Encouraging Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

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**Purpose**

I have long been interested in gifted education and how I can provide further challenge for these students in my classroom. I earned AIG licensure in 2008, and in the process I was introduced to many ways to differentiate for the gifted. So often teachers go to workshops and learn all kinds of new and innovative strategies to use in their classrooms, but when they get back to school after the workshop, they don’t implement all those great ideas they learned. I think this is due in part to the lack of time and resources teachers have in order to plan and successfully implement these new ideas. We, as teachers, are all aware that each student is different and learns in different ways and at different rates. What works for one student may not be best for another. Differentiated Instruction is the best way to provide the appropriate level of instruction for all the diverse learners in the classroom. The purpose of my project is to provide a plan for a professional development session for teachers that will inform them about reasons to include differentiation in their classroom and also give examples of how they can easily do this with all their students that don’t take hours of time.

**Background**

I, as so many other teachers, have been aware that my students come in a variety of learning styles. It has been become apparent to teachers in all levels of education that we can’t continue teaching our lessons in the same ways we have been for so long. We know what helps us to learn more easily and some ways are not beneficial to everyone so we need to take that knowledge into consideration when planning instruction for the students in our classroom. I came across an article while doing my research on differentiated instruction that referenced an article written by Carleton W. Washburne in 1953. In this article Washburne discusses the range of abilities that can be found in the classroom and the possibilities of how teachers can accommodate this range. Even in that time so many decades ago, teachers were faced with this dilemma of how they can teach a classroom of mixed-ability students effectively. Differentiated Instruction is obviously not a new idea, but it can be a difficult one for teachers to implement into the classroom.

The main ways that teachers can differentiate instruction are by content, process and product. One very important aspect of differentiation is to provide students with choice. In Kondor’s (2007) action research, she found that implementing differentiated instruction and providing choice for her students increased their overall motivation and engagement. She stated that when students were working on Tic Tac Toe Board choices, they would ask if they could work on them throughout the day not just during specified class time.

Also in her research, Kondor (2007) says that teachers should plan their instruction to address learners’ different needs, rather than planning one lesson for everyone and adjusting it when it does not work for some students. In the long run this will save time since you will have already made accommodations for the various needs of your students than teaching something first and then having to start over when something doesn’t work for a handful of the students.

Both Bernal (2003) and Shaunessy (2007) discuss differentiated instruction in regards to gifted students. They each emphasize the importance of offering challenging opportunities for learning that are appropriate in complexity, pace, depth and level. Differentiated Instruction is an ideal way to accomplish this if gifted students cannot be grouped in a homogenous setting. Not only is this way of teaching good to use with gifted students, but it is also good to use with all students at any level in your classroom. It may require more planning time in the beginning, but it will ultimately save the teacher precious time later on when she/he doesn’t have to re-teach a concept when there are some that didn’t get it.

Most teachers don’t have an infinite amount of time on their hands to research and plan this type of instruction. They may be able to get a basic foundation, but with the everyday demands of teaching, it is difficult to keep abreast of new strategies and techniques to integrate into differentiated instructional teaching.

Much of the research that is out there today provides a plethora of examples of what teachers can do in the classroom to differentiate. There is no need to go and reinvent the wheel in the beginning of a teacher’s journey into differentiating instruction. They should first start out with using lessons and ideas from other teachers so they can be comfortable with what is possible to do in your classroom, as every classroom is different and what works for one classroom, may not work in another. When the teacher is feeling comfortable with differentiating in their classroom that is the time to branch out and look for other possibilities. This can mean trying a new strategy or creating something totally new on your own.

The most common forms of differentiation strategies that teachers can use in their classroom discussed in the video by Lester (2009) might be some of the following: Bloom’s Taxonomy, Layered Lessons, Anchor Activities, Adjusted Questions, Learning Contracts, Curriculum Compacting, Independent Study, Lesson Acceleration, Lesson Deceleration, Buddy Study, Peer Teaching, Flexible Grouping, Learning Centers, and Technology Activities. These are just a selection of the many strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms to differentiate instruction. Two other strategies that were not mentioned in the video, but are two good strategies to utilize are Multiple Intelligences and Tic Tac Toe Boards. Dill (2010) cites Tic Tac Toe Boards as an easy and creative way for differentiating instruction. A Tic Tac Toe Board can be created to include activities that will challenge all students on their level. “It works best when you create two or three different boards so there can be a variation of levels available.” Wilson (1998) discusses Multiple Intelligences as another way to differentiate instruction. The author states, “Instructional planning techniques based on MI principles help (teachers) easily create interesting, clearly differentiated components for integrated units.” It is also possible to combine differentiation strategies. Appendix A shows an example of a Tic Tac Toe Board that also integrates MI into the activities.

One last strategy that was mentioned in Lester’s (2009) video was Independent Study. Powers (2008) says, “Independent Study (IS) is a highly encouraged differentiation technique by educators of the gifted that offers student autonomy and challenge in the learning process.” This type of differentiation strategy allows for choice and challenges the student to have ownership of their learning. This is something that can be done over a short period of time or it can be used as an anchor activity over a longer period of time.

Differentiated Instruction has been around for many decades and teachers know how beneficial it is the reach all students in the classroom using this method of teaching. The most important, and often difficult, part of differentiated instruction is how to get started. There is an astounding amount of resources available on the internet, in your school’s professional library and from other teachers at your school. It can seem a daunting task for teachers to begin differentiating instruction, but if they will seek out help and advice from others, it can be a much more manageable and enjoyable experience.

**Plan**

Since I am not able to actually carry out this project idea, I have created a plan that explains how I would go about sharing this information with my school faculty during a workshop or professional development session.

I would first begin the session by introducing the topic for the session and give a general definition of what differentiated instruction is. I would then ask for teachers to tell me as much as they can of what they know already about the topic. This is a way of using differentiated instruction in the workshop, since differentiation requires pre-assessment to see what students already know and who needs what level of instruction. After listening and recording this information, the video, *Doing Differentiation! OH Edition,* would be shown. This video gives an overview of differentiated instruction and the basic ways to differentiate in the classroom. After finishing the video, I would a little more in-depth into some selected strategies discussed in the video and a few that were not mentioned.

At this point, I would give teachers a chance to get together into grade level teams to choose a specific differentiated instruction strategy they would like to learn more about. The teachers would be participating in a JIGSAW activity. I would give them some time to look over information and examples of these strategies in their groups and learn the basics for planning that particular type of differentiated strategy. After each group had had sufficient time to become familiar with their chosen strategy, I would give each teacher a number and each teacher with the same number will get together and share their knowledge of their differentiation strategy giving time for others to ask clarifying questions if needed. When all groups have had time to share, teachers would then get back into their grade level teams and given the task to make a goal to choose one type of strategy to use in their classroom this year. After making that goal, teachers will be given time to, as a grade level if they wish, plan one lesson or activity that they plan to use in the future that implements the differentiation strategy they chose for their goal. To hold teachers accountable for making sure they do implement the lesson or activity, I will require each teacher to turn a copy of the planned lesson and also a post reflection after they have taught the lesson.

If it was possible, I’d like to have another date set aside for teachers to check-in with each other and to share their thoughts, ideas, progress, successes and set-backs. Having the time to get together with other teachers and discuss these things is mandatory I think. You learn much more by sharing with others and having this time with other educators can provide benefits to the students in the classroom participating in the lessons the teachers are planning and implementing.

**Conclusion**

Students will always come in different sizes, shapes, colors and learning abilities. Differentiation can provide a way to teach all students in the mixed ability classroom, from the students who are below grade level to the students who far above grade level. Yes, it will take time to plan using differentiation strategies, but if teachers can start out using lesions already made by others first, they can gain the confidence to begin to plan their own differentiated lessons for their classrooms. Teachers also need time to plan these lessons. Schools shouldn’t require teachers to sit in a professional development workshop and learn about something new and then require them to implement this new strategy into their classrooms, but not give them the time and support to plan effectively. Often times, teachers don’t get this much needed time and support, but are told to implement it into their teaching ASAP. Time is a precious commodity in the teaching world, but if teachers can be given this gift of time to plan and effectively implement these strategies into the classroom, the end result will be outstanding.

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| **1. V-L**  **Write a conversation between two characters from your story.** | **2. V-S**  **Research a person or event from the story and make a storyboard to explain your findings.** | **3. L-M**  **Demonstrate an understanding of the information in the text.** |
| **4. N**  **Demonstrate how nature played a role in events from the text.** | **5.**  **FREE CHOICE** | **6. B-K**  **Organize information from the story using a living timeline.** |
| **7. INTRA**  **Interpret and illustrate information from the story on a piece of paper.** | **8. INTER**  **With a partner, create a position statement for a person from the story. (Ex. Emily thinks…)** | **9. M**  **Make up a song to act out a part of the story.** |

Appendix A – Sample Tic Tac Toe Board using Multiple Intelligence

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