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So That All May Learn: Differentiating Instruction in the Primary Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract

There is increasing diversity in our classrooms today. In order to manage this diversity, enable every child to learn and make sure no child falls between the cracks, we need to reconsider how we plan and enact our lessons. Our past practice of a “One size fits all” lesson may be expedient but is no longer sufficient to meet the learning needs of our students. Differentiated instruction is a recommended approach for educators who acknowledge the diverse needs of learners and who want to help all their learners achieve the required academic standards. This paper attempts to explain in simple terms what Differentiated Instruction is and to show, with examples, how it can be planned and carried out in the primary social studies classroom.

Introduction

When we walk into a classroom in Singapore today we are more likely to see greater diversity of children than before. Singapore’s reputation of delivering a sound education as well as its development as a global hub has increasingly attracted many international students. With the increased diversity in the classroom, there is a greater imperative to adjust our instruction to meet the varied needs of our students. Why is this so? All students are different. They differ in many ways, such as in their learning preferences, socio-

economic and cultural backgrounds, interests and readiness levels. Students do not all have the same knowledge base, competency level or interests. Neither do they learn the same way nor at the same pace. As teachers, it is important that we acknowledge these differences and take steps towards ensuring that our instruction meets the needs of our students. Good teaching is not just about delivering a good lesson, it is also about adjusting our lesson so that every student can be a successful learner. Our past practice of a single approach to teaching, or what is commonly called a “One size fits all” approach can no longer suffice. To help every one of our students achieve the learning goals, it is essential for us to differentiate our lessons so as to meet their learning needs.

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction, according to its proponents, is a philosophy and not simply a set of tools (Gregory & Chapman, 2007). It is a belief system held by educators who acknowledge the diverse needs of learners and strive to help all their learners achieve the required academic standards. Gregory & Chapman (2007, p.2) identify the following as important beliefs of supporters of differentiation:

- All students have areas of strength.
- All students have areas that need to be strengthened.

- Each student’s brain is as unique as a fingerprint.
- It is never too late to learn.
- When beginning a new topic, students bring their prior knowledge base and experience to the learning.
- Emotions, feelings and attitudes affect learning.
- All students can learn.
- Students learn in different ways at different times.

These beliefs are important as they will influence educators’ decisions in curriculum planning and instruction.

Tomlinson (2003b) defines differentiated instruction as a systematic approach in curriculum planning and instruction to enable academically diverse learners to acquire the targeted knowledge, skills and dispositions of the planned curriculum. This approach is based on the belief that “One size does not fit all”, that is, a singular approach to instruction will not help all the students in the class to learn. Very often, because we have to meet the challenge of ‘covering’ the syllabus, we end up doing ‘stand up and deliver’ routines. Unfortunately we also often discover that not all the students are with us at the end of these routines and so we end up conducting remedial lessons (which sometimes are merely reprises of the ‘stand up and deliver’ routines).

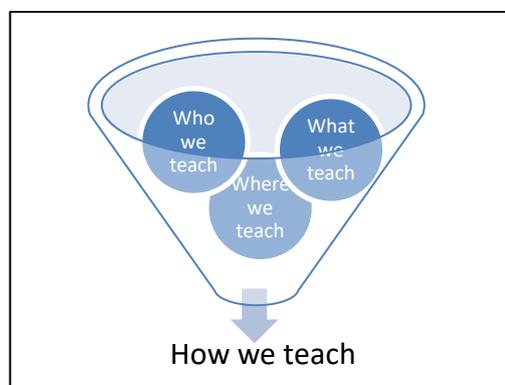
This does not mean, however, that we have to throw out all that we have been doing all these years. Experienced teachers are differentiating instruction when they reflectively select different content for different groups of students or when they set work of differing levels of difficulty for their students according to their abilities. Many teachers are already using mixed ability teaching in their lessons. My student teachers very often tell me that their lesson plans cater to ‘HAMALA’ (high ability,

middle ability & low ability) students. So the idea of differentiating instruction is not new. What we need to remember is that differentiating instruction is not simply catering to student differences in abilities. In a nutshell, differentiated instruction is about differentiating the content, process and product of student learning in response to their differences in learning profiles, interests and readiness levels. This will be elaborated on in the next section.

How can I Differentiate Instruction?

In instructional planning a teacher has to consider two essential factors – student needs and curriculum requirements. A third important factor to consider is also the environment in which lessons take place. Thus, these three factors - *who*, *what* and *where* we teach, influence *how* we teach. (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003a).

Figure 1: Factors influencing instructional decisions



In considering who we teach when planning differentiated instruction, we should take into account three student characteristics:

Student readiness – this refers to the knowledge, understanding and skill level that a student has. To me, ‘readiness’ is the preferred term to use to describe students’ level of competency because it is predicated on a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012) and

focuses on students' potential achievement in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). It is not to be confused with student ability, which is a more fixed measure of competency and tends to label and pigeonhole students into an almost immutable caste.

When crafting a new lesson, we need to consider who in the class already have some prior knowledge, skill or disposition (KSD) and who are lacking the foundational KSD needed to move on to the material we are about to introduce. Our challenge is in finding ways to build on and extend the learning of those who are ready to move on while providing basic instruction for those who are still not quite there yet.

Learning profile – Each one of us has what Sylwester (1995) calls “designer brains,” that is, each person’s brain is uniquely designed and different. Therefore how a person learns is also uniquely different. Tomlinson (2001) describes learning profile as the way a person learns best. Many people confuse learning profile with learning styles. Most teachers think of learning styles as being in four categories – visual, auditory, tactile or kinesthetic. However, learning profile is more than learning style. A student’s learning profile is influenced by factors such as his/her culture, gender, socio-economic and family background, learning and intelligence preferences (Tomlinson, 2001, Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003b; Heacox, 2002).ⁱ

Learning preference refers to the preferred way in which one acquires and processes information. There are a number of theories on learning preferences. Some theories focus on sensory modes – sight, sound and touch (visual, auditory, kinesthetic or tactile learners).ⁱⁱ Other theories focus on aspects such as social organization (preference to work alone or in groups), physical environment (if the room

is spacious or cluttered, too bright/dark; too warm/cold, noisy/quiet) emotional climate (safety, motivation) and psychological factors (whether a student is impulsive, reflective, etc.).

Besides learning preference, proponents of differentiated instruction also consider intelligence preference as another important factor influencing how we learn. Carol Tomlinson defines intelligence preference as the kinds of “brain-based predisposition” towards learning that we all have (Tomlinson, 2001, p.62). Two theories on intelligence are commonly used by teachers when differentiating their lessons to cater to students’ learning profiles. These are Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2006) and Robert Sternberg’s Thinking Styles (Sternberg & Zhang, 2005). Sternberg and Zhang define thinking styles as “the preferred ways of thinking about material” and distinguishes it from learning preferences which he defines as the “preferred ways of learning material” (Sternberg & Zhang, 2005, p. 245).

Learning and thinking preferences can be harnessed in planning differentiated instruction to develop students’ strengths. A fundamental principle is that some part of instruction and assessment should match students’ preferences (whether it is learning preference or thinking styles preference) in order for students to benefit most from the lessons. The key is to have rich and varied resources that will cater to different learning preferences and to provide choice for students to demonstrate their learning. But note that there need not always be a perfect match of instruction and assessment with students’ preferences. Everyone has a unique blend of skills, intelligences and learning preferences. Some may be more intelligent in one aspect and weaker in another but no one is intelligent in only one area. For students to grow and develop in

their competencies, we need to provide them with a range of challenges so that they do not become stunted in their growth if they only learn in one way or continue to demonstrate their learning in their most preferred mode. Teachers can plan for students to develop in areas where they may not be strong in by providing scaffolds for students to negotiate across that zone of proximal development.

Student Interest – As most of us know, interest is a great motivator for it is when students enjoy their learning that they will be willing to work hard. The goal of differentiating by interest is to help students connect the new learning with things that they already find appealing or intriguing. When teachers make the effort to find out students' interests, pique their curiosity and show them how the material they are learning is connected to what they are interested in, students are more likely to be engaged and interested in the lessons. Again, we need to take note that students should be encouraged to explore new interests rather than always staying in areas which they are comfortable in. The excellent teacher is one who can inspire new interests and passions in students.

When planning differentiated instruction we are taking into consideration students' readiness, learning profiles and interests and modifying one or more of three curricular elements in instruction – the content, process and product. Differentiating instruction involves providing students with different approaches to what they learn, how they learn it and how they may demonstrate their learning.

Content – this is the input or the “what” of teaching - the themes, concepts, knowledge, skills or values/attitudes that we want our students to learn by the end of our instruction. It must be remembered that

differentiated instruction is not different children learning different things. There should be a common core of foundational knowledge, skills or understandings that all the students in the class should achieve. But the content can be modified to match students' different interests, learning profiles or readiness. To do so, teachers need to pre-assess student interest, prior knowledge, understanding and skills or competencies. With that information, teachers can then plan to allow student choice in exploring areas that they are more interested in (matching content to student interest), provide learners with appropriate resource material according to learning profile (matching content to learner profile) or provide basic or complex learning resources to suit the readiness levels of students (matching content to readiness).

For example, when exploring the concept of culture and how culture is influenced by the environment, the teacher can allow students to choose to investigate the cultural groups that they are interested in. Teachers can also consider using learning centres with varied resources of different modalities (audio, video, graphic, text or concrete objects) for students to learn more about their area of interest. The teacher may want to match the difficulty and complexity levels of the resources at the learning centres to the readiness levels of the students. At the end of the lesson students can then share with the rest of the class what they have found out in their special interest centres.

Process – this is the “how” of teaching. It is how students begin processing or making sense of the new information, concept or skill that has been introduced. This is an essential part of instruction because without it, students will not be able to develop understanding or competency. When modifying process, we can cater to the different learning profiles of student by

allowing them to explore or make sense of the information in their preferred way of learning – for example, through watching a video, handling or playing with artefacts/objects or even giving them choice to work individually or in a group. The process can also be modified to cater to students of different readiness levels by varying the challenge, abstractness or complexity of assigned tasks.

Tiering is one strategy often used by teachers to differentiate process. In tiering, the teacher is creating multiple pathways

for students to learn the key understandings but at varying degrees of complexity or abstractness. When planning tiered instruction, the teacher needs to be very clear about the desired learning outcome for the students. All students should be able to achieve that fundamental learning outcome but how they go about learning it may differ. One conventional way is to use Bloom’s taxonomy to adjust the challenge level of tasks. Using the earlier example of teaching about how culture is influenced by the environment, the teacher may consider the following tiered assignments:

Table 1: Examples of Tiered Tasks by Readiness Level

Readiness Level	Tiered Task
Not so ready - students who are still struggling a little with concepts of environment and culture	Gather information about how climate affects the types of shelter and dress of people living in temperate places.
Quite ready - students who show some understanding of environment and culture	Explain how occupations of people are affected by the topography of the region they live in (e.g., people who live near seas and lakes tend to be fishermen or traders).
Very ready - students who have good understanding of environment and culture	Compare and contrast types of housing of people who live near forests with those living in deserts and explain how these are influenced by the environment.

When planning tiered assignments, we can adjust a number of variables such as:

- the amount of structure provided;
- degree of complexity;
- degree of abstractness;
- amount of time;
- number of steps needed;
- level of dependence or independence.

Carol Ann Tomlinson’s “Equalizer” (see Figure 2) is a useful planning tool for teachers.

Product – this is the visible, demonstrable result of learning. It is usually something tangible and reflects what students have understood or learned to do. Like content and process, products can be differentiated to cater to students’ interest, learning profiles and readiness. Teachers can draw from Bloom’s taxonomy or Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences to offer

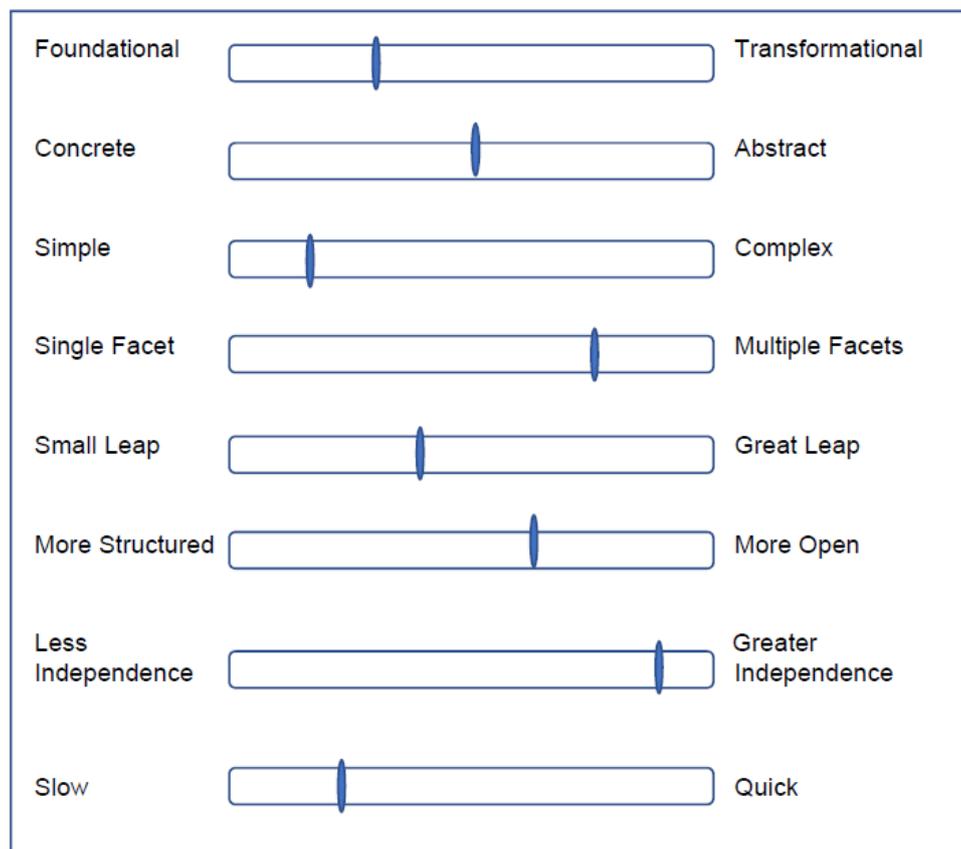
choices of products that match or stretch students' thinking preferences or readiness levels. For example, following the completion of the tiered assignments in the lesson on the influence of environment on culture, students can be tasked to demonstrate their understanding by drawing a chart, composing a song, creating and acting out a skit or making a model. Products can also be varied to provide the appropriate challenge to suit student readiness. Differentiated products to suit readiness are often related to the differentiated process in the tiered assignment. For example, in the lesson on the influence of environment on culture, the product for the 'Very ready' group of students could be a Venn diagram and the products for the 'Not so ready' and 'Quite ready' groups could simply be the teacher-

designed worksheets to aid the completion of the tasks.

What we need to remember in differentiating products is to offer choices to students but at the same time, ensure that these choices stretch student thinking and competencies. There must be sufficient challenge –enough to enable them to grow but not too much that they become discouraged.

In summary, when differentiating instruction, we need to consider student interest, learning profile and readiness levels and then modify content, process or product to meet student needs. Figure 3 provides an overview to help us consider the different elements when crafting differentiated curriculum.

Figure 2: The Equalizer: A Tool for Planning Differentiated Lessons (Tomlinson, 2001, p.47)



Some essential points to remember when differentiating instruction

Assessment is key

One crucial thing to note is that assessment is key to our planning effective differentiated lessons. We need to pre-assess our students to know their learning needs. Pre-assessment is often carried out to find out about students' prior knowledge, competencies, learning profiles, readiness levels and interests. Ongoing assessment is necessary for the teacher to understand how students are progressing, who is struggling, who is 'cruising' and who is being challenged to go beyond his/her current capacity. Ongoing assessment will also help the teacher make relevant changes to the learning plan and grouping decisions. At the end of instruction of a unit, the teacher should also conduct summative assessment to check if the learning goals have been achieved, or if there's a need to modify curriculum or instruction.

Create a safe and conducive Learning Environment

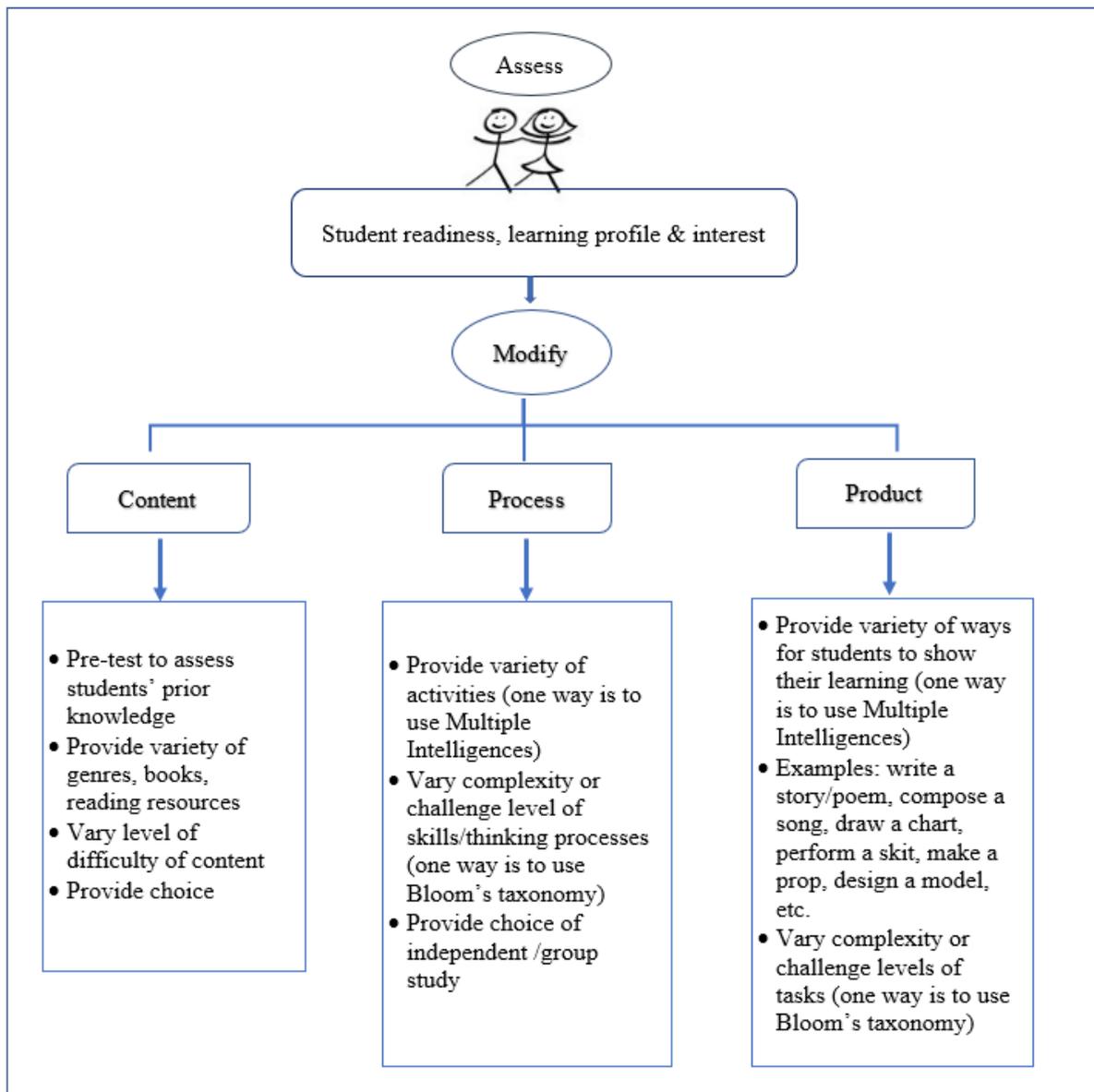
This refers to both the visible and invisible classroom structures. There are three important elements – space, time and materials, to consider in differentiating the learning environment. Things such as space for flexible groupwork and for display of students' work should be considered. Appropriate lighting, orderliness and sufficient resources are also necessary for creating that safe and conducive environment to encourage learning. Sufficient time for students to explore and

make sense of new information or practice new skills is also an important factor in planning differentiated lessons. The guiding principle for the teacher is to consider how these three elements can be used to optimize student learning. A safe learning environment, one in which students are respected and respectful, not afraid to voice their opinions, raise questions or make mistakes, is vital to a successful differentiated lesson.

Differentiated instruction is a blend of whole class, group and individual instruction

We need to remember that differentiated instruction is not individualized instruction. Neither is it always groupwork. There will be times when whole class instruction is necessary, especially at the start of a new unit of lessons. It is advisable to begin with whole class instruction to establish common understandings of the learning goals of the unit. It will also be necessary for the class to get together again to share what they have learned. When planning differentiated tasks, we should consider offering students the choice of pursuing their learning in groups or individually. However, if a student is observed to want to work individually all the time, it may be good to encourage him/her to learn to work in groups. Sometimes it will be necessary to teach social skills to the class. This is where co-operative learning is a valuable approach to adopt in differentiated lessons. In differentiated instruction therefore, there is a blend of whole class, group and individual instruction.

Figure 3: Overview of Differentiated Instruction Planning Process



Conclusion

In summary, differentiated instruction is about considering learner interest, readiness and learning profiles in planning our curriculum and varying the content, process or product to meet their learning needs. This plan includes providing for varied student access to knowledge, understanding and skills and providing different ways to process as well as demonstrate their

learning. What we need to remember is that differentiated instruction is not about catering to every individual difference in the classroom but it is varying content, process or product to cater to different groups of students. It may seem a daunting task as it requires a lot of time to pre-assess students to discover their needs and interests and much work in planning appropriate activities and selecting relevant and meaningful resources but with practice

and perseverance, it will become easier over time. As mentioned earlier, differentiated instruction is a philosophy and not a set of tools or strategies. If we truly believe that every child can learn and every child is different with unique intelligences and learning preferences, then we cannot continue to deliver “One size fits all” lessons.

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ⁱ For more information on how culture gender and socioeconomic and family factors influence learning, see Heacox, D. (2002), pp. 8-10.

ⁱⁱ For a useful discussion of learning and thinking styles, refer to Gregory, G. & C. Chapman (2007), Chapter 3 Knowing the Learner.