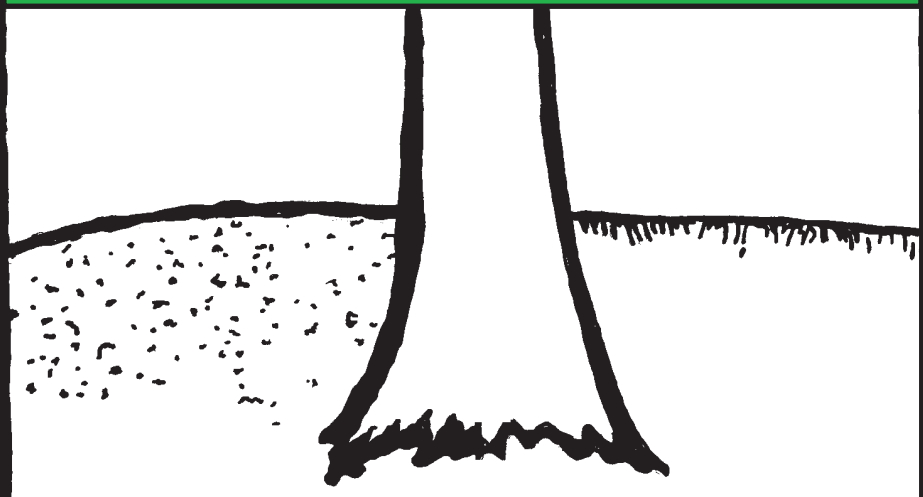
Differentiating Instruction



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Why Bother?

By Carol Ann Tomlinson

I know a lot about differentiation. I have practiced it for more than 30 years at the primary, middle school, high school, and university levels. I know the vocabulary of it and the research behind it. I have studied teachers who differentiate instruction and teachers who do not. Yet the most compelling answer I have for why differentiation matters in the middle grades is my own experience as a young adolescent. It is that experience that makes me "feel" why differentiation matters vs. "knowing" why it should be worth the trouble.

I was a prototype young adolescent—growing too fast, resentful of a too-tall body, awkward, and certain that everyone was looking at me all the time (except when I was sure they wouldn't notice if I fell off the face of the earth). To say I had a fragile sense of self is way too generous.

In that nerve-exposed time of life, I encountered two teachers whose impact on me extended beyond the year they taught me—even until today. It would be correct to say that one of them taught math, the other taught me English. There is a subtle but pivotally important difference in the way those clauses are written.

Ironically—or perhaps not—I cannot recall the math teacher's name, although I have a clear image of her standing at the blackboard, raging through the math text. She was a serious math teacher. She covered math with a single-mindedness that was evident even to seventh graders. She explained the math in one way and one way only. She taught each topic one time

and one time only. She used one form of assessment and one form only. She knew math, but she didn't know about me at all.

That I understood virtually nothing she was talking about was either off her radar or beyond the parameters of her interest. She kept going. I got more profoundly lost—more profoundly desperate. My sense of hopelessness was compounded by the fact that a good number of my friends seemed to be hanging on to various degrees while I sank by the day.

One way of looking at the math episode is simply to say I didn't do well that year. In truth, my grade was the least of my problems. My uncertainty about myself grew in direct proportion to the math fog that collected around me day by day. Not only did I become a seventh grader who "couldn't do math" (despite six prior years of success in math), but I remain to this day a person who regards all things mathematical with a feeling in my stomach that takes me directly back to the worst aspects of early adolescence.

I do remember my English teacher's name. He was Mr. Arnold. He was a fairly new teacher and, as teachers go, wasn't very good yet. He was not strong in either the charisma or the classroom management categories. But he worked hard to know us as individual students and to make the class work for us as individual students.

He met during class with small groups of students who needed help with an assignment. He connected our various interests and personality traits to literature we read. He picked out books for individuals' book reports, dignifying us with that bit of personal attention. He gave careful thought to student groupings and told us what he thought would make the class work for us.

Mr. Arnold somehow learned that I had a spiral notebook in which I copied lines from books that seemed lovely or important or funny to me. I didn't understand that I was developing a love affair with language, but he understood. Many times during that year, he gave me personal projects that involved using or adding to the notebook. He saw that I needed to learn at a different pace and even in different directions than did some of my peers in his class—and he saw to it that my needs were a part of his plans, as were the needs of my various classmates. I found young adolescent hope in literature and writing in the same way that math came to confound my young adolescent despair.

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I'd like to say that the dehumanizing experience was offset by a humanizing one. But the scales don't balance so easily. The sense of stupidity I developed in math could not be cancelled out so easily. I concluded that Mr. Arnold was a little stupid, too. He seemed to think I could do something worthwhile—so clearly he didn't know the real me. It took years to undo what that math class did and some of it has not yet gone away.

I don't think anyone used the word "differentiation" in those days, but they could have. At the time in my life when I was seeking identity like a drowning man seeks air, a one-size-fits-all approach to math proved to me daily that I was a loser. A much more student-focused and personalized English class planted the seed for a possible future, even though I could not see it at the time.

Reason To Bother

Despite the damage, I was lucky. I had some history of school success. I had parents who valued education. I had a few good friends.

What if I had had a learning disability or had been learning to speak English or had never learned to read confidently or had had only one parent who lacked the financial means to care for me or had had to grapple with racial identity—or a hundred other possibilities that come to middle school on the shoulders of a large number of students every day?

Here is the real reason it's worth the bother to differentiate instruction in the middle grades. Our success as teachers in helping students see themselves as competent in the subjects we teach will affect the rest of their lives.

Middle school students are perhaps the most developmentally varied group of learners in our education systems. Not only do they represent all the forms of diversity that exist in general, but they represent a huge range of physical, social, emotional, and mental immaturities and maturities. The students are in search of themselves, and they are often, if not always, fragile and uncertain in at least some dimensions.

Clearly, young adolescents need to develop what we call self-esteem and thus they need adults who find them blatantly worthwhile. In truth, however, they cannot succeed unless they also repeatedly encounter self-efficacy. A sense of self-worth in the absence of a sense of competence cannot endure.

And so, we have to teach whatever we teach so that kids who struggle with it emerge with its important understandings and skills in their grasp. We also have to teach whatever we teach so that students who grasp it with uncanny speed can experience and surmount personal challenge. Self-efficacy is born only when any student encounters something that student believes to be out of reach, only to find that he or she had what it took to overcome what seemed impossible. In that way, motivation to learn flourishes, persistence is a price worth paying, and an uncertain kid becomes a real student.

We have to teach whatever we teach so that each student feels known, valued, and supported. The alternative is not only

lower achievement in whatever we teach, but alienation of students from the learning of whatever we teach.

How Do We Differentiate?

It's beyond daunting to think about "doing something different" for each of 150 students, but that's not what differentiation is. Differentiation simply suggests that teachers have clear learning goals that are rich in meaning and provide various avenues and support systems to maximize that chance of each student succeeding with those rich and important goals. Here are a very few ways that might look.

Pre-assess students at the outset of the year to begin understanding their interests, preferred ways of learning, and fundamental skills. Use teacher-made surveys on interest, attitude about the subject, and learning preferences. Give quick reading comprehension checks using text material. Do quick spelling or writing checks. Then build on your early knowledge throughout the rest of the year, gathering bits of information about students as a mosaic of understanding develops for you.

Pre-assess at the outset of each unit to determine what students know, understand, and can do related to the topic before the unit begins. Use what you learn to inform your sense of who has or lacks important background knowledge, understanding, and skills as well as the degree of knowledge, understanding, and skill individuals have about the content you will explore with them in the unit.

Meet with small groups in class. Using small, teacher-led groups as a regular part of teaching routines is very powerful. In those groups, you can hear from students who get lost in the larger group, re-teach important content in alternate ways for students who continue to struggle, or extend learning for students who learn quickly or who "know the content" prescribed for the unit. You can make personal contact with students and get to know them much better.

Use multiple presentation/teaching modes. When you teach, move out of your own comfort zone. If you like talking, push yourself to use diagrams or pictures as well. If you like giving notes, make yourself add demonstrations. If you enjoy being "on center stage," add times for students to summarize your key points, ask questions, act out ideas, and so on. If you enjoy collaborative learning, build in opportunities for healthy competition (and vice versa). Plan with the intent of inviting more students to be comfortable with the way you teach!

Scaffold reading success. There are simple routines that make a powerful difference for the many middle school students who struggle with reading.

- Front load vocabulary. As the unit begins, teach the half dozen or so words that are essential for making meaning of the content. Post them on the wall. Refer to them as the unit progresses. Go back to them as they recur in later units.
- Use Think-Alouds in which you model how to make meaning of text by using context clues, captions, tables, personal connections, educated guesses, and so on.
- Use highlighted texts in which you've marked the most essential passages with a bright marker so that students who cannot manage a whole chapter can read what matters most.
- Use bookmarked Internet sites on the same topic but at different readability and complexity levels—and in different languages.
- Make time to read aloud with students in similar-need small groups. When part of the class has begun working on an assignment, take a few minutes to read aloud to five or six students who need to hear strong reading, need an opportunity to read in a safe setting, and need help with sounding out words or making sense of text.
- Use reading buddies. Have students work in pairs, that vary over time, to read and interpret text material so that students are not "left alone" to figure out how to make meaning of what they read.

Use differentiated homework. When everyone in the class has exactly the same homework assignment, some students will likely only be doing busy work because they have already mastered what they've been asked to practice, while some other students simply have no idea how to do the required work. Differentiated homework can provide a great opportunity for students to "work backwards" to master missing skills, to extend content to challenge advanced learners, and to link applications of content to student interests.

Encourage learning and expressing learning in varied ways. While it's generally important for students to pursue the same essential understandings in a content area, some will learn or demonstrate learning better if they can make oral presentations of what they have learned. Others will fare better if they can use visual modes of presentation. Some will work better alone, some when they work with peers. If the goal is learning, then it makes sense to help students learn and express learning in ways that work for them.

There's no single formula for differentiation. It begins when a teacher takes an honest look at the diversity of learners in the classroom, accepts responsibility for the success of each of them, and says, "If they're all going to learn, I'll have to find more than one route to success!" Look at your students! Try something new! ■

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