

**Using playlists in online and blended
contexts**

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USING PLAYLISTS IN ONLINE AND BLENDED
CONTEXTS

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contexts**

Despite the content, context in which they teach (location, blended, online,
face-to-face)

or level of student, educators usually want their students to succeed. Oftentimes, a

plethora of

challenges make it difficult for this to occur, so education and teaching strategies have evolved to

meet the needs of learners. “Differentiated instruction simply meant to adjust the learning

environment based on the student abilities and needs,” (Lunsford & Treadwell, 2015, p.13) and

has typically been broken into the categories of content, context, product, profile, readiness, and

process (TEAL, 2010). In terms of context, online, hybrid and blended learning has become

increasingly popular (Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007); even face-to-face learning has incorporated more

technology so that students can use it to personalize learning (Keengwe & Agamba, 2015).

Teaching strategies under the umbrella of differentiated instruction allow educators to provide

flexible options for students in terms of content, product, and process. One example of such a

strategy is called playlists. Originally playlists were created for use in face-to-face contexts or

blended/hybrid contexts (Gonzalez, 2016), but this paper will examine how this strategy can be

implemented online contexts as well.

Playlists in face-to-face and blended/hybrid

contexts

Students are given task sheets with the same learning goals, standards, and a visualization

of the process as to how they will demonstrate their knowledge of those goals/standards.

Throughout this process, they are given check points during which they will conference with the

teacher, and the time frame for all students remains consistent. When using playlists, the content,

process, or product can be differentiated, and students are empowered to take ownership of these

decisions and their learning provided it matches the learning goal/standard (Lunsford &

Treadwell, 2015; Usher, 2019). Even flexible groupings can be incorporated when using

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playlists. All decisions are created with learners' individual needs in mind, and the teacher takes

on the role of facilitator, offering several mini lessons as options and conferencing as often as

possible (Gonzalez, 2016). Everything about utilizing playlists as a differentiation strategy is

flexible, even the context. **Playlists: How to modify for online**

contexts

Maximize technology

Understanding that students have chosen online learning for its various assets is a good

place to start when differentiating. Online learning offers flexibility, access to

programs/sites/activities, and opportunities that other contexts do not offer (Cuthrell & Lyon,

2007). Therefore, teachers should provide or facilitate more technology-based, innovative and

authentic assessments when implementing playlists in the classroom, particularly in online

contexts (Frey et al., 2012; Lunsford & Treadwell, 2015). Additionally, technology can assist

with efficiency, tracking, and other management/administrative tasks (Keengwe & Agamba,

2015) for both the teacher and student so that both parties can spend more time engaging in

learning and interacting. In fact, several programs have come out of the woodwork “that can be

used to create or deliver playlists...such as “Gooru, PowerMyLearning, Blendspace, Symbaloo,

Google Docs, Moodle, and Canvas,” plus several pre-made (and editable) playlists exist that use

these tools (Putnam,

2018).

Technology can also provide natural scaffolds and supports for learners at various levels

of readiness; it also provides infinite options for accessing content and opportunities to

demonstrate mastery of content (Kipp, 2013; TEAL, 2010). Another aspect of the playlist

strategy involves teacher-led mini-lessons that students can choose to “attend” in a corner of the

room during work time while others continue to work (Herold, 2017). In the online context, this

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becomes a trickier feat. Teachers would need to post mini-lessons asynchronously and/or offer

set times to virtually demonstrate/teach mini-lessons synchronously, record, and then post for

others to watch at later times. (Gonzalez, 2016).

Interaction

s

Student-to-student. Purely online contexts can feel isolating and lonely, therefore

lowering motivation for many learners, plus grouping in online contexts can

feel more

inconvenient and uncomfortable for some, which is why facilitating interactions amongst

students is important, as it can negate these negative effects (Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007). This

remains an important aspect of differentiation (and playlists). “The real bonus of differentiation

in an online environment is that the issue of classroom management fades in the background”

(Kipp, 2013, p.106). Even in the online environment, teachers can create flexible groupings for

peer review, collaboration, to present work, or for brain breaks/ice breaker activities; it is useful

to create these opportunities for interaction (Keengwe & Agamba, 2015). These can be done by

interest, according to topic, using random strategies (like favorite color), or student choice. No

matter how students are grouped or paired, these groups must remain flexible and rotate

frequently (Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007; Kipp, 2013). These groups’ purposes should also vary

(TEAL, 2010).

Student-to-teacher. Building relationships and understanding students - and their needs

- remains a crucial aspect of differentiated instruction, as are the frequent

check-ins of this

playlist strategy. Therefore, increasing the frequency of these check-ins or at least the educator's

availability when using playlists in online learning environments could help maintain open lines

of communication between student and instructor, thus reducing these challenges (Lunsford &

Treadwell, 2015). This can be done via virtual office hours using a variety of technology tools

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(Zoom, Skype), phone calls, emails, text, Voxer, or other technology-mediated methods

(Cuthrell & Lyon, 2007; Kipp, 2013). Using technology for interaction between teacher and

student - either synchronously or asynchronously - is important (Keengwe & Agamba, 2015).

Student Voice and Choice

In order for differentiation in general - and playlists in particular - to be successful in

online contexts, "discourse between students and teachers [must be] increased" (Keengwe &

Agamba, 2015, pg. 17). Teachers need to offer more opportunities for student

input and

feedback than in traditional contexts because of the teacher's inability to read body language,

facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues when online (Lunsford & Treadwell, 2015). When

students have a voice, they also will feel more confident and empowered to make educated

choices about their learning paths/goals (Herold, 2017). In that vein, teachers should ensure

those choices match the learning goals and are available according to content, product, process,

ability/readiness, and interest (Keengwe & Agamba, 2015). Educators, even online, should

make themselves available to assist students with these decisions; sometimes they might include

short online descriptions/videos with each choice, sometimes they might set up conferences with

each student, and sometimes they might leave the option up to the individual student unless a

problem arises (Kipp, 2013).

Conclusi on

While playlists as a differentiation strategy may initially seem simpler to implement in

face-to-face or hybrid/blended classes, implementing best practices of online teaching

and using

knowledge from research can make this a seamless transition. Teachers must maintain

relationships with their students, ensure students' individual needs are at the heart of all

decisions, open lines of communication (foster this communication, and ensure it can occur in a

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variety of methods), and utilize technology but know it does not replace effective teaching

(Herold, 2017). At the heart of it lies the basis of effective teaching: the constant balance of

challenging students and providing support so that they can be successful (Kipp, 2013).

CONTEXTS

Appendix A

Below is a list of references used with a one-paragraph overview of each.

- Cuthrell, K. & Lyon, A. (December 2007). Instructional strategies: What do online students prefer. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* (3), 4, 357-362.

This case study looked at online students and their preferences regarding technology, the online format, and group work. All these directly relate to this paper and differentiation, particularly the differences between face-to-face learning and online learning.

- Frey, B., Schmitt, V., & Allen, J. (January 2012). Defining authentic classroom assessment. *Practical Assessment, Research & evaluation: A Peer-Reviewed Electronic Journal* (17), 2, 1-18.

This article first clearly defines what it means for an assessment to be authentic, but also goes into the interplay of process, product, context, and content. Since differentiation relies on student voice and choice, so much of it is intertwined with authentic assessment, interests, goals, and the real world, so this article related in a parallel manner.

- Gonzalez, J. (2016, September 4). Using playlists to differentiate instruction [Episode 50]. *Cult of Pedagogy*. Podcast retrieved from <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/student-playlists- differentiation/>

This interview podcast outlined a unique approach to differentiated instruction in the ELA classroom. The approach originated in a math classroom. While the context was brick-and- mortar, easy connections could be made for blended and online instruction because the basis is technology-based.

- • Herold, B. (March 28, 2017). Curriculum 'Playlists': A take on personalized learning.

Education Week. Retrieved from

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/03/29/curriculum-playlists-a-take-on-personalized-learning.html>.

This online article discussed a case study from a school who initially used teacher-created playlists that took 11 hours each night to create. They switched to a company who does it for them now; they use the Teach to One model and are finding success, albeit some bumps in the road. This article discusses the overarching theory of differentiation and the strategy of playlists, why it works for students, and how to implement it. Although it mostly focuses on face-to-face and blended/hybrid contexts, a lot of what they say can be easily adapted for online contexts, as it is mostly theoretical. One major finding, however, discussed the role of a teacher, despite the context or program used.

- Keengwe, J. & Agamba, J.J. (2015). *Models for Improving and Optimizing Online and Blended Learning in Higher Education*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

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This text covers a wide range of topics (differentiation, building community, motivation, active learning, engagement, different contexts), and different strategies for student success. Since I used several sections of the book, I cited the entire text.

- Kipp, K. (2013). Differentiating assignments. *Teaching on the Educational Frontier: Instructional Strategies for the Online and Blended Classrooms* (pp.105-115). Plano, TX: Jossey-Bass.

This chapter provided practical applications of differentiation to blended classrooms, particularly in the K-12 setting, which is not common, as most focus on higher education blended learning. Furthermore, this reiterated some common themes and trends found in several other sources: using technology as supports for students as well as a communication tool, ensuring flexible groupings, and making sure students have voice and choice.

- Lunsford, H. & Treadwell, G. (2015). Implementing differentiated instruction for

online college writing courses: Addressing challenges and developing best practices. *Distance Learning* (13), 3, 11-22.

This article discussed how two online, higher education writing courses implemented differentiated instruction. The authors wrote about the previous literature, strategies, suggestions, results of the study, and suggestions for future research. One unique aspect of this source is that it explicitly outlined the challenges that online teachers face, particularly at the higher educational level, when attempting to implement differentiation.

- Putnam, M. (June 8, 2018). Using playlists to personalize learning. *International Literacy Association*. Retrieved from <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2018/06/08/using-playlists-to-personalize-learning>.

This article discussed the basic premise of playlists, but also the specifics of how to design one, several programs to use, and the pros and cons of each program. Furthermore, it provided further information (articles, sources) that I used in this paper. This article also provided specific steps and suggestions for teachers who are just beginning to implement differentiation and using the playlist strategy.

- TEAL center fact sheet no. 5: Differentiated instruction. (2010). *TEAL: Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy*.

This fact sheet overviews differentiated instruction for adult learners. This source took a more in-depth approach to the aspects of what to differentiate than most others that I reviewed, so it was helpful as I began to take a more application-based look at differentiated instruction, particularly online instruction, as that is predominantly attended by adult learners.

- Usher, K. (2019, April 10). Differentiating by offering choices. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/differentiating-offering-choices>.

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This online article looked at specific strategies to offer choices in differentiated

learning contexts. For example, a section of the article focused on portfolios. This led to a discussion on formative assessment. It also discussed the additional impacts of differentiation, such as responsibility, collaboration, and motivation.

CONTEXTS

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