

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

Take these broken wings and learn to fly.....

Every year comes to a close and I find myself reflecting on the good, the bad, and the ugly. The period three animation class has left me but they will never be forgotten. We journeyed through the year together and developed our own individual paths of learning. My goals for my study and class included creating projects that would have an impact, increase motivation, and provide personal challenge regardless of skill level, background, gender, or learning style. Throughout the course of the study I implemented various differentiation strategies and individualized projects, tailored to each student's learning style: creative, analytical and practical. There were some struggles in the development of projects, finding research to match the needs of my class and grade level, and getting the students to understand the benefit of the research. But what did emerge through the personalization of projects was growth in self-confidence and then naturally came the increased motivation, engagement, quality, and ownership.

Break the mold.....

Trying to break free of the traditional high school project is not easy. We have been programmed to teach and learn in one particular manner and setting. Other teachers and I included are guilty of creating assignments that are a one size fits all mentality and expecting all students to succeed at them. We wonder why we are so disappointed in test scores, why students lack motivation, engagement, and ownership.

Implementing differentiation and learning styles into my curriculum did not come without trials and tribulations; it is difficult to let go of some of the old habits and time consuming

creating new ones. As Tomlinson states it takes up to "...five years to create a fully inclusive differentiated classroom." She suggests starting small, something is better than nothing, then keep adding one new piece of differentiation to the curriculum, or to another class, just keep doing it.

Throughout the study I was able to gather qualitative and quantitative data through surveys, exit slips, animations, and drawings. This feedback allowed me to track motivation, progress, and individual problems, and enabled me to make any necessary on the spot changes in project structure. Once the data was gathered and sorted I was able to identify themes of confidence, ownership, and intrinsic motivation.

The students were involved in designing the animation projects and providing feedback during the study. They were made aware of their learning styles during all phases of the study and gained understanding of how we were utilizing them. Each responded with valuable input that gave me the insight on how to redesign the animation projects. Each time we adjusted the assignments I was ultimately giving the students more control of the project direction and content. I was still meeting my needs of teaching the students the required course information but I was able to implement projects to fit their learning style, skill level, interests, and background.

There were three projects that particularly stood out in my research when I noticed changes in student behavior, community, and confidence. The first project, "What type of cartoon character are you?" changed the dynamics of the class. Students were proud to share their comic created selves and stories, they thought it was funny. But underlying for all of us it was a chance to get to know each other on a safe yet personal level. This project allowed me to find out about the students' personalities, interests, and in some cases background information too. The class

dynamics were never the same from this point on. We had evolved from an introverted class to an extroverted group that was comfortable with one another.

The next animation project, an extension of the cartoon self, was self-designed to fit the learning style of each student. Provided with prompts and scenarios creative, analytical, and practical, they were to choose one and create their final animations. This project started off with enthusiasm but that soon changed. I had not taken into mind the students' individual skills, backgrounds, and interests. I gave them control to create longer projects than they were ready for. Many were not yet at a skill level to achieve the ideas they had, and some were still fairly new to the class. Over time this particular project proved not to be the best of assignments, but it was a learning experience for all of us. I found I needed to take into account the individual aspects of each student; learning styles was only one small piece of the successes I found. Tomlinson states, "We have such a huge range of readiness in classes that not to address readiness and to assume that a focus on learning styles is going to take care of everything, is generally way off base. In terms of both needs of learners and in terms of what research tells us, readiness is where we need to begin and focus, and then we can open things up by looking at those other categories" (Tomlinson, 2011). I found I was only looking at one third of the problem not the whole, so I knew the next part of my study needed to incorporate the other missing pieces and why the current project was not as successful as I thought it would be.

By the second phase of the study, through creative design and various project approaches, I was able to blend what I have come to believe the most important ideas about differentiation; providing project choice, respecting students as individual learners, utilizing learning styles, being aware of skill level and ability, and incorporating interest and background. It sounded like

a lot of information to deal with when attempting to write an animation assignment but I couldn't see not doing it either. I wrote individualized assignments based on each student's needs. The students and I discussed the assignment one on one and came to agreement about theme, content, and interest that would work best for them. I also knew I wanted to incorporate skill standards, content, and their learning style into the assignment. The only way I could see to manage the mixed abilities of the students' necessities and mine was to utilize prescriptive assignments tailored to each student's needs. This strategy turned out to be one of the best things that happened with my experience in differentiation and learning styles. I was able to design a project that gave each student a summary of their progress, a theme designed in their learning style, challenges appropriate for their individual skill level, and a connection to their interest and backgrounds. The students were involved throughout the design of the project. I know that this project was successful because of the students' feedback, collected data, observational practices, and quality of their final animation products.

Through the implementation of differentiation strategies interwoven with each student's learning style I was able to provide individualized instruction to not one, not some, but all students. Looking at their learning styles provided me insight in why a student comes up with a great idea and has a hard time executing it. Or a practical learner needs to have a connection to real world uses or becomes disinterested and that analytical learners like to dissect or solve problems. I had doubts during the first phases of the study that used Sternberg learning styles and Tomlinson's differentiation ideas. I didn't feel confident in using the tools that were not particularly designed for my subject matter let alone high school grades. It was also about letting go of some traditional mindsets and experimenting with something new and it proved to be successful.

Differentiation and learning styles was a of a powerful new way to manage my course content, students, and classroom environment, and it provided areas of change and growth in me, my students, and my curriculum. There were many positive experiences that developed through the use of differentiation strategies and interweaving them with learning styles and personalization. Through it all emerged confidence, pride, community, and respect for individual needs. The students became more independent and frequently asked one another for help, they were excited about their projects and eager to share their progress, and they connected with one another regardless of grade, background, or skill level.

Finally I must agree with Tomlinson that is all teachers' responsibility to continue to try to reach all students successfully as we can. I have experienced the power of differentiation and learning styles and the difference it can make. My students and I benefited from this experience in numerous ways. Tomlinson sums it up best, "Differentiation is an instructional approach to help teachers teach with individuals as well as content in mind. Differentiation really means trying to make sure that teaching and learning work for the full range of students, which really should be our goal as teachers. We've often taught as though all the kids in the classroom are wired exactly alike to learn, as though they should come in programmed to learn on the teacher's schedule" (Tomlinson, 2011).

Implications

Differentiation and student achievement go hand in hand. To engage, motivate, and build self-confidence, teachers need to implement the use of differentiation into their curriculum regardless of course content. As seen in my research, students' level of engagement, motivation, and self-confidence increased and in turn so did the quality of work. I was successful in reaching

not one, not some, but all students. I know that students benefited from the structure and involvement as was seen in my own study and that of the The American Association of School Administrators also believes there are many benefits to differentiated instruction which include:

Students were motivated to stay engaged in learning. Students seemed to enjoy learning, showed more interest and motivation, maintained higher energy levels and stayed more engaged in the activities.

Student needs were being met. Students seemed appropriately challenged and worked comfortably at their level of ability, resulting in improved time-on-task and behavior.

Students experienced greater student success and felt learning was more relevant. Students worked diligently and the quality of their work improved. The teachers provided documentation of higher scores on post-assessments and more frequent successes among low-achieving students.

Students felt greater ownership of content, products and performances. In an atmosphere where students were given more options about how they could learn the material and demonstrate mastery of the content, they seemed to actively enjoy learning. There was an improved sense of wanting to share what was learned.

Teachers gained new insights. Teachers learned a great deal about how their students work and learn. Many felt challenged to find more creative instructional strategies, even while using a prescribed curriculum, (AASA, 2007).

I was astounded by the level of mastery my students showed when I employed differentiation strategies my classroom. I feel that any teacher implementing differentiation would benefit in the same way regardless of the course content. Reaching more students is imperative as our nation struggles to keep up educationally amongst others. It is not about rote memorization and tests every week which will soon be forgotten. What is important is the long lasting impact the material has on a student and how they are able to apply it to themselves throughout their lives, not for one unit. If this is such, students will be more likely to have the confidence and means to graduate high school and college, be an integral part of their community, and succeed at challenging careers. The implications of differentiation are very clear

and I think more school, students, and communities would benefit if more educational facilities were on board.

Tips for Teachers

Depending on your individual needs and classroom developing differentiation can be a daunting task. I have included some basic guidelines and tips to keep in mind as you begin your own journey in creating a differentiated classroom.

Use all main components of differentiation not just one- To create a well-designed differentiation project be sure to look at all student facets; readiness, student interest, and student learning profile. Learning profile includes gender, culture, learning styles, and intelligence preferences.

Trial and Error- Don't be afraid to experiment with new strategies. It is ok if everything is not perfect or does not go as planned. This is a way to grow and reflect on the experience. This happened to me but instead of being discouraged I dug deeper and looked to the students for answers. The great thing about students is they will tell you the truth. Be patient—it will pay off in the end.

Student Voice and feedback- I could not have gotten through the year without this student feedback and voice. They provided me with so much insight and qualitative data that was developed through conversation, exit cards, drawings, animations, and reflection books. I would say continue with collection data throughout the year and after because students change, and so do their views, the outside world, etc. This information will also be helpful in the next round of project design and looking at what was effective or not. It is very important to use your students as a tool, listen to them and get to know your students as much as you can.

Expect to spend extra time developing material- This is a new area of study and is unfamiliar to many. Much of the developed material is geared toward academics and elementary to middle school grade levels, definitely not multimedia or animation. I needed to develop and many of my own resources based off of ideas meant for other areas. Once I felt more comfortable later in the year this became more natural in the development of my projects.

Assessment- It is ok to let some assessment become observational for certain skills and topics. Students need not feel pressured into a grade for everything they do. Allow time for practice, trial and error, and success, not relying on a percentage.

Use topics that students can relate to themselves- If students can find a connection with the material they will be more likely to be engaged in it. When a project or assignment means something to oneself it has value and substance, it becomes personal.

Assignments should incorporate real world scenarios- If and when at all possible make a relation to how your topic relates to the real world, whether it is a skill used in the career industry, how the skill is applied outside of class, or how learning that new topic affects them.

Engage them in various ways—all students are different- We are all different and we do not come pre-programmed to learn, take in, or execute information in the same manner. Be sure to give the students various resources in which to find and discover new material that is developed in different formats, learning styles, and needs. Give the students' choice in product and assignment execution and delivery. This will get students engaged with the content based on their learning profile and giving them control and ownership of their learning.

Let them feel confident and successful about their work- By providing a safe community for learning students will be able to give and take constructive criticism. Allow time for feedback and revision so the student has time to take yours and others advice. This will in turn give the students a chance to create higher quality products.

All in all, implementing differentiation is worth the student outcome and achievement.

The amount of change that I witnessed in student confidence, value, and ownership was evident as my research unfolded. Differentiation and learning styles unquestionably have a link but it is necessary to also incorporate all of the differentiation elements; student choice, student interest, and student learning profile. When any human feels a sense of value and pride a positive response comes naturally and that includes learning. One wants to learn more once engaged in material that means something to oneself and others around you. This is when I feel you will see a change in the quality of work, the use of content beyond the classroom doors, and students whom are excited to part of the class community. Should not just one, not some, but all students have a chance to learn?