Response: Differentiating Lessons by 'Content, Process' or Product'

By Larry Ferlazzo on April 18, 2014 12:09 PM

(This is the first post in a two-part series on this topic.)

Tagrid Sihly asked:

What are some ways of differentiating a lesson?

As all of us teachers know, differentiation in theory is a whole lot easier than it is in practice.

Today’s post features a "power-packed line-up" of guest responses, with Carol Tomlinson, Donalyn Miller and Jeff Charbonneau contributing responses.

In addition, you can listen to a ten minute recent conversation Carol Tomlinson and I had about differentiation on my BAM! Radio program.

You might also be interested in reading a two-part series I published on this topic last year:

Several Ways To Differentiate Instruction

I was lucky enough to get both Carol Tomlinson and Rick Wormeli to contribute their ideas here!

More Ways To Differentiate Instruction -- Part Two

This post features contributions from Megan Allen, Florida's 2010 State Teacher of the Year and Dr. Kimberly Kappler Hewitt & Daniel K. Weckstein, co-authors of Differentiation is an Expectation: A School Leader's Guide to Building a Culture of Differentiation.

Lastly, I've compiled my favorite resources at The Best Resources On Differentiating Instruction.

I'll be publishing Part Two in a few days, and I hope readers will contribute comments so I can include them.

Now, for today's guests!

Response From Carol Ann Tomlinson

Carol Ann Tomlinson is William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundation, and Policy at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia in Charlottesville. She is the author, with Marcia B. Imbeau, of Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom (ASCD, 2010). She has written numerous books on digital teaching portfolios, and is partnering with Tomlinson to write a book on using technology to differentiate instruction:

Technology as a Tool for Differentiation

Differentiation is trying to make the classroom a good fit for a broad range of students to maximize learning. Powerful differentiation happens in the context of an invitational learning environment, quality curriculum, formative assessment that guides teaching and learning, instruction based on on-going assessment information, and classroom procedures that balance structure and flexibility to allow attention to individual differences.

Teachers can differentiate content (what students learn or how they get access to information), process (how students make sense of and come to understand content), product (how students show what they’ve learned), and affect and learning environment (classroom arrangement and climate). Each of these three elements can be differentiated in response to student readiness, interest, and/or approach to learning.

Powerful technologies that are increasingly available in contemporary classrooms show great promise for improving teachers’ efforts to differentiate. Although they cannot replace quality environment, curriculum, assessment practices, instruction, and routines, the tools can significantly enhance a teacher’s effort to "stretch" the classroom to make room for more students to learn more robustly.

Technology can address student differences in many ways, including:

• Providing students access to resources at their current readiness level or in a first language,

• Connecting members of a class so they can work together beyond the school day,

• Linking students who have shared interests independent of their geographic location,

• Making abstract ideas more accessible to all learners using vivid graphics, animations, videos, or interactive models,
• Offering a variety of tools that support learning tasks such as writing, spelling, or studying,

• Providing students access to rich and real content materials such as websites with expert explanations,

• Allowing students engaging ways to express their learning, such as animation programs or through avatars.

A few of the many ways in which technology can assist teachers in designing, managing, and delivering differentiated instruction include:

• Monitoring student knowledge at key points in a lesson and keeping track of student progress,

• Determining reading level of text materials,

• Finding teaching resources that connect with students’ interests and cultures,

• Creating personalized lessons for or sharing personalized materials,

• Communicating with students and parents.

• Creating multi-media lessons that capture the attention of students who learn in a variety of ways,

• Organizing lessons and classroom time,

• Sharing lessons with colleagues,

Technology is a tool. It’s possible to use that tool with little regard for student differences—and also to use it in ways that honor individual needs and extend the learning potential of every student.

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Response From Donalyn Miller

Donalyn Miller has worked with a wide variety of upper elementary and middle school students and currently teaches fifth grade at O.A. Peterson Elementary in Fort Worth, Texas. In her popular book, The Book Whisperer, Donalyn reflects on her journey to become a reading teacher and describes how she inspires and motivates her middle school students to read 40 or more books a year. In her latest book, Reading in the Wild, Donalyn collects responses from 900 adult readers and uses this information to teach lifelong reading habits to her students:
While teachers focus on standards-based instruction, these standards are often open-ended—allowing teachers and students to select texts to read or topics to explore that match individual students. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999), there are three ways to differentiate a lesson that allow students more choices in their learning by differentiating content, process, or product. Through assessment data, and interest surveys, teachers can guide students toward choices that match their abilities and interests.

**Content:** Differentiating content refers to a change in the material being learned by the student. For example, if all students must write a research report, students can select their own topic to research. Teachers can focus instruction on research skills such as locating and evaluating information and citing sources, and students can show their mastery of these skills while pursuing their interests. In reading, teachers can match students with books at their reading level and focus instruction on comprehension or literacy elements. We must determine whether students can’t internalize the skill we are teaching them or simply can’t access the text we are asking them to read.

**Process:** Differentiating process allows students to access the material they are learning in multiple ways. For example, students can conduct research on the Internet, read books about a topic, or interview a local expert. When developing their understanding of a concept, students can create visual representations or write a bulleted list.

**Product:** Differentiating product provides students opportunities to show their learning in various ways. Students could write a formal research paper, record a podcast, or create infographics summarizing key points from their research findings.

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**Response From Jeff Charbonneau**

Jeff Charbonneau is the 2013 National Teacher of the Year. He is a Chemistry, Physics, and Engineering teacher at Zillah High School, in Zillah, WA. You can follow him on Twitter at @JeffCharbonneau:

There are lots of ways to differentiate a lesson. None of them are perfect in all scenarios. Which makes sense. After all, we are talking about differentiation for individual circumstances! Here are a few of the major ideas on differentiation:

1) **Projects**

Projects are one of the easiest ways to differentiate a lesson. By allowing students to work on different project, often of their own choosing, the teacher can modify the level of depth and scale of the project to fit the current level of student understanding.

To take this to the next level, consider sequencing multiple projects one after the other, with students staying on the same or similar topics each
time. This allows the teacher to then change the project requirements with each iteration to match the new level of understanding of the student.

2) Video / Flip

Flipping, or video recording your lessons allows students to access them either at home, in the school library or on their portable devices. This can allow for students who need to see or hear your explanations multiple times, a chance to do so. This can also be very effective for those student who want to move along at a faster pace.

If you do use this method, consider asking your department or school to purchase inexpensive hand-held video/mp3 players for students who do not have access to computers at home. There are several options in the sub $30 range.

3) A note on deadlines

One of the oldest solutions to differentiation is the idea of just simply giving students more time to complete the assignment. While this certainly is a valid strategy, please consider how you as the teacher can also help during this extended time. What additional resources can you give? This can include videos, websites, articles, and additional tutoring. Extra time, on its own, many time is not sufficient.

4) Assignments that matter

Really think about the assignments you give. What is their purpose? What do they demonstrate? Then look at every problem and ask the same question. Assignments should not be measured based on the number of problems, but instead on the impact the assignment has on the learner and the learning process. By getting really specific on what assignments you give and WHY you are giving them, you will often find that the answer on how to differentiate your lessons will become very clear.

Thanks to Carol, Donalyn, and Jeff for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post. I’ll be publishing readers’ ideas in Part Two.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it’s selected or if you’d prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind. You can also contact me on Twitter at @Larryferlazzo.

Anyone whose question is selected for weekly column can choose one free book from a number of education publishers. I’ll be highlighting one particular publisher every two months, and it’s Routledge’s turn now.

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2014/04/response_differenitatiing_lessons_by_content_process_or_product.html
Just a reminder -- you can subscribe to blog for free via RSS Reader or email... And, if you missed any of the highlights from the first two years of blog, you can see a categorized list of them here. You won't see posts from school year in those compilations, but you can review those new ones by clicking in the monthly archives link on blog's sidebar.

You can also see annual lists of my most popular posts.

Education Week has published a collection of posts from blog -- along with new material -- in an ebook form. It's titled Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching.

Last, but not least, I've recently begun recording a weekly eight-minute BAM! Radio podcast with educators who provide guest responses to questions. You can listen and/or download them here.

I'll be posting Part Two in a few of days....

Categories: answers instruction

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