What Are We Differentiating in Differentiated Instruction?

In this article, Dr. Frank Serafini explores the topic of differentiated instruction. He suggests that to create supportive, effective learning experiences for the wide range of learners in our classrooms, we need to address the following six dimensions: 1) teaching, 2) texts, 3) tasks, 4) time, 5) talk, and 6) contexts. Each of these dimensions is discussed in the context of lessons and experiences focusing on reading instruction.

Although the topic of differentiated instruction has garnered a great deal of interest in educational circles of late, the concept has been an important part of pedagogical approaches for decades. A primary component of the Progressive Education movement initiated by the work of John Dewey and others in the early 1900s, the concept of addressing the needs, interests and abilities of individual learners has evolved into recent calls for the differentiation of instruction. Often positioned in opposition to a “banking or transmission model” of education (Freire, 1970), differentiation of instruction has been associated with child-centered, individualized instructional approaches.

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) outlined a Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRR) that has served as a framework for many literacy instructional programs and as a theoretical foundation for differentiating instruction. The GRR model is based on the gradual transfer of responsibility from the teacher or more proficient learner to the novice for a particular learning task (i.e., reading a text). The focus of this model is on the level of responsibility a teacher maintains to ensure a successful learning experience or completion of a particular task. In other words, the amount of responsibility the teacher releases to the student is the purview of the teacher, based on their knowledge of a particular student. This model assumes that responsibility initially resides with a teacher or more proficient learner and is given over to a student or novice learner during the learning experience.

The level of support provided by the teacher or the amount of responsibility released, has also been referred to as scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In this seminal article, their model of scaffolding was described as containing three important aspects: 1) allowing a learner to do what they are capable of individually, 2) offering support for what a learner can almost do on their own, and 3) doing for learners what they cannot do. Closely aligned with the concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), both the GRR and scaffolding models focus on the role of the teacher and their responsibility for maintaining the quality of the learning experiences provided to novice learners.

Using the term differentiation as a modifier indicates a particular type of pedagogical approach or instructional method offered by the classroom teacher. By altering the instructional approach, the assumption is that teachers can accommodate students’ abilities and provide optimal instructional experiences for all learners at their point of need. By default, the term differentiated also assumes there is a type of instruction that is undifferentiated, a one size fits all instructional approach that does not address the needs of individual learners, that should be eliminated.

Regardless of its history or philosophical foundation, the term differentiated instruction suggests teachers are responsible for providing the appropriate instructional approaches to enable individual students to reach their fullest potential as learners. One of the primary goals of these various models of differentiated instruction is to provide students, both within tasks and across tasks, with a manageable amount of challenge. The premise here is that we don’t want students to become overly frustrated with a given task or experience, yet, we want them presented with enough challenge to support their development as learners, in particular as readers.

The level of challenge that is part of a particular literary experience or task will differ for each reader and should not be assessed outside of authentic reading experiences (Johnston, 1997; Serafini, 2010). What an individual can do with the help of a more capable other is only understood in the actual context of learning something new, and can only be
of a learner’s ability and performance in the actual task. We do not know what learners are capable of doing on their own or with our support until we get them involved in a particular reading or learning task, observe them closely, talk with them, and reflect on their performance.

Considering these various approaches for differentiating instruction, the challenge for me was trying to conceptualize what was in fact to be differentiated? To provide support for individual learners, it seemed important to address more than variations in instructional approaches. To truly differentiate the learning experiences of individual students, educators should also consider addressing the selection of texts and resources of varying levels of complexity, the types of tasks associated with the learning experience, the amount of time allotted for students to complete these tasks, the type of teacher talk that accompanies the instructional experience, and the social and instructional contexts these experiences take place within. I believe that we need to address the following six dimensions as we attempt to create supportive, effective learning experiences for the wide range of learners in our classrooms: 1) teaching, 2) talk, 3) texts, 4) time, 5) talk, and 6) contexts. Each of these dimensions will be discussed in the context of lessons and experiences focusing on reading instruction.

Teaching

Varying the type of instructional approach, for example lecture, discussion, inquiry, or jigsaw reading has been the primary vehicle used to differentiate instruction to support the needs of individual learners. Differences among these instructional approaches include varying the amount of direct instruction, the level of student involvement and amount of responsibility required to complete the learning task.

Margaret Mooney (1990) conceptualized the level of support offered to readers and writers using the terms To, With, and By. These terms refer to the amount of teachers’ and students’ responsibility during a literacy instructional experience. Teachers were to invited to read TO students, read WITH students and allow students to read BY themselves in this instructional framework. The primary focus remained on the level of involvement of the teacher. Although reading TO students assumes more responsibility lies with the teacher, when teachers are reading TO students, the student’s role is to listen to the story and attend to the demonstrations being given. The responsibility is shared, though unevenly in this case. In addition, when students are reading BY themselves, it is the responsibility of the teacher to monitor students’ progress and maintain a successful reading experience by varying the texts and tasks assigned as required.

Other instructional approaches, for example scaffolded discussion groups or jigsaw reading (Opitz & Ford, 2008), vary the level of involvement of the teacher; however, they also vary in terms of the types of interactions among students and change the task and learning expectations. Lecturing to students requires less involvement on the part of the student, and may in fact develop more passive learners. It would be hard to argue that this instructional approach could evolve into more engaging types of approaches. However, simply changing the instructional approach or delivery method does not address the shift necessary to move from a transmission style of teaching to a more constructivist epistemology.

Direct lessons, in this case delivered through a lecture format, should be reconceptualised as the demonstration component of the lesson and not the entire instructional approach. Teachers need to explicitly demonstrate reading strategies that readers emulate in their independent reading time, but these demonstrations do not constitute effective lessons in and of themselves. Contextualizing the lesson, providing time for guided practice and independent use of the strategy, and opportunities to reflect on how the lesson served the needs of individual learners should also be part of the lesson (Serafini, 2004). Although varying the instructional approach is an important consideration in differentiating instructional experiences, other aspects of effective practice are worthy of our attention.

Texts

The selection of texts and other resources used in the learning experience can serve as a scaffold to provide support for a variety of reading abilities. Readers should spend as much time as possible with texts at the appropriate levels of difficulty, as determined by a variety of formulae and procedures. Providing readers with manageable amounts of challenge is an important aspect of levelled texts and procedures for selecting resources for instruction.

Texts are written, illustrated and designed with varying levels of complexity across genres and formats. Familiarity with particular text forms and genres supports readers’ experiences and provides a foundation from which to comprehend more advanced texts. The level of cohesion across multimodal elements, the interplay among written text and visual images, and the features of texts all influence the level of challenge for particular readers.

In units of study focusing on particular authors, genres, topics or themes, readers should not be required to always read the same text. In addition to varying the instructional approach, for example To, With, and By, teachers can also vary the resources and texts used to support students in reading. By providing readers with texts that are well suited to their levels, stages, and needs we can address the challenge of comprehension and engagement.
With, and By, providing readers with a wide range of texts to address the content under study supports the needs and interests of individual readers. By creating text sets that include a wide range of formats and genres, in particular picturebooks, magazines, novels, on-line resources, brochures, newspapers, poetry, and non-fiction texts, teachers can more adequately address the varying needs, interests and abilities of the students in their charge.

**Tasks**

What we ask students to do, or expect them to be able to do greatly affects the learning experience. Whether we have students read a book to discuss it with friends, answer questions on a computer-based quiz, write a book report or simply enjoy the reading experience changes which students will be successful with a particular text. Too often, the tasks we require of readers are inauthentic experiences, designed to keep readers busy as teachers work in guided reading groups with a small number of students. These inauthentic experiences often do not address the needs of individual learners, nor do they allow a point of entry into the reading experience.

The more we can vary the modes of representation we require students to respond with, for example written language, drawing, drama, painting, oral conversations, the more support we provide each reader in completing the tasks we require. Asking readers to recall literal details from a text is very different than asking them to analyse and synthesize ideas across a range of texts or genres. By varying the tasks we ask of readers, we open up spaces for conversation that supports interpretation and understanding and allows us to support the needs of individual readers.

It is time we stopped asking readers to do things in the name of developing lifelong readers that lifelong readers would never tolerate! Asking readers to build dioramas, make mobiles of favourite characters, fill in save the teacher should come to an end. We need to reconsider what we ask readers to do when they are finished reading a text. The amount of time spent responding should never be more than the time readers spend reading. Asking students to talk about what they read, share recommendations, read another connected text, research information from the text, or write a review for other readers should be used with discretion and not dominate our reading frameworks.

**Time**

The amount of time allocated for the completion of a particular task can be lengthened to provide more support for struggling readers. Other than in the context of a standardized test, the amount of time allowed to read a particular text can be readily varied to accommodate individual readers. Reading should not be viewed as a race, nor should reading faster be the primary goal of reading instruction.

Readers need to be immersed in particular genres and texts for extended periods before we require them to perform specific tasks with these texts. Immersing students in the texts we require them to work with allows them to expand their understandings of connected texts and develop experience about the textual structures, features and styles being read (Cambourne, 1988).

Except for the case of students who read very, very slowly, and are not capable of a basic level of decoding or automaticity (Adams, 1990; Samuels & Farstrup, 1992), it should not matter how long it takes to read a particular text. Varying one’s rate of reading in support of effective comprehension is in fact a positive strategy for comprehension, not an indication of poor performance. Simply put, readers should not be penalized for taking more time to read a text.

**Talk**

In addition, varying the type of talk used in the instructional experience can also provide varying degrees of support for individual learners. If we want students to talk about books in particular ways, we have to show them this preferred way of talking and support their efforts as they move in this direction. If
we want students to construct sophisticated interpretations, we need to construct more sophisticated interpretations during our discussions, and explain our interpretive processes so students may internalize them as they construct their own interpretations (Serafini, 2009).

In addition to ways of grouping students, the resources available in a given setting can enhance learning experiences. Reading with access to other books, a computer, a dictionary and other reference materials can support young readers. The physical and social contexts of the reading event can play a role in supporting young readers. Reading in a comfortable chair, with access to good light, a person to talk with and additional books can be more positive experience than reading alone on a plastic chair in the corner of a classroom.

A Brief Example
If a particular text is required reading in a grade level, then teachers’ options for differentiating is reduced. Teachers would then have to alter the amount of time for reading the text, the level of instructional support (which could range from reading it on one’s own to the teacher reading it aloud), the resources made available (providing the book on CD), and what readers are asked to do during and after reading the text (quizzes, discussions, reader response notebooks). Even when a text is mandated, there are still other avenues available for the teacher to differentiate the level of support provided.

Concluding Remarks
Unfortunately, in the name of differentiation many teachers simply changed how readers were asked to read the same text. Teachers asked one group of students to read a story by themselves, while others read in small groups or with the support of a friend. This seems a rather narrow view of differentiation, and may inadvertently suggest a more passive role for the student than is the intention of people promoting differentiated instruction.

Each of the six dimensions outlined in this article can be altered or adapted to suit a wide range of learners’ abilities, interests and needs in our classrooms. By differentiating each of these dimensions we truly begin to support the needs of individual learners in our classrooms.

References

About the Author:
Dr. Frank Serafini will be a keynote speaker at RAI’s 36th Annual Conference, taking place at the Marino Institute of Education in Dublin from September 27th-29th, 2012. He is an author, illustrator, photographer, educator, musician, and an Associate Professor of Literacy Education and Children’s Literature at Arizona State University. In addition, Frank was an elementary school teacher and literacy specialist for twelve years in Phoenix, AZ. In 2009, Frank received a Foundation Award at ASU for his Excellence in Teaching. Frank spends a great deal of time providing staff development workshops and conducting research focusing on reading instruction and the role of children’s literature in elementary schools. Frank has published six books with Heinemann, including: The Reading Workshop, Reading Aloud and Beyond, Lessons in Comprehension, Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days and Classroom Reading Assessments. In addition, Frank has recently published Interactive Comprehension Strategies: Fostering Meaningful Talk About Texts with Scholastic. Frank is currently working on a project with Teachers College Press focusing on Visual Literacies.