



How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Carol Ann Tomlinson

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In this 2nd edition of a book that has provided inspiration to countless teachers, Carol Ann Tomlinson offers three new chapters, extended examples and information in every chapter, and field-tested strategies that teachers can use in today's increasingly diverse classrooms. Tomlinson shows how to use students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles to address student diversity.

How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms Details

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From Reader Review How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms for online ebook

Becky Shattuck says

This book has a lot of contradictory information, and I'm also not convinced a lot of the arguments made are supported by evidence. There's no in-text citations, and, as I read, I really wanted to know what the recommendations were based on.

The first handful of chapters start by saying why differentiation is good. This was the best part of the book but extremely repetitive. We want to provide many different opportunities for students to learn, and we want to have high expectations for all students. I support these ideas, but kept wondering when the author would start telling us HOW to do those things instead of just repeating why differentiating is so important.

Then she covered examples of differentiation in some classrooms, and I felt like I didn't buy into most of the examples. In a math class example, he lets students test out of the semester, so they only have to sit in on the first few classes of each unit and then can work independently on research or on other classwork. Why not make the classroom an open-ended, problem-solving classroom, so that students can find and use different strategies, which would be at their individual level? In the science class example, he lectures and then gives a lab so students can test out what they learned about. But, typically, students learn better the other way: having the concrete experience first to provide context to their learning. Later in the book, she mentions moving from concrete to abstract, but her examples didn't demonstrate that at all.

When she talks about differentiating, she keeps going back to the idea that some students work well in groups and some work better individually. I think it's good to know that students have preferences, but we shouldn't necessarily cater to those. We need to help students succeed by providing different experiences so that all students are able to work both individually and collaboratively. Of course some students do better work on their own, but we know from social learning theory that they will learn more when they're exposed to other students' learning, too. I don't think we should deprive students of this by always giving them an "out" from collaborative work, as the author suggested.

She also connects differentiation to the idea of different types of learners--auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. As far as I'm aware, there is no evidence that students learn better if we present information according to their learning style. In fact, they do better if the learning style matches what it is that they are learning. I thought it was ridiculous when she suggested we have an auditory reader first read a book aloud to a kinesthetic learner who would pantomime it as it's read. My thought is that having students act out a scene from a book or play is fine, but having our "kinesthetic learners" always pantomime books is absurd.

Of course I support the idea of differentiating content in the classroom, but I think the suggestions on how to implement differentiation are severely dated and lacking in this book. They don't jive with best teaching practices. I'm still feeling frustrated about how she suggests to differentiate in math. She says if a student understands the process of converting fractions to decimals, then we don't need to worry about making sure they understand the underlying concept because they "must" already understand it to do the process. That's not true at all.

Perhaps there were good ideas in this book, but by the time I got to the meat of it, I was pretty closed off to her suggestions.

Josiah says

Helpful book on how to differentiate instruction in a classroom. I have mixed opinions about the value of differentiation in my own field (the classics/humanities), since I feel like differentiation is more relevant for skill-based subjects like Math or Science than in discussion-and-idea-based subjects, but I was still able to glean profitable ideas from this. Tomlinson did a good job of being practical and providing lots of examples, and so I appreciated this book a lot. For educators looking to understand differentiation better, this is a good introductory work.

Rating: 4 Stars (Very Good).

Jessica Montalvo says

The author offers the explanation of the differentiated classroom to best accommodate diverse learning styles. Focused on multiple activities and multiple methods to provide a varied learning experience to build on knowledge, the author emphasizes how imperative it is to initially establish ground rules, expectations, directions, and the scope and sequence in order to promote an effective differentiated classroom. The author delves into how the mind works, and how people best learn, revealing that people need hands-on activities, collaboration, and other diverse methods of instruction to promote learning in order to keep them actively involved. She provides examples of various differentiated classrooms and gives ideas from what learning looks like, what classroom environment looks like, and what the process and products look like. The idea of the differentiated classroom is to make sure that all students are being challenged at their level of learning to retain interest and to draw on their personal interests and strengths.

Nicole says

Really good book with some great ideas I plan to implement. However, it doesn't seem like it would be possible to do this all the time and still be able to fulfill state and district requirements. So the book's content is excellent in theory; I'm just not sure how practical it is in reality.

Monique says

So I didn't actually finish this book. It was for a class, and I had to return it before I finished. It's a great book on differentiation. The problem is that I don't buy into differentiation in high school math. The only suggestion for it in the whole book was to allow kids to test out of math units. That's not differentiation.

Edit: I ended up finishing the book. It has some good theory and suggestions. I still don't see how differentiation will help me teach Algebra, but this book would be great for an English teacher.

Awagner says

This book offers some excellent examples of teaching methods. It really inspired me to use differentiated instruction as a part of my PDP goal as an initial educator. One of my favorite sections is the one addressing the introduction of differentiated instruction to students and parents. I plan on using some of Tomlinson's examples to help students see why their content, processes, and products will vary from their classmates at times.

Tracie says

I read this book for class. I think it is a great book on differentiation for beginners or for new teachers. It provides a lot of good examples and best practices that can be done in the classroom for each of the ideas presented, but without bogging you down with too much detail or depth. I used this in conjunction with another book on differentiation which took Tomlinson's ideas and stretched them out to give more depth, detail and examples of how things can be done.

This was a little daunting to me however. While I do work with a lot of the ideas in this book in my preschool and adult learners classes, I'm still a new teacher that hasn't worked in a secondary classroom. So I honestly feel like I don't know where to start. And that scares the crap out of me.

James Carter says

I was forced to buy the book for an education class and threw it in the trash after I was done. I should know because I have taught.

Four reasons:

1. There is no evidence that differentiated instruction works. You can look for it all you want, but you cannot find very much that's not written by Carol Ann Tomlinson and her acolytes at the University of Virginia. Even the author has already admitted this, but she doesn't care and will forge ahead in her mission with zealous blindness. Please, no theories or sound bites, but the evidence...it's that important.
2. It's impossible to implement differentiated instruction by yourself in a class of heterogeneous students consistently all the time year round. This is a great way of being quickly burned out on the job.
3. There is no evidence that teaching to learning styles improves academic achievement.
4. It takes too much time for any teacher to plan differentiated instruction, and most of them would just like to rest after their school day is over...like every day.

Do yourself and your students a huge favor: stick with what's evidence-based, and you will get results.

All in all, the education world is full of unproven fads and gimmicks, and differentiated instruction is one of them.

Gabrielle says

Fine as a refresher but it isn't groundbreaking. And, if you follow her guidelines, aspects of differentiated instruction will kill you.

Hollie says

I got so many insights from this book about how to structure learning with various ability levels and interest in students. Marvelous! Took many notes! She has great ideas for activity starters you can try for opening-up student thinking and leveling-up learning challenges to create intrigue in the classroom setting. It could've used another edit for slight errors in sentence structure- a very few misspelled words, and typos. But, those things do not take away from the gem of information inside the pages for teachers of any type!

Jennifer says

This book gives a simple, bare bones explanation of differentiated instruction. Admittedly, there are lots of ideas that would be overwhelming to try and apply in the classroom all at once. Tomlinson suggests choosing a few and building as the strategies become natural extensions of what you do. I'd recommend this book for anyone wanting to begin the exploration process...it is only 97 pages, so not too scary!

Stephanie says

I am guessing that when this book came out it must have been all the rage. However, as it stands now in my first reading of it, not so much. I know the strategies, I understand the pedagogy, I've already decided what I want to own or dismiss in terms of differentiation and I can find most of what she's talking about online with a tech-enhanced option.

While it is good (maybe for the first year teacher), I'm not sure why it's the required texts in a graduate level course. There must be something (that even Tomlinson has written) that is more in-depth and has a more modern approach.

Alycia Bencloski says

This book has a lot of great info about using differentiated instruction in mixed ability classrooms. However, it is more directed at K-12 differentiation for the novice. As an adult educator with over 6 years of experience, I have been using many of these techniques for years. I just did not know what all of them were called. So now I can update my lesson plans to have the terminology rather than my silly attempt to apply my own adjectives to what I have been doing for years.

Katherine Lewis says

Honestly, this just freaked me out and made me feel hopelessly inadequate. I know the point is not to do EVERYTHING, but rather to know so many strategies and options that you can adapt when/where possible/desirable. I know that intellectually...but reading it still gave me heart palpitations. I have tried many of the strategies already (to mixed success) and I have affixed copies of several of the diagrams to my desk so that I can glance down and pull-up a strategy when I'm feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with a student's lack of success or cooperation. I'm probably going to need to revisit this several times throughout my teaching career. Baby steps, right?

Shanna says

This is a useful primer for the beginning teacher in how to differentiate their content to their diverse community of learners in their classroom. I am nervous as a "student teacher" that I will not be successful in guiding my students to helpful material because I am not properly scaffolding the content. This book may very well serve as a gateway to further inquiry into differentiation in the realm of education. Overall, this book garners a solid 3.5 stars from me.
