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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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# Faith: A New Component within Differentiated Instruction

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## **Introduction**

In the discipline of Education, Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a strategy teachers use to improve the learning experiences for students in today's culturally and academically diverse classrooms. In higher education settings, including those with a Christian emphasis, there has been a focus on widening participation of people from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (David, 2009). Research has shown that educational, purposeful interaction between diverse groups of college students is related to personal growth and development, vocational preparation, intellectual development and diversity competence regardless of academic, cultural or religious affiliation (Hu & Kuh, 2003). Scholars such as Astin (1993) suggest that affective learning is most influenced by classroom interactions which flourish in a strong community (or *Koinonia*) environment. The current study describes DI as a scientifically-researched teaching strategy that is based on prevalent, psycho-educational foundations. In addition, it highlights community building constructs evident in religious authorship. The study includes data gleaned from an informal survey utilized to demonstrate how DI promotes a participatory learning environment among students from varying religious backgrounds in the Christian college classroom.

## **Defining Differentiated Instruction**

DI is a scientifically researched-based method of teaching that has proven successes in pre-kindergarten to twelfth-grade classrooms since 1993 (Forsten, 2004; Gregory, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005). Teachers tailor instruction to meet student needs by using four instructional elements to account for variances in student learning and student affect. These elements are Content, Process, Product and Learning environment. DI methodology ensures that the content a student is exposed to, the process by which he/she learns it, how the student demonstrates what

he/she has learned, and how conducive the student perceives the classroom environment, is matched with that student's readiness level, interests and preferred mode of learning (Tomlinson, 2004). To illustrate, DI is comprised of two overarching themes: Instructional elements and Student characteristics. Each is further delineated into subcategories. The subcategories for Instructional elements are Content, Process, Product and Learning environment. The subcategories for student characteristics are Readiness, Interest and Learning profile. Readiness, defined as a point of required mastery where a child cannot successfully function by her/himself, but can succeed with scaffolding or support; Interest, defined as a psychological state of complete involvement in an activities to the degree that time and fatigue fade; Learning Profile, defined as a student's preferred mode of learning affected by a number of factors, including learning style, intelligence, preference, gender and culture (Tomlinson, 2004). Figure 1 helps summarize the definitions and examples of DI and the DI framework with faith proposed as a fourth student characteristic:

Figure 1. The Differentiated Instruction (DI) framework with faith included as a fourth student characteristic. The figure includes DI categories and subcategories in addition to examples that illustrate potential or existing manifestations in higher education environments.

Differentiated Instruction								
Categories	Student Characteristics				Instructional Elements			
Sub-categories	Readiness	Interest	Learning profile	Faith	Content	Process	Product	Learning environment
Definitions	Point of required mastery where a student cannot successfully function by her/himself, but can succeed with scaffolding or support	Psychological state of complete involvement in an activity to the degree that time and fatigue fade	Factors that enhance or deter learning for individual students	Practice or tradition of worshipping, following and believing in Jesus	Curriculum and information to which a student is exposed	Manner by which a student constructs or makes sense of ideas	Manner by which a student is able or asked to demonstrate learning	Setting where learning takes place
Examples	GPA Formative assessments Prerequisite coursework Curriculum introduction Survey Pretest	Purposeful interactions with Jesus, peers, teacher, text Time on task Degree-seeking Related experiences to discipline Career	SES Race Linguistic code Intelligence Gender Culture	Public prayer Inspirational reading Silent devotion	Biblical Studies Philosophy Math Sciences Business Languages Nursing Education Art	Responsive teaching Grouping Presentation method Flipped classroom Instructional strategy	Service opportunities Projects Summative assessments Reports Tests Quizzes Performances	Chapel Classroom Online Campus community Off-campus field settings

Adapted from Tomlinson, C. A. (2005). Traveling the road to differentiation in staff development. *National Staff Development Council*, 26(4), 8-12.

Historical, as well as recent research, in instructional strategy and educational environment suggests that when teachers and professors demonstrate a sincere investment in student success, students are more apt to maintain interest in content and vocation. The relationship of the teacher to a student in the presence of content is at the crux of efforts to improve performance (Elmore, 1996; Kuh, 2001; Weimer, 2013). By design, DI promotes teacher investment in student learning. However, DI design, until now, has proposed no formal declaration that recognizes a students' faith as a means by which college professors can further cultivate an interest for and demonstrate an investment in student learning and success. This paper explores faith as a fourth Student characteristic, adding to student Readiness, Interest and Learning profile. For the purpose of this report, faith is defined as belief in Jesus Christ as Savior. Faith tradition or faith practice is the manner by which students choose to worship Jesus, either by silent devotion, public prayer or an inspirational reading.

### **Differentiation in the College Classroom**

At the college level, DI is recognized in teacher education programs as a manner by which “prospective teachers may be encouraged to create progressive learning environments that resist labels, focus on substance vs. form, and recognize the importance of both public accountability and personal responsibility to individual students” (Sherman, 2009, p. 50). “Differentiation can be the crucible for change encouraging pre-service and in-service teachers to construct best practice for responding to what Harvard University’s Hans Hofmann calls “the tremendous plasticity and potential built in to the genes of each individual” (Shaw, 2003; Gould et al. 2010, pp. 3-4). In short, DI is an instructional strategy many Christian higher educators can utilize to reach and teach college students with diverse academic, social, cultural and now, faith-based

practices. The information in this paper seeks to provide the reader with a description and rationale as to how faith may be added to Readiness, Interest and Learning Profile as a fourth student characteristic within the framework of DI.

### **Faith Ideals Common with Differentiation**

Christian theology purports that Jesus is relevant in our lives and in the lives of others with whom we interact. It requires “abiding and deep-rooted joy are anchored in Christ, and in loving, humble relations with each other” (Brensinger, 2000, p. 61). It calls for us to transcend our immediate desires to those that will allow us to share in the comforts of the Lord through caring for others.

Christian faith practices vary across denominations. Christian practices have commonalities as well. For example, Baptist, Brethren in Christ, Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox and Wesleyan traditions aspire to the impact Christ has on one’s life. Jesus’ influences and teachings are not exclusive, but simple and applicable to “everyone, everywhere, in every time in history, regardless of age, color or state of life” (Kelly, 2010, p. 47). Amidst the countless religions and religious traditions delineating Christianity, ideals highlighted in the book *Gracious Christianity* (2006) have been lauded as a theological conversation approaching “the beliefs that matter most to people who are called to love God and their neighbors” (Okholm, as cited in Jacobsen & Sawatsky, 2006). Its definition is broadened to include describing an ability of those who envelope this tradition, to serve as conduits of God’s love and to serve as messengers of His love to others (Jacobsen & Sawatsky, 2006). The Bible encourages us as Christians, to accept others as Christ did; to accept with gratitude those oppressed and unfortunate; to understand that in His eyes, there are no “undesirables” (Yancey, 2005, p. 155). DI encourages us to embrace

individual differences (e.g., disability, culture, learning style) to facilitate learning for *all* students.

As Christian educators and scholars at faith-based institutions, we have the distinct responsibility to not only impart subject-specific knowledge upon our students, but to deepen and enrich their faith through, or at times exclusive of, the practices and strategies we implement in our classes. We are called to demonstrate care and our selfless commitment to our students along their journey of scholarship and faith integration. We may choose to begin class with devotion, end class with prayer, or call attention to a faith practice as a result of teaching subject matter within our area of expertise. As faculty we imbricate faith and scholarship. Understanding this is essential to our mission as faith messengers for students. But at times, this can be difficult for reasons such as varying faith denominations present within Christian institutions, the necessity to teach content in a set time frame or unique learning environment (i.e., semester, intensive, online, digital) and academic and cultural diversity in higher education is on the rise (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002). One instructional method that is implemented to help understand then imbricate these varying denominations, content expectations, and diversity in higher education through instructional delivery is DI.

### **The Differentiated Instruction Framework Now**

DI is comprised of two overarching themes: Instructional elements and Student characteristics. Each is further delineated into subcategories. The subcategories for Instructional elements are Content, Process, Product and Learning environment. The subcategories for student characteristics are Readiness, Interest and Learning profile. In theory, Differentiated Instruction is instruction that seeks to maximize student growth by recognizing that students have different ways of learning, different interests and different ways of responding to

instruction. It stems from beliefs about differences among learners and individual learning processes (Anderson, 2007). In practice, it involves offering several different learning experiences in response to these varied needs. As noted earlier, educators modify learning activities and materials in three ways: by difficulty, so as to challenge students at different readiness levels; by topic, in response to students' interests; and by student learning profile in response to a student's preferred way of learning or expressing her or himself (Ravitch, 2007). It involves providing all students with varying instructional approaches that allow them to acquire instructional elements as content, to process, construct, or make sense of ideas and to be provided with teaching materials relevant to their characteristics which are defined as Readiness, Interest, and Learning profile effectively, regardless of differences in ability.

DI consists of a systematic approach to planning curriculum and instruction giving consideration to the dual goals of honoring each student's learning needs and maximizing each student's learning capacity (Tomlinson & Doughty, 2005). It requires educators focus on the "nature of the student and the essential meaning of the curriculum" (Tomlinson & Doughty, 2005, p. 6). An educator's consideration for the nature of the student's learning preference conveys then, a message of caring hence demonstrating her/his commitment to student success. Furthermore, it shows that the professor has a vested interest in students and wants to understand what they want to know and how they want to learn. This expression of caring contributes to the creation of what the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (trans. 1978) referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD. This zone is a theoretical, psychological space among participants in which students collaborate with others (e.g., educators, peers) to solve complex problems, gradually internalizing increasingly sophisticated psychological functions (Holzman, 1997).

Differentiating instructional elements based on student characteristics increases the likelihood that students will learn as much as possible as efficiently as possible and also allows the educator to recognize individual differences (Sprenger, 2003). This promotes successful establishment and maintenance of Vygotsky's ZPD by contributing to the caring relationship students seek and establish with professors (Goldstein, 1999; Kanevsky & Keighley 2003; Levykh, 2008; Fredricks, Alfeld & Eccles, 2010). The following section will provide the reader with examples of how differentiation can support the professors role in ZPD as well as establish a student's faith practice as a fourth dimension to the Student characteristics category of DI.

#### **Addressing the Student Characteristic Subcategories Using DI**

The manner by which a professor can attend to a student Readiness to learn is illustrated when the professor has an understanding of the academic background and academic ability of the student or students in question. For example, if a professor of religious theory is teaching a freshman class about consubstantiation, he or she might first establish that the students in the class have either ever been exposed to the term or already fully understand what the term means. Perhaps the professor establishes this by an informal survey or pretest to ascertain the academic level at which the student is functioning. The survey or pretest data serves as a means by which the professor can tailor instruction for the students who first need to comprehend what the term means in order to proceed with and successfully interact with forthcoming content.

The element of Interest is fostered when a professor integrates student choice into her or his curriculum. This is illustrated, for example, in a service learning course where students are able to choose an organization for which they would have a vocational or faith-related interest in providing unconditional service. It may also be illustrated if the professor allows students to choose the manner by which they prefer to demonstrate learning course concept. For example, if

a course requirement is to demonstrate understanding of the writings of Henri Nouwen, the professor may require that the student either write a synthesis paper about the subject as one option or create a presentation about the subject as another option.

Learning profile takes into consideration the modality by which a student maximizes her or his potential to make sense of and process information. For example, most professors are acquainted with visual, auditory and tactile modalities, with the understanding that some students learn by viewing information, others by listening to information and yet others by active, hands-on involvement. Modality instruction was expanded upon in the last few decades by scholars such as Howard Gardner with *Multiple Intelligence Theory*, Spencer Kagan with *Cooperative Learning Theory* and Marzano's *The Art and Science of Teaching*. All these theories and theorist have given much consideration to the uniqueness of the individual and his or her specific learning profile. Carol Tomlinson's *Differentiated Instruction Theory* encompasses many aspects of each theory presented here, but gives consideration to how each can be efficiently integrated and implemented to reach all learners in the classroom without having to individualize instruction for every student during every class period. The addition of *Faith* as a fourth student characteristic permits us as Christian educators to call upon our own ideals to interact positively with those created in the image and likeness of Christ. Our faith-scholarship takes shape in the practice of Differentiating Instruction for students in our classes. We are called to recognize that their unique characteristics (i.e., academic, social, cultural and religious) are gifts bestowed upon them by Christ in His image and likeness. As the relationship of Christian ideals to Differentiated Instruction is gradually evidenced in this written account, information reported in the following section supports its use for Christian educators.

### **Implementing Differentiated Instruction as a Christian Practice**

The Jacobsen's (2006) challenge Christian scholars to "use disciplinary knowledge as a fixed point of reference to critique our own Christian faith" (p. 154). By critique, one might assume that within the content of their writings, the authors ask us to develop our understanding of our faith practices as they apply to our interactions with Christ and how these interactions with Christ influence our curriculum and our teaching.

The Christian relationship with Christ, although beneath the surface is complex, is simplified by the phrase "follow Jesus." So when we as scholars are asked to follow Jesus when we teach, what really are we asked to do? Are we asked to disseminate information to students? Are we asked to impinge our own faith practices about Christ onto our students? Or are we asked by Christ to accept all students as stewards of the Lord's grace regardless of the diverse backgrounds from which they come? If we proclaim to be gracious and caring followers of Christ, we are cognizant of disseminating information and of our faith traditions, but embody the notion that students (and others) are stewards of God's grace and worthy of our individualized attention. Students do not only come to us with diverse backgrounds, but with God-given gifts and talents that need to be nurtured that for we as Christian scholars, possess unique qualifications.

Differentiated Instruction is to education as graciousness in our Christianity is to religion; a fruitful and sustainable analogy for the Christian higher education classroom. When DI is utilized, faith concepts become more self-evident. Recall that the Bible encourages us, as Christians, to accept others as Christ did; to accept with gratitude those oppressed and unfortunate; to understand that in His eyes, there are no "undesirables" (Yancey, 2005, p. 155). In addition, teachers may be encouraged to create progressive learning environments that "resist

labels, focus on substance vs. form and recognize the importance of both public accountability and personal responsibility to individual students” (Sherman, 2009, p. 50). When drawing meaning from both quotes, one might interpret that when we Differentiate Instruction for our students, we are in a sense acknowledging that they are unique individuals created by Christ in His image and likeness. We are accepting diversity as Christ did, accepting with gratitude those who may be less fortunate and are creating learning environments that relinquish such classifications. When we adhere to the elements that comprise DI, Readiness, Interest, Learning Profile and now, Faith, we make a conscious connection and concerted effort to follow Jesus in our scholarship and in our teaching.

This commitment to our students generalizes across all populations when we embrace DI and faith as integrated themes and motivational contexts of caring. The process of inculcating both practices within our teaching allows us to extend our thinking, to reflect on our current practices and to envision how faith-scholarship shapes our own relationship with Christ to students with disabilities, to students of other countries and to students of other religions. As supported in research, encouraging students to grasp an understanding of their intrinsic value, their connection to others, and their ability to impact humankind through their actions could have a dramatic impact on the world they inhabit (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Through such engagement, students can understand the power of forgiveness and their ability to affect their own situation through peaceful equanimity (Astin & Keen, 2006). In order to extend this research and assess and communicate the rationale and purpose for Faith differentiation in our class, an informal survey was created then distributed to students. The following section describes its use and results.

### **A Class Exercise in Faith Differentiation: An Informal Survey**

Educators are schooled in DI and DI implementation typically beginning in their second year of baccalaureate education. At the end of a specialized degree program in education, most intuitions have equipped their graduates with both theory and practice in Differentiating Instruction; theory through text and readings, practice through field experiences and student teaching. Pre-service teachers are trained to differentiate content, process and product through capitalizing on student learning ability, profile and interest despite their area of expertise (i.e., Math, Science, English, Music).

**Using Differentiation to uncover student faith practices.** Of the many combinations by which DI is implemented, Differentiating Instruction by a proposed fourth Student characteristic, Faith, was chosen for this informal study. As stated early, Christianity and faith practices vary across denominations. Given this, it is important for faculty to create a community of learning early on. In order for ZPD to be facilitated within this community, a clear understanding of how the students wanted to learn while interacting with Christ needed to be established. The information regarding student faith practices was gathered via an informal, in-class survey (see Appendix). Note that the purpose of this survey was not to seek information regarding gender, culture or disability. Its intention, however, was twofold: to gather preliminary information indicating student preferences (e.g., public prayer, silent devotion, inspirational reading) for practicing Faith in class and to demonstrate how Differentiated Instruction is employed in a classroom thus giving a nod to active learning.

There were 21 students who participated in the survey and did so voluntarily. Twenty of the students were college sophomores. One of the students was a college senior. Two of the students were classified as non-traditional. All of the students were enrolled in a Teacher

Certification Program in central, PA. By observation, there were five males and 16 females ranging in age from approximately 20 years to 44 years.

The survey was distributed as part of the “Creating a Community of Learners” week in an introductory teacher preparation class at the college. The students were asked to participate in an informal survey to record the manner by which they were interested in worshipping Christ while in class. The survey asked one question to which the students were to choose one answer but also, they were given the opportunity to record other questions or add comments about the survey or class at the end of the form (see Appendix). After a brief introduction to and discussion about the survey, the survey was distributed.

The survey was informal and distributed to a convenience sample. From the 21 (N = 21) students who completed the survey, seven students indicated that they would prefer public prayer as a means by which they would feel comfortable worshipping Christ in class, seven chose silent devotion, and seven chose inspirational reading. Four of the students included “second choices” but also wrote they would do anything so as to recognize Christ’s presence in each person they encountered while in the class or elsewhere (Brensinger, 2000). Many of the comments recorded at the bottom of the surveys shared thoughts of gratitude for the professor’s attention to the topic and to the mechanism by which the professor used to demonstrate investment in and care for students.

**How student input was realized.** Throughout the remainder of the semester, each week a student was named to share a preferred faith practice. For those choosing public prayer, the students selected or simply recited a prayer before class began. For those choosing silent devotion, they engaged in listening to others and reflected on the devotion for the week. For those choosing inspirational reading, students read a quote that inspired them to live a Christ-

filled life. The quote did not necessarily have to be biblical, but it did have to have deep meaning for them and be adequately conveyed as such to their peers. The class became the venue for introducing how differences in children impact their ability to learn.

Differentiating Instruction is one of the teaching strategies covered in this introductory teaching practices course. Teaching this strategy via active learning to the college students helped them understand that children too, will come with varying degrees of academic preparation, parental support, affective mannerisms and motivation or ability to learn and faith practices while simultaneously learning to build a better relationship with Jesus through reflection in class (Tomlinson et al. 2004; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2006). This exercise also helped me learn how my students chose to interact with Christ, not realizing the level to which my faith, the insights of different Christian denominations and practices, and my scholarship, had made on the students.

### **Resulting Implications for Faith Differentiation**

As a scholar of Education, I personally have had over 20 years of experience working with DI in both pre-kindergarten to twelfth-grade and higher education classes. Having heard the followers of faiths other than mine speak about their relationship with God, has formed the foundation on which I base my relationships with others; neighbors, friends, family, students and colleagues alike. Koinonia or fellowship, is a hallmark of the Christian experience and as a result, a cornerstone of Christian educational philosophy (Pazmino, 1997). Throughout this paper the reader was exposed to perspectives on Christian practices as well as to current and research-based practices in Education. A scholar might conclude that Faith may be evidenced as a motivational context for and a fourth Student characteristic within the framework of

Differentiated Instruction. Albeit through evidence that is supported, the responsibility herein lies with the beholder of this newfound revelation.

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## Appendix

### Practicing Faith Traditions in Class XXXX 111

**Please tell me how you would like to express your devotion to Christ in our class. (Check one option, add additional information if you feel comfortable doing so).**

- Public prayer**
  
- Silent devotion**
  
- Inspirational reading**
  
- Other**

**Comments or questions:**

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