Getting Started with Differentiated Instruction

Our project is a set of differentiated instruction activities that can be applied in various middle school classrooms. In our middle school classrooms, we as teachers are faced with the challenge of educating a group of students with a wide spectrum of ability levels and needs. Students enter our classrooms with different backgrounds and prior knowledge. With today’s high standards and high-stakes testing, each student must attain the highest level of mastery the content in which he/she is capable. Through continuous professional development and practice we have found that differentiated instruction is a key component to reaching various ability levels in a middle school classroom.

Differentiated instruction is “doing different things for different kids according to their needs in order to maximize their learning” (Wormeli, 2005). A driving idea behind differentiated instruction is that what is fair is not always equal. While the state standard is the same for each student, differentiated instruction provides various avenues for different students to achieve that standard. When implementing differentiated instruction, teachers should create an environment that supports higher level thinking by providing interesting and engaging activities for all students (VanSciver, 2005).

For our project we gathered five differentiated instruction activities that can be used in any middle school classroom. Along with theses activities we designed lesson plans to guide the teacher through carrying out the activity. We intended for these activities to serve as a starting
point for a teacher interested in implementing differentiated instruction. The compiled activities are meant to be used for a variety of lessons repeatedly throughout the year.

In order to make our activities teacher-friendly, the lesson plans follow the same format. The format includes objectives for the lesson, a list of materials, a step-by-step procedure, and ideas for assessment. It is important to note that the teacher will need to modify the activities according to his/her needs.

In middle school classrooms teachers are responsible for assessing each student’s prior knowledge. When using “Charting a Colorful Course,” students brainstorm in groups the answers to five predetermined questions about the upcoming content. To prepare the lesson the teacher will write five questions, each on a large sheet of paper, and post them in various locations around the classroom. Each group of students will have a different color marker and will be responsible for traveling from location to location answering each question in their color. The completion of this activity allows students the opportunity to synthesize and summarize classmates’ responses into categories.

A concern of many middle school teachers is the wide range of reading comprehension skills among their students. The “Active Bookmarks” is a during reading strategy that stimulates thought at various points throughout the text. For the “Active Bookmarks” activity students are instructed to randomly place three bookmarks at the beginning, middle, and end of the reading selection. Each bookmark contains an assignment which encourages comprehension of important ideas from the text.

One driving factor behind differentiated instruction is giving students a choice of activities that they can complete. “Tic-Tac-Toe” is best used as part of an interdisciplinary unit to show students the relationship between two or more core subjects. This activity allows
students to choose three homework assignments to make a Tic-Tac-Toe. When completing this activity students should be encouraged to choose assignments that are at their ability levels and also of interest to them.

Review of material is essential in order to allow students to relate concepts and prepare for assessment. “Flips-flops” is an exciting, effective, and hands-on way for students to review content. An added benefit of this activity is students must read and follow directions in order to construct their “Flips-flops.”

Not only should differentiated instruction be used in lessons, it is also important to differentiate assessments. The “Choice Board” has various assessment activities set up in five rows and five columns. Students will choose one row, column, or section to complete for assessment of a chapter, unit, or end-of-the-year evaluation. This activity allows for fair assessment of all student ability levels.

During the past school year our district’s main initiative was differentiated instruction. To encourage the implementation of differentiated instruction, the district provided professional development opportunities on this topic. This coming school year we will be expected to incorporate additional differentiated instruction into our classrooms. We included these five activities because they can be modified to work in any grade level and content area. Furthermore, we chose these specific activities because they are to be used in the beginning, middle, and end of a lesson. Finally, we hoped that these five activities would be used as a starting point for any teacher interested in differentiated instruction. So utilize these activities and hit the differentiated instruction road running.
References


