Goal Three Reflective Essay: Differentiated Instruction

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Differentiated Instruction

Todd Rose, in his speech at TEDx Sonoma County (2013) told a story about Air Force fighter pilots. He said that when engineers started to make fighter jets, they would design their cockpits to fit the average-sized pilot. The average-sized pilot didn’t exist however, and this engineering had some dangerous results. So they took measurements of pilots and made the cockpits adjustable for all dimensions. The result was that the most skillful pilots were able to fly these planes, and less accidents occurred. Rose went on to argue that education must be made adjustable for individual students. This is known as differentiation.

I believe that differentiation is one of the hardest and most important aspects of education. There are some students that are naturally gifted at the content and others who need more scaffolding. There are students who come from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Educators must see that all students meet their district or state standards. Differentiation is an adjustment in the instruction to meet student needs. I believe that careful planning of layered lessons, as well as real time flexibility in response to constant assessment is the key to differentiation.

First, lessons need to be well planned out. Professors Carol Shepherd and Enid Acosta-Tello suggest using the three phase lesson. The three phase lesson consists of a core lesson for all students, a basic lesson for struggling students, and an enrichment lesson for advanced students. The prior knowledge required and the concepts to master are the same for the three phases, but the tasks are different. According to Shepherd and Acosta-Tello, every lesson should be “based on the assumption that the individual brings previously learned concepts to the instruction. However, students come to school with differing skills, abilities, and experiences” (2015, p. 96). Their three phase lesson model is based on this assumption, and designed to accommodate the differing skills, abilities, and experiences that students have. Based on the lesson’s objective, the teacher needs to make concepts to master. Each of these concepts must be assessable by a task. This is where the differentiation comes in. Using the three phase lesson approach, each concept should have three tasks of differing levels: basic, core, and enrichment. Once these are in place, students can be differentiated into these categories.

Once differentiated lessons are carefully planned with tasks oriented toward basic, core, and enrichment needs, the real-time differentiation can happen. Researchers Seth Parsons, Stephanie Dodman, and Sarah Burrowbridge (2013) claim that “the adaptations made in the midst of instruction are an important aspect of differentiation that is frequently overlooked or discouraged” (p. 40). This is where relationships are very important. Teachers must get to know their students and constantly be monitoring their progress and searching for their learning styles. If the teacher’s prior knowledge of their students’ skill level is accurate and continually assessed, students can be differentiated ahead of time to the differing tasks. A pre-assessment can always be given at the beginning of the lesson to find where students’ abilities are with the task at hand.

Differentiation in real time can take many forms. During my student teaching internship in high school math, I have often used the technique of walking around and working with students individually during independent work time. This has worked quite well. Students have learned the routine of taking notes while I teach a particular mathematical concept, then they try a similar problem by themselves, when they finish or get stuck they raise their hand so I can either check for correctness or answer a question they have. I will often ask students who have solved their example problem to assist those who want help. Students have told me that they understand something better if they get the chance to teach it.

Other forms of differentiation can involve grouping. Teachers can group students based on needs, such as with the three phase lesson; learning styles; or interests. Elementary Teacher Holli Levy gives an example of needs-based grouping:

The teacher has taught the lesson and a small group of students need further instruction. The teacher pulls these students together for additional support. There is also a group who came into class knowing what was taught. The teacher can pull these students together and take the lesson to the next level through more challenging activities. Ability groups are not stagnant; they change each time we assess the children. (2008, p. 163)

This grouping is based on formative assessment that is ongoing. Similar grouping can be used for learning styles or interests, depending on the lesson itself.

  Differentiation is difficult to do well, but is attainable with careful, layered planning and real-time flexibility based on ongoing formative assessment. As Todd Rose explained with his fighter pilot metaphor, it could make all the difference to a skilled student who just isn’t being provided the right instructional adjustment.

References

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