

Differentiation in Teaching and Learning: Principles and Practice

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In all areas of education pupils have diverse learning needs. Successful implementation of inclusive and democratic practice requires educators to ensure that these needs are properly addressed. This book purports to offer advice and explanation as to how teachers can adapt their teaching and curriculum provision to meet the needs of **all** pupils and teach them effectively. Throughout the text the authors use the terms 'teacher' and 'learner' to refer to everyone involved in giving or receiving learning in a learning situation such as a classroom or school. Both adults and pupils are viewed as having the potential to be teachers as well as learners.

On cursory inspection, the book displays a number of attractive features. It is compact in size and clearly written. The text is not overloaded with technical terms or academic jargon, making it accessible to a wide range of teachers. While references are kept to a minimum, additional material that might be useful is included in the bibliography.

The content is presented in nine relatively short chapters, which run to just over 170 pages. Each of the chapters is divided by subheadings, making them very readable and easy to follow. These are cross-referenced throughout, permitting quick access to other relevant material and allowing you to read them chapter-by-chapter or in whatever order is preferred. That being said however, by reading the book sequentially I think one may get a clearer picture of the field of differentiation and grounded learning in action.

The first three chapters of the book deal with issues involved in understanding differentiation, the principles that apply to it in the real world, the limitations imposed on it by our beliefs and stereotypes regarding learners, and the assumption that when a teacher teaches a learner learns. In Chapter 3 the reader is presented with a useful framework to help him/her analyse the process of differentiation in his/her own work place.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore how pedagogical, emotional, social and cognitive factors affect learning, and how understanding the way teachers and learners see themselves and each other can improve our ability to differentiate. Chapter 6 looks at how fluid thinking as opposed to rigid or fixed thinking can help teachers deal with challenging situations. It also provides a framework for the former and shows how this type of thinking relates to practice.

In Chapter 7 the authors present two process models of learning - a social model and a cognitive one. They claim that the cognitive model will apply to all learners and all learning contexts. In Chapter 8 the "self-esteem" of both teachers and learners is dealt with in relation to the emotional context for learning and differentiation. Here, the term "self-esteem" is used deliberately to convey a concept that is fluid and multidimensional as opposed to self-esteem, which is perceived as being "concrete or monistic." Finally, Chapter 9 presents two detailed and complex case studies with a view to helping the reader to develop further their analytical skills in relation to the practice of others. In

addition, they are invited to create a third case study themselves to help them ground their analysis in their own work.

Throughout the chapters the authors use examples and anecdotes very effectively to connect with the real world of the reader and to enable him/her ground the principles of differentiation in everyday practice. Within the text humour is used to illustrate a serious point and provide a smile or two as well. Summary details of sections of Chapters 4 and 7 help to augment further the reader's thinking.

Within each chapter the reader is asked to respond to some or all of four different types of task. These include: *reflection points*, which invite you to reflect on what you have just read in the context of your own practice and experience; *dialogue points*, which ask you to discuss certain issues with a work colleague; *case points*, which use real world teaching and learning experiences to reinforce and illuminate the principles and practice of differentiation; and *action points*, which invite you to take action or to do something in your own work place. Overall, these tasks encourage the reader to respond to the text in a self-help manner and could be useful as a basis for individual or whole school development. However, I feel that it may not be practical to perform all of the tasks due to time constraints.

In conclusion, I found the content of this book thought provoking and very relevant to the real world as experienced by teachers and learners. It provides new insights, perspectives, models, frameworks, and questions, in addition to practical applications to help teachers in whatever teaching and learning context they operate.

DIFFERENTIATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE by Tim O'Brien and Dennis Guiney, is published by Continuum, London, 2001, and costs Stg£15.99.