How Does Student Diversity Affect Teachers' Priorities in Differentiating Instruction?

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Many American educators, and perhaps most of the general public, believe that the term "diverse" is generally used to refer to communities, classrooms, or groups of students who are not primarily Caucasian. Thus, "diverse" is often used to refer to groups of racially differing people. Teachers frequently refer to a homogeneous classroom (one which might be considered as lacking in diversity) as one where all of the students are of the same race. Conversely, a heterogeneous classroom would be one where students of several different races are well represented.

But the concept of diversity in America is not that simple. It is vital to take into consideration that this country was founded on the premise of male Caucasian superiority. Only Caucasian men who owned land were allowed to vote. The American educational system as it solidified over 100 years ago, still reflected those values. The legacy of segregation, genocide of the indigenous population, and internment of American citizens of Japanese descent are only a few examples of institutionalized racism. It might be nice if Americans could "sweep all of this under the rug" and "put it behind us", and perhaps someday we, as a nation, will. But, for now, this legacy of inequity has created a great deal of sensitivity to issues surrounding racism, genderism, and classism in America. Perhaps that is why there is so much media attention being paid to the controversy over use of politically correct and/or culturally sensitive language. Some high-profile conservative politicians have even likened political correctness to a kind of censorship (Seidl, J., 2010).

What do educators need to take into account regarding the diversity of 21st century American students? Perhaps the creation of an analogy between students and snowflakes will provide some clarification. All snowflakes are bits of frozen precipitation, but each one is thoroughly unique; as is every student. Each child comes to our classroom with a wide array of differing experiences outside of school; they demonstrate different talents, favor a variety of different learning styles, etc. Diversity refers to all of these differences and more; including but not limited to "race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies". ("Definition of diversity", 2010).

All educators need to see both sides of this issue. It is important to treat our students as individuals, but also to help them to form a learning community in which "[all] students [including] low-status/historically marginalized students…support one another in group learning activities" [in their classrooms] (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005). It should be clear, then, that "diversity" indicates a wide range of backgrounds and experiences that contribute to our students' uniqueness. "Diversity" does not simply refer to race. Thus, it is accurate to assert that all classrooms are a combination of diverse learners. If every student is unique, then every classroom is diverse. The next step is to identify how to best help all students live up to their potential as unique individuals.

It is vitally important to endeavor to answer the question: "Which facets of diversity are or should be the most significant to the classroom teacher?" It is possible that educators might simply focus on racial, ethnic, or diversity based on SES, and try to tailor their instruction based solely on these characteristics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these are not the most salient facets of student diversity. In 21st century classrooms, many teachers would agree that the real need is to concentrate on the students' diverse levels of ability (Lawrence-Brown, 2004) and/or fluency in English and numeracy, as well as their learning styles and collaborative skills. Perhaps these are the factors that educators should concentrate on when planning and implementing differentiated instruction.

Rick Wormelli (2007) explains that teachers need to "…give…every student a fighting chance to be not just competent but excellent, while finding meaning in the learning as well. Differentiation means we increase what students can achieve…". Tomlinson and Eidson (2003) refer to the "dual goals of honoring each student's learning needs and maximizing each student's learning capacity". Many authors have written extensively on the topic of differentiating instruction, often adding to the explanation by giving examples of what differentiation is NOT. Simply stated; differentiation is the opposite of the instruction that our parents received. The typical mid to late 20th century classroom relied on a mixture of rote memorization, teacher to (whole) class instruction, and formal, summative assessment.

To successfully differentiate instruction, novice teachers are now being instructed how to employ a variety of grouping options, materials, assessment tools, and use classroom space in a flexible manner. This article is not intended to be a means of instructing educators in the use of specific differentiation techniques. Many other gifted authors have written entire books on using these tools within a single grade level and/or discipline. This article is meant to condense these strategies into a short list that teachers can use as a "jumping-off point". Teacher candidates are often confused and even resistant when first confronted with the "assignment" to incorporate techniques for differentiation into their instructional plans. What then are some of the most important tools or strategies that they can use?

A huge concern in public school classrooms today is the wide range of students' ability. Many educators state that it is vital to "teach them where they are"…referring to terms like "prior knowledge" (Recht & Leslie, 1988) or by using KWL charts. It makes no sense to facilitate a lesson where a given percentage of the students have little or no ability to succeed. Instructors need to tailor the lesson to students' prior knowledge and present abilities. Then, teachers can make decisions about grouping students in various ways based on this data. Educators can then consider incorporating techniques such as "turn and talk", grouping students into smaller heterogeneous groups, etc.

As educators attempting to differentiate instruction, we should all recognize the importance of incorporating opportunities for student choice. Individual or group research projects are a highly effective method of differentiating instruction. If the unit is on mammals, teachers can assign a project where each student or group of students can choose the specific example they would like to study. In language arts, as another example, teachers often let the students choose the piece of literature that they will read.

Educators who differentiate instruction are trying their best to pay attention to students' individual needs. Teachers should realize that creating an equitable classroom environment is an important facet of the process. Every instructor must resist the temptation to simply "call on" those students who are the most motivated (raise their hands the most frequently, etc.). There are many ways to attempt to equalize "talk time". Calling on non-volunteers (especially students who rarely volunteer), using random methods (popsicle sticks are a familiar technique), going around the circle, using the tag-team approach; all of these are valuable ways of attempting to create more equitable response opportunities for our students. Another way that teachers can endeavor to enhance all students' development of self-esteem is through apportioning leadership opportunities. Every student should get a chance to pass out the papers, lead a section rehearsal, be in charge of a group presentation, etc. The old model was to only give these opportunities to our highest achieving students. 21st century teachers should adopt a more equitable model.

Another facet of instruction which teachers often overlook is how and when to give students effective positive reinforcement. Suffice to say that all students benefit from positive reinforcement; some also suffer from lack thereof. It is important to "spread it around", so that all students get affirmed for their efforts; thus teachers continuously work to enhance the self-esteem building process for all of their students. The TESA program (Good, 1981) is one of the most well-researched and seemingly effective ways of gauging and investigating this process.

As mentioned previously, Washington State requires that their teacher candidates provide evidence to verify their competency in a number of areas. One is in regard to communication with adults in the students' homes. The language mandates that teachers will provide evidence of their efforts to facilitate two-way communication that provides "adequate opportunities for families to engage in communication or activities to support student learning" (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005).

Again, much has been written about the importance of enhancing students' academic support in their home settings. But, it is vital that teachers recognize that this, too, is a means of facilitating student learning, thus a powerful tool in the process of differentiation.

There is one particular way that most teachers DO differentiate their instruction. They give individual assistance to students as they are working; a powerful yet informal means of formative assessment. This often takes the form of answering students' questions individually while they are working in their seats. Teachers can facilitate this process by circulating through the classroom and intentionally asking probing questions to the students who are likely to need the most assistance in terms of their skills and/or motivation. This formative assessment technique is a (perhaps one of the most?) valuable means of differentiating instruction.

State standards and certification requirements always include language which is meant to answer the question; "How do you know that the students met your objectives?" Our parents' teachers would have simply pointed to their summative assessments and quote the quantitative data ("80% of our students achieved at least 75% accuracy on the test"). Today, teachers are expected to do more informal and formative assessment. In a unit which encompasses several hours of instructional time, if teachers don't do much formative assessment, they could find that they have "wasted" an enormous amount of time if their students "fail" the summative assessment. Every teacher should be able to collect a great deal of data from formative assessments that take place throughout each instructional period. This might include reflective oral or written exercises, but could also be as simple as conversations that take place during teachers' circulation (as mentioned above) through the classroom. (I often refer to this as the process of "peeking over students' shoulders").

There are other ways that teachers should take assessment into account regarding enhancement of equity in their classrooms. Due to the range of student abilities, interests, and learning styles, we know that all students do not respond similarly to any one method of assessment. Our parents' teachers leaned heavily on formal, summative, "paper and pencil" tests and quizzes. In some courses, the entire final grade was composed of averages from a series of these summative assessments.

Today, all teachers are encouraged to grade based on a variety of data; much of it based on formative assessment. The state of Washington mandates that preservice teachers provide evidence of their ability to utilize "multiple modes of assessment" (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005). Experts in the field of alternative assessment have written extensively on the variety of possible techniques that are now available (McGraw-Hill, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, suffice to say that it is a necessity to incorporate that variety into our planning. All teachers should consider the importance of giving only a portion of the final grade based on any combination of tests and quizzes. If that "value" could be limited to about 50%, then at least 1/2 of the final grade would reflect a mixture of grades for informal and formative data, as well as projects, presentations, etc. This differs greatly depending on grade level and discipline, but should be thought of as a warning to novices about the dangers of teaching… "as we were taught" (Belmonte, 2009) [or more specifically…"grading as we were graded"].

As teachers endeavor to differentiate instruction, it is important to look at the desired outcomes. Equity is a goal which is clearly of paramount importance. 21st century educators all are working to move away from a "bell curve" mentality; and no longer use schools simply as a sorting mechanism. The current goal is to create a more level playing field; and eventually, equalize the access to higher education for all students. In the short term, though, that goal may be as simple as focusing on developing the potential and self-esteem of each and every student.

This short article is meant to help clarify some priorities and perhaps broaden one's concept of differentiated instruction, while also giving a few ideas for practical applications that can and should be used to create a more equitable classroom environment. The following list can be an initial starting point for educators working to enhance their differentiation strategies. Tools/strategies for differentiating instruction can include;

a) Begin with the students' prior knowledge;
b) Create opportunities for student choice;
c) Group students flexibly;
d) Use a variety of means to equalize response opportunities, leadership opportunities, and positive reinforcement;

e) Give students individual help as often as possible;

f) Establish two-way communication with all students' parents/guardians;

g) Use a variety of assessment techniques and don't give too much "weight" to summative formal assessments.

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