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Differentiation and Faith: Improve the Learning Process by Finding Every Student's God-Given Talents

By Andrea P. Beam and Deanna Keith

The principle of differentiation of instruction is found in the many ways that God has used to communicate with people. As recorded in Hebrews 1:1, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (NIV). It is important to recognize that God Himself did not select just one way to communicate.

For example, in the Old Testament, God communicated with Moses by speaking to him through the burning bush; 40 years later God communicated with the Israelites through the written word of the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself taught verbally, rarely using the written word. After His death, people began to write down communication and doctrine for the church, including what is now known as the Bible. In the New Testament, Paul says that even nature teaches us: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

The examples of differentiation God has given us through His Word clearly demonstrate various ways of communicating and teaching. As Christian

educators, we strive to emulate our master Teacher. “As it is, there are many parts, but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20). Even today, God’s children learn by hearing the preaching of God’s Word, by reading the Word, and by understanding His voice through prayer. No one method is of lesser importance than the others. Although we are all members of the Body of Christ, we do not pray the same, we do not exhibit the same spiritual gifts, we do not all serve the same functions of the Body, and we do not all learn in the same way. Our challenge as educators is to find the best way to instruct each student, not one way to instruct all students.

Society uses many buzzwords to describe American education and the new trends educators “should” follow to stay ahead of the curve. One such trend that has developed, thanks to Carol Ann Tomlinson, is that of differentiation. “In differentiated classrooms, teachers ... accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act

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on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning

modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity” (1999, 2). A succinct definition is that “in a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs” (Tomlinson 2001, 7).

Differentiation is a unique method of address-

ing issues of diversity in academic ability, learning styles, interests, culture, and motivation that many of our students encounter. To differentiate a lesson is to allow students various freedoms. For example, many teachers find that students learn best in environments that allow freedom of choice, open-ended exploration, freedom from judgment, validation of every student’s experience, and belief in every student’s ability.

Children learn in different ways, so teachers must teach in different ways. Long gone are the days when educators can stand at the front of the classroom and lecture for hours on end to students begging for a fire drill to break up the monotony of the day. Today, the No Child Left Behind Act¹ charges educators with educating all of our children, including the disadvantaged, and ensuring academic growth with each passing year. To promote this necessary advancement, instructors need to understand the multiple intelligences that children possess and reach them according to their interests and abilities.

Before Christian educators can develop a successful differentiated lesson, the teacher must understand students’ ideal learning strengths. Nobody describes the multiple intelligences better than the originator of the theory himself, Howard Gardner. Gardner has been extremely successful for decades as he describes what it means to teach to our student’s strengths—hence, to differentiate.

Gardner has identified multiple specific intelligences found in learners. Children with linguistic strengths, as one would imagine, think in words. Because of this, they love reading, writing, and telling stories. For academic success, they need books, audio, discussions, and debates. Logical-mathematical learners, on the other hand, think by reasoning. They love experimenting, questioning, and puzzles. For these students, teachers should use manipulatives and trips to the planetarium and museum.

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Spatial learners think in images and pictures. They love to design, draw, and visualize. Teachers should use art, video, and movies to motivate spatial learners. Bodily-kinesthetic learners enjoy somatic (physical) sensations. They love to dance, run, and jump. Additionally, they enjoy role-playing, movement, and hands-on activities. Finally, musical learners think via rhythm and melodies. Students who are musically

strong love to sing, whistle, and hum. They learn best with sing-along time and playing music.

A chart is an efficient way to take in abundant material. In *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (2009, 52–53), Thomas Armstrong shows the different types of learners, as proposed by Gardner, and summarizes various teaching strategies that will enable successful learning by these varied students in the following tables.

Summary of the “Seven Ways of Teaching”

Table 1

Intelligence	Teaching Activities (examples)	Teaching Materials (examples)	Instructional Strategies
Linguistic	Lectures, discussions, word games, storytelling, choral reading, journal writing, etc.	Books, audio recorders, typewriters, stamp sets, audiobooks, etc.	Read about it, write about it, talk about it, listen to it
Logical-Mathematical	Brain teasers, problem-solving, science experiments, mental calculation, number games, critical thinking, etc.	Calculators, math manipulatives, science equipment, math games, etc.	Quantify it, think critically about it, conceptualize it
Spatial	Visual presentations, art activities, imagination games, mind-mapping, metaphor, visualization, etc.	Graphs, maps, video, LEGO sets, art materials, optical illusions, cameras, picture library, etc.	See it, draw it, visualize it, color it, mind-map it
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Hands-on learning, drama, dance, sports that teach, tactile activities, relaxation exercises, etc.	Building tools, clay, sports equipment, manipulatives, tactile learning resources, etc.	Build it, act it out, touch it, get a “gut feeling” of it, dance it
Musical	Superlearning music, rapping, songs that teach	audio recorder, recorded music, musical instruments	Sing it, rap it, listen to it
Interpersonal	Cooperative learning, peer tutoring, community involvement, social gatherings, etc.	Board games, party supplies, props for role plays, etc.	Teach it, collaborate on it, interact with respect to it
Intrapersonal	Individual instruction, independent study, options in course of study, self-esteem building, etc.	Self-checking materials, journals, materials for projects, etc.	Connect it to your personal life, make choices with regard to it

Table 2

Intelligence	Sample Educational Movement (primary intelligence)	Sample Teacher Presentation Skill	Sample Activity to Begin a Lesson
Linguistic	Whole Language	Teaching through storytelling	Long word on the board
Logical-Mathematical	Critical Thinking	Socratic questioning	Posing a logical paradox
Spatial	Integrated Arts Instruction	Drawing/mind-mapping concepts	Unusual picture on the projector
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Hands-On Learning	Using gestures/dramatic expressions	Mysterious artifact passed around the class
Musical	Suggestopedia	Using voice rhythmically	Piece of music played as students come into class
Interpersonal	Cooperative Learning	Dynamically interacting with students	“Turn to a neighbor and share ...”
Intrapersonal	Individualized Instruction	Bringing <i>feeling</i> into presentation	“Close your eyes and think of a time in your life when ...”

Dr. Tomlinson, taking into account different learning strengths, continues to address the how-to of differentiation in her book *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2001). She suggests that teachers adjust class activities according to student strengths. Some ways teachers can differentiate are by incorporating independent study, tiered activities, flexible grouping, and alternate assessment.

If all teachers would differentiate their lessons, student success rates could hit an all-time high.

We must differentiate in our mind-set first and our lessons second.

Not only would student attention increase, but teacher enjoyment would improve as well. Tomlinson highlights qualities of a differentiated classroom:

- "Student differences are studied as a basis for planning"
- "Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to [help teachers] understand how to make instruction more responsive to learner need"
- "Many instructional arrangements are used"
- "Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction"
- "Multi-option assignments are frequently used"
- "Multiple materials are provided"
- "The teacher facilitates students' skills at becoming more self-reliant learners" (Tomlinson 1999, 16)

In the most significant commandment that He gave to Christians, Jesus said to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). This verse clearly commands

us go to all people everywhere and teach them through whatever methods are necessary. Christian educators must recognize that to reach all—regardless of age, race, disability, socioeconomic status, or other differences—we must differentiate in our mind-set first and our lessons second.

Note

1. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Public Law 107-110, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 115 (2002): 1439–1440, codified at *U.S. Code* 20 (2006), § 6301.

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