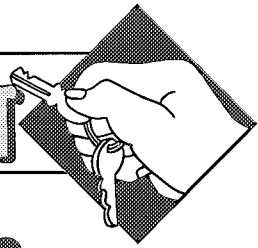


KEY WORDS IN INSTRUCTION



Differentiated Instruction

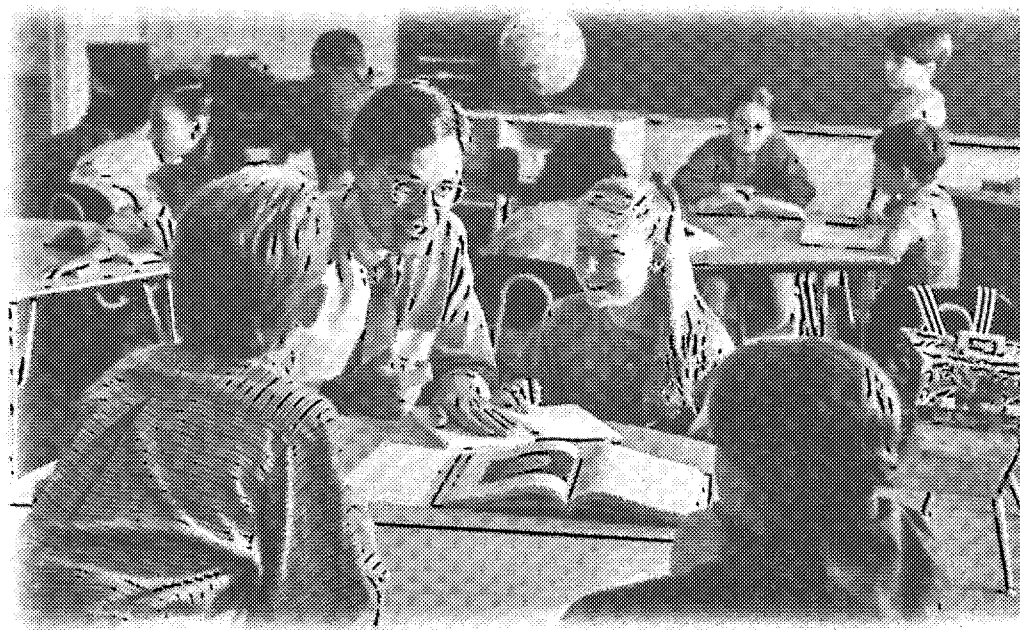
by Gail Bush

Differentiated instruction (DI) is one particular approach to instructional strategies, the delivery of the curriculum, covered within the study of curriculum. It is not a form of curriculum design although it has recently been blended with the backward design model, the basis of *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe 2005). Differentiated instruction requires that educators know their students in such a way that they can effectively plan for students' learning experiences prior to instruction. This is the major distinction from the Skillful Teacher Model where the teacher quickly reacts to the struggling student. In the DI model, the differentiation is planned within the lesson. Basically it is the difference between proaction and reaction. There is more flexibility built into the overall lesson plan and, therefore, more effective teaching delivery to more students.

Differentiated instruction is a learner-centered instructional design model that acknowledges that students have individual learning styles, motivation, abilities, and, therefore, readiness to learn. Within the learning environment, educators balance the three essential elements of content, process,

not only what content needs to be taught, but how to teach in a way that most effectively results in each student's ability to demonstrate understanding of the content.

There is a rhythm to differentiated instruction because this strategy allows for various groupings that are most effective within the



and outcome. In DI, whereas all these elements are differentiated, all students are held to standards that measure substantial growth and achievement. Pre-assessment as well as ongoing assessment become essential measures to determine where a student is in relation to the learning activity. The goal becomes

learning process. For example, the teacher who starts with whole class discussion might move to individualized assigned tasks, back to whole class, then to small group, back to whole class, and so on. Students tend to have varying skills in readiness to learn based on the content, so a skilled math student might be in a particular small group in math but might be in a very different group for language arts. The fear of

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stigma attached to ability grouping subsides as students feel fulfilled in reaching their potential in goals that match their abilities.

Differentiated instruction includes three essential elements of curriculum: what is worthwhile learning—content; how is the instruction best delivered—process; and what is evidence that demonstrates learning—product. The differentiation is planned according to the student's readiness, interests, and learning profile.

DIFFERENTIATING CONTENT

What knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values are most worthwhile to students? These basic questions of curriculum are answered by learning standards and standardized testing. However, there are a few ways to differentiate what is deemed desirable content: level of difficulty within the same unit of study; access to different sources that deliver the content; and different requirements of what is gleaned from the content, such as reading for factual information versus patterns or themes.

The School Library Media Connection: The mission of the library media center is to support the curriculum for every student which mandates that there will be resources available at the appropriate reading levels. There may be reference sources at different reading levels, nonfiction books, and access to online resources to serve all students, including English language learners and special education students. The library media center serves students of all abilities in accessing the general curriculum. The library media specialist is prepared to consult with teachers to match

students with the appropriate resources.

DIFFERENTIATING PROCESS

Curriculum scholars ask what activities and strategies are most effective in enabling learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values deemed worthy. In other words, if content is “what to teach,” process then is “how to teach.” “What to teach,” or content, is when educators set goals and student behavioral objectives for learning. When this selection of content process works, students can make sense of what they are learning, apply it to prior knowledge, and seek categorization, thereby making it a part of their knowledge base. The most effective method for sense-making is to challenge students to reach to the next level by using what they know as a springboard for understanding. This process may be differentiated by a multitude of strategies including learning logs, graphic organizers, journals, literature circles, jigsaw, mind-mapping, and so many others to be explored.

The School Library Media Connection: Along with the library media center resource collection which is essential for differentiating content, the library media center has a physical space that can be used for learning centers or stations. As instructional partners, library media specialists guide and facilitate an understanding of instructional strategies and how they can be best utilized. Library media specialists continue to learn about strategies, education databases, and websites so that they may serve as resources for teachers.

DIFFERENTIATING PRODUCT

How do we know if the learners

have acquired the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are most worthy to learn? What provides evidence of students' understanding of the content? How do we know that they have made meaningful and substantive growth? In the DI model, assessment is ongoing to accommodate flexibility in guiding instruction. However, a product or outcome is necessary as evidence of understanding, and it also serves the student as a tangible representation of his or her learning achievement.

The School Library Media Connection: The library media center program provides resources not only for learning but also for development of learning products. The library media center is an appropriate learning environment for students to design webpages or quests, create public service announcements, prepare for a debate or town meeting, write a play, develop an advertising campaign, design and conduct experiments and research, tutor younger students, make video documentaries, hold press conferences, and so on. The library media specialist provides the instructional consulting, resources, and space to make differentiated products a reality in the school. Additionally, the library media center provides space that is inviting to other members of the school learning community, where they can join together in viewing or participating in these deeply textured demonstrations of understanding.

STUDENT READINESS

Matching the student's skills and understanding to the topic at hand is considered “readiness to learn.”

Readiness differentiation focuses on the dynamics of moving a student beyond current knowledge to outside his or her comfort zone. Tomlinson identifies “The Equalizer,” a tool listing eight variables, as a way to differentiate based on readiness:

Foundational	↔	Transformational
Concrete	↔	Abstract
Simple	↔	Complex
Single Facet	↔	Multiple Facets
Small Leap	↔	Great Leap
More Structured	↔	More Open
Less Independence	↔	Greater Independence
Slow	↔	Quick

(2001, 47).

These variables are adjusted to match students’ readiness to be equally and appropriately challenged by the general curriculum. The more the teacher knows about his or her students, the more fluid these adjustments become throughout the course of the year.

The School Library Media

Connection: As a learning environment that provides for independent learning and small group work, the physical setting of the library media center lends itself to the range of equalizing variables for student readiness to learn. Authentic and meaningful lessons, challenging comfort zones, and high expectations are important for all students and are also accommodated by the library media program.

STUDENT INTERESTS

We must be engaged to truly learn and be transformed. Student choice is, therefore, a good measure that satisfies many interests. As students enter the learning environment, differentiating by interest

does not make the teacher captive to the interests of students, although learning about those interests can be a key method of engagement. Savvy teachers may, instead, create additional interest by sparking imagination through the artistry of inspirational teaching.

The School Library Media

Connection: The library media center serves all students in support of the curriculum, but it also serves students’ various interests. Facets of these varying interests may include real-life, authentic, local, global, pop culture, and hobbies that all stimulate student engagement and, therefore, have a place in the library media program. Displays, exhibits, programs, collaboration with the public library and local museums, and online communities all generate interest. By extending the meaning of “access to resources,” the library media specialist can provide for this wide variety of students’ interests.

STUDENT LEARNING PROFILE

How do we learn best? There are many measures, models, and studies to choose from including learning styles, multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, and domains (cognitive, affective/emotional, and psychomotor). The four categories identified in the DI model used to plan instruction include group orientation, cognitive style, learning environment, and intelligence preference. Other factors include culture-influenced preferences, gender-based preferences, and combinations of both culture and gender. Although it is tricky to accommodate all learning profiles at all times, it does behoove us to recognize that all students do not share our particular profiles. The challenge to

many educators is to acknowledge those preferences different from one’s own.

The School Library Media

Connection: As teachers struggle to keep up with daily tasks both in the classroom and administratively, we in the library media center have the opportunity to assist them as instructional consultants. Identifying trends in learning profiles, providing ready access to professional education resources, and providing professional development in both the relevant features of the new research in classroom and school library applications all facilitate student learning.

Differentiated Instruction is simply an honest and mindful approach to teaching our diverse student populations. It acknowledges individual differences and seeks to make learning meaningful for all students. Our mission in the library media center mirrors these goals and matches this learner-centered instructional design model. Our role in the school strengthens our learning community’s capacity for improving student learning.

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TITLE: Differentiated Instruction
SOURCE: School Library Media Activities Monthly 23 no3 N 2006
PAGE(S): 43-5

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