

Leading and Managing A Differentiated Classroom. —

Carol Ann Tomlinson & Marcia B. Imbeau
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Chapter 1 .

Understanding Differentiation in Order to Lead

Aiming for Fidelity to a Model



Few would argue that opportunity in life is strongly connected with educational opportunity. However, we have often misconstrued the notion of equal access to education to mean that all students should receive precisely the same pacing, resources, and instruction. The result is a one-size-fits-all education system. Differentiated instruction recognizes that students are not the same and that access to equal education necessarily means that, given a certain goal, each student should be provided resources, instruction, and support to help them meet that objective.

—John Stroup, University of Virginia doctoral student

"My district wanted all of its teachers to differentiate instruction," the young woman told me, "so they created a notebook of strategies for us. It's really nice. It's bound and everything. I guess it must have a dozen strategies in it."

"I'm glad you found it useful," I responded.

She paused as she searched for her next comment. “I did find it useful,” she said. “I used every one of the ideas. And now I guess I’m just waiting for the next notebook.”

She was puzzled. She had “done differentiation” cover to cover and had no idea where to go next. Because she had no basis for understanding how the ideas in the notebook had been generated, she was left feeling as if she had no basis for charting her own growth. She was experiencing what Ralph Waldo Emerson understood when he cautioned that if we only learn methods, we are tied to those methods, but if we learn principles, we can develop our own methods. My conversation with the young teacher reflected several common misunderstandings about differentiation:

1. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is a set of instructional strategies.

Reality: Differentiation is a philosophy—a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is, in fact, a set of principles.

2. **Misunderstanding:** It’s adequate for a district or school leader (or professional developers) to tell, or even show, teachers how to differentiate instruction effectively.

Reality: Learning to differentiate instruction well requires rethinking one’s classroom practice and results from an ongoing process of trial, reflection, and adjustment in the classroom itself.

3. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is something a teacher does or doesn’t do (as in, “I already do that,” or “I tell our teachers that they already differentiate instruction.”).

Reality: Most teachers who remain in a classroom for longer than a day *do* pay attention to student variation and respond to it in some way—especially with students who can threaten order in the classroom. However, very few teachers proactively plan instruction to consistently address student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile.

4. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is just about instruction.

Reality: Although differentiation is an instructional approach, effective differentiated instruction is inseparable from a positive learning environment, high-quality curriculum, assessment to inform teacher decision making, and flexible classroom management. To the degree that any one of those elements is weak, the others are also diminished.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief summary of what we call differentiated instruction; a full explanation of the elements of this approach is available in other resources (e.g., Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2004; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). A clear understanding of the individual elements of differentiation, and how they relate to and shape the classroom system, paves the way for a more robust exploration of the philosophy of differentiation (which directs how teachers manage and lead an effectively differentiated classroom). The following two chapters should eliminate misunderstandings about differentiation—such as those noted above—and help prepare teachers to be effective leaders for differentiation in their classrooms and schools.

Key Elements of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation can be accurately described as classroom practice with a balanced emphasis on individual students and course content. In other words, in an effectively differentiated classroom, it is understood that

- Students differ as learners in terms of background experience, culture, language, gender, interests, readiness to learn, modes of learning, speed of learning, support systems for learning, self-awareness as a learner, confidence as a learner, independence as a learner, and a host of other ways.
- Differences profoundly impact how students learn and the nature of scaffolding they will need at various points in the learning process.
- Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that all of their students master important content.
- Teachers have to make specific and continually evolving plans to connect each learner with key content.
- Teachers are required to understand the nature of each of their students, in addition to the nature of the content they teach.
- A flexible approach to teaching “makes room” for student variance.
- Teachers should continually ask, “What does *this* student need at *this* moment in order to be able to progress with *this* key content, and what do I need to do to make that happen?”

At the core of the classroom practice of differentiation is the modification of four curriculum-related elements—content, process, product, and affect—which are based on three categories of student need and variance—readiness, interest, and learning profile.

Content

The knowledge, understanding, and skills we want students to learn.

During differentiation, we emphasize the methods that students use to access key content (e.g., independent reading, partner reading, text on tape, text with images, listening comprehension, online research, communication with experts, group demonstrations, small group instruction) rather than change the content itself (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). There are instances, however, when some students need to go back to prerequisite content in order to move ahead, when advanced learners need to move ahead before their classmates are ready to do so, and when student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) direct the teacher to change the content itself.

Process

How students come to understand or make sense of the content.

Real learning—of the sort that enables students to retain, apply, and transfer content—has to happen *in* students, not *to* them (National Research Council, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The word *process* is often used as a synonym for *activities*. However, activities can be misaligned with content goals and fail to require students to think through, grapple with, or use essential knowledge, understanding, and skills. Therefore, it is wise to substitute the term *sense-making activities* to emphasize that what we ask students to do in the name of learning or practice should help them “own” the content, see how it makes sense, and realize how it is useful in the world outside the classroom.

Product

How students demonstrate what they have come to know, understand, and are able to do after an extended period of learning.

A product is not something students generate in a single lesson or as a result of an activity or two. Rather, it is a rich culminating assessment that calls on students to apply and extend what they have learned over a period of time. Tests have these characteristics when they present students with complex problems to

solve or issues to address in ways that require understanding of key ideas, transfer of knowledge, and application of skills. Effectively designed authentic assessments inevitably have these characteristics.

Affect

How students' emotions and feelings impact their learning.

Emotions and feelings originate in the brain based on past experiences and reactions to current experiences. They impact our motivation to learn, ability to work with others, and self-concept as a learner. In that way, affect is integral to, rather than apart from, curriculum. When a student has a positive affect regarding learning and himself or herself as a learner, it opens the door to academic growth. Conversely, a student's negative affect regarding learning or his or her own abilities as a learner shuts the door. Expert teachers don't just observe student behavior; they work to understand the affect that drives behavior so they can guide students in a positive direction.

Readiness

A student's current proximity to specified knowledge, understanding, and skills.

It is important to keep in mind that readiness is not a synonym for ability, and the two terms should not be used interchangeably. The term *ability* connotes what we sometimes believe to be a more or less fixed and inborn trait. *Readiness* suggests a temporary condition that should change regularly as a result of high-quality teaching. You'll see, as this chapter continues, that thinking in terms of "student readiness" rather than "student ability" is beneficial to both student and teacher. To grow academically, students must work consistently with tasks that are sharply focused on essential knowledge, understanding, or skills and that are a bit too difficult for their current level of readiness. In addition, students must have a support system in the form of peers and/or teachers who will help them surmount this difficulty and emerge from the task (or sequence of tasks) at a new and more advanced level of readiness (Sousa, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wolfe, 2010).

Interest

That which engages the attention, curiosity, and involvement of a student.

Student interest is tied directly to student motivation to learn (Collins & Amabile, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When student interest is engaged,

motivation to learn is heightened, and learning is enhanced. Personal interests are typically linked to a student's strengths, cultural context, personal experiences, questions, or sense of need.

Learning profile

A preference for taking in, exploring, or expressing content.

A student's learning profile is shaped by four elements and the interactions among them:

1. Learning style—A preferred contextual approach to learning. Learning styles include working alone or with a partner, in a quiet place or with music playing, in a bright room or a darkened environment, while sitting still or moving around (Dunn & Dunn, 1992, 1993; Gregorc, 1979).
2. Intelligence preference—A hard-wired or neurologically shaped preference for learning or thinking. For example, intelligence preferences include verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical-rhythmic, spatial, analytical, practical, creative (Gardner, 1985; Sternberg, 1985).
3. Gender—Approaches to learning that may be shaped genetically or socially for males versus females. While not all males (or females) learn in the same ways, there are gender-based patterns of learning, and it may be advantageous to utilize teaching and learning options that reflect a range of gender-based preferences while we continue to enhance our understanding of ways in which gender and learning are interrelated (Gilligan, 1982; Gurian, 2001; Tannen, 1990).
4. Culture—Approaches to learning that may be strongly shaped by the context in which an individual lives and by the unique ways in which people in that context make sense of and live their lives. For example, how people communicate, relate to one another across generations, envision power structures, celebrate and mourn, and show respect are shaped by culture. As they do between genders, patterns of learning vary somewhat across cultures, but it is not the case that all individuals from a given culture approach learning in the same way. Thus, it is likely advantageous to student learning for a teacher to provide a range of teaching and learning approaches that, in turn, reflect a range of

culture-based learning preferences. In order to do this, it is essential that teachers study the diverse cultures of the students they teach so they can achieve a more multidimensional understanding of the relationship between culture and learning (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Lasley, Matczynski, & Rowley, 1997).

A teacher in an effectively differentiated classroom seeks to develop increasing insight into students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In order to develop instruction that maximizes each student's opportunity for academic growth, the teacher then modifies content, process, product, and affect. Figure 1.1 provides specific examples of how this can play out in the classroom for content, process, and product. By contrast, attending to students' affective needs generally

Figure 1.1

Examples of Differentiation Based on Student Need

	Readiness	Interest	Learning Profile
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> materials at varied readability levels spelling assigned by proficiency alternate presentation methods targeted small group instruction front-loading vocabulary highlighted texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> range of materials that apply key ideas and skills to a variety of real-world situations teacher presentations designed to link to student interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> varied teaching modes (e.g., verbal, visual, rhythmic, practical) video or audio notes for students who learn better with repeated listening
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tiered activities mini-workshops flexible use of time learning contracts varied homework assignments RAFT options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expert groups interest centers supplementary materials based on student interests jigsaw independent studies interest-based application options RAFT options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> choice of working conditions (e.g., alone or with a partner) tasks designed around intelligence preferences RAFT options blogs and vlogs to share ideas
Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tiered products personal goal-setting varied resource options check-in requirements based on student independence providing samples of good student work at varied levels of complexity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use of student interests in designing products Design a Day options use of contemporary technologies for student expression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complex Instruction varied formats for expressing key content varied working arrangements varied modes of expressing learning

occurs when a teacher adapts the learning environment rather than the other three classroom elements.

Differentiation and the Classroom System

Differentiated instruction is a principle-guided method to approach teaching and learning, and it is implemented in the context of a classroom system that contains four interdependent elements: learning environment, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. In all classrooms, there is a learning environment that is shaped by a teacher's beliefs, experiences, and actions. There is a curriculum, shaped by a teacher's content knowledge, text materials, and local or federal mandates. There is some form of assessment, again shaped by both the teacher and forces external to the teacher. Finally, all classrooms benefit from instruction that individual teachers design (or follow established designs for) and implement. The way in which the teacher envisions and enacts each of these elements shapes each of the other elements. For example, an assessment that feels judgmental to students will negatively impact the learning environment. Likewise, a classroom in which curriculum is highly prescribed, with few or no options for a teacher to make professional decisions on behalf of students, limits that teacher's options for instruction.

The model of differentiation supported in this book adopts the position that each of these four elements must be shaped and cultivated to provide opportunities for every student to maximize his or her learning capacity. Only when each of the elements—separately and in conjunction with one another—supports maximum learning for each student is the classroom functioning as it should.

Learning environment

The physical and emotional context in which learning occurs.

The appearance, organization, and structure of a classroom can invite learning with appealing colors, effective displays of student work, spaces for both solitary and collaborative work, easy access to materials and supplies, furniture arrangements that focus attention on peer input rather than largely or solely on the teacher, and visible cues to support quality work. Conversely, a classroom's physical environment can diminish learning by being barren, drab, cramped, teacher-focused, distracting, or limiting (with seating arrangements that isolate students from one another). More significant than this physical climate, however, is the classroom's more intangible emotional climate. Students learn

best when they feel safe, respected, involved, challenged, and supported. Thus, a learning environment that invites each student to be a full participant in the classroom—with full support for the journey—is a necessity for robust differentiated instruction.

Effective differentiation—in other words, effective attention to the learning needs of each student—requires a learning environment in which

- The teacher is attuned and responsive to the affective, cognitive, and physical needs of learners.
- Students feel safe, both physically and affectively.
- The teacher respects and supports the possibilities inherent in each student.
- Individual differences are accepted as natural and positive.
- Students learn to respect and support one another as learners.
- The teacher and students share in the decision-making process about daily routines and classroom operation.
- Hard work is an expectation.
- Physical arrangements are flexible and support student access to a variety of learning options.
- A range of resources are available and support student access to content.
- Flexible student grouping capitalizes on student strengths and allows effective attention to student weaknesses.

Curriculum

An organized plan to engage learners with important knowledge, understanding, and skills.

A list of standards is not a curriculum. A textbook is not a curriculum. These are ingredients—resources necessary for developing a curriculum. A high-quality curriculum begins with a teacher's sense of the authentic nature of the discipline that the curriculum will represent. It includes a clear delineation of the essential knowledge students should have and the skills they should possess as the result of a particular segment of learning (e.g., a year, a unit of study). It includes summative assessment mechanisms for determining student proficiency with designated outcomes that are tightly aligned with those assessments. It includes a carefully planned sequence of lessons or learning experiences that are designed to engage students with essential content and to ensure student success with the essential

knowledge, understanding, and skills (Erickson, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2009; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

The model of differentiation represented in this book advocates that all students (unless an IEP indicates otherwise) should

- Work with the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills in a lesson and unit of study.
- Be expected to think, and be supported as thinkers, as they engage with curriculum.
- Work with respectful tasks (i.e., tasks that are equally interesting and engaging, and those that promote understanding of, and the ability to apply, essential content).

Assessment

A data-gathering and analysis process that determines the degree to which students have achieved essential outcomes and informs decisions about and planning for instruction.

There are three kinds of assessment: (1) diagnostic assessment (preassessment), designed to determine a student's status relative to essential learning outcomes as a unit of study begins; (2) formative (ongoing) assessment, designed to follow a student's progress as he or she attains essential outcomes as a unit of study progresses; and (3) summative assessment, designed to measure student outcomes as a unit of study ends or at other key points in a unit or year of study.

High-quality assessments should guide students in understanding essential learning outcomes, their status relative to those outcomes, and ways in which they can work effectively to maximize their growth toward and beyond those outcomes (Earl, 2003). The model of differentiation on which this book is based emphasizes the use of

- Diagnostic assessments (preassessments) to determine individual students' entry points into a unit of study in terms of their readiness, interest, and learning profiles. This process is essential to planning for student variance.
- Formative assessments to measure students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles. This process is essential to planning for and supporting student variance.
- Summative assessments to offer varied modes of expression and scaffolding (based on students' needs in terms of language, time allocation, writing, etc.).

This process helps students express what they know, understand, and can do relative to essential outcomes.

Instruction

The process of teaching, educating, and engaging students with content.

Instruction is what many people think of when they think about teaching. It is the mechanism used to “deliver” the curriculum—or, more accurately, it connects content and learners. It positions the teacher as a metaphorical “bridge,” helping students connect the knowledge and skills they already know (or are currently learning) to the essential outcomes they need in order to continue developing as learners and human beings. It helps develop an appropriate “game plan” to develop students’ knowledge, self-awareness, and independence.

The model of differentiation on which this book is based advocates that instruction will

- Align with essential knowledge, understanding, and skills.
- Be designed with student differences in mind, including differences in learning, culture, language, and gender.
- Be flexible in terms of time, materials, support systems, student groupings, instructional modes, and teaching and learning strategies.
- Offer various routes to accomplishing essential learning outcomes.
- Help students develop self-efficacy and independence as learners.
- Help students develop proficiency in collaborative learning.
- Provide classroom routines that balance student needs for guidance and freedom.

Interdependence of Classroom Elements

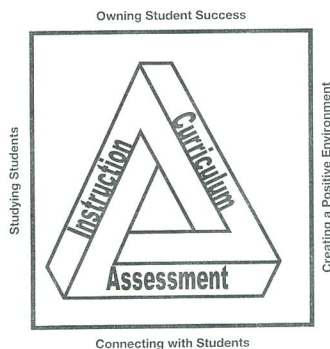
It’s likely that many of us began our teaching careers without a clear vocabulary to think about the key classroom elements described in this chapter. It’s also likely that we weren’t aware how each action we take ripples into all corners of the classroom. Over time, and as we became thoughtful and mindful professionals, we gradually developed a general awareness that our mood and energy levels set in motion “weather fronts” that permeate through the day and affect our students. Our weariness settles on students like fog; our joy becomes their excitement. A test that we have made to seem ominous can bring with it a storm cloud that

threatens an otherwise hospitable atmosphere. Our capacity to peacefully disarm a crisis with one student makes the overall learning environment seem more secure for all students in it.

As we continue to develop as professionals, we become more cognizant of how the classroom elements interact. For example, we recognize that if a student feels like an outsider in the classroom, he or she is unlikely to commit to class discussions, group work, or even individual tasks, and this unfavorable learning environment negatively impacts curriculum and instruction for that student. Likewise, if assigned work is beyond the abilities of certain students, they will feel unsafe in the classroom and regard the learning environment as negative.

With time and experience, we are able to anticipate such situations and be proactive with specific and precise strategies to avoid them. For example, if we provide diagrams and images to ensure that students understand a difficult process before they read the relevant material in their texts, even students who typically resist such independent reading will likely feel that they have a better understanding of what they read. Careful instruction, then, improves the likelihood of a positive experience with curriculum. Figure 1.2 represents the Möbius-like interdependence among curriculum, assessment, and instruction—surrounded by aspects of the learning environment.

Figure 1.2
Interdependence of Key Classroom Elements



From Chapter 4: Learning Environment

• A high school French teacher put a cupcake on a student's desk on his birthday. She stood by the student's desk as class began, wished the student a happy birthday, and acknowledged two or three things about the student that she particularly valued. The students applauded and class went on. The importance of this small gesture might be easy to overlook. However, it was evidenced by a quiet student in the class who had an opportunity to travel abroad with her parents later that year. This student was very excited about the trip because she would have a chance to speak French and bring some things back for the class. Shortly before the trip, though, she told her mother she couldn't go and asked her to get a refund for her ticket. The mother, puzzled and not very pleased, asked her daughter why she suddenly felt she couldn't go on the trip. Her daughter replied, "I didn't realize the trip was during the week of my birthday. I'd miss my cupcake in French. I have to be there for that!" It wasn't the cupcake that the student would miss, of course, it was the teacher's public acknowledgement of her value and what it communicated to the class that made the day more important than the trip. The cupcake ritual modeled an ethic of respect and appreciation that pervaded everything in the classroom. It was one of many ways the teacher led the students to conclude, "This is who we are, and this is how we treat one another in here."

Teachers develop their own strategies to identify and clarify the specific goals to which they aspire as a class. In doing so, they not only clarify what matters most in the classroom, but they help students come together around those significant ideas. They do not emphasize community in lieu of content, but rather as a means of opening students to the learning process. Figure 4.3 and the Teacher's Toolkit contain more examples of methods teachers can use to build a more positive classroom community.

Using student groups and classroom community

In differentiated classrooms, the use of student groups is integral to building a productive, positive community, but it's not the only requirement. In fact, effectively differentiated classrooms will inevitably require students to work independently or in whole-class sessions. Theoretically, at least, it might be possible to differentiate without ever having students work in small groups. Except for concerns about classroom control, however, it's difficult to understand why a teacher would want to do that.

When student groups function effectively, they are highly motivating to students. They provide an opportunity for students to share ideas, get input, encounter alternative ways of approaching problems or tasks, and get support. For many students, this is a precursor to successful learning. Groups also make the classroom more efficient for teachers who can, for example, more effectively focus on five or six groups than on 30 individuals. In Chapter 6, we'll look at procedures for helping students work effectively in groups. Here, though, we'll spotlight some principles of effective grouping that support the beliefs and practices of differentiation.

Use flexible grouping. A nonnegotiable aspect of effective differentiation is that teachers plan a consistent flow of varied student groupings within a unit of study based on the nature of the work and the individual needs of students. This allows students to see themselves and one another in a variety of learning contexts, and it provides the teacher with regular opportunities to observe each student in multiple contexts. For example, Benjamin may be scheduled to work four days this week with peers who have similar readiness levels and skill needs. However, the teacher's plan for literacy groups during the week should also, for instance, include opportunities for Benjamin to share some reading with students who have similar interests regardless of their readiness needs, to work with another group of students who choose to express what they learn in a particular format, to work independently at a center, and to work with a student of his choice to discuss class material. Students perform and learn differently in different circumstances; they deserve the opportunity to work with varied peer groupings on a regular and consistent basis so they can see themselves, and are seen by others, as multidimensional learners.

Teach up. Design group tasks to ensure that each student works with a rich curriculum and has to think about and apply essential ideas and skills. Occasionally, a student or group will need time to practice a discrete skill, but there should not be student groups that consistently practice skills out of context while other group tasks cast students as thinkers, problem solvers, and creators. Begin by planning tasks that challenge advanced learners, and then scaffold as needed for learners who are less advanced. Teaching in this way is an indicator of a growth mind-set teacher, and it will be an advantage to virtually all learners.

Use multiple ability tasks. Such tasks have more than one right answer or way to solve a problem, are intrinsically interesting and rewarding to a variety of students, allow different students to make different contributions to the successful completion of a task, and require a variety of skills and strengths for successful completion (Cohen, 1994). Multiple ability tasks often draw on a variety of media because of their high relevance to students, the access they provide to important content,

and the opportunities they allow for students to express learning. These tasks also emphasize the critical importance of reading and writing to student success.

Assign individual roles within groups. Individual roles ensure that each student has a genuinely important academic or intellectual contribution to make to the task. For example, if one student in a group is designated as the reader and another is the timekeeper, it's evident to students that the reader has a more "valuable" role than the timekeeper. On the other hand, if one student is expected to diagram the steps necessary to solve a math problem and another is expected to write prose directions for solving it, each student contributes equally to the task of "demonstrating what a student who has been absent this week would have to know, understand, and be able to do in order to feel competent with the kind of math problem we've been focusing on this week." Groups in which only some members have competencies that are critical to success create a sort of caste system of winners and losers rather than contribute to a developing sense of community in the classroom.

Make content accessible to everyone. In mixed-readiness groups, ensure that written content is accessible to everyone in the group. English language learners (ELLs), for example, should have a feasible method for bridging the two languages. Recall that students cannot grow academically when work is too difficult or too easy for them, and it is inappropriate and ineffective to base a task on material a student cannot read. To deal with varied reading levels in a mixed-readiness group, one student can be designated as the group's reader, text or directions can be recorded, or students can read materials at different levels of complexity and then work together on a common and related task.

Assign competence. Observe students carefully, noting the particular strengths, skills, and insights they bring to group work. When you see a worthy and honest contribution, remark on what you saw. For example, say, "I think the question Sherisa just asked was a significant one. It caused you to rethink the line of logic you were using as a group. The ability to ask a challenging question at the right time is a very useful skill." It's important for all students to receive this sort of affirmation, but it's particularly important for students who may be seen as having lower status among their peers to hear—and for their peers to hear—such comments from a teacher when they are genuinely warranted.

Effective use of instructional group work benefits individual students in terms of their academic development. It also contributes to a sense of classroom community as students consistently have opportunities to work with a broad range of classmates on a variety of tasks designed to ensure that everyone is a meaningful contributor to the shared assignment.