



SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

By Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D., and Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D.

Presenting more on the work of Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson— Differentiated Instruction: Focus on product differentiation

This column will continue the focus on the topic of Differentiated Instruction and the work of Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson. Support materials to help implement these approaches are located at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (CCSE) Web site (luc.edu/ccse).

As explained in the November issue, when thinking about differentiated instruction, it can be helpful to think about DI as four pillars: learning environment, content, process and product. Each one of these pillars will yield unique and specific strategies when implementing this approach. Without this framework, DI could appear random and therefore implemented in a sporadic and haphazard fashion. This column will focus on the pillar of product differentiation.

Product differentiation

The product refers to the tangible evidence that shows “how the student will demonstrate and extend what she has come to know, understand and be able to do (Tomlinson, 1999).” As with all differentiation, product differentiation also is based on the pre-assessment that has been conducted by the teacher. Different students can create different products based on their own readiness levels, interests and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2001). Product differentiation is predicated on the recognition that there are several valid ways for students to provide evidence of the intended learning. In order to promote complex learning, the student-generated products should be related to real problems, concerns and audiences and promote synthesis of concepts and ideas rather than

promote summarizing of information and facts.

Steps for explicitly differentiating product

There are several critical steps to follow when differentiating product.

1. Identify the important learning that students should demonstrate upon the conclusion of instruction.

As presented in earlier columns, it is vital that the important learning (IL) of a unit (identifying what students should know, understand and be able to do) be identified and remain the focus of instruction throughout the unit or topic. Without this clarity, teachers will not know what the targets are and attempts to differentiate products will lack specificity; therefore, these attempts may not be rigorous samples of evidence of learning. (Teachers must always keep in mind that the IL should remain the same for all students; it is the form in which students demonstrate achievement of the IL that is differentiated.) An example of a chart that illustrates this idea can be found at luc.edu/ccse.

2. Decide how students will demonstrate that important learning. Explicitly state the acceptable ways that the students will provide the evidence that the learning has occurred.

Recognizing that there

can be multiple avenues to show that learning has occurred, teachers can identify the acceptable products that students will use to provide evidence of their learning. These products can be varied according to format (respecting the students’ various learning styles—linguistic, auditory or tactile/kinesthetic) or complexity (depending on the student’s readiness level). A list of products can be found at luc.edu/ccse.

Not every product will be a valid measure of that important learning. Teachers must use their professional judgment to ensure that the product gives the student an ample opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Just because a product can be completed in an alternate form does not mean that it is a reliable measure of the IL! The recurring question for a teacher should be “If a student completes this product, will it show that she really learned the important concepts of the unit?”

3. Develop and publish the criteria for evaluating the evidence of learning. Once the acceptable products are identified, it is important to develop the criteria that the teacher will use to assess how the important learning has been demonstrated. Before the assignment, the teacher should name the critical concepts and ideas that

students must demonstrate in order to ensure that the important learning has occurred. The critical concepts should come directly from the *Knowing-Understanding-Doing* instructional planning activity that should occur at the beginning of development of the topic/unit. Once the critical concepts are identified, the teacher develops the descriptors to show the varying degree of mastery of the concepts. An example of a scoring rubric can found at the CCSE Web site.

Pitfalls to avoid

When differentiating product, there are pitfalls that should be avoided.

Avoid the “arts and craft” approach to product differentiation.

In an attempt to provide students options to demonstrate their learning, it can be easy to get caught up in the creativity and variety of projects and forget about the learning. For example, a popular product that can be found in most fifth grade social studies classes is the model villages that represent Native American groups. This can provide powerful evidence of learning, if the focus is placed on the learning. However, students may get so busy creating pueblos that they forget why they are doing so! The mere creation of a Native American village does not provide evidence of this learning. The student should be able to provide evidence that she understands the critical dimensions of that particular indigenous group of people (such as understanding of lifestyle, impact of geography on choice of living structure, etc.) By ensuring that the product is a valid measure of the learning that is meant to take place, academic rigor can be ensured.

Address the “assessment problem.”

Don't wait until the products are turned in before you decide how to assess it. If everyone is unclear of what the learning is and how the learning will be measured, the products most likely will miss the mark and not be valid measures of these critical concepts. Taking the fifth grade social studies example, the students should know, before the assignment is begun, that they must be able to demonstrate understanding of the critical concepts. This can be accomplished by “publishing” the assessment rubric at the beginning of the unit so that students will understand the target that they are trying to hit.

Don't differentiate-just-to-differentiate.

Differentiate with purpose. Make sure that these products provide ways for students to provide evidence of learning. It can be tempting to jump into differentiation by providing alternate products for students. However, providing students with a variety of options without real purpose can water down important learning. Instead, stay focused on the learning target and continually challenge yourself to ensure alignment between the product and the learning target.

Implementing together

Here are several implementation suggestions for schools:

- Read and discuss the *SOS* article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meeting.
- Share examples of how product differentiation is currently used by teachers – be very specific. Make suggestions for how to use the strategy more effectively. It is critical to work with colleagues. Many teachers report that there is great power in brainstorming options and discussing the validity of the option in provid-

ing evidence of learning.

- Develop scoring rubrics together. Using collegial discussion, identify the important concepts and ideas that must be demonstrated by the students. With this list of important concepts and ideas, collaboratively develop the rubric.
- In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls. Agree on and clearly identify one concrete thing you will all do to differentiate product. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observing each other at least once. Arrange with the principal and/or department chair to observe as well.
- Share observations and chart the impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.
- Share actions taken and observations of impact at the next faculty meeting. ❖



Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D.
Assistant Director,
Center for Catholic
School Effectiveness,
School of Education,
Loyola University
Chicago
mboyle3@luc.edu



Lorraine A. Ozar, Ph.D.
Director, Center for
Catholic School
Effectiveness,
School of Education,
Loyola University
Chicago
lozar@luc.edu

References:

- Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C., & Allan, S. (2000). *Leadership for differentiation schools and classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.