Differentiated Instruction

Summary

Carol Ann Tomlinson, one of the foremost researchers of the heterogeneous classroom and differentiated instruction, shares that differentiated instruction is “more qualitative than quantitative, rooted in assessment, provides multiple approaches to content, process, and product, and is student centered” (Tomlinson, 2001).

A common question for both veteran and novice teachers is who needs or qualifies to receive differentiated instruction? The answer to this question is simple, everyone! Rick Wormeli (2006) says it best, “It requires us to do different things for different students some, or a lot, of the time in order for them to learn when the general classroom approach does not meet students’ needs.” Remember, the end result, content mastery, is the goal; how each student reaches the goal does not have to be the same.

The first step in planning for differentiated instruction is to acquire an extensive knowledge of your students’ background knowledge, interests, learning styles, and readiness levels.

Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligence is used to identify a student’s primary pathway of learning. The different types of intelligences include the following.

- words (linguistic intelligence)
- numbers or logic (logical-mathematical intelligence)
- pictures (spatial intelligence)
- music (musical intelligence)
- self-reflection (intrapersonal intelligence)
- a physical experience (bodily-kinesthetic intelligence)
- a social experience (interpersonal intelligence), and/or
- an experience in the natural world. (naturalist intelligence).
Once students’ readiness levels, interests, and learning styles have been collected the results are used to form groups. Groups should be fluid, changing with the level of the task, the rate at which the student masters the content, and the interests of the group.

Differentiation can occur through the content, process, or product. Course content should adhere to the course and grade specific standards as identified by the school’s governing body. In a differentiated classroom, content also includes the materials used to guide learning. Process refers to the way content is delivered. The product is the way in which students demonstrate content mastery.

Accommodations are ways to meet the needs of students without changing course or grade level standards. Modifications are ways of meeting the needs of students who require changes to the standards to achieve mastery. Differentiated instruction embraces accommodations.

Chaoman (2013) describes strategies as those methods that provide instruction of content, but tiered as such to meet individual student need without changing the content or significantly altering the assessment procedure.

When planning, remember, the goal is to take every student from his/her unique level of understanding to mastery of the lesson content. This would include any strategies, accommodations, and modifications necessary to ensure mastery. Include each of these in the lesson plan, along with activities, assignments, and assessments.