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Introduction

While seasoned staff know that there really is nothing new in education, from time to time, a compelling concept is revisited with such gusto that it almost takes on a life of its own. This is the case with the concept of differentiated learning. It is not a new idea, by any means, as evidenced by such terms as personalised instruction, individualised learning contract and individual education plan (IEP). Yet, the concept of differentiating learning has captured the attention of educators across the many continents.

According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (1998), 'Three principles from brain research – emotional safety, appropriate challenge and self-constructed meaning – suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to classroom teaching is ineffective for most students and harmful to some'. Differentiating learning is not about teaching louder and slower. It's about a robust instructional repertoire. It's about having an assortment of teaching tools and techniques to meet the diverse needs of students. It's about different strokes for different folks, and about different entry points and end points to learning!

Based on Tomlinson's conceptual model, differentiation is about change, challenge and choice in today's classroom: Change the content! Change the process! Change the product! It's about the opportunity to learn through the many ways of knowing and expressing what one knows. Differentiation is

**Differentiation is
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challenge and
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about standards-based instruction and brain-based learning. It's about high quality teaching that targets how students learn best.

This is the second book on differentiation from the *In a Nutshell* series. The first book is entitled, *Differentiating Learning: Different Strokes for Different Folks*, by Robin Fogarty.



Chapter 1: Definition and rationale

This chapter is about defining the concept of differentiation in both formal and informal ways. In addition to a comprehensive look at what differentiation means, this chapter also focuses on the rationale that supports it. Teachers are given a look at how students are identified as individuals and as flexible skill groups for differentiated instruction. In brief, the essence of this chapter is to introduce the concept of differentiation and the rationale for it, as well as to place the strategy within the context of a standards-based curriculum.

The chapter addresses the following questions:

What is differentiation?

How does differentiation relate to standards-based learning?

What is meant by a 'teaching repertoire' for differentiation?

What is the rationale for differentiated learning?

How does data support differentiation?

What is differentiation?

Differentiation refers to the concept of meeting the individual needs of each learner, of customising instruction to help students learn. Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) defines differentiated instruction by suggesting that differentiation is changing something: the content, the process or the product. (The informal definition, in a more folksy manner, is 'different strokes for different folks'.) It's



about matching the teacher's teaching to the student's learning. It's about determining appropriate instruction by student likes, student interests and student profiles.

Synonyms for differentiated include: personalised, individualised, customised, tailored, 'tweaked', modified, adjusted, adapted, accommodated, stylised, manipulated, and fine-tuned. The best, most clarifying synonyms are personalised instruction or individualised instruction; the most helpful idea is about 'tweaking' a basic lesson for the developing learner or for the advanced learner.

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Analogies that clarify differentiation include: Differentiation is like a movie, because both leave the participant with different views. Differentiation is like a balloon, because both take you to new heights. Differentiation is like a mobile phone because both can be highly personalised.

How does differentiation relate to standards-based learning?

The two concepts of standards – standards for all students and differentiation for each student – sound like diametrically opposed and conflicting ideas.

How can teachers teach the same standard curriculum to all and at the same time teach differently to each, according to individual needs, talents and abilities? Yet, the message is actually quite consistent: the standards are 'the

what' and the differentiation is 'the how' (Tomlinson, 1999). The two concepts, in effect, complement each

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other and speak to teachers about their 'best practices' in the classroom.

Standards of learning speak to the curriculum content that is delineated for the learners. Subject matter content outlined in the standards sets expectations for exactly what students should know and be able to do. Typically, the *content standards* include principles, facts and data, concepts and skills, while *process standards* include attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind and life skills such as problem-solving, teamwork and communication. These standards are nested into the lesson that targets content standards.

Differentiated learning speaks to the methods by which learning occurs, within the framework of the standards, to the diversity of the learners and to their myriad approaches to learning. It's about a repertoire of teaching strategies. There must be many ways for students to learn and to demonstrate their learning and, at the same time, the standards of learning, or the goals of the curriculum, must remain constant.

When these two concepts work together, students become the focus of schooling. They are exposed to a standard curriculum that sets high expectations for each and every student's achievement and, at the same time, students are allowed to learn content in personally relevant ways. Both the teaching and learning processes are fully honoured: The standards honour the accepted curriculum that teachers are required to teach and are held accountable for; and differentiated learning honours the full range of diverse learners found in most classrooms.

What is meant by a teaching repertoire for differentiation?

Teachers must have a robust instructional repertoire if they are to reach the needs, talents and abilities of various students; they need a repertoire of strategies to structure the teaching/learning process individually for each student. In other words, teachers must have a broad spectrum of instructional, curricular and assessment methodologies.

Teachers must have a rich and versatile set of teaching tools and techniques to structure the learning processes for the diversity of children in their classrooms.

'It's about honouring the uniqueness of each student.'

Teachers in today's schools need multiple ways to tap into the many kinds of minds. As one senior teacher once said, 'Teaching differently doesn't mean teaching the same thing louder and slower. It does not mean special education classes, gifted education, learning resource rooms or pull-out and push-in programs. It's not

about labelling, sorting or disenfranchising any student in any way. In fact, it's the antithesis of these things. It's about honouring the uniqueness of each student.'

How do teachers differentiate instruction?

To differentiate instruction, teachers must change something substantive – the content, the process or the product (Tomlinson, 1999) – and they must effect these changes within the context of challenge and choice. Differentiation is about welcoming each and every learner, in celebration of the differences of each one. It's about a robust instructional repertoire that teachers tap into as they try to reach and teach each student.



Differentiation is about change, challenge and choice in today's classroom: Change the content! Change the process! Change the product! Change the pacing! Change the environment! (Fogarty, 2001) Change something! It's about the opportunity for teachers to use varied methods of instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in that classroom.

Differentiation is about standards-based learning and high quality teaching. It's about accepting each and every learner that comes our way, and expecting the best from each and every one of them. Quality teaching means challenging students, requiring rigour in their learning, leaving nothing to chance, making no excuses and teaching with a results-oriented approach.

Differentiation is about standards-based learning and high quality teaching.

What is the rationale for differentiated learning?

There are a number of reasons that educators around the world are interested in this complex process called differentiation. Reasons include: diverse multicultural demographics; myriad English language learners (ELL); local initiatives and state and federal mandates for inclusive classrooms; the rising mobility of society as a whole; and last, but not least, the emergent science of the brain and learning.

Multicultural

Perhaps a primary reason that differentiated instruction has become a global interest is that, in many cases, the school itself has taken on

... differentiated instruction has become a global interest ...
