

Chapter VI

Differentiating Instruction to Meet the Needs of Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces how to differentiate instruction in an online environment. Fostering successful online learning communities to meet the diverse needs of students is a challenging task. Since the “one size fits all” approach is not realistic in a face-to-face or online setting, it is essential as an instructor to take time to understand differentiation and to work in creating an online learning environment that responds to the diverse needs of learners. It is our responsibility to ensure that the teaching and learning that takes place online is not only accessible, but of quality. The author hopes that developing an understanding of differentiation and specific instructional strategies to differentiate online will inform the learner of ways to maximize learning by addressing the diverse needs of students.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is complex. It involves careful preparation and the planning of objectives and learning experiences. Effective educators set high expectations for all students and select strategies to propel student learning. As an educator, it is essential to create a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected. We realize that not all students are alike. A central focus of the educator is to maximize the capacity of each student. When

teaching in a face-to-face classroom at the university level, there will invariably exist a diverse group of students with various levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Students must be thought of as individuals in order to help differentiate the classroom, thereby bringing more meaning to their learning. The same is true in an online classroom. Although networked learning offers us new opportunities to build collaboration and creativity into the teaching and learning process, these innovations also pose numerous challenges

(Zhu, Payette, & DeZure, 2003). This chapter attempts to address the following questions by reviewing the literature on differentiation and its connection to and impact on online learning. It offers ideas for differentiating in an online environment. The conclusion section discusses some implications to online learning and offers recommendations for future research.

- What is differentiated instruction?
- What are the principles that guide differentiated instruction?
- What is the impact to online learning?
- Why differentiate? Its basis in theory and research.
- How can you differentiate?
- Conclusion
- Future Research Directions

WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

Not all students are alike. This is true with students in a face-to-face or online setting. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning that gives students multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. Differentiation has come to mean consistently using a variety of instructional approaches to modify content, process, and/or products in response to learning readiness, interest, and learning profile of academically diverse students (Tomlinson, 1999).

BACKGROUND: WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE DIFFERENTIATION?

Tomlinson (1999) presents a few key ideas about differentiation as it relates to the traditional face-to-face classroom. Consider these principles in relation to your online classroom.

Principle 1: The Teacher Focuses on the Essentials

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher carefully fashions instruction around the essential concepts, principles, and skills of each subject (Tomlinson, 1999). The standards tell us what our students need to know and be able to do in the K-12 setting. The same is true at the university level when preparing students for a particular field. Most professions have national and/or state organizations that publish a clearly defined set of standards. These standards guide our programs. Whether you are teaching face-to-face or online, the standards are the same.

Principle 2: The Teacher Attends to Student Differences

Students differ in terms of readiness, interest, and learning profile. As instructors, we need to take time to understand, appreciate, and build upon student differences. The pedagogical theory that guides differentiation is constructivism, which is the belief that learning happens when the learner makes meaning out of information (Benjamin, 2005). Just as we have a variety of learners in the face-to-face setting, the same is true in an online environment. Online education must capitalize on student's unique approaches to learning, says Nishikant Sonwalkar (2003). In order to do so, we must design and implement programs of study and courses that differentiate to meet the needs of the students we serve. The research indicates that individuals learn in accordance with their readiness to do so. Jenson (2000) indicates that moderate challenge is critical. When a task is not challenging enough, students become bored. Yet if a task is too challenging, students become anxious. Also, when interest is tapped, learning is more likely to be rewarding and students become more autonomous learners. When designing a learning environment, helping students to discover and pursue their passions can maximize

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