

Engl 471: Differentiated Instruction in the Writing Classroom

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What Is Differentiated Learning?

The development and assignment of distinct instruction or curricula for students who are perceived to have different learning abilities or styles.

Differentiated instruction is not a single strategy but rather a framework with which to implement a variety of instructional strategies to account for differences between students.





Styles of Differentiated Instruction

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- Differentiation by learning style
- Differentiation by ability



The Myth of Learning Styles

- Various theories of learning styles exist, the most common of which feature “left-brain/right-brain” or “VAK” (visual/auditory/kinesthetic) as the functional divisions between styles. As of 2004, at least 170 learning style models have been developed, and they are quite popular in educational theory. (Willingham, et al.)
 - These models suppose that “information gained through one sensory modality is... learned independently from information gained through another sensory modality” (Geake, 2007).
- Unfortunately, there is a serious lack of positive evidence for the usefulness or accuracy of these models (Willingham et al.) Furthermore, these models suggest single modalities for individual students, when “input modalities in the brain are interlinked” (Geake).


What this does and doesn't mean:

- The inaccuracy of the learning-styles model does not mean that only one modality should be emphasized in the classroom. In fact, abandoning this model will permit teachers to expose students to a variety of sensory modalities, as opposed to focusing only on their 'preferred learning style.'
- This policy has the added benefit of reducing the workload for the teacher, who is now free to incorporate a greater variety of teaching methods without having to tailor each lesson to individual student styles.



Differentiation by Ability

Differentiation by ability is based on student academic performance, as measured by national/state standards, IQ tests, ability-testing, or teacher/parent recommendation, among other methods of assessment. Student learning environments may be differentiated when students are above grade level, below grade level, or are facing developmental/learning disabilities.

- More hierarchical than 'learning style' differentiation: some students considered accelerated/advanced while others considered to be below the mark.
 - Numerous methods of differentiation exist - alongside numerous potential objections to differentiation *and* identification techniques.
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Methods of Differentiated Instruction

Self-Contained Schools

- “Magnet schools” for gifted students
 - All subjects (English, Math, etc.) taught at an advanced level
 - Social environment for students--learn with peers at their own level
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- Non-resident tuition is \$15,000; financial assistance available for demonstrated need
- Online program for remote students
- Personalized Learning Plans
- Dual enrollment with U of Nevada

Self-Contained Classrooms

- More accessible than self-contained schools
- Single subject differentiation possible--students can be in accelerated classrooms for writing and not math, etc.
- Social environment similar to self-contained schools: eliminates fear of failure/embarrassment of 'being too smart'
- School-wide benefits; increased engagement from students at lower levels

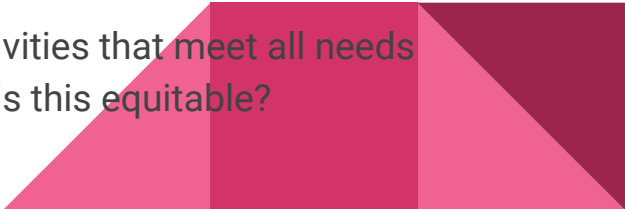
“Both higher and lower aptitude students would suffer [if]... in the name of de-tracking, schools eliminated enriched and accelerated classes for their brightest learners”

- Kulik & Kulik (1992)

Drawbacks of Self-Contained Models

- Loss of brightest students from other classrooms on teacher and other students may have questionable effects
- SCS's often in 'centralized' locations requiring bussing or long commutes
- Private schools may require extra tuition; public schools/programs often underfunded
- Correlation to "tracking" -- label as 'gifted' or 'non-gifted' may be permanent
- Educators must have sufficient (ongoing) preparation/support
- Certain demographics (low-income students, students of color, and English Language Learners) often underidentified
- Difficulties and costliness in identifying 'gifted students'
 - Teachers are not trained
 - Reliance on standardized testing to confirm

Differentiated Instruction Within One Classroom

- Students are allowed to learn at their own pace and in a variety of ways, diversifies the classroom
 - Students publically signaled out in front of class, can face social isolation
 - Significant burden of extra work for teachers
 - Having to come up with individual, group, and whole class activities that meet all needs
 - Entirely teacher dependent and sometimes does not happen--is this equitable?
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Controversial Tracking

Some experts believe that differential learning is the key to detracking students:

- Each student would be educated based on their individual strengths or areas of improvement.
- Therefore, students would not be placed in certain classrooms with one or two concrete learning styles adjusted to school's perception of how advanced those students are for their grade.

Other experts disagree and believe that tracking is inevitable, even with differential learning:

- They reason that the act of creating education based on an individual's strengths or weaknesses allows for unavoidable tracking. The very fact that students are assigned certain materials or teachers based on their skills or areas of improvement means that these children are being tracked.
- Because there needs to be some way to determine how well the students are doing academically compared to the state standardized requirements for each grade.
- There also is racism involved in any form of tracking based on unconscious biases or expectations.

Real-World Application

The Advanced Learning Debate
in Seattle Public Schools

Currently, Seattle Public Schools has a self-contained model of differentiation for advanced learners - the Highly Capable Cohort.

However, the current Superintendent seeks to disband this program on grounds of racial inequity.

Washington State mandates that all school districts provide services to accommodate advanced learners, but the question becomes: how?

Activity

Please split into groups of five or six

From all these different ideas presented, there are many cons and no concrete solutions.

Given your group of students, how would you include differentiated learning? (Can be in one class, creating different classes, or separate schools, ect.)

Logistically, how would this be implemented and help your group? What are the possible pros and cons?
