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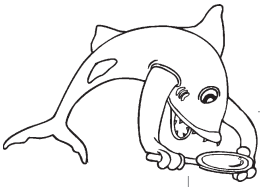
Introduction

Common Sense to Common Practice

Good teachers have always known that one size doesn't fit all, and yet they are often pressured into using instructional strategies that cover a narrow range of their students' abilities, interests, and readiness levels. This *teach to the middle* approach neglects the capable students' enthusiasm and frustrates those with learning difficulties and special needs. Incredible educators continue on their own to develop varied strategies and techniques and will tell you that this approach is just common sense if your goal is to reach all students in your class. If you want "no child left behind," then use various strategies to bring all children along. In addition to helping all students learn the basics, educators must also use techniques to challenge and inspire our most gifted learners. Providing enrichment opportunities and expanding the core concepts also require the ability to use several diverse strategies.

Differentiated instructional strategies are what good teachers have used in common practice on a daily basis. These educators have a range of techniques they apply as needed. An exceptional teacher is an innovator as well, one who continuously adapts to student needs and situations.

Differentiated instruction isn't limited to remedial strategies that help struggling students understand basic concepts and acquire basic skills. When a teacher incorporates differentiated instructional strategies, students at all levels are challenged. The bar is raised for even the gifted and high-potential students. As Carol Ann Tomlinson, a recognized author and expert in the field of educational differentiation, points out, "Differentiated instruction is first and foremost good instruction. Many current understandings about learning provide strong support for classrooms that recognize, honor, and cultivate individuality" (Tomlinson 1999, 18).



DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Differentiated instruction is defined by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) as “a form of instruction that seeks to maximize each student’s growth by meeting each student where she is and helping the student to progress. In practice, it involves offering several different learning experiences in response to students’ varied needs. Learning activities and materials may be varied by difficulty to challenge students at different readiness levels, by topic in response to students’ interests, and by students’ preferred ways of learning or expressing themselves” (ASCD 2005).

Change Your Bait

A fishing analogy fits the key concepts of differentiation perfectly. My son Kris has taught me almost everything I know about fishing. He developed this passion when he was eighteen months old, fishing off his grandparents’ dock on Lake Tulloch. He developed his skills from dawn to dusk, often refusing to do other lake activities for the chance to catch another fish. He refined his skills by watching fishing shows on Saturday mornings in lieu of cartoons or videos.

The basic strategies of a good angler include thorough preparation:

- ◆ Check the weather and decide on the optimum time of day for success.
- ◆ Consider geographic location and potential fish-gathering spots.
- ◆ Recall past successes—what has worked best before?
- ◆ Know the type of fish you want to catch—what are its habits?
- ◆ Include many diverse lures and bait in your tackle box—be prepared!

- ◆ Ask other anglers who have been out recently—where have they been successful?
- ◆ Schedule enough time in case you need to keep at it for a while.

After considering all the factors, anglers select the lure or bait they believe will give them the greatest chance of catching the fish they desire, although luck will still be a factor. If after an hour, one's success or luck is waning, a good angler will *change the bait* (or the location, time of day, or another factor). Getting ready to teach a concept or skill to a mixed-ability class of students could be approached in the same way.

The basic strategies of a good teacher also include thorough preparation:

- ◆ Orchestrate the optimum time of year and day to introduce the concept or skill so that students will get it.
- ◆ Consider the best teaching location to enhance learning.
- ◆ Pull out your best resources and successful implementation strategies.
- ◆ Stock your tackle box of strategies with diverse lures.
- ◆ Discover as much as possible about the students—read files and collect data.
- ◆ Consult with other teachers about what has worked best with their students.
- ◆ Allow for enough uninterrupted time for the learning to take place.



Even though we know that one size does not fit all, it makes sense to start the instruction and learning with our best lure and see how many kids bite the first time. Use common sense to know when to reel in and change the bait or location. Differentiated instruction is simply a teacher preparing a tackle box with a wide range of teaching and learning strategies and developing experience about when to implement them. Stocking your tackle box with only one or two lures—such as the textbook program and a strategy that used to work ten years ago—will not help you hook your students. This book is designed to help you fill your tackle box with multiple strategies so that you have options as you attempt to leave no child behind as well as challenge your high-potential students.

Align with Standards

Learning standards should drive the curriculum design. These standards provide descriptions and expectations of what all students should know and be able to do. Just as there is more than one way to catch a fish, however, there are a vast number of methods and processes to help students master the standards. Differentiated instruction as part of the learning process honors each student's unique abilities, experiences, and learning preferences while helping all students meet standards.

Each lesson design should begin with the standards to be taught. Instruction should begin with the *best guess* strategy for the particular group of students. Differentiated instructional techniques are implemented in the lesson design to expand and enrich understanding as well as to remediate or to clarify concepts that are challenging for the learner, as Tomlinson describes: "In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs" (Tomlinson 2001, 7).

Following is a list of the most common ways teachers differentiate. Each is explored further in subsequent chapters. Baby steps to begin with are outlined in chapter 11. *Remember: Implementing innovative instructional strategies may not have the desired outcomes if the learning environment isn't compatible with how the brain learns most efficiently and effectively.* Chapter 1 reviews the basics of brain-compatible learning. Use this as your foundation for success in the classroom.

Elements of the Learning Process That Can Be Differentiated

Physical Environment

- ◆ Consider the effects of environmental stimuli on the students' brains and bodies.
- ◆ Modify seating arrangements within the classroom to accommodate students' preferences.

- ◆ Investigate and use alternative work areas outside the classroom.

Social Environment

- ◆ Establish a sense of belonging and inclusion by creating base *tribes*.
- ◆ Pre-arrange various partnerships and small groups to save time and reduce stress.
- ◆ Identify *learning clubs* as needed to reteach or to cluster students based on interest.



Presentation

- ◆ Use novelty and humor to engage the students' attention.
- ◆ Link the new concept or skill to the here and now and to students' daily lives.
- ◆ Orchestrate a discovery process using a project, an experiment, and technology resources.

Content

- ◆ Emphasize meaningful, relevant, and worthwhile content to motivate and challenge students.
- ◆ Engage students by teaching specific areas in depth rather than broad general concepts.
- ◆ Adjust the curriculum to match and accommodate students' readiness levels.

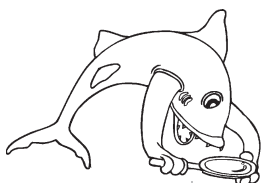
Process

- ◆ Include diverse reflection activities to build long-term retention.
- ◆ Orchestrate frequent opportunities for choice using various intelligences and systems.
- ◆ Use available technology resources to gather information and integrate student understanding.

Products

- ◆ Orchestrate meaningful culminating projects for students to apply their understanding through authentic achievements.
- ◆ Build higher-level tasks, inquiries, and activities using Bloom’s taxonomy.
- ◆ Design diverse products and performances for students to demonstrate their understanding.

The best instructional strategies, however, will not provide the intended results if implemented in a brain-antagonistic environment. Think of differentiated instruction as an essential element of brain-compatible learning. When stating the goals for differentiation, keep the brain in mind. The more we know about this wonderful organ for learning, the more we will be able to design environments and curriculum that match how learning takes place naturally and efficiently—for each unique learner.



BRAIN-COMPATIBLE DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Teachers differentiate by orchestrating powerful learning experiences in response to every student’s unique needs, guided by brain-compatible teaching and learning concepts:

- creating a safe and secure climate and environment
- designing meaningful and engaging experiences, tasks, and activities
- using flexible grouping and collaboration
- providing immediate feedback and ongoing assessment
- allowing adequate time for active processing
- orchestrating opportunities for individual choice within an organized system