



Kristina J. Doubet
Jessica A. Hockett

Foreword by Carol Ann Tomlinson

Differentiation

in Middle & High School

Strategies
to Engage
All Learners



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Introduction: Is This Even Possible?

The Challenge

Middle and high schools in the United States today are blessed with students from a rich range of racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This vibrant diversity expands students' understanding of what makes us *us*, and helps equip them to become productive, empathetic, and ethical citizens who can thrive in an ever-changing global society.

Our country's commitment to educating all children well has driven the push for all graduates to be "college and career ready" and globally competitive. In pursuit of that goal, we have increased the rigor of academic standards. A high-quality education is no longer the province of the few or the rich, but the right of every child in every community.

The confluence of these two factors—rising student diversity and increased academic rigor—means that today's middle and high school teachers have greater accountability for a more diverse population of students than ever before. In many schools, appraisal of teachers' performance is based at least in part on their ability to ensure the progress of every student, regardless of background, native language, motivation, or school savvy.

Herein lies the challenge: how do teachers capitalize on the benefits offered by the lavish tapestry of the U.S. secondary classroom while ensuring growth for such a wide range of learners?

Is it even possible?



Attempts to Meet the Challenge

U.S. school systems have historically “handled” student diversity by sorting students into different schools, course levels, or special programs based on test scores or presumed educational destination. Unfortunately, these approaches have tended to widen achievement gaps, exacerbate student status differences, and result in some students receiving a higher-quality education than others.

At the classroom level, middle and high school teachers address student diversity through the kinds of instruction they employ. *Traditional instruction* is the model most familiar to teachers, as it represents the kind of instruction they typically experienced as students. Featuring the teacher as center, this model has all students take in, process, and demonstrate mastery of learning in the same manner during a given time frame. Although instruction may be offered in multiple modes (e.g., audio and visual), all students move at the same pace through those modes. Groupings other than whole-class are atypical in a traditional classroom, although students may occasionally work with self- or teacher-selected partners to complete tasks assigned to the full class.

One attempt to move away from a teacher-centered classroom is *cooperative learning*. In this model, the teacher typically delivers the same content to all students at the same time using the same set of strategies for the whole class. Students process this information collaboratively in small heterogeneous groups, with all groups working on the same task. Although this group work is the norm in this model, the teacher rarely varies grouping configurations or tasks. Students in a cooperative classroom may occasionally receive choices for tasks or assignments, but for the most part, all students complete the same work (albeit in interactive settings).

Unfortunately, both the traditional model and the cooperative model fail to discern the nuances of students’ varying learning needs and adjust instruction accordingly.

Differentiation: A Better Solution

One-size-fits-all approaches to teaching and learning will not propel all (or even most) students toward and beyond standards. A more promising and productive way to address student differences is known as *differentiated instruction* (Tomlinson, 2003, 2014a). Differentiation is *not* synonymous with tracking or ability grouping. Rather than describing *where* students learn (i.e., in a classroom with peers who are deemed to be at the same academic level), differentiation articulates *how* the classroom teacher makes important curricular goals accessible to all learners within the same classroom.

Middle and high school classrooms that regularly implement differentiated instruction are characterized by certain hallmarks not typically shared by traditional or cooperative classrooms. In a differentiated classroom, teachers

- Create an atmosphere in which students' unique qualities and needs are as important as the traits they share.
- Uncover students' learning needs through pre-assessments and formative assessment and tailor tasks accordingly.
- Plan experiences and tasks that are bound together by common and important learning goals.
- Present varied approaches and avenues for students to take in, process, and produce knowledge.
- Vary grouping configurations frequently and strategically as a way of granting access to learning goals, providing support and challenge, and building community.

For many teachers, the cultivation of differentiated classrooms is neither natural nor intuitive; such a practice stands in stark contrast to their own experience as students, and traditional and cooperative models feel more familiar and comfortable. But used exclusively, both these models fail to meet students where they are and call them to something higher while offering appropriate levels of support and challenge. This is the goal of the differentiated classroom.

Misconceptions abound as to what "qualifies" as differentiated instruction. In this book, differentiation adheres to the criteria outlined in the bulleted list above as well as to the distinctions laid out in Figure I.1 (Tomlinson, 2003, 2014a).

FIGURE I.1

What Differentiation Is and Is Not

Differentiation <i>Is</i>	Differentiation <i>Is Not</i>
... A philosophy rooted in effective teaching and learning.	... A bag of tricks or set of strategies that can be plunked into low-quality curriculum.
... Regularly examining evidence of student learning and making thoughtful instructional decisions accordingly.	... Either an everyday necessity or a once-in-a-blue-moon "event."
... Tailoring instruction in response to patterns in student needs.	... Writing individualized lesson plans for every student.
... Designing respectful tasks and using flexible grouping.	... Sorting or pigeonholing students into static groups or levels.
... A way <i>up</i> to standards and learning goals.	... A way <i>out</i> of standards and learning goals.
... Critical to improving instruction for <i>all</i> students.	... More important for certain groups of students (e.g., students with IEPs or English language learners).

To be clear, differentiation is not a “magic bullet.” It’s not an easy fix, and it can’t immediately or neatly solve the complex problems teachers face in their classrooms.

Instead, differentiation is a proactive way of thinking. It’s systemic practice. It’s hard work. And it offers hope.

What’s Ahead

All teachers plan. Differentiation is, in essence, a way of upping the ante in the planning process by calling on teachers to *purposefully* and *proactively* think about how instruction could be more responsive to more kids. As a middle or high school teacher engages in this kind of planning, he or she may wonder,

- How do I set the tone?
- How do I determine what I have to teach?
- How do I know what students already know?
- How do I get students to care?
- How do I help students make sense of it?
- Is my teaching working?
- What if students are in different places?
- Do students get it?
- How do I keep this sane?

These key questions provide practical entry points for thinking about how differentiation influences each phase of lesson design. Their answers form the backbone of this book, which aims to be a comprehensive guide to differentiation in middle and high school classrooms. Here’s a brief look at what each chapter addresses:

Chapter 1 presents techniques to promote healthy teacher-student and student-student relationships and foster a growth mindset.

Chapter 2 shows teachers how to prioritize, focus, and “translate” the curriculum into manageable and meaningful learning goals that are fit to be differentiated.

Chapter 3 offers guidelines on how best to gather information about what students already know, understand, and can do prior to beginning a unit or lesson.

Chapter 4 features strategies designed to foster student investment by conceptually linking students to what they are about to read, discuss, see, or listen to.

Chapter 5 explains strategies for actively involving all students in discussions and other kinds of activities aimed at making sense of content.

Chapter 6 provides strategies and prompts for gauging the progress of student learning—both during the course of a lesson and at its completion—with the goal of using that information to inform future instructional decisions.

Chapter 7 focuses on low- and high-prep approaches to adjusting content, process, and product for student readiness, with an emphasis on closely analyzing and planning instruction directly from formative assessment results.

Chapter 8 features strategies that require students to demonstrate command of learning goals while allowing them to choose tasks that appeal to their varied interests and learning profiles.

Chapter 9 offers practical suggestions and tools for navigating potential roadblocks to differentiation in the secondary classroom.

The Conclusion addresses lingering questions about how and where to get started and provides additional resources to help teachers move forward in their quest to create more responsive classrooms.

This book recognizes two fundamental truths: (1) that the real world of middle and high school is characterized by pressure and time constraints that significantly influence what is feasible for teachers in terms of change, and (2) that the most powerful (and efficient) learning often happens by example. Accordingly, Part 2 of each chapter provides a plethora of tools and examples spanning a range of grade levels and subject areas that were developed *by, for, or with* real teachers. These can be used to support teacher growth in myriad contexts, including professional learning communities, department or team planning meetings, and instructional coaching relationships. In any of these situations, teachers will benefit from studying examples from both inside and outside their content areas, as different disciplines can learn much from one another. For added utility, select forms and templates from this book can be downloaded at www.go.hbe.com.au.

Used well, this book and its tools have the potential to upgrade what happens in middle and high school classrooms and, ultimately, to improve the learning and the lives of both teachers and their students.

It is possible.