STRATEGIZING TEACHING: DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING STYLES AND LEARNING BRAIN

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ABSTRACT

"Differentiated instruction has the potential to create learning environments that maximize learning and the potential for success for ALL students— regardless of skill level or background."
– McQuarrie, McRae and Stack-Cutler, in Differentiated Instruction: Provincial Research Review (2005)

Differentiated teaching is an approach that enables teachers to plan strategies through which they can meet the needs of every student. It is based on the philosophy that there is variability among any group of learners and that teachers should adjust teaching according to those differences among the learning brains (students) (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). It is the teacher's response to the diverse learning needs of his or her students.

In other words, Differentiated teaching is a philosophy and an approach to teaching in which teachers and school communities actively work to support the learning of all learnig brains(students) via **strategic assessment**, **thoughtful planning** and **targeted, flexible teaching**. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, differentiated teaching means 'shaking up' what goes on in the classroom in such a way that learning brains have myriad opportunities for taking in information, making sense of ideas and expressing what they learn.

Differentiated teaching has been a trendy word in k-12(primary and secondary) education for the past three decades but has only recently gained ground in adult basic education (BSE). The cornerstone of differentiated teaching is active planning: the teacher plans teaching strategy to meet learners' varied demands and to offer multiple avenues through which the target learning brains can access, understand, and apply learning. In differentiated teaching, lessons are expected to be responsive to the needs of each learner; teachers must take into cognizance not only what they are teaching (content), but also whom they are teaching (individual learning brains). They need to know the varying **readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles** of each of their students and then design learning options capable of fitting into these three factors.

Evidence shows that learning brains are more successful in school and are more engaged if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (Vygotsky, 1986), their interests (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and their learning profiles (Sternberg et al., 1998). According to Tomlinson (2001, 2003), in adopting differentiated teaching, teachers try to address these three characteristics for each student.

KEYWORDS: *Readiness,* teaching, teachers, knowledge, Learning, students, Interest

BENEFITS OF DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING

Today's classrooms are increasingly diverse. Students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a wide range of interests, preferences, learning strengths and needs. Differentiated instruction makes it possible for teachers to reach all learners and can particularly enhance the success of:

◆ Students with disabilities (as part of or in addition to an individualized program plan)

◆ Language learners; example, Arabic or English language learners

◆ Students who are gifted

◆ Students considered at risk for leaving school before completion.

An important part of differentiated teaching style is a way of recognizing that education demands are not as direct as just regular or special. On any given day, in any given subject area, or for any given type of activity, different students may have difficulty engaging in classroom activities, or learning new skills and ideas. Differentiated teaching offers multiple pathways to learning, so that all students are engaged and emerge successful learners each and every school day. Effective differentiated teaching also helps students decipher what they are expected to learn, evaluate their own progress, and articulate their learning capacity, challenges and interests. Starting where students are at, providing meaningful choice, and creating opportunities for students to showcase their interests and skills increases students' motivation, self-confidence and willingness to assume responsibility for their learning.

Readiness

Readiness refers to the learning brains' knowledge, understanding, and skill related to a particular sequence of learning. It is influenced by a student's cognitive proficiency as well as prior learning, life experiences, and attitudes about school. Readiness can vary widely over time, and according to topic and circumstance. As Tomlinson (2003) points out, if readiness levels in a class vary, so must the complexity of work provided. Tiered activities are one way to address readiness effectively; for example, all students study the same concept but complete activities appropriate to their readiness levels. Readiness also can be addressed through small group sessions or the provision of one-to-one teacher and peer support or coaching.

Interest

Interest arises from topics that evoke curiosity and passion in the learning brains and in which they want to invest time and energy to learn about. When a student's interests are tapped, that student is more likely to be engaged and to persist in learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1962; Sousa, 2001; Wolfe, 2001).

Learning profile

Learning profile refers to how a student learns best. Preferences for learning are shaped by learning style, intelligence preference, culture, and gender. Teachers differentiate by learning profile when they provide learning activities that offer students choices for demonstrating mastery of learning: journals, videotape presentations, role plays, oral histories, or project-based learning. When different modes of learning are offered and supported, more students successfully complete learning tasks (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Sternberg et al., 1998).

Content and Process

In response to the learner characteristics of readiness, interest, and learning profile, teachers can differentiate, or modify, learning experiences in the three areas of

1. content,
2. process, and
3. Product (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003).

Content refers to what students need to learn. The major concepts, principles, and skills that are taught. All learners should be given access to the same content. Teachers should adjust the degree of complexity using diverse instructional processes to teach the content. In this way, all students learn the same concepts but in different ways.

Process refers to ways in which the content is taught. The activities that help students understand and eventually own the concepts and skills being taught. The key to differentiating process is

a. Flexible grouping, in which learners are sometimes grouped by readiness levels,
b. Sometimes by interest, and
c. Sometimes by learning profiles.

For example, a teacher might group learners with a similar readiness level for reading instruction and then regroup them by interest to discuss current events or a movie they have all viewed. By varying the groups in which learners participate, teachers prevent labeling learners as members of the "fast group" or the "slow group," thus encouraging a respect for difference among learners. This approach also supports the growth of a strong community of learners among everyone in the class. It would be difficult to differentiate teaching without using flexible grouping.

Products

Products allow students to demonstrate whether they have learned the key concepts and skills of a unit and to apply the learning to solve problems and take action. Different students can create different products based on their own readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2001). Students should be given a choice of four or five products from which they may select to demonstrate mastery of learning. Students also may elect to work alone or in small groups on their products. Examples of products include a written report, an oral presentation, a group discussion on key concepts, a short book in which the key concepts are explained and described, a game centered around the characters and theme of a book, or an event planned within a specified budget. Products should be related to real problems, concerns, and audiences and they should synthesize rather than summarize information.

Key elements of differentiated instruction

When done effectively, differentiated instruction is a seamless part of everyday instructional planning and practice. It is woven throughout the school day for all students and is integrated into how the physical space is organized, what learning resources are used, how instruction is planned and delivered, and how student learning is assessed. The very nature of differentiated instruction means that it will look different in different learning contexts and environments, depending on the students, teacher, and/or curriculum. In all contexts, however, effective differentiated instruction involves:

I. Knowing your students
II. Understanding the curriculum
III. Providing multiple pathways to learning
IV. Sharing responsibility with students
V. Taking a flexible and reflective approach.

Taking a flexible and reflective approach

Putting this philosophy into practice requires proactive planning, in which teachers identify, from the beginning, multiple routes for students to succeed, rather than retrofit- ting one-size-fits-all approaches after the fact. At the same time, it is important to plan with flexibility in mind. This flexibility, in terms of both scheduling and attitude, allows you to respond as much as possible when new student needs or interests emerge in relation to a topic or concept of study. In differentiated instruction, ongoing assessment of students drives and extends teaching and helps you to continually refine your efforts. Along with ongoing assessment, differentiated instruction also demands that teachers systematically reflect on their instructional practices and use this information to improve their practice. Consider the following self-assessment.

Does my instructional approach:

1. Use assessment strategies at the beginning of the instructional cycle, to determine what students already know and understand?

Yes   Not yet

2. Use varied instructional approaches including discussion, demonstration, guided reading and discovery activities?

Yes   Not yet

3. Emphasize critical and creative thinking and the application of learning?

Yes   Not yet

4. Use varied instructional groupings, including whole class, small groups, partners and individuals?

Yes   Not yet

5. Provide opportunities for students to choose activities based on their interests and preferences?

Yes   Not yet

6. Provide opportunities for guided and independent practice of new skills and concepts?

Yes   Not yet

7. Incorporate ongoing assessment strategies to check student learning and understanding throughout instructional sequences?

Yes   Not yet

8. Accommodate for learner differences by providing a variety of ways to show learning?

Yes   Not yet

9. Use strategies for re-teaching, which are different from those strategies used to teach the skills and concepts the first time?

Yes   Not yet

10. Ensure those re-teaching activities demand higher-level thinking skills while reinforcing basic skills and content?

Yes   Not yet

11. Provide enrichment activities that demand critical and/or creative thinking and the production of new ideas, thoughts and perspectives?

Yes   Not yet

12. Provide learning activities and ways of organizing that will scaffold student learning?

Yes   Not yet

Challenges

The greatest challenge to implementing differentiated teaching relates to time: the planning time that teachers need to assess learners' needs, interests, and readiness levels; to determine key concepts and organizing questions; and to design appropriate activities for each learner.

The next issue relates to classroom management and the changing role of the teacher from dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of learning.

The third issue concerns the need for teachers to acquire and use strategies that may be new to them. The only way to address all these concerns is through effective professional development that strongly encourages teachers to apply the skills and then provides coaching throughout the process of moving toward differentiation as a teaching approach.

CONCLUSION

It takes the commitment of teachers, administrators, and students to make differentiated teaching styles a reality.

For teachers and students, the challenge is to move comfortably into a new instructional paradigm.

For administrators, the challenge is to support teachers' professional development, provide teachers access to a variety of teaching materials, and encourage the use of new methodologies and teacher support networks or peer coaching. Throughout the process, administrators need to be the keepers of the vision of an instructional program that responds to the needs of all learners. Differentiated teaching styles offers appropriate levels of challenge according to learners' abilities, interests, and preferred learning profile, and maximizes learners' potential.

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About the Author

Dr. Ahmed Sebihi -Researcher, committed teacher and educator, Dr. Ahmed Sebihi has more than 24 years' experience all over the world.

Dr. Sebihi started his professional career as a Chief Editor in Algerian weekly newspapers "AL SAMURAH" and "AL AQEEDAH"before moving to Tunisia to work as a correspondent with "RUSSIKADIA" Newspaper. He then relocated to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to assume the role of Director of Media Center and Public Relations in the High Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina under the patronage of H.H. King Fahed Ibn Abdul Aziz, May his Soul rest in Peace.

Dr. Sebihi is currently an Associate Professor at Gulf Medical University, Ajman (GMU), UAE, position which he has held at many other renowned universities in the UAE namely the American University in the Emirates (AUE), the Canadian University of Dubai (CUD), Gulf Medical University of Ajman (GMU), the University of Sharjah (UOS), Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), Ajman University of Sciences and Technology Network (AUST), University College for Mother and Family Sciences (UCMFS).

Throughout his long enriching experience, Dr. Sebihi developed a great deal of educational, learning and teaching skills. He led a range of workshops for teachers and students in Thailand and in the UAE and has many contributions in all levels of the educational scale in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Malaysia, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates. In Thailand, he has been discerned the award of the "Best Teacher" by the Institute of Islamic Saiburi under the Islamic Foundation for Education. In Malaysia, he was a member of the Preparation and Review Committee of the "Al Aq'd Al Fari'd fi Alfa'd Al Qura'n Al Maji'd" encyclopedia.

In the UAE, he has been/is still involved in many activities to serve the Community, among which a participation to a live discussion on major issues in the Muslim Community with a local Quranic Radio Channel" 846 KHZ.; a series of workshops in Sharjah and Ajman: "The Psychology of Marriage Co-partnership"; " ULFA Program"; "How to succeed in your Marriage"; " How to excel your Studies"; " How to Plan Ones Future "; " Class Management".