

SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

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Final review of the work of Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson— Differentiated Instruction: Focus on process differentiation

This column is the conclusion of the series on 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 web site (luc.edu/ccse).

When thinking about differentiated instruction, it can be helpful to think about DI as designed around 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 process differentiation.

Process differentiation

Process refers to ways in which the content is delivered to students. Differentiating the process means varying learning activities or strategies to provide appropriate methods for students to explore and then master the concepts. The process of how the material in a lesson is learned may be differentiated for students based on their learning styles, interest and readiness (as previously assessed through the pre-assessment process).

When looking at process differentiation, the emphasis has to be on active learning. The adage of moving teaching from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side” is helpful in visualizing this transition. Active teaching strategies place the teacher in the role of facilitator of student learning. With this shift, the focus is on person-centered instructional strategies instead of content-centered ones.

Strategies such as flexible grouping, increasing student choice in learning activities and cooperative-grouping practices can be helpful in achieving this aim.

Steps for differentiating through process

There are several critical steps to follow when differentiating process. Of course, all of this is based on engaging in the process of pre-assessment (as discussed in the September column of NCEA Notes on “Sustaining Outstanding Schools.” This column can be found at <http://luc.edu/ccse/nceanotes.shtml>)

First, know your own learning style. A teacher’s learning style will greatly influence the teaching style within the classroom. An auditory teacher will tend to use more auditory techniques when teaching. Similarly, a teacher with a strong visual preference for learning will tend to use more visual strategies in instruction. With a focus on one learning modality, there is a risk that students who do not share this same learning style preference may be excluded. With an understanding of one’s learning preference, teachers can be more mindful of balancing approaches, using a variety of teaching modalities.

Second, audit your teaching practices. Take time to reflect on the primary methods of instruction that you tend to use in your classroom. Determine how much of your instructional time is teacher-directed as opposed to student-centered. It can be helpful to journal about your teaching practices (this is best accomplished right after teaching a class). Analyze any patterns that might emerge. Another powerful

source of information is your class. Poll your students as to the teaching strategies that they see you use. (For example, a Catholic high school in Chicago polled students and teachers about instructional strategies used in the classroom. Teachers identified that they “lectured” only 18% of the time; students responded that teachers lectured 63% of class time. The difference in perspective can spark important conversation about the real-time effects of teaching strategies for students. Students’ perspectives can help teachers reflect on their practice in useful ways that lead to more differentiated process.) Additionally, ask for a colleague to complete a peer observation. Sit down with your colleague and review the feedback.

Third, determine areas of instructional techniques that could be expanded. Are you using more teacher-directed activities? In this case, explore ways to that you might use more peer-directed learning opportunities. Are you using more auditory input? In this case, explore ways to incorporate graphic organizers and other kinds of cognitive maps within your instructional repertoire. A useful framework for instructional strategies can be found with the high-yield strategies by Robert Marzano. Materials supporting this approach can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness web site (luc.edu/ccse).

Finally, chart the changes. Take time to reflect on the implementation of these new strategies. Again, journaling can be a useful tool to reflect on the new strategies. Invite colleagues to conduct peer observations and review the feedback to determine the impact on students’ learning.

Pitfalls to avoid

When differentiating by process, here are some pitfalls that should be avoided.

- **Not trusting the new strategy**
It can be hard to try new instructional strategies – especially if it means releasing some control by increasing student ownership of the instructional process. Moving from teacher-directed instruction to a facilitation process could lead to a sense of “losing control” of the classroom. This does not mean that the teacher is abdicating authority in the class. Rather it is about empowering students to be in charge of their learning.
- **Reverting to old preferences**
Often, it is easy to be excited about an instructional strategy. After time, that excitement can decrease, perhaps leading you to revert to old patterns of instructional behavior.
- **Lack of established classroom management routines**
For differentiated approaches to be effective, there must be a clearly established set of classroom routines. In order to increase student ownership of learning, students must be keenly aware of the behavioral expectations and the routines that will guide the functioning of the classroom. Without this clear expectation, students will not know what is expected of them and the classroom cannot operate smoothly.
- **Being anxious about the peer observation**
The only way that you will gain information about your instructional strategies is if you seek out the information. An optimal method to achieve this aim is peer observation. By using a structured process to engage in a collegial observation, teachers can gain

critical information about how they deliver instruction. Unfortunately, teachers are not always comfortable with others observing them with the goal of providing feedback. As a result, teachers avoid this useful process. A handbook to help manage the process of peer observation can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness web site.

Implementing together

Suggestions for schools:

Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings.

Share examples of how process differentiation is currently used by teachers – be very specific. Make suggestions for how to use the strategy more effectively.

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 process. 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 next faculty meeting. ❖



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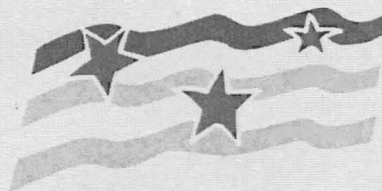
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Coming in September 2010 – 21st Century Learning Skills

This column concludes the focus on Differentiated Instruction. The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge the supportive comments that have been received from readers. Next year, this column will continue with a specific focus on developing 21st Century learning skills.

—The authors



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