

Making a Difference

Carol Ann Tomlinson explains how differentiated instruction works and why we need it now.

By [Anthony Rebora](#)

Differentiated instruction—the theory that teachers should work to accommodate and build on students' diverse learning needs—is not new. But it's unlikely that anyone has done more to systematize it and explicate its classroom applications than University of Virginia education professor Carol Ann Tomlinson .

A former elementary school teacher of 21 years (and Virginia Teacher of the Year in 1974), Carol Ann Tomlinson has written more than 200 articles, chapters, and books, including [The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners](#) and [Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom: Strategies and Tools for Responsive Teaching](#). Characterized by a rigorous professionalism and a strong underlying belief in both teachers' and students' potential, her work has given many educators both practical and philosophical frameworks for modifying instruction to meet the individual needs of all students.

Anthony Rebora, editorial director of the Sourcebook, recently talked to Tomlinson about the theory of differentiated instruction and its use in schools today.

Differentiated instruction is a term that is interpreted in a lot of different ways. How do you define it, and why is it important for teachers today?

I define it as a teacher really trying to address students' particular readiness needs, their particular interests, and their preferred ways of learning. Of course, these efforts must be rooted in sound classroom practice—it's not just a matter of trying anything. There are key principles of differentiated instruction that we know to be best practices and that support everything we do in the classroom. But at its core, differentiated instruction means addressing ways in which students vary as learners.

The reason I think differentiated instruction is important is that students do vary in so many ways, and our student populations are becoming more academically diverse. They always have been, but they're becoming more so. And the chances are pretty good that this will continue throughout our lifetimes.

As I see it, there are three ways to deal with students' differences. One is to ignore them. We've tried that for years, and we just don't have any evidence that pretending that all kids are alike and teaching them the same things in the same way over the same time period is effective.

The second way is to separate kids out—trying to figure out who’s smart and who’s not. When we do that, we end up getting the idea that most teachers are supposed to work with “normal” kids, and the kids who are somehow “broken”—if you don’t speak English too well, if you have a learning disability, if you’re too smart—are put someplace else. But we’re finding that this separation process isn’t helping in terms of achievement, particularly for the “broken” kids. And there’s the problem that the broken kids are often poor and minority, while the kids we see as being in good shape tend to be white and more affluent. So, the division between the haves and the have-nots is being reinforced by schools rather than ameliorated. Finally, sorting kids in this way creates a negative mindset, to use author Carol Dweck’s term. We’re basically telling kids from the outset they’re too different and that they can’t do the work—which is pretty detrimental to their outlook.

So that leaves us with the third, unfortunately less common choice—keeping kids together in the context of high-quality curriculum but attending to their readiness needs, their interests, and their preferred ways of learning. And we have a fairly good body of research to suggest that when you do that the results are pretty impressive. Differentiated instruction assumes a more positive mindset: Let’s assume they can all do good work, and let’s attend to the ways that they need us to teach them in order to get there.

What are the hallmarks of a well-run differentiated classroom? What are the things you look for when you visit a classroom?

One of the first things I look for are teacher-student connections. Does this seem to be a teacher who is really paying attention to the kids, who’s going out of his or her way to study them and understand what makes them tick? To be effective with differentiation, a teacher really needs to talk with the kids, ask them their opinions on things, sit down with them for a minute or two to see how things are going, and listen to them and find out what they are interested in. All that feeds back into instruction. And teacher-student connections not only help teachers plan what to do with kids, it also provides motivation for differentiation: If I can see kids as real individual human beings, I’m going to be much more invested in helping them learn and grow individually.

Another thing I look for is a sense of community in the classroom. Has the teacher pulled this class together as a team? It’s helpful to think of a baseball team: Different players play different positions and fill different roles, but they also work together and support each other in working toward a common goal. In the same way, it’s really important for kids to come together and understand and appreciate their differences, and to be willing to help one another succeed—as opposed to the cut-throat competition that sometimes goes on in schools.

The third thing I look for is the quality of the curriculum being used. You have to differentiate something. And if what you differentiate is boring enough to choke a horse, you’ve just got different versions of boredom. If you differentiate something that’s murky and not clear regarding why anyone’s doing it, then you just generate multiple versions of fog. Or if all you’re doing—as unfortunately many teachers feel pressured to do today—is teaching a telephone book of facts in preparation for a test, you’re not really providing memorable or useful learning. So teachers who are trying to reach out to kids really need to keep asking themselves about the quality of what they are teaching. This is also a mindset issue: If I really think all my kids are

capable of learning, then I want to give them the most robust materials, not the watered-down stuff.

So what are the key things a teacher needs to think about when developing a differentiated lesson plan?

This gets us further into the core principles of differentiated instruction. One of these is what we call “respectful tasks.” This means that everybody’s work needs to be equally engaging, equally appealing, and equally important. It’s very easy to fall into the pattern of giving some kids no-brainer tasks and giving other kids the teacher’s pet tasks. What you really want is every student to be focused on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skill. And for every student to have to think to do their work.

Another important principle is that of flexible grouping. This means you don’t arbitrarily divide students or automatically group them with kids of the same skill level. You need to systematically move kids among similar readiness groups, varied readiness groups, mixed learning-profile groups, interest groups, mixed interest groups, and student-choice groups. In a sense, the teacher is continually auditioning kids in different settings—and the students get to see how they can contribute in a variety of contexts.

Another key to a good differentiated lesson is “teaching up.” We do much better if we start with what we consider to be high-end curriculum and expectations—and then differentiate to provide scaffolding, to lift the kids up. The usual tendency is to start with what we perceive to be grade-level material and then dumb it down for some and raise it up for others. But we don’t usually raise it up very much from that starting point, and dumbing down just sets lower expectations for some kids.

You alluded to the fact that teachers are under a great deal of pressure to teach mandated standards and to improve standardized test scores. How does differentiated instruction fit into this context?

I think it fits in pretty well actually. As I see it, you’ve got two choices. One is to say, “Look, all I think I can do is cover this list of skills.” But even if that’s all you think you can do, it’s still better to start where the kid is and help him move from that point instead of trying to skip over gaps.

But what we really know from people who work with good quality curriculum is that the stuff we’re being asked to teach kids for the tests is part of a bigger picture of something that helps them make sense of the world. To teach that bigger picture is the second choice. Typically, what we’re being asked to teach kids are facts and skills, but you can wrap them in understanding. You give kids a sense of how this makes sense in the world, how it all fits together, how it ties in with their lives, and what they can do with it as people. You don’t jettison the facts and skills; you just package them in a way that makes them more interesting to learn, more memorable, more transferable, more useful, and retainable.

No one would ask teachers not to teach what they feel they're responsible for. But you can teach those things in ways that are more meaningful and richer. So what I'm talking about is quality curriculum and my sense of it—and I think this is where most curriculum experts are, too—is that quality curriculum is centered on understandings.

I found it interesting that in *The Differentiated Classroom* you say that an effective teacher “must like himself.” What do you mean by that?

When you see purpose in what you do, when you really like what you do, when you get up in the morning ready to make a difference, when you see human beings that are going to be impacted by your work—I think these things enable you to be a fulfilled person. And I think that teachers who really find fulfillment in the classroom feel better about themselves and are more likely to have the courage to reach out to kids and try new things than those who doubt themselves and feel discouraged. And I would guess this is also true of teachers who are more self-efficacious in the first place. You need a certain sense of self-assurance to teach at high levels.

To use differentiated instruction as you discuss it in your books, teachers really have to get to know and understand their students—in terms of their learning styles, interests, strengths, and weaknesses. It seemed to me that this would be very difficult to do if you have five or six classes a day. How do teachers digest all this?

Let me just clarify that I taught for 21 years, so this isn't just something I thought of at a university and never tried in a classroom. I've done it with 150 kids a year. But it is difficult. *Teaching* is difficult. So are many other professions.

But getting to know students in this way isn't really as hard as you think. The key thing is to actively get kids to show you who they are and what their needs are. There are a lot of pretty simple techniques to do this. For example, we have a fairly substantial body of evidence that some of us learn better in creative ways, some in practical ways, and some in analytic ways. To start to gauge where your students fall within this schema, you could create three different journal prompts that all ask the same question—but with one coming at it from an out-of-the-box perspective, one bringing in a life-application aspect, and one in a more methodical or analytic way. Then just ask the kids to respond to the prompt that's best for them personally. More generally, you could give students periodic surveys of the class, asking them what they particularly liked and what they found particularly difficult. It's also good practice for a teacher to keep a kind of journal where they jot down things they learn about kids—about they're likes and dislikes, and what they get really excited about—and be able to refer back to it.

Actually, we're hitting on another key principle of differentiation, which is ongoing assessment, meaning that I'm continually checking in on who's where with the knowledge and understanding I'm trying to teach and continuing to track the progress of kids, much the way a hospital would track the blood work or respiration of a patient. There are really a lot of ways to do this, outside of formal quizzes and tests, that aren't tremendously laborious. You start by systematically watching kids, taking good notes, checking work regularly and closely, and asking good questions. It's really as much a predisposition on a teacher's part as anything else.

The growing numbers of English- language learners in schools pose particular challenges for many teachers. In your books, you talk about the ability of differentiated instructors to build “language bridges” to help these students. Can you explain how that’s done?

You learn a language through speaking, so making sure these kids participate in discussion groups where they can make a contribution is really very important.

One great way to do this, when possible, is to put a student who is just learning English in the same group as someone who can serve as a kind of bridge—someone who speaks the same native language but is further along in English. This gives the English-language learner a way to contribute and follow the work.

Another helpful strategy is what we call “front-loading vocabulary.” This is when the teacher identifies the half-dozen or so words in a unit that really are central and really give it its meaning. Then you teach this academic vocabulary before the unit begins, so that when the lessons and readings start the kids have something to build on. This is helpful not only with second-language learners but also with students with learning disabilities or below-level vocabulary skills. It helps tremendously with focus and understanding.

A related technique is the use of word walls—which we tend to associate with younger grade-levels but can work well with older students, too. These are simply places on the classroom walls where you list words and definitions and categorize them in word families and in other ways. This gives kids something to refer to and helps them learn words and derivatives. I know a high school teacher in North Carolina who has her students—many of whom are learning English—“adopt” particular words by creating poster-board presentations on them, complete with definitions, pronunciations, and illustrations. Strategies like these really amount to vocabulary-support systems and can help kids create associations and understandings.

Another tried and true technique is to make audio recordings of reading assignments that kids can listen to while they read. Oftentimes, hearing vocabulary in a new language develops more quickly than their reading vocabulary.

Graphic organizers can also help English-language learners organize and make sense of ideas in the content.

Teachers often say they don’t get enough—or any—training or professional development in differentiated instruction. Why do you think that is?

I think the main reason is that differentiated instruction requires a complex change process for most teachers. It’s not something you can show me how to do today and then I can go back and do in my classroom tomorrow. And unfortunately, the professional development models used in most schools aren’t conducive to complex, meaningful change or growth. For most schools, a good professional development program is, “Well, shoot, we used two whole staff-development days.” But something like differentiated instruction takes a lot more than that. You have to have people in the classrooms with teachers and you have to give teachers opportunities to trouble

shoot and work together. And you need a leader who's both approachable and insistent, who commits to the program.

In the book I recently co-authored, called *The Differentiated School*, we actually look at two very different schools—one elementary and one high school—that have moved their entire faculties to differentiated instruction. The one thing that was immediately evident in both schools was that they had leaders who really understood what differentiation meant. And they went about staff development with the understanding that asking teachers to change their practices in this way is a complex thing. Both schools came up with staff-development plans that were sustained and persistent and embedded in the school's culture, with people in charge who never went away. On some level, when you look at those schools, it's almost a no-brainer. Everything they did was entirely sensible—it's just that we almost never do those things systematically and persistently in schools.

Considering the high teacher turnover in many schools and the increasing use of scripted lessons, are you optimistic about the growth of differentiated instruction in schools?

I think I'm sort of a realistic optimistic. I understand how hard change is, and I understand the complexities of schools and school systems. But there's no doubt that our classrooms are becoming more diverse, and that's going to continue. And whether you call it differentiation or something else, we're going to have to reach out to those kids. Educators get this. New ideas in teaching often disappear from the scene fairly quickly because real change is so hard. But I've been working with differentiated instruction for at least 15 years now, and people are sticking with it. It's even starting to take hold, quite effectively, in some good teacher-prep programs, giving young teachers a strong basis for development.

Now, I don't think this is because people just like the way it sounds. I think it's because we all have these kids, in all their wonderful diversity, right there in front of us every morning—and we have to figure how to help them reach their potential. So, I think my optimism comes from what seems to be a sustained interest on the part of educators in reaching out to diverse student populations and a willingness to pursue change even if it doesn't come in a simple formula.