

Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent

Differentiated Instruction

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Education in the United States, from its beginning until the early 20th century, generally taught children in a one-room schoolhouse or multigrade classrooms. Once education had moved beyond the one-room schoolhouse era, in the early 1900s, pedagogy slowly began to change. Prior to that change, typical instruction was characterized by a one-size-fits-all format, whereby children of the same age were grouped together and all students were exposed to the same content; everyone did the same assignments and homework, and everyone demonstrated understanding of the content by taking the same test. This was the typical classroom, and this was how teachers were taught to teach.

Over the course of the century, educators came to recognize that many children were not invested in learning and were either bored or lost as the teacher taught to the mean of the class. Difference in students' abilities, communication skills, interests, emotional and social maturity, culture, and learning styles were evident in the classroom. By the early 1990s students with identified special needs were also integrated into the classroom, with the expectation they would be exposed to and [p. 273 ↓] learn the general education content, not just work on individualized skills. Educators realized that changes in teaching styles were needed to teach to this diverse group of students.

Differentiated instruction describes individualizing instruction within the general education classroom. It does not mean that every student is learning something different but that there are several different options for learning. Carol Ann Tomlinson has been perhaps the most widely recognized proponent of this method, with others accepting her basic premise and expanding on her concepts. She identified three components of classroom instruction that can be differentiated to accommodate all learners. These components are (1) content, (2) process, and (3) product, with differentiation based on the student's readiness, interest, and learning profile.

Content is often tied to state standards, and teachers must review the scope and sequence of required content to determine what must be taught in their classrooms. This can be considered the core concept of a lesson plan, with adaptations made to the complexity or difficulty of the content, the amount of the material to be learned, or the need for an alternative goal using the same materials. Occasionally, the need

to substitute an easier or less complex concept for some of the students with special needs may be required.

Process involves how the content is taught. Differentiating allows for students with varying learning styles to have the information presented in a format that makes sense to them and allows them to make meaning out of the information and learn the new content (constructivist theory). How the instruction is presented is the key, with the level of support needed (e.g., additional materials and examples or the assistance of a paraprofessional or tutor) also a part of differentiating. Time needed to present and learn the content, as well as participation level should also be considered. Students that can quickly learn the concepts can be given higher-level thinking options for learning and applying the content, ensuring motivation and interest are maintained. Groupings are also critical, with the groups changing based on the needs of the students.

Product is how the learning is observed and evaluated. The student's interests, skills, and learning profile again have to be considered, with options for how a student can document learning the content. The teacher needs to design products that will allow for the differing needs of the students, while proving they have learned the required content. The product should encourage students to think, integrate previous and newly learned content, and extend their thinking to reach toward the next concept to be learned. The teacher's responsibility is to make the product extensive and rigorous enough to be able to document student learning.

Although this model has been successful in increasing the learning of diverse students in the classroom, teachers often find themselves challenged in the implementation of differentiated instruction. Students are often engaged in different activities and academic tasks. Grading is accordingly difficult; because every student is expected to learn through differentiated instruction, they will not all complete the same level or difficulty of an assignment. Thus, the grading system will need to be differentiated as well; this may arouse dissent among many parents and teachers. Finally, planning, developing, organizing, and implementing the various methods of instruction and documentation will take a great deal of time, particularly as the teachers make the shift from a traditional classroom. However, the time required should decrease as the teacher becomes more practiced at differentiation.

The primary goal for education is of course to help students learn. With the diverse needs of many of today's students, differentiated instruction can help ensure learning while decreasing the need for students to leave the classrooms for special services and assistance. According to William N. Bender, teachers implementing this model of instruction in their classroom are finding students more engaged and expanding their skills in problem solving, integration of previously learned content, and ability to “fit” into the general education classroom.

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See also

Further Readings

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Tomlinson, C. A. (2000). *Leadership for differentiating schools and classrooms* . Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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