HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE INSTRUCTION in Academically Diverse Classrooms

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Introduction

Bill Bosher, a former Superintendent of Education for Virginia, was fond of saying that the only time there was any such thing as a homogeneous classroom was when he was in the room by himself. He would follow this statement with a longish pause and a questioning brow—then, "and come to think of it, I'm not even sure about *that*."

He's right, of course. All classrooms are heterogeneous on many levels, as are the individual students within them.

Some kindergartners arrive at school already able to read 3rd grade books with comprehension, while their peers grapple for months, if not years, with the idea of left-to-right print progression or the difference between short and long vowel sounds. Some 3rd graders make an independent leap from multiplication to division before any explanation has been offered. Many of these same children, when they reach middle school, make connections between themes in social studies and literature, or apply advanced mathematical tools to solve science problems before other students in their classes have grasped the main idea of a chapter in the textbook. In high school, students who have been seen as "slow" or "average" can surprise everyone by developing a complex and articulate defense of a position related to scientific ethics or economic strategy. Meanwhile, some of their classmates who had always found school a "cinch" find they must now work hard to feel comfortable with ideas at a more abstract level. One student is more successful in math than in English and, within math, more comfortable with geometry than with algebra and, within English, more competent—at least for the time being—with analyzing fiction than with analyzing nonfiction or with grammatical constructions. Another student easily envisions objects moving in space but has great difficulty following the multistep directions necessary to complete science labs.

In life, kids can choose from a variety of clothing to fit their differing sizes, styles, and preferences. With just a few clicks, they can create their own playlists one song at a time, free from earlier generations' obligation to buy an entire album just to hear a favorite song. They can access all kinds

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of media on demand and on multiple platforms. We understand, without explanation, that these choices make them more comfortable and give expression to their developing personalities.

In school, instruction that is differentiated for students of differing points of entry and varied interests is also more comfortable, engaging, and inviting. Even though students in a classroom may be chronologically the same age, one-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch just as surely as single-size clothing would. Acknowledging that students learn on different timetables, and that they differ widely in their ability to think abstractly or understand complex ideas, is no different than acknowledging that students at any given age aren't all the same height. It is not a statement of worth but of reality.

To operate with the assumption that it is of little significance whether a student understood last year's math, or whether a student loses concentration when forced to sit still for extended periods, or whether a student can read the required textbook, or whether words scramble on a page for a student, or whether a student has already mastered the content in the unit of study that is about to begin is delusional.

To argue that we teach too many students to be expected to know them in a multidimensional way is to reject one of the clearest and most fundamental findings of educational research: that learning is relational.

To say that teachers don't have time to attend to student differences is akin to a physician telling a patient that his case is taking too much time to figure out and should therefore be dismissed.

In truth, most teachers grasp the reality of learner difference early in their careers and quickly begin the process of adapting to it. They use humor differently with one student than another. They move around the classroom while most students are working confidently to answer questions for those who are still uncertain with the content. They ask questions targeted at students' different interests or strengths during class discussions. They offer choices of topics for papers or performance tasks. The question is not whether asking teachers to attend to students' varied learning needs is appropriate or desirable, but rather how school and district leaders can systematically and vigorously support the growth in the direction that virtually all teachers begin as a matter of course and a matter of necessity.

A baseline goal for success in today's schools should be helping teachers create "user-friendly" learning environments in which they become

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systematically more confident and competent in flexibly adapting pacing, approaches to learning, and channels for expressing learning in response to their students' differing needs—learning environments designed to make room for the students who inhabit them. While the goal for each student in such environments is challenge and maximum growth, teachers will often define challenge and growth differently in response to students' current, diverse interests and starting points.

A goal of this book is to provide a reliable source of guidance for teachers seeking to create learning environments that address the variety typical of academically diverse classrooms. It aims to help these teachers determine what differentiated instruction is, why it is essential for all learners, how to begin to plan for it, and how to become comfortable enough with student differences to make school comfortable for each and every student.

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1 What Differentiated Instruction Is—and Isn't

Kids of the same age aren't all alike when it comes to learning any more than they are alike in terms of size, hobbies, personality, or food preferences. Kids do have many things in common, because they are human beings and because they are all young people, but they also have important differences. What we share makes us human, but how we differ makes us individuals. In a classroom with little or no differentiated instruction, only student similarities seem to take center stage. In a differentiated classroom, commonalities are acknowledged and built upon, and student differences also become important elements in teaching and learning.

At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means "shaking up" what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.

In many classrooms, the approach to teaching and learning is more unitary than differentiated. For example, 1st graders may listen to a story and then draw pictures about the beginning, middle, and end of the story. While they may choose to draw different aspects of the elements, they all experience the same content, and they all engage in the same sense-making or processing activity. A kindergarten class may have four centers that all students visit to complete the same activities in a week's time. Fifth

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graders may all listen to the same explanation about fractions and complete the same homework assignment. Middle school or high school students may sit through a lecture and a video to help them understand a topic in science or history. They will all read the same chapter, complete the same lab or end-of-chapter questions, and take the same quiz—all on the same timetable. Such classrooms are familiar, typical, and largely undifferentiated.

Most teachers (as well as students and parents) have clear mental images of such classrooms. After experiencing undifferentiated instruction over many years, it is often difficult to imagine what a differentiated classroom would look and feel like. How, educators wonder, can we make the shift from "single-size instruction" to differentiated instruction to better meet our students' diverse needs? To answer this question, we first need to clear away some misperceptions.

What Differentiated Instruction Is NOT

Differentiated instruction is NOT "individualized instruction."

Decades ago, in an attempt to honor students' learning differences, educators experimented with what was called "individualized instruction." The idea was to create a different, customized lesson each day for each of the 30-plus students in a single classroom. Given the expectation that each student needed to have a different reading assignment, for example, it didn't take long for teachers to become exhausted. A second flaw in this approach was that in order to "match" each student's precise entry level into the curriculum with each upcoming lesson, instruction needed to be segmented or reduced into skill fragments, thereby making learning largely devoid of meaning and essentially irrelevant to those who were asked to master the curriculum.

While it is true that differentiated instruction can offer multiple avenues to learning, and although it certainly advocates attending to students as individuals, it does not assume a separate assignment for each learner. It also focuses on meaningful learning—on ensuring all students engage with powerful ideas. Differentiation is more reminiscent of a one-room-schoolhouse than of individualization. That model of instruction recognized that the teacher needed to work sometimes with the whole class, sometimes with small groups, and sometimes with individuals. These variations were important both to

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move each student along in his or her particular understandings and skills and to build a sense of community in the group.

Differentiated instruction is NOT chaotic.

Most teachers remember the recurrent, nightmarish experience from their first year of teaching: losing control of student behavior. A benchmark of teacher development is the point at which the teacher becomes secure and comfortable with managing classroom routines. Fear of returning to uncertainty about "control of student behavior" is a major obstacle for many teachers in establishing a flexible classroom. Here's a surprise, though: teachers who differentiate instruction are quick to point out that, if anything, they now exert more leadership in their classrooms, not less. *And*, student behavior is considerably more focused and productive.

Compared with teachers who offer a single approach to learning, teachers who differentiate instruction have to be more active leaders. Often they must help students understand how differentiation can support greater growth and success for everyone in the class, and then help them develop ground rules for effective work in classroom routines—all while managing and monitoring the multiple activities that are going on. Effectively differentiated classrooms include purposeful student movement and sometimes purposeful student talking, but they are not disorderly or undisciplined. On the contrary, "orderly flexibility" is a defining feature of differentiated classrooms—and of any classroom that prioritizes student thinking. Research tells us that neither "disorderly" environments nor "restrictive" ones support meaningful learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007).

Differentiated instruction is NOT just another way to provide homogeneous grouping.

Our memories of undifferentiated classrooms probably include the bluebird, cardinal, and buzzard reading groups. Typically, a buzzard remained a buzzard, and a cardinal was forever a cardinal. Under this system, buzzards nearly always worked with buzzards on skills-focused tasks, while work done by cardinals was typically at "higher levels" of thought. In addition to being predictable, student assignment to groups was virtually always teacher-selected.

A hallmark of an effective differentiated classroom, by contrast, is the use of flexible grouping, which accommodates students who are strong

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in some areas and weaker in others. For example, a student may be great at interpreting literature but not so strong in spelling, or great with map skills and not as quick to grasp patterns in history, or quick with math word problems but careless with computation. Teachers who use flexible grouping also understand that some students may begin a new task slowly and then launch ahead at remarkable speed, while others will learn steadily but more slowly. They know that sometimes they need to assign students to groups so that assignments are tailored to student need but that in other instances, it makes more sense for students to form their own working groups. They see that some students prefer or benefit from independent work, while others usually fare best in pairs or triads.

In a differentiated classroom, the goal is to have students work consistently with a wide variety of peers and with tasks thoughtfully designed not only to draw on the strengths of all members of a group but also to shore up those students' areas of need. "Fluid" is a good word to describe assignment of students to groups in such a heterogeneous classroom. See the Appendix for more information on flexible grouping.

Differentiated instruction is NOT just "tailoring the same suit of clothes."

Many teachers think they are differentiating instruction when they let students volunteer to answer questions, grade some students a little harder or easier on an assignment in response to the students' perceived ability and effort, or let students read or do homework if they finish a class assignment early. Certainly such modifications reflect a teacher's awareness of differences in student needs and, in that way, the modifications *are* movement in the direction of differentiation. While such approaches play a role in addressing learner variance, they are examples of "micro-differentiation" or "tailoring," and are often just not enough to adequately address significant learning issues.

If the basic assignment itself is far too easy for an advanced learner, having a chance to answer an additional complex question is not an adequate challenge. If information is essential for a struggling learner, allowing him to skip a test question because he never understood the information does nothing to address the student's learning gap. If the information in the basic assignment is simply too complex for a learner until she has the chance to assimilate needed background information or language skills, being "easier

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on her" when grading her assignment circumvents her need for additional time and support to master foundational content. In sum, trying to stretch a garment that is far too small or attempting to tuck and gather a garment that is far too large is likely to be less effective than getting clothes that are the right fit. Said another way, small adjustments in a lesson may be all that's needed to make the lesson "work" for a student in some instances, but in many others, the mismatch between learner and lesson is too great to be effectively addressed in any way other than re-crafting the lesson itself.

Differentiated instruction is NOT just for outliers.

Certainly students who have identified learning challenges such as autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, visual impairment, and so on are likely to need scaffolding on a fairly regular basis in order to grow academically as they should. Likewise, students who learn rapidly, think deeply, and readily make meaningful connections within or across content areas will need advanced challenges on a regular basis in order to grow as *they* should. And students who are just learning the language spoken in the classroom will typically require support as they seek to master both content and the language in which it is communicated. But in virtually any class on any day, there are students "in the middle" who struggle moderately, or just a little, with varied aspects of what they are seeking to learn.

There are students who know a good bit about a portion of a lesson or unit but struggle with specific steps or content. There are students whose experiences outside the classroom weigh negatively on their ability to concentrate or complete work. There are students who are just about to "take flight" with an idea that has been out of their reach and need encouragement and a boost to ensure their launch is successful. Every student benefits from being on the teacher's radar and from seeing evidence that the teacher understands their development and plans with their success in mind.

What Differentiated Instruction IS

Differentiated instruction IS proactive.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher assumes that different learners have differing needs and proactively plans lessons that provide a variety of ways to "get at" and express learning. The teacher may still need to fine-tune instruction for some learners, but because the teacher knows the varied

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learner needs within the classroom and selects learning options accordingly, the chances are greater that these experiences will be an appropriate fit for most learners. Effective differentiation is typically designed to be robust enough to engage and challenge the full range of learners in the classroom. In a one-size-fits-all approach, the teacher must make reactive adjustments whenever it becomes apparent that a lesson is not working for some of the learners for whom it was intended.

For example, many students at all grade levels struggle with reading. Those students need a curriculum with regular, built-in, structured, and supported opportunities to develop the skills of competent readers. While it may be thoughtful, and helpful in the short term, for a teacher to provide both oral and written directions for a task so that students can hear what they might not be able to read with confidence, their fundamental reading problems are unlikely to diminish unless the teacher makes proactive plans to help students acquire the specific reading skills necessary for success in that particular content area.

Differentiated instruction IS more qualitative than quantitative.

Many teachers incorrectly assume that differentiating instruction means giving some students more work to do, and others less. For example, a teacher might assign two book reports to advanced readers and only one to struggling readers. Or a struggling math student might have to complete only computation problems while advanced math students complete the computation problems plus a few word problems.

Although such approaches to differentiation may seem reasonable, they are typically ineffective. One book report may be too demanding for a struggling learner without additional concurrent support in the process of reading as well as interpreting the text. Or a student who is perfectly capable of acting out what happened in the book might be overwhelmed by writing a three-page report. If writing one book report is "too easy" for the advanced reader, doing "twice as much" of the same thing is not only unlikely to remedy that problem but could also seem like punishment. A student who has already demonstrated mastery of one math skill is ready to stop practicing that skill and needs to begin work with a subsequent skill. Simply adjusting the quantity of an assignment will generally be less

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