



## SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

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### More on the work of Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson— Differentiated instruction: Focus on content differentiation

The SOS series 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 Web site ([luc.edu/ccse](http://luc.edu/ccse)).

When thinking about differentiated instruction (DI), it can be helpful to think about it 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 content differentiation.

#### Content differentiation

Content refers to what students need to learn and how they will gain access to that information. Content is most often differentiated by providing materials at varied ability or grade levels in one classroom. Reading materials that address course content below and above grade levels are common ways to differentiate content. Differentiation of content offers students the chance to start at different places in the curriculum and/or proceed at different paces, but all learners are held to high expectations for their learning.

The critical aspect of content differentiation is that the important learning goals remain constant for all learners. Differentiation cannot be about having different expectations for learning outcomes for students of varied ability within a classroom. The variable that changes is the curriculum material used for instruction.

Hall (2002) points out several factors that should be considered when looking at content differentiation:

Varied materials are used to support instructional content. “The variation seen in a differentiated classroom is most frequently the manner in which students gain access to important learning. Access to the content [important learning] is seen as key. This access can vary in terms of complexity of the curricular materials that are used to achieve the learning goals.”

Align tasks and objectives to learning goals. Learning goals for the units that will be taught are clearly defined. This clear delineation of learning goals helps to determine what learning activities and materials are needed to achieve this level of learning.

#### Principal-driven instruction

Instruction is concept-focused and principle-driven. “The instructional concepts should be broad-based and not focused on minute details. Teachers must focus on the concepts, principles and skills that students should learn. The content of instruction should address the same concepts with all students but be adjusted by degree of complexity for the diversity of learners in the classroom.”

This approach to differentiation is not easy. It depends on the teacher’s disposition to critically reflect on the important learning in a unit and the creativity to locate materials of different levels of complexity that all will lead to achieving the identified learning outcome of the unit.

#### Steps for explicitly using differentiations through content

There are several critical steps to follow when differentiating content. All of this is based on engaging in the process of pre-assessment as discussed in the September column which can be found at <http://luc.edu/ccse/nceanotes.shtml>.

1. Identify the important instructional goal and objectives for a unit of learning. To accomplish this, teachers may want to make use of a K-U-D (Know-Understand-Do) chart, a graphic organizer that outlines this process. Using the KUD chart, teachers can identify the most important learning of the unit of study: what students should know, what students should understand, and what the students should do as a result of the unit of study. Although this may seem blatantly obvious, it is a critical step that may be overlooked. (An example of the KUD chart also can be found at our Web site.)
2. Identify the instructional materials that can be used to help achieve this learning.
3. Organize the material by complexity, matching the complexity to the student need, based on the pre-assessment.

For example, in a Literature unit, the important learning goal is identified as “students will demonstrate critical reading strategies.” Using the framework for content differentiation, the teacher completes the KUD chart. In terms of “knowing”, the

teacher identifies that all students should know on-going reading and self-monitoring strategies such as predicting, summarizing and questioning. Next, the teacher identifies that all students should understand that there are strategies that good readers use to make sense of text. Finally, the teacher identifies what students should be able to do. In this case, the teacher identifies that all students should be able to read text and select appropriate strategies to build comprehension. After this analysis, the teacher starts to identify various kinds of reading materials that would help to accomplish this learning. Based on the pre-assessment data, the teacher will identify which students may require less complex reading materials and which students may require more complex materials.

### Pitfalls to avoid

When differentiating by content, there are some pitfalls that should be avoided:

#### Trying to differentiate all of the time

It can be easy to think that all content needs to be differentiated all the time. This could not be further from the truth. This approach would lead to teacher burnout. Content differentiation should occur when student need has been identified. "Effective differentiated classrooms include many times in which whole class, non-differentiated fare is the order of the day. Modify a curricular element only when 1) you see a student need and 2) you are convinced that modification increases the likelihood that the learner will understand important ideas and use important skills more thoroughly as a result." (Tomlinson, 1999 p. 11)

#### Trying to differentiate without a clear understanding of the knowledge, doing and understanding.

Without a crystal clear definition of the important learning in a particu-

lar unit, good content differentiation cannot be achieved. Identifying the "Know, Understand and Do" dimensions of a unit provides a focus on what needs to be learned. Only after this focus has been achieved can a teacher make the decisions about to how to vary the instructional materials to achieve this learning.

#### Trying to differentiate without pre-assessment data

Sometimes, in the interest of trying to save time, it can be tempting to "skip" the pre-assessment aspect of differentiation. It is critical that classroom teachers engage in the process of pre-assessment in order to truly establish baseline data on students. It provides for a much more systematic approach to differentiation and lessens the potential haphazard implementation of this approach.

#### Trying to maintain too many options for content differentiation

Just as dangerous as using only one set of materials to address all the needs of the various learners in a classroom is trying to use too many variants of learning materials. By trying to provide too many options for content differentiation, the teacher is pulled in too many directions, which can fragment instruction. This provides a significant challenge to managing instruction within the classroom.

#### 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 the content 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 by content. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observ-

ing 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 your next faculty meeting. ✦



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