers—Cindy Strickland and Ellen Hench. Their own words will add someday to what I have tried to do here. In the meantime, thanks for the nudge that has made me realize we should never take for granted that something is obvious.

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What's Behind the Idea of Differentiated Classrooms?

Schools are like airport hubs; student passengers arrive from many different backgrounds for widely divergent destinations. Their particular takeoffs into adulthood will demand different flight plans (Levine, 2002, p. 336).

The idea of differentiating instruction to accommodate the different ways that students learn involves a hefty dose of common sense, as well as sturdy support in the theory and research of education (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; Tomlinson, et al., in press). It is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for student differences in classrooms. It suggests, for example:

- If a student learns faster than a prescribed pace or is ready for greater depth or breadth of knowledge than is planned for a learning sequence, those things matter and there should be plans for adapting the pace and scope of learning for that student.
- If a student has great difficulty learning—for whatever reason—there should be provisions made to ensure that the student masters essential knowledge and has an active support system both to fill in gaps in knowledge and to move ahead.
- If a student is just learning to speak English, there should be mechanisms in place to help the student manage critical elements of subject matter as well as practice continually with the new language.
- If a student's culture or gender results in learning preferences that vary from those typically addressed in the classroom, the range of learning modes should be expanded to support effective and efficient learning for each learner.
- If a student has “given up” on school, there should be active and continual planning to help the student reconnect with the power of learning to positively shape his or her life.

In other words, the philosophy of differentiation proposes that what we bring to school as learners matters in how we learn. Therefore, to teach most

effectively, teachers must take into account *who* they are teaching as well as *what* they are teaching. The goal of a differentiated classroom is to plan actively and consistently to help each learner move as far and as fast as possible along a learning continuum. The current interest in differentiation is probably a response to several factors in contemporary schools:

- The number of English language learners in classrooms across the country is increasing, even in localities where there were virtually no such students just a few years ago (Center for Immigration Studies, 2001). English language learners face the daunting task of mastering complex subject matter even as they tackle a new language.
- The achievement gap for minority learners—particularly African American, Native American, and Hispanic students—continues in schools across the country (Haycock, 2001). Even accounting for economic status does not eradicate the gap in achievement for these students compared to their Caucasian counterparts (McWhorter, 2001; North Carolina Commission, 2001). The intractability of the gap is probably explained in part by the fact that currently 75 percent of teachers in the United States are Caucasian, while projections are that 70 percent of the student population will be non-Caucasian within the next 25 years (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Garcia, 2002). This mismatch in experience and perspective between many teachers and their students may result in classrooms that are ill suited to the needs of large groups of learners.
- The field of special education has moved steadily toward the goal of inclusive instruction for many students with disabilities; the number of such learners educated in regular classrooms has grown 20 percent over the past decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This approach to the education of students with special education identification is based on the premise that all students—including those with disabilities—are an important part of general education, both benefiting and benefiting from interactions with a wide variety of learners (Shea and Bauer, 1997). At the same time that the field of special education has moved toward inclusion, there are more students with learning problems attending schools (Gersten, et al., 2001; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2001).
- Our brightest students may be losing academic and motivational ground in classrooms ill-equipped to ensure that they, like other students, are expected to progress at least a year's worth in an academic year (Callahan, et al., 2000).

These factors, of course, only extend the challenge that has always existed for teachers—being many things to many different young learners. The one-size-fits-all teacher may very well discover that the “size” of instruction he or she has selected fits almost no one.

Differentiating Instruction: What and Why

Differentiated instruction is responsive instruction. It occurs as teachers become

increasingly proficient in understanding their students as individuals, increasingly comfortable with the meaning and structure of the disciplines they teach, and increasingly expert at teaching flexibly in order to match instruction to student need with the goal of maximizing the potential of each learner in a given area.

More complete explanations of differentiation are available in a variety of sources (e.g., Gartin, et al., 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). The goal of this book is to expand on rather than reiterate those explanations. Nonetheless, it is useful to review briefly some common terms related to differentiation and to revisit briefly why particular elements are significant in addressing academic diversity.

Student Traits

There are four student traits that teachers must often address to ensure effective and efficient learning. Those are *readiness*, *interest*, *learning profile*, and *affect*. The first three of these student needs have been discussed extensively in the previous publications on this model of differentiation. The fourth, *affect*, will be discussed more extensively throughout this book.

Readiness refers to a student's knowledge, understanding, and skill related to a particular sequence of learning. A student's general cognitive proficiency affects his or her readiness, but readiness is also profoundly influenced by a student's prior learning and life experiences, attitudes about school, and habits of mind. This model of differentiation uses the term *readiness* rather than *ability* because

ability generally seems more fixed, less amenable to intervention, whereas readiness can vary widely over time, topic, and circumstance. Only when a student works at a level of difficulty that is both challenging and attainable for that student does learning take place (Howard, 1994; Jensen, 1998; National Research Council, 1999; Sousa, 2001; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wolfe, 2001). Thus, if readiness levels in a class vary, so must the complexity of work provided for students.

Interest refers to those topics or pursuits that evoke curiosity and passion in a learner. These are facets of learning that invite students to invest their time and energy in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and skill. Students bring to school interests in particular areas. School also offers the opportunity for students to realize new interests. Thus, highly effective teachers attend both to developing interests and as yet undiscovered interests in their students. Students whose interests are tapped and deepened in school are more likely to be engaged and to persist in learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1962; Sousa, 2001; Wolfe, 2001).

Learning profile refers to how students learn best. Preferences for learning are shaped by a constellation of overlapping and interlocking student factors. Those include learning style, intelligence preference, culture, and gender. If classrooms can offer and support different modes of learning, it is likely that more students will learn more effectively and efficiently (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Sternberg, Torff, & Grigorenko, 1998; Sullivan, 1993).