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DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

Differentiating instruction is one of the most applied methodologies in teaching nowadays. I attended a very inspiring lecture given by Prof. Patrick Jones from Boston University at a conference in Vienna. In his talk entitled: "Curriculum for the new economy: making school meaningful for students' lives" he said: "The post-industrial economy (globalization) needs workers who are creative, innovative, and expressive, are goal oriented, and who can think and work independently and in groups." He also emphasized that differentiating instruction is essential for developing those skills and perspectives. Globalization is no longer a term that applies for business and economy only, it has entered all areas of our lives, including education. "Globalization implies opening out beyond local and nationalistic perspectives to a broader outlook of an interconnected and inter-dependent world with free transfer of capital, goods, and services across national frontiers."¹) In these new conditions, "education should help students synthesize information from a variety of disciplines and geographies, so they understand how economics informs politics. Prof. Howard Gardner, the founder of the multiple intelligences theories, recommends that educators back off on a few educational practices to make room for this interrelated style of education. The tools of new media, for example, have made a fact-based emphasis redundant and educators should teach children how to find information, not have them memorize facts."²)

What is differentiating instruction?

It is a strategy of instruction when all students are taught the same curriculum topics, and same educational goals are set but individual differences are acknowledged. Each student will be given an opportunity to find his/hers strengths in learning. It is a process, not a single lesson, in which students' understanding is constantly accessed and constructive feedback is provided. "Differentiated instruction provides multiple approaches to content, process, and product. It is student-centered."³)

To make differentiation work-in fact, to make teaching and learning work-teachers must develop an alternative approach to instructional planning beyond "covering the text" or "creating activities that students will like."⁴)

Differentiating Instruction Strategies

Entry Points	Tired Assignments	Anchoring Activities
This term comes from Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligence. He names five "entry points," or pathways, to learning a given topic. These are: • narrational (entering the topic via a story); • logical/quantitative (entering the topic via numbers, deductive reasoning, or scientific inquiry); • foundational (entering the topic via its philosophy or key words); • aesthetic (entering the topic via the arts); • experiential (entering the topic by manipulating the objects and materials involved)	These are parallel tasks that are varied in levels of complexity, depth, abstractness. These tasks are following the same goals.	These are both classroom management tools and strategies to foster stretching students to work beyond the established curricular goals. As a management tool, learners are taught to complete anchoring activities when work is done and are often used to keep students learning while the teacher is working with another group.
Example: Show students a picture/diagram, photo, etc. visual tool. The following questions could be applicable: 1. What do you think it represents? 2. Now, without looking at the picture try to draw it. How many elements of the picture you have the same? 3. Does this picture remind you of something else? What? 4. If the person who drew it stands in front of you now, what question you will ask him/her?	Example: New Topic: Salts Use your textbook (internet, library, etc.) to answer the following questions: 1. What is the chemical definition of a salt? 2. By which chemical reactions the salts are produced? Find as many examples as you can and find a way to classify them. 3. For each of the methods found write at least 3 balanced chemical equations. 4. Plan an experiment to produce two grams of a salt of your choice.	Example: Soaps and detergents are examples of salts but have some different features both in structure and in usage. Find out what are these characteristics.

The above mentioned strategies could be implemented in any subject using all or some of the following steps in teaching a new topic:

1. Pre-assessment and grouping of students. If the teacher knows the students well, it might not be necessary to do a pre-assessment. The groups could be formed based on the teacher's judgment, or an individual approach might be applicable, as well.

2. Entry point activity of any sort is a good idea for a starter and introducing the topic content, objectives, and assessment.

3. Learning experiences - tasks of research, presentations, discussion, problem-solving, experimental work focusing on the topic covered. Clear goals and assignments are essential here.

4. Ongoing assessment - homework or class work feedback, not necessary to be formally graded

5. Anchor learning experiences – gifted students receive more challenging tasks. On the other hand, students who struggle are given extra help and guidance.

6. Summative test.

These ideas are student-centered but the teacher's role is crucial for recognizing and praising students' achievements, for making this experience valuable, engaging, and interesting. Differentiated instruction is dynamic - students and teachers are learners together and require ongoing collaboration.³⁾

NOTES

1. <http://www.businessdictionary.com/>
2. <http://www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/03.04/03-globaled.html>
3. <http://www.txstate.edu/edphd/Images/DiffInst.pdf>
4. http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/diffinstr/el199909_tomlinson.html

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