Differentiated Instruction

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Introduction

The goals of education are not only to develop lifelong learners, or learners who will be able to problem solve and think critically, but to also meet the needs of all diverse learners and ensuring that there is improved educational outcomes for all students. Based on these goals, institutions are always seeking established ways to reinforce traditional schoolroom practices. The challenges faced by instructors in the classroom are not restricted to students with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. The new classrooms are filled with students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. One of the main disadvantages of the traditional classroom is that many instructors tend to “teach to the middle” as a result, students with disabilities, those from diverse background, and those who require varied instructional needs suffer academically. These students cannot function in a one size fits all approach to teaching, if such practices continue these student are the ones most likely to drop out or remain unemployed due to lack of advancement (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008).

A solution to this is for instructors to implement differentiated instruction practices in the classroom. Differentiated instruction is the process of "ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning" (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 188).

In AET/520, Instructional strategies in adult education and training, Marvo Prosper-Azille developed an instructional training module for Baderman Island Resort’s Boardman Corporate University. The module entitled *The Principles of Selling and Service it was designed because:*

An examination of the of the Virtual Business Organization Portal, revealed that although Baderman Island Resort has two shops (Baderman Island Gift Shop and The Shops at Tenney), Boardman Corporate University does not provide any courses that are specific to retail and sales. For example, courses in merchandising, selling and service, communication for business or mathematics for business, these courses would enhance all the other skills being taught by BCU9 (Prosper-Azille, 2014).

The following paper based on the said instructional plan, will explore differentiating the content to be learned, varying or altering the instructional strategies used to teach the required content, varying the end product used to demonstrate mastery of the required content, and varying or altering the environment to accommodate varied learning styles.

**Differentiating the Content To Be Learned**

To differentiate content in the classroom, the instructor has to vary what is being taught as well as how the learner gains access to the knowledge or content. The corporate training class comprises of 30 adults (men and women). The age range is from 18 to 60 years old. The trainees are fulltime employees of Baderman Island Resort with work experience ranging from 0 to 20 years. Among the group, there are high school diploma holders, first degree, and graduate degreed workers. They come from diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds. Majority of the learners are a mix of auditory and visual.

Differentiating the content may be based on what the students know already versus what they need to know. The instructor should plan with the knowledge that whatever differentiation of the content he or she is going to undertake must consider the basic standards of the course being taught. Differentiating by content includes addressing the same ideas but altering the degree of difficulty based on the student's interest, willingness, or learning style. This is important because there are some students who have no knowledge or prior knowledge of the content; some students might have a little bit of knowledge about the content; and there might be others who have mastery of the content before the lesson begins. One effective means of differentiating the content to take all these variables into consideration is to design the class activities for the different groups of students by using Bloom’s Taxonomy. For example, students without any prior knowledge of the concepts can be given tasks on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, and application. Those students with limited knowledge of the content can be given activities that utilizes application, analysis and evaluation areas, and finally, the students who have high levels of mastery may be asked to complete tasks in evaluation and synthesis.

When instructors differentiate the content to accommodate the diverse learning groups in the classroom they may adapt what they want the students to learn or how the students will gain access to the knowledge, understanding and skills (Anderson, 2007). They are not varying the objectives or lowering standards instead they are giving that learner a chance to blossom in an otherwise restricted classroom environment. The benefits to the learners are endless teachers who differentiate the content of their lessons find that their students are more engaged in learning. Instead of having the learner struggle with the new content, giving them the content at the level which they can operate gives them that self-confidence which increases interest, motivation and the likelihood of transferring that learning into the real world. The use of differentiated instruction puts more of the learning responsibility on the students. Teachers who work to differentiate instruction for their students often provide students some choice in learning activities, which also leads to increased student achievement.

**Varying Or Altering The Instructional Strategies Used To Teach The Required Content**

Once the content is varied, the instructional strategies used to teach the required content has to be altered. The strategies should provide the students with the opportunity to participate in small-group, whole-class, and individualized learning plans. Discussions whether they are whole groups or small cooperative learning groups create interest and engage students. They also encourage dialogue among and between students this improves listening and conversation skills and will also develop important speaking skills (Weimer, 2011). There are several effective examples that demonstrate altering instructional strategies. One example is to use assistive technologies along with independent study. It involves the use of high- and low-technology items such as books on tape, writing and editing software. They are beneficial to the learner who would otherwise be crippled without them. With Independent Study, the instructor gives the students the choice of topics selection, setting their own goals, and developing criteria for their work. Independent study provides total flexibility based on students readiness, interest and learning profile. This is good for the diverse classroom where all students do not work at the same pace (Voltz, Sims, Nelson, & Bivens, 2005).

Another great strategy to differentiate instruction is to ensure that each lesson should have a beginning, middle and end this is useful in letting students make connections with the content they are learning. Using graphic organizers can help with this as well as; graphic organizers are communication devices that show the organization or structure of concepts as well as relationships between concepts. Spatial arrangements depicting the information’s structure reduce the cognitive demands on the learner. Apart from providing a graphic visual that helps the learner remember the content easier, the graphic organizer is an effective tool because it reduces the processing demands on the brain. Therefore, the instructor can scaffold the content of the lesson. Showing how the information is related instead of trying to explain can be an influential way to facilitate understanding. Also, the learner is more likely to become a strategic learner. Reading and writing skills, communication skills, and analytical, critical, and creative thinking skills are all subject to improve when students learn recognize these patterns of thinking, construct, and use graphic organizers (Masterminds Publishing, 2001).

**Varying the End Product Used To Demonstrate Mastery of The Required Content**

In the same manner that one size teaching does not fit all, so too does one size evaluation or assessment does not fit all; not all students demonstrate mastery at least not when it comes to passing tests or submitting assignments. Therefore, varying the end product used to demonstrate mastery of the required content is recommended.

The two performance-based objectives for this module are:

1. After viewing scenarios of effective and non-effective sales techniques, the learner will be able to identify effective sales techniques with at least 85% accuracy.

2. After listening to a presentation on persuasive communication, the learners will be able to participate in simulations and role play activities depicting five positive persuasive communication strategies for sales and services.

Student demonstration of mastery must be relevant to the course, so instead of the usual end of course test the instructor can give an activity that requires the learner to demonstrate the use of the new content in a real life applicable situation. This will include directly observing the learners in the role play and simulation activities as they utilize the skills of persuasive communication taught in the class. Another recommendation is have the trainees submit a final project to demonstrate their mastery. This will be in the form of a presentation using cooperative learning groups to achieve a goal. They will do presentations on effective communications utilizing different forms of media. These two evaluation strategies are excellent for the students because they provide instant feedback and at the same time they have the additional benefit of working in groups which foster learning, retention and transfer.

**Varying or Altering the Environment to Accommodate Varied Learning Styles**

The proposed instructional plan has the courses being delivered in a face to face modality and implemented on a weekly basis (held the first week of the month). Classes will be of one day duration and will be taught at the training classrooms of Baderman Island Resort’s Boardman Corporate University. In order to break the monotony of sitting in the classroom listening to the instructor lecturing on effective communication and sales techniques, the trainees can be taken on a field trip to the actual shops on the resort where they can see the skills in practice and also take part in such real activities. This would be very beneficial for the learners whose style is not auditory. The visual and kinesthetic learners now have a chance to learn in an environment that is conducive to their learning style. Also this will be keeping in line with the theories of adult learning. According to Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2011), Adults are more concerned about the immediate applicability of learning. Adult learners are more receptive to learning when they can apply what they are learning in real life or if they can see the applicability of what they are learning to the job.

Another recommendation is for the instructor to experiment with the classroom environment. This would include the temperature, lighting, physical arrangement of classroom, and noise level. The comfort level of the trainees is important if the instructor expects them to sit and listen actively and absorb the new content. A comfortable classroom environment facilitates learning and the motivation to learn. Varying the seating arrangements to facilitate discussions (arranged in a large circles, or small clusters) is good for adults to participate in discussions. Adult learning groups are likely to be composed of persons of many different ages, backgrounds, education levels, and so forth; the sitting arrangement should be one that fosters discussion and allow the learners to share the vast knowledge they bring to the classroom. This should be accompanied with the instructor planning activities of varying lengths, to accommodate students with different attention spans or tolerance for sitting quietly. Also for adult learners lesson length is important adults, in addition to perceiving time itself differently than children do, also are more concerned about the effective use of time (Knowles et al. 2011).

**Conclusion**

To differentiate instruction, content, strategies or make modifications to an instructional plan is not a passing craze. It will take a lot of practice because it requires time, effort, and the instructor thinking outside the box. One size does not fit all when it comes to learning or teaching. To differentiate instruction is to identify that adult learners have varying background knowledge, language, preferences in learning, interests. The role of the instructor is to react responsively and differentiate the content to be learned, varying or altering the instructional strategies used to teach the required content, varying the end product used to demonstrate mastery of the required content, and varying or altering the environment to accommodate varied learning styles. When this happens, the instructor is working with differing abilities in the same class but not sacrificing content, process or product. What he or she is doing is maximizing each learner’s growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process.

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