

The Nuts and Bolts of Differentiation

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Understanding Differentiation

As I conduct workshops with teachers of all ages and grade levels, I hear a familiar tune: Differentiating curriculum is a worrisome and stressful topic. I believe this is largely because teachers just do not know where to begin. Their administrators tell them that they must differentiate, but teachers are overwhelmed with the task of doing it because there is not a clear explanation of what to do. Teachers know the theory. They know they need to do it. They just do not know *how* to do it.

I believe the first key to understanding differentiation is listening to our “guts.” When we have students who do not succeed, we need to find out why they are not succeeding. In other words, we need to know our students. Then, we look for the kinds of support they need to learn specific concepts. We make adjustments when students have trouble comprehending material. We look for new ways to present information, new manipulatives that make sense, and the adequate amount of support, among other things. Then, as these struggling students grow, we pull back on the amount of support that we are giving them so that they continue to grow instead of using the support as a crutch. Differentiation is about meeting the needs of *all* students.

The Myths of Differentiation

As I travel, I have the opportunity to talk with many teachers. Our discussions vary depending on districts and students. Some of these discussions are difficult, but they are always interesting. I’ve discovered that people believe many things about differentiation. And, some of these beliefs are myths. Below are just some of the myths about differentiation that often come up in our discussions.

Myth #1: There is only one right way to differentiate. If this were the case, then the mystery of differentiation would be easy to unravel. The truth is, there are many ways to differentiate curriculum. Teachers can use menus of options, choices boards, leveled learning centers, leveled questions, tiered reading materials, and so on. The strategies in this notebook only begin to give us an idea of how we can differentiate curriculum.

Myth #2: You have to differentiate all the time to be effective. Ideally, it would be great to have every lesson differentiated. But no teacher, no matter how fantastic he or she is, can differentiate every lesson every day of the school year. The key is starting. Teachers should start with differentiation strategies that seem easiest to them. They should try a few per week or one per day. As teachers start the process of differentiating lessons, their confidence builds and they see success, which makes them want to differentiate more. Each year, a teacher can add more differentiated lessons.

The Nuts and Bolts of Differentiation (cont.)

The Myths of Differentiation (cont.)

Myth #3: Differentiation cannot include whole-group instruction. It is possible for teachers to provide whole-group instruction and differentiate at the same time. Small groups are great and should be used while differentiating, but whole-group instruction and activities are also possible. One way to do this is by letting students read leveled texts silently and then having a whole-class discussion on what they read. All students can participate because they all read the same content. Teachers can ask questions that are at different levels of complexity and be sure to call on the appropriate students to answer each question. It is important for teachers to make sure they do not always use the same groups or the same methods when they differentiate instruction. They need to mix things up.

Myth #4: Differentiation does not really work when you have high-stakes testing for the students. When teachers use the standards and objectives and then differentiate lessons, all students have the opportunity to learn the material and do well on high-stakes testing. If a teacher takes a lesson that meets the objectives and standards, and he or she differentiates that lesson, then differentiating the lesson actually helps students meet the objectives and standards. Differentiation for below-grade-level and struggling students is not about “dumbing down” the curriculum. It is about giving appropriate support so that students can grow. Too much support, and it becomes too easy. Teachers have to monitor how much support they give these students, with the goal of pulling back along the way so that the struggling students can grow and learn and finally reach the objectives and standards on their own without the support.

Myth #5: Differentiation is best for students who are in special education. Differentiation is best for *all* students, not just special education students. All students need to grow and learn, including above-grade-level students. When these students are appropriately challenged, they will be engaged and the teacher can then spend energy and focus helping students who need the extra support.

Myth #6: Differentiation means the same thing as individualization. The idea of meeting the needs of all students sounds daunting to many teachers. Many believe that this means individualization. However, individualizing instruction for each student is next to impossible for any teacher with a classroom filled with students. Instead, teachers need to use flexible grouping when differentiating. (See page 17 for more information.) Think about the needs of students who are performing below grade level. What needs do students who are performing above grade level have to keep them challenged and motivated? To make differentiating curriculum manageable, teachers need to think about differentiating for groups of students. This way, the teacher will be able to meet the needs of most of his or her students instead of just a few.

The Nuts and Bolts of Differentiation *(cont.)*

The Myths of Differentiation *(cont.)*

Myth #7: Differentiating curriculum does not encourage mastery for all students. On the contrary, if the teacher differentiates a lesson that is based on objectives and standards, then the goal for all students is to meet the objectives and standards. Again, differentiation is not about “dumbing down” the curriculum. It is about getting all students to meet the objectives and standards of each lesson.

Myth #8: Differentiation leads to unbalanced workloads. Many teachers think that above-grade-level and gifted students should naturally be asked to do more work. These students are bright and they are capable, so shouldn't they do more work? One problem with this idea is that these students are very smart, and they will soon figure out that being smart means double work. They will soon learn to not be so smart. Instead of providing these students with more work, a better solution is to provide them with more-challenging work. Their minds need to be stretched to think about more complex issues and concepts. On the other hand, below-grade-level students should not always be asked to do less work. At times, it is necessary to reduce the number of problems a student must complete, but this should be done purposefully. A teacher should never randomly assign just the even or just the odd problems. Reducing problems for these students should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The goal is for all students to have just the right challenge of work so that they finish at about the same time.

Myth #9: You have to group students and stick with those same groups to be successful. The key to differentiating successfully is to shake things up. Just because Ty is a struggling reader does not mean that he should be in the below-grade-level group in math. Maria might be an expert in dinosaurs, but she struggles to understand plate tectonics. Keep in mind that students will grow, and often will not need as much support as they did in the beginning. Groups need to be flexible. There are appropriate times for heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping. Both should be used while differentiating curriculum.

Myth #10: Above-grade-level students should be used as tutors for below-grade-level students. Since above-grade-level students are capable, shouldn't teachers use them as tutors to help struggling students? There are a few problems with this idea. First, these above-grade-level students need to be learning, just like everyone else. If they already know what is being taught, then the curriculum needs to be differentiated so that they can delve deeper into it. They need to be asked more challenging questions and encouraged to be creative with their products that show what they know. Second, the ability gap is too large between an above-grade-level student and a below-grade-level student. They often do not have enough in common to meet in the middle and relate to one another. However, there are times when it is appropriate for students to work together because students can learn from one another. A teacher can spend two hours trying to help his or her class understand a difficult concept to no avail. Yet, when the teacher lets students explain the concept to one another, they understand it in just five minutes. The key to letting students work with one another in this capacity is to group students who are not too far apart in ability levels. For example, have above-grade-level students work with on-grade-level students and have on-grade-level students work with below-grade-level students.

The Nuts and Bolts of Differentiation (cont.)

The Myths of Differentiation (cont.)

Myth #11: Differentiation is not fair to the students. All students deserve to learn and to grow. Differentiated curriculum allows for *all* students to do this. What could be more fair?

Myth #12: Assessment is not difficult when you differentiate. Assessment is difficult, no matter what. Some people feel that students who complete modified work should not receive the full credit for the work since the others in the class are completing unmodified work with no support. They say the playing field is not level. Other teachers worry that parents will be upset if their above-grade-level students are held to higher standards than other students in the class. Parents complain that this type of grading could ruin their children's grade point averages. And, there are teachers who feel that students should be graded on the work that they completed. If a below-grade-level student scores a perfect score on his or her modified work, then he or she gets the perfect score. However, some teachers average that grade with weekly or monthly state benchmarks that are not differentiated. They feel that averaging these grades gives the students a more accurate grade. Administrators definitely have opinions about grading in these circumstances, and when teachers work in a school district, they have to follow the guidelines of that district. Having different kinds of assessment tools can aid teachers as they seek to grade these differentiated assignments. (See page 21 for more information on assessment.)

How Do We Differentiate?

One of my favorite things about working with teachers is showing them a clear method to differentiate curriculum. Remember, there are many ways to differentiate curriculum, but providing samples of how to differentiate content, process, and product helps teachers conceptualize what differentiation will look like in their classrooms. Teachers can provide an enriched learning environment for students through carefully structured differentiated units of study. What follows are some ways that teachers can support students through differentiating the content, process, and product:

- **Content:** Teachers can differentiate content (what students learn) by adding necessary support and challenge to what students are learning. These include offering leveled texts, assigning tiered graphic organizers, and using different resources and materials that cover the same concepts but that vary in levels of difficulty and abstraction.
- **Process:** Teachers can differentiate the process (how students learn) by varying instructional techniques and materials. These include varying the complexity of assignments, using leveled questions, assigning self-paced assignments, offering different kinds of instruction (direct instruction), and providing varied grouping techniques. This also includes altering aspects of the classroom environment to better meet the needs of students.
- **Product:** Teachers can differentiate product (what students produce to show what they have learned) by offering choices or tiering assigned products. These include offering menus of options, assigning choices boards, and setting up leveled learning centers with options.