

Helping Teachers to Differentiate Their Online and Blended Classrooms

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As more school districts are using student growth data to gauge the effectiveness of its teachers, educators need to be more in-tune with the needs of their individual students in an effort to maximize growth over the course of a school year. This concept of using student abilities, interests, and preferences as a starting point for personalized, tiered, or scaffolded instruction is at the heart of differentiation within the classroom. Especially in classrooms that are primarily online or blended, the ability of teachers to differentiate instruction is immensely important because the students who come to online classes can be more diverse than those sitting in a traditional classroom due to the sheer numbers of students enrolled (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). So, how do

teachers learn about differentiation and get started using it in their classrooms? For many, it is a term thrown around by eager administrators looking to increase student growth scores in a building or district. For others, it is a concept they heard of and tried implementing but little is known about it and whether or not what is being done meets the definition of differentiated instruction. Therefore, this paper serves to help teachers to differentiate in their online and blended classrooms since much of the research does not give a helpful step-by-step guide in getting started nor implications for professional development.

Step 1: Assessment

To begin any foray into differentiated instruction, the online instructor must give students a diagnostic pre-assessment in order to judge their starting capabilities related to the content and will continue to re-assess as an ongoing process throughout a unit of study (Masten, 2017). This beginning information can be gathered from a short reflective piece, a quiz, or another type of document so that teachers know the starting point of all the students. In an online environment, the format of this pre-assessment can be varied and technology can be utilized to quickly and easily aggregate data. For example, using Google Forms or Survey Monkey for questions helps an instructor see individual needs and the big picture of the group overall.

The information provided by these assessments helps educators to group students effectively, provide proper choices for work along the way, and to track students' progress and growth. As Masten (2017) put it, "the teacher assumes that different learners have differing needs and proactively plans lessons that provide a variety of

ways to “get at” and express learning” (para. 2). While summative assessments - tests, projects, essays, etc. - tell the instructor about the total learning which has occurred by the end of a unit of study, the formative assessments along the way help the teacher to better differentiate in order for students to learn.

Step 2: Scaffolding

One common myth about differentiated instruction is that it is “dumbing down” curriculum or providing more work to those who excel (Masten, 2017). Instead, Tomlinson (2015) suggested that the teachers who differentiate the best plan first for their most advanced learners and then find ways to level the instruction in order to help those who struggle to reach the same rich experience. Furthermore, tracking students does not help them achieve more, and often, a tracked class will not receive the same level of deep content (Tomlinson, 2015). Instead, instructors in online and blended environments need to embrace the diversity of their learners. After first gathering pre-assessment data, an educator will begin to design a lesson which scaffolds properly so that students of all abilities and interests can interact with and attain the learning objectives of the online or blended course. Wormeli (2007) summarized, “With differentiation we strive to change the nature of our assignments, not the quantity” (p. 65). Especially in an online environment, it is not enough to push traditional lessons out to students through digital means; the entire process of student learning needs to be considered within a differentiated lens.

Differentiation of Content

Content is one aspect of instruction which is likely to be nonnegotiable in regards to offering change and options to students. Often, content is what is legally mandated to be taught in a particular course (Wormeli, 2007). For some students, teachers are able to identify the content which is more critical in order to create a more specific focus while sometimes the only change that needs to occur is the order in which content is addressed. Additionally, some content can be grouped or chunked together so that it makes more sense to students. In online and blended environments, educators can sequence modules and units in an appropriate way in order to increase student interest and motivation, and create a proper pathway to learning the necessary curriculum, or educators could allow students to choose the order of the modules allowing for more individual autonomy.

Differentiation of Process

A second way that instruction can be differentiated is through the instructional process. Wormeli (2007) defined the *process* as “the many ways in which our students learn the curriculum” (p. 71). This may mean that students are learning the same content, as is required, but can receive that content through a variety of ways. In an online classroom, this may mean that teachers provide students with texts to read, podcasts to listen to, videos to watch, or pose discussion questions; all of these options allow students to choose the way of learning they prefer and will ultimately allow them all to understand the same content no matter how they arrived there.

Additionally, Masten (2017) posited that the process of learning should be done individually, in pairs or small groups, and/or in a full class setting rather than as one of

these ideas exclusively. Online and blended learning allows for a unique opportunity to regularly and flexibly group students as needed during the instructional process so they can get the most out of the instructor's chosen strategy for that lesson. Some content is approachable independently while other content requires direct input from a teacher; however, there is a broad spectrum of learning which can occur during the collaboration and interaction with peers in the in-between.

Differentiation of Product

The most common differentiation option for educators is through options in the product students create to demonstrate their understanding (Masten, 2017; Wormeli, 2007). The project possibilities are numerous in online and blended learning environments as instructors can request the basic concepts to include but can provide choices for students. Online learners might choose to create a song or video, write an essay, design a concept map, create a physical or digital poster or presentation, or any one of many other formats available. It is important to remember that all of these suggestions are pieces to the puzzle of differentiation; it is not expected that every online instructor creates every lesson in a differentiated way for content, process, and product. The best way to help teachers differentiate is to allow them to pick and choose when it is appropriate to offer differentiated options and to start small, with just a few options or modifications so as to not overwhelm the instructor or the learners.

Step 3: Continuous Learning

Just as students are always learning, teachers are constantly seeking new strategies for the classroom to maximize student growth and achievement. While some

educators are able to research on their own and begin the differentiation process in their online or blended classrooms, it is most helpful for instructors to receive properly designed training and development within undergrad studies and beyond (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014). Ideally, these opportunities are presented to teachers using differentiation strategies they can see modeled and apply to their own classrooms. Dixon et al. (2014) and Suprayogi et al. (2017) also suggested that if districts plan to instruct teachers in this type of strategy, they should also make it an ongoing process so teachers can grow and learn which, in turn, makes them more comfortable using differentiated instruction in their own classrooms. In fact, Goddard and Kim (2018) stated that “some educators indicate that teachers are not likely to begin or continue using differentiated instruction without support” (p. 6). Therefore, it is necessary for districts to not only provide educators with professional development but to make it a continuous process of support and learning so that it can be most effective. Collaborative processes also contribute to the abilities of educators to design differentiated lessons (Goddard & Kim, 2018). Not only can instructors learn from other teachers who are modeling good differentiation practices, but teachers can learn a lot from their students by meeting with them regularly about their progress and ideas for their own learning (Wormeli, 2007). This idea is also supported by Masten (2017) who suggested having ongoing meetings with students to hone the work into something meaningful and useful based on their own input. In digital environments, meeting with students can look like email communication or video chats or phone calls. These meetings serve as their own type of professional development for instructors as they

can learn just as much from their students as they can from their colleagues or workshop session presenters.

Overall, teachers can begin their differentiation journey through research on their own or professional development. To start, always begin with pre-assessments in order to know where students start. Then, scaffold instruction by offering choices through content, process, and product. Finally, recognize that this process is never done and ongoing training and collaboration is one way to continually improve in order to see the most growth from students.

References

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