

The Power of Differentiation

The last two decades have taught us a great deal about how students work and think and the differences between different students and how those differences change the way those students process information and learn. On the surface, as a teacher, its easy to say, well I cannot change my curriculum to suit every possible learning disability or quirk of personality. That is the old model of teaching that has been in place for many decades. Students came to a centralized class and the way the lessons were presented was what they got and it was up to the student to adjust to be successful or a failure.

The problem with that model is that it puts the weight of the responsibility to be successful in education on the student. That is all well and good at the college level where the students are essentially adults and they are expected to be ready to bare a larger level of responsibility. But at the elementary level, the burden of assuring that the student not only hears the lesson but understands it lies with the teacher. So in the last few years, a teaching style called "differentiation" has come along that utilizes innovative classroom methods to help all students come away with a solid understanding of the material, not just the few who were able to adjust to the single approach the teaching of the old model.

Differentiation begs the question, "Who is responsible for the education of the children?" The system where the children were exposed to a lecture, given an assignment which may have been cryptic to understand and sent home for the hapless portents to decipher what was expected is at best ineffective and at worst just plain lazy.

Modern approaches to education see the job of the teacher as not just to present information and to correct papers. The job of the teacher is to teach and that teacher is not a success until every student in his or her class has learned the information well and can interact with it to demonstrate that the information has become knowledge which is useful and applicable in daily life. This is a high requirement on teachers but anything short skirts the objectives of the teaching profession entirely.

One difference between students that drastically effects how well the student learns is learning styles. Some students are visual learners meaning they do well when they learn by seeing. Others can absorb and process information audibly whereas others must physically interact with the material to truly grasp it. Differentiation changes the way class time is used so the same information is presented in a variety of teaching methods so all students can use each style to fully grasps the material.

Differentiation may not have been possible before we had so many new teaching tools available via the internet. But with online resources, we can tap the power of video online and utilize online activities so that learning is no longer just listen, write it down and repeat it on a test. Learning now is interactive and repetitive in many different ways to the same information is processed uniquely each time. The outcome is the student not only can learn through the learning style that fits his or her personality but that learning is deeper and longer lasting.

Adapting your teaching style to fully tap the power of differentiation will take some time. There are new technologies to learn to use and a new approach to the daily lesson plan to understand and learn to work with. But once you are simultaneously teaching many while addressing the individual learning styles and unique characteristics of each child, you will find the outcome of your teaching so much more effective that you will never want to go back.

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Word Count 640