

Making the Case for Differentiation

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Abstract: Three misconceptions about differentiated instruction prevent some teachers from using it: it is just another new fad that will fade away; it requires a separate lesson plan for every student; and it is not worth the effort. Examining those ideas through the perspectives of actual teaching experience and sound research proves them to be just what they are: faulty thinking. In clarifying those misconceptions, this article offers numerous examples of successful differentiation and makes the case for its prominent place in every teacher's repertoire.

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"I see that our staff development session tomorrow is about differentiated instruction. Is that something you've tried?"

"Well, it's an interesting concept, but I'm not going to waste my time on it; it's the *strategy du jour*. Next week they'll want us to do something else."

"I like the idea of being able to reach all of my kids, but good grief! Who has time to make a separate lesson plan for every kid in every class? No way."

"Even if you didn't have to do that, it sounds like a lot of hard work. I can't believe the return on investment would be worth the effort."

That conversation illustrates three misconceptions about differentiated instruction that plague its reputation and deter its use. A close look at those ideas through the dual lens of research and experience should put them to rest for good and strengthen the case for differentiating instruction—in classrooms of teachers like those presented here and in your own as well.

In this day of increasing demands on teachers to help students attain high standards—whether dictated by the state, the district, the school, or the community—teachers must embrace approaches that facilitate the attainment of those standards, not just by students whose prior knowledge and motivation pave the way for their early success, but by all of the students in every classroom. Differentiated instruction is one of those approaches (Tomlinson 2000). Let's examine the misconceptions about it and reconsider its value.

Differentiation Is Just Another New Fad That Will Fade Away

Quite the contrary, differentiated instruction has been around for years. Teachers in one-room schoolhouses employed differentiated instruction before it was called by that name; indeed, they taught children who varied not only in interests, learning styles, and background knowledge but also in age. Effective teachers have always addressed students' varying needs and interests to help each succeed. As long as that remains our aim, differentiated instruction will be the primary means to achieve it.

Research on differentiation, however, is relatively new. Morgan (2014) points out that what we know now as differentiated instruction is based partly on Vygotsky's work in the 1970s and on Gardner's theory of various intelligences, published in 1983. Research has burgeoned since then, leading to Carol Ann Tomlinson's (2014) vivid second edition of *The Differentiated Classroom*, in which she cites 40 years' worth of research that supports differentiation.

In my own lifetime, I have experienced, used, and observed effective differentiated instruction. When I was in the 6th grade, our art teacher knew which children needed more guidance with sketching and painting and which ones were ready to move forward on their own,

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and she taught accordingly. She attended to all of us, tutoring the less able artists in the basics while encouraging with sophisticated guidance those who were more accomplished.

When, years later, I was teaching 8th-grade English, spelling was required by the curriculum. It was clear to me that my students varied greatly in their aptitude and interest in spelling, so I created three spelling lists for each week of school, one of basic words that were easy to spell, one of grade-level words, and one of advanced, complex words. I administered a diagnostic test that indicated the level at which students were already spelling, and then I allowed students to study the list indicated by the test or to opt for a more difficult one. Then I cut out pictures of race cars and mounted them on cardboard. A huge chart on the bulletin board served as the race-track, with each increment representing a word correctly spelled. Students chose their cars, took the weekly tests, and moved the cars along the track to indicate progress. Spelling had never been so much fun. And all of that was years before Schlagal's (2002) report on the history, research, and practice of spelling instruction—in which he reports that learning to spell words from lists is still more efficient than learning them from context. He offers other helpful insights about spelling, too, and his study is available online.

As an assistant principal for curriculum in a large urban high school, I had the opportunity to observe effective differentiation in numerous subjects. One outstanding example was in a French class. After delivering whole-group instruction in dialogue and vocabulary, the teacher divided students into pairs and gave them a tiered assignment. Struggling students worked with a dialogue prepared beforehand by the teacher. Moderately able students used assigned keywords to write their own dialogue. Advanced students created their own dialogue, using whatever words they chose. All of the students then performed their dialogues for the class. *Voilà!* Successful differentiation.

More recently, I had the opportunity to observe an algebra I class for 8th graders. The teacher's approach is described in *A Teacher's Guide to Successful Classroom Management and Differentiated Instruction* (Birnie 2014b, 25).

At the beginning of each term, James allows his students to choose their partners (two or three). The self-selected triads or quartets stay together as long as all of the students in them make gains; if anyone shows unsatisfactory progress, James rearranges the groups.

Combined with direct whole-group instruction that gives plenty of examples with unconditional support for all of his students (many of whom speak no English), this informal cooperative learning comprises the major approach for James's classes. Students work with their partners to solve problems after each whole-group lesson; they do their homework together, either on campus after

school or by telephone, email, or texting from home in the evenings; and they study for tests together.

James makes himself available during class, during part of the lunch period two days a week, and before and after school. He reported that it is rare for an individual student to seek him out. "They rely on their partners more than they rely on me," James says. True interdependence—one of the two factors essential for success in cooperative learning. The other factor, independent accountability, is built into periodic tests.

Each student must take tests without help from partners; the test scores are James's measures of individual progress. According to school administrators, James's approach has yielded uncommon success; nearly all of his students earn As or Bs, high school credit, and the opportunity to accelerate their study of mathematics when they reach ninth grade.

As teachers learn more about differentiating successfully, as they modify and refine approaches and techniques, as they include more and better technology in the mix, they will become more proficient in differentiating instruction. Instead of being abandoned, it should become an increasingly important strategy in every teacher's tool kit.

Differentiation Means Making a Separate Lesson Plan for Every Student

This is perhaps the most pervasive misconception about differentiated instruction. As the previous examples illustrate, this misconception is far from the truth. Even in the most heterogeneous class, abilities tend to fall into three or four manageable ranges. And if there is an outlier in a class—a student whose readiness to learn is far below or far above the norm, for instance—the needs of that student can be addressed separately.

The research offers several successful approaches, none of which involves a "separate lesson plan" for every student. Chubb (2012), for instance, describes the use of technology to differentiate effectively. In the Alliance Technology and Math Science High School (ATAMS) on the east side of Los Angeles, students experience differentiation through a highly structured program based on three models of instruction: direct instruction by teachers first, followed by cooperative learning in groups of four students each (one tutor and three learners), and finally, highly individualized computer-based instruction. While it is too early to report achievement data from the school, the program has been enthusiastically received by students, parents, and teachers, and its prospects are promising.

Tomlinson (2014) describes other approaches, all of which have been used successfully: stations, centers, tiered activities such as the French assignment described earlier, small-group instruction, choice boards, and discussion circles, to name but a few. None of those strategies requires a lesson plan for every student.

Another way to differentiate efficiently is to offer contracts to students. One master teacher uses this approach in his 7th-grade social studies class. In the unit on families, he asks his students to choose one of three contracts for their family portfolios. All of the portfolios must include pictures of at least five family members (or friends, if necessary). The pictures may be photographs or drawings, as the students choose. For the contract that yields a grade of C, the student writes a paragraph about each picture. (The teacher provides a “frame” for his English-language learners so that they simply fill in the blanks and then copy the paragraph in their own handwriting.) For the B contract, the student writes a three-paragraph essay about each picture. To earn an A for the portfolio, the student writes an essay about each picture and also produces a diagram of the family tree, with explanatory notes about the branches. If students exhibit a deeper interest in pursuing research on their families after completing this assignment, they may pursue a long-term out-of-class assignment that involves online research, interviews with relatives, and a review of family documents.

Dealing with the outliers does require a separate plan for those students, but making the plan and supervising its implementation are easy enough to do in addition to teaching the rest of the class. I think of two such experiences in my own career. The first was with Sam, a student in a 9th-grade composition class whose writing skills were minimal and whose fear of writing was paralyzing. Each day, while the rest of the students were working independently or in small groups, Sam would dictate to me. He thought and spoke clearly, so his oral compositions were interesting, focused, and well organized. After the dictation, I gave him the transcript of his words, and he copied it in his own handwriting. The next day, while the other students were working, Sam read to me his paper from the day before, we critiqued it together, and then he dictated another, building on his strengths and addressing whatever deficiencies we had identified. We kept this up until Sam had learned that “if you can think it, you can say it, and if you can say it, you can write it”—words I heard years later from an inspirational teacher of writing. When Sam felt comfortable drafting on his own, his drafting replaced the dictation. I corrected each draft, returned it to him for him to copy, and the next day he would bring me the corrected paper and a new draft. We continued until he had developed enough confidence to join the rest of the class for instruction and assignments—long before the school year was over. (A considerable body of research exists now on modeling, or using “mentor texts,” to help students learn to write. For two recent guides to that approach, see Gallagher [2011] and Birnie [2014a].)

At the other end of the spectrum was Mark, whose first paper in 10th-grade English class alerted me to two facts: first, Mark viewed himself as a “mountain man” rather

than a student in an urban high school (the assignment had asked students to write about where they most liked to be), and second, his language skills far exceeded those of the typical 10th-grade student. I called Mark aside at the beginning of class the day after I had read his paper and asked if he had read A. B. Guthrie’s (1947) novel *The Big Sky*. He had not. So I sent him to the library to check it out and begin reading, asking him to check back with me at the end of the period. After reading that book for almost an hour, he was hooked. From then on, Mark came to the classroom each day at the beginning and end of the period to get his pass, to turn in a review of the book just finished, and to receive another assigned reading. He worked his way through a considerable reading list of both fiction and nonfiction that appealed to his interests, and he refined his skill in writing at the same time. Unfortunately, he dropped out of school before the end of the year, but he came back to see me the following year to let me know he had passed the test and secured a GED (General Education Development), or alternate high school diploma.

Differentiation does not mean creating a lesson plan for each student in your class. It does mean “teaching that accommodates all of the learning needs of all of the students in a class, enabling each student to attain the desired academic results” (Birnie 2014a).

Differentiation Is Not Worth the Effort

Differentiation can be hard work. In fact, Morgan (2014) says, “although differentiated instruction is designed to benefit *all* students, it requires extremely hard work by knowledgeable and well-prepared teachers” (37). Chubb (2012, 65), too, deals with the difficulty of teaching—not only of differentiating instruction but also of teaching in general. He says: “It’s not a profession for students who don’t want to work hard or who have no other options.” And Tomlinson (2014) elaborates on the very nature of differentiation.

Differentiation is not an instructional strategy, a collection of strategies, or a teaching model. It’s a way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocates beginning where individuals are rather than with a prescribed plan of action that ignores student variance. It is a way of thinking that challenges how educators typically envision assessment, teaching, learning, classroom roles, uses of time, and curriculum. (170)

All of that can be very hard work. But is it too hard? I think not. It’s the very essence of teaching and learning, the challenge of helping all students succeed, and, in fact, the only way to help all students succeed.

For teachers who are daunted by differentiation, the best advice is to start small. Begin with interest surveys, diagnostic tests, observation of students’ preferred learning styles. Experiment with whatever approach is most appealing: tiered assignments, for instance, or individual assignments for the outliers. Be warned,

though: Once you begin to differentiate, you will find that your students are more successful and more motivated, and there will be no turning back. You will find that you'll be working harder, perhaps, but also working immeasurably smarter, and you will undoubtedly agree that whatever it takes to differentiate successfully will be well worth your time and effort.

Conclusion

The misconceptions, then, are just that: faulty thinking about an approach to teaching that should be a major strategy in every teacher's repertoire. It is not a new fad, as some think; it has been in use by good teachers for years, and it will continue to benefit teachers as they serve students who vary in aptitude, attitude, learning styles, cultures, and prior knowledge. It does not demand an individual lesson plan for every student; indeed, among the most effective forms of differentiation are those that serve only three or four levels of learning in each class. And although it does demand intellect,

skill, and commitment from even the best of teachers, it is not too hard, because its greatest reward—success for every student and the teacher—is worth the work.

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