

Chapter 15

Digital Pedagogy for the 21st Century Educator

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the process by which educators entered into a 21st century pedagogy that aids students' access to course materials using a digital platform. It explains how graduate students in one course learned how to utilize different technological tools and change their thinking and skillset. It also explores differentiated instruction in digital form rather than using traditional means. The root cause of the limited pedagogy that prevents teachers from reaching their fullest potential through using differentiated tiered assignments is also examined.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how creating student-centered learning digital opportunities can provide students with a differentiated, creatively rich learning opportunity. Teachers who are engaged with learners of the 21st century have a responsibility to confront their own pedagogies and begin to transform them to meet their needs. Digital student-centered practices are necessary for teachers to be able to know, understand and do, as they are central to mastering the art of teaching and learning 21st Century educators. With the advent of Web 2.0 technology students can now work in uniquely personalized environments, but many educators have been trained to “teach to the middle”, utilizing pen and paper activities only. This is the great problem of teaching and learning in the digital age. Those with the power to utilize the technology for the betterment of the students they serve often do not do so. Therefore, a change in instructional strategy and pedagogical thinking is one that would aid pre-service and in-service teachers in their instructional paradigms. However, the only successful change would take place provided they are given the professional development time to understand such paradigms and implement their practices. Training teachers to engage students in digital work in a differentiated fashion should be at the heart of new-age 21st century pedagogy. Erstad, Eickelmann & Eichhorn (2015) bring the instructional dichotomy to the fore in identifying that:

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School systems worldwide are likewise in a phase of development where tensions between old and new models of schooling are becoming more apparent, creating new demands upon teachers as agents of change. These demands include integrating technology into student-centered learning and enhancing subject-specific, as well as cross-curricular, competencies. (p. 642)

This is a challenge for all teachers at every level, but it is especially important for K-12 educators and those who prepare them to teach students. Price-Dennis and Matthew (2017) further highlight the challenges teacher education programs face stating:

Teacher education programs across the country are in problem-solving mode. Among the policy reforms and top-down mandates, many of us are puzzling over how to best prepare teachers for 21st-century classrooms. We struggle to ensure that our preservice teachers are both technically and socially prepared to begin their journey as educators. (p. 97)

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Teacher preparation and in-field practice are central to developing positive students' learning experiences. One major aspect of how teachers teach is that they focus on the typically developing student. The average student is provided work that is on his or her level, and such work is tailored to their abilities and teacher expectations of their performance. Conversely, students that are not on-grade level performers are not often provided with material that is appropriate for their development. Furthermore, all of these students are provided limited opportunities to have their learning centered around their particular interests, readiness level or learning style. This denies them the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. It also reinforces traditional modes of learning that fail to connect to the learners of today.

Table 1 gives a basic generic breakdown of how teachers generally approach the instructional process and the potential results those instructional foci have on their students' learning. The traditional perspective of *what to teach* and *how to teach* to teach it constitute a pedagogy that lacks depth and diversity in its form, function and style. The form seems to be "cookie cutter" for all students. They sit in rows and raise their hands to participate in their learning activities, but must not stray too far ahead because the teacher fears disorder in the classroom. Therefore, the function of the learning activity becomes one that exists to support the inability of the teacher to create adaptable learning structures in the classroom.

Table 1. Typical teaching focal points for different student types

Student Type	Instructional Focus	Impact on Learning
Typically Developing Student	Average Level	Lack of Engagement Differentiation not based on Ability or Readiness
At-Risk Student	Low Level	Lack of Engagement, Increased disengagement and decrease in learning
Special Needs Student	Low Level/Remedial	Lifelong handicaps in learning confidence levels.
Above Average Performer	Average Level	Disengagement and apathy
Gifted Student	Average Level with Additional Work Add-ons	Disengagement, apathy and disillusionment

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