

Strategies to Use When Differentiating and Individualizing Instruction

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### Abstract

Differentiating instruction is an important facet to teaching. There are many conversations in the current educational climate that discuss differentiation. As a result it can be confusing when reviewing the research to decide what groups are trustworthy. It is important to have certain criteria in place in order to choose differentiation strategies effectively. These criteria will be discussed in the following pages.

“Effective teachers have been differentiating instruction for as long as teaching has been a profession” (Teachology, 2012). This is because it is an innate sense of teaching for them. Effective teachers know that in order to reach students “where they are” they must differentiate and individualize their instruction to students. Part of the discussion to follow will include good strategies to use when individualizing instruction as well. Rationale for differentiating and individualizing will be included as well as a quick exploration of the literature and data which exists on these subjects.

Strategies to Use When Differentiating and Individualizing Instruction

**Introduction and Rationale**

Differentiating instruction (DI) is part of the fabric of teaching pedagogy. As part of any teacher preparation program, differentiation and individualization of instruction joins the conversation. Teachers are taught to be reflective practitioners through the practice of good teaching techniques. DI is no different. Teachers use reflective practices to “structure learning environments that address the variety of learning styles” (Willoughby, 2005).

Since the discussion of DI and individualizing instruction is prevalent among educators, it is important to be able to “sift” and “glean” good information from bad. Creating a series of criteria in order to make the process amenable is important. This not only allows for the comprehension and understanding of data which supports DI and individualization, it also makes it possible for the educator to ensure that he or she is using DI strategies which have been proven by reputable professionals.

**Criteria One: Reputation**

If an individual is suggesting that certain DI and individualization strategies be used, that person should be supported by an organization that is reputable in the world of education. In certain cases, the individual will have a solid reputation him or herself. These are good places from which the teacher can acquire suggestions for DI strategies since he or she will not have to “reinvent the wheel”. Instead the teacher can learn about strategies that work, from those with good reputations in the field of education.

**Criteria Two: Demonstrated Interest in Students**

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“Our efforts to boost learning are most effective when we share the same philosophy: It's about the kids, not us” (Wasserman, 2012). It becomes apparent, through the writings and communications of organizations and individuals, whether or not these people are committed to student achievement. One can also distinguish if they have other goals which supercede the best interest of the student. At times, it may be difficult to make this determination, however if enough reading and investigation is completed, then the source will demonstrate its commitment to the student.

### **Criteria Three: Strategies are Connected to Data**

The most important resource that educators have is time. People in education are selfish with their time and protect it religiously. They are right to do this. If an educator is recommending a strategy for differentiating or individualizing, they should have tested it first. There should be data which exists in support for that particular strategy which is being suggested. The temptation is to write an article or create a blog, suggesting a strategy without ever having tried it first. This is because time is precious and most education professionals have limited amounts of it. However, for a DI strategy to demonstrate effectiveness it should have a reasonable amount of data associated with it which shows the benefit.

With some more thought there could be additional criteria which would further delineate good suggestions for DI strategies from bad. Using the three criteria listed above, however, should provide the educator with a reasonable amount of assurance that the information he or she is using is a good source from which to draw.

### **Relevant Literature**

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As previously mentioned, there is a lot of discussion on using DI and individualization strategies. The three criteria described in the introduction have been used when referencing the available literature. As a result, the relevant literature provides excellent differentiation strategies, that, if used, should assist in student achievement increasing. This is the primary goal of differentiating and individualizing instruction.

Some recommend that differentiation begins with knowing what the research says about brain-based learning, learning styles, and authentic assessments. This is a good starting point since it provides a foundation for learning that is most common in education circles today. DI strategies and individualization techniques have roots in these three concepts. DI can also be used in many different settings. A middle school ELA teacher discusses the benefits of collaboration with colleagues (Mansaray, 2014), a special education teacher describes the co-teaching environment and the importance of collaboration (Wasserman, 2012), and another educator illustrates how technology assistive devices can be used in the differentiation process (O'Connor, 2012).

“An entire session for students should not consist of all drill and practice, or any single structure or activity” (Hall, Strangman, Meyer, 2011). Learning styles become important when considering DI. “They (learning styles) are defined as the way each individual begins to concentrate on, process, internalize, and retain new and difficult information” (Lauria, 2010). Learning styles should be evaluated at the beginning of any attempt to incorporate DI into the classroom. This will make it easier to provide individualized instruction. “Differentiated classrooms anticipate and respond to student differences in

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readiness, interest and learning needs” (Huebner, 2010). These learning needs often translate to understanding how the student learns best. By extension, understanding the individual learning style of each student will be extremely helpful.

DI and individualizing instruction has also been connected to Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is commonly used in schools today to provide a tiered system of support. “Differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention share a central goal: to modify instruction until it meets the needs of all learners” (Allan & Goddard, 2010). By connecting RTI and DI teaching becomes dynamic rather static. This provides yet another reason why teachers need to be reflective practitioners. Teachers should “continually assess; reflect; and adjust content, process, and product to meet student needs” (Huebner, 2010). If they practice these activities regularly, they will find themselves practicing RTI as well.

Differentiated and individualized instruction requires the teacher to engage in specific and intentional planning. Traditional projects and activities should be adapted to meet the needs of each learner. As mentioned earlier, collaboration is part of this process which requires intentionality. “By collaborating, teachers can provide several learning options, or different paths to learning, which help students take in information and make sense of concepts and skills” (Willoughby, 2005). Notice Table 1-1 which highlights the differences of the DI classroom and the non-DI classroom. To create a classroom which contains the characteristics listed in the table, the teacher must plan purposefully.

### **Data in Literature**

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Using DI and individualized instruction in the classroom is a foregone conclusion. The benefits are obvious. Effective teachers know that if they had the time to teach students one-on-one and according to their learning style, then student student achievement would increase as a result. This is a major reason why people seek tutors for their children when struggling academically. They know that individual attention is where students thrive the most.

Although these benefits are clear, specific strategies should have data attached to them which proves the technique is a valuable one and improves student achievement. Understanding the difference between data which supports differentiation in general and differentiation using specific strategies is also important. The data in literature tends to be general in nature, whereas specific strategies are mentioned often without data supporting their use.

Data is measured over time. Writers uses the photo album versus snapshot analogy. They say, “The album presents a more accurate and revealing ‘portrait’ of an individual than does a single snapshot... a single test at the end of instruction is less likely to provide a complete picture of a student’s learning than a collection of diverse sources of evidence” (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006). By using multiple sources of data and the “photo album” approach, the teacher is able to obtain fuller insights into the student. The data obtained allows the teacher to make instructional decisions, which often involve DI and individualizing instruction. Data obtained by teachers must be authentic in nature. “Students’ progress is closely monitored at each stage of intervention to determine the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education, or both” (Allan

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& Goddard, 2010). Although this comment is discussing the combining of RTI with DI, it also speaks to the heart of what an authentic assessment is and should be. When using DI strategies, an assessment should be done both before and after the strategy has been used. Many of the strategies listed in the section have been used effectively in classrooms. It is important, that the teacher using them be able to justify their use. By documenting student work before and after the strategy has been used, the teacher now has authentic data to either continue DI in that specific way or use a different DI strategy.

According to the U.S. Department of Education there are several conclusions which can be drawn when discussing teachers and their use of data. Although these conclusions are general in nature, they translate to DI since they show how teachers would interpret data used in making decisions regarding DI and individualized instruction. These conclusion are:

- Teachers are able to read graphs, charts and tables well. They are adept at interpreting these visuals.
- Teachers tend to focus on the high and low scores of a student group rather than the average score.
- Teachers were sensitive to the fact that assessments be phrased in a similar way as the information was taught.
- Most teachers struggle when attempting to pose questions relevant to improving achievement (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010).



### **Recommendations-Putting It All Together**

In looking at the information concerning teachers and how they process data, it is important that they use DI strategies which coincide with the above conclusions. DI and individualizing instruction has been linked to RTI and has roots in Gifted and Talented programs as well as Special Education Services. This makes sense since these two student groups are at the extremes of a student population rather than the large middle group which tends to score closely when averaged together. The purpose of DI is to meet students where they are, thus the reason for these strategies being used mainly for students where scores are in the upper and lower tiers of the student population.

The following strategies are recommended because they have proven to be successful by reputable organizations and educators. They should be implemented after the foundation has been laid and all planning completed. The key is the planning, which is at the heart of the first recommendation. “Get to know your students, identify areas of your curriculum that could be adapted to differentiated instruction, and examine your role as teacher in the differentiated classroom” (Willoughby, 2005). Doing these three things means that the teacher is essentially keeping track of all the factors which will impact the DI strategy being implemented. In other words, essential planning is being conducted, with the mindset that students are the primary focus of any effort to differentiate or individualize instruction.

When attempting DI it is often advisable to provide student choice. This is the second recommendation. Providing students with choice gives them the feeling and perspective that they are taking ownership of their own educational experience. Although this is the case, the student must *feel* as

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if this is what is happening. For example, giving students the choice to read in a group or by themselves will help them to feel more comfortable before they even sit down to read. Provide three ways to assess students and allow them to choose the method. Examples might include a homework assignment, drawing a picture of the concept being assessed, or giving a verbal test rather than a written one.

“The instructional concepts should be broad-based, not focused on minute details or unlimited facts” (Hall, Strangman, and Meyer, 2011). This is the basis for the third recommendation and idea for differentiating. Teachers should be careful not to get “bogged down” when teaching. There will always be a few students who understand what is being taught, but the students who need individualized and differentiated instruction mostly will not. Sticking to general concepts, keeping teacher lectures short, and using class time to allow students to speak and interact with the concepts provides a much different result than providing information which is detail driven.

Much of what DI and individualizing instruction is used for involves reading and implementing reading strategies. This is doubly important in the K-2 grades since students should be reading at grade level by third grade. DI can be considered a type of intervention, designed to provide students support as they work through their zone of proximal development. This is the fourth recommendation. Using data, identify students not reading at grade level. Then, use DI and individualized strategies to target these students. Examples of differentiated strategies that would work in this scenario are having students choose books at their independent reading level rather than their frustration level, teach pre-reading strategies such as inferencing and asking questions, and teaching students how to annotate texts

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(Mansaray, 2013). These are just a few examples, but if teachers use them, they will notice student reading levels increase throughout the year.

<b>Table 1-1: Comparison of DI and Non-DI Classrooms</b>	
<b>Traditional Classroom not Using Differentiated Classroom</b>	<b>The Differentiated Classroom</b>
Student differences are masked or become problematic.	Student differences are the basis for planning.
Assessment is most commonly done at the end of a unit.	Assessment is ongoing.
A relatively narrow sense of intelligence exists.	Focus on multiple intelligences is evident.
Student interest is infrequently tapped.	Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices.
Whole class instruction dominates.	Many instructional arrangements are used.
Time is relatively inflexible.	Time is used flexibly in accordance with student need.
A single text prevails.	Multiple materials exist in the classroom.

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