Five Ways to Differentiate Instruction in an Online Environment

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Teaching
By Larry Ferlazzo — May 04, 2020 6 min read
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here.)

Today's question is:

What are the best ways to differentiate online instruction?

In Part One

, I listed specific ways content teachers could support English Language Learners in online instruction.

Today, Eugenia Mora-Flores and Sandra N. Kaplan share helpful ideas for all students.

I'm adding this post to All Classroom Q&A Posts on the Coronavirus Crisis.

Engaging "a diverse group of learners"

Eugenia Mora-Flores is a professor of clinical education and chair of the master of arts in teaching program, University of Southern California , focused on academic-language development and supporting English-learners.

Sandra N. Kaplan is a professor of clinical education, University of Southern California , focused on curriculum and pedagogy with an emphasis on advanced and gifted learners.

Learning online has multiple and relevant opportunities for both the teacher and the learner. The array of teaching/learning options, the readily available preparation and delivery of curriculum and resources, and the relevance to contemporary information and presentation formats capture opportunities for educators and educational needs. However, comments from teachers regarding the lack of consistent attention and enthusiastic participation from students and the inability of students to attain successfully the major outcomes outlined for the online educational outcomes identify a concern about why online learning fails to satisfy all of its objectives.

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One of the major reasons for the online educational curriculum and/or presentation to meet its goals may not be in the production of the online material; it may be in the alignment of the online learning expectations to the teacher's instruction and the student's participation. The primary reasons for this situation can be defined as the lack of recognition and responses to the differences among the learners. Selection of an online educational site and/or program must take into consideration the individual differences that identify learning needs, interests, and abilities. Teachers are working long hours selecting materials for students, meeting with their classes online, and answering messages via email, texts, phone calls at all hours. These efforts by teachers are commendable as they are learning to engage students in distance learning, for some, for the first time. What we can't lose sight of is that many of these assignments are being generated for "the class," not for individual differences. Without giving teachers more work to do, as they are already taxed, we offer some considerations for how to engage a diverse group of learners through the distance-learning experiences they are already engaged in.

1. What knowledge about interacting with technology do students bring to the online learning experience that potentially inhibit or activate their participation?

Family rules about the use and time allocated to technology and students' skill sets developed to use a computers are indicators of varying levels of enthusiasm and abilities learners bring to engage purposefully and attentively to online learning. For example, teachers need to consider how to facilitate the transfer of students' proficient skills at computer gaming to the skills needed for an online history lesson. Teachers should review norms of engagement when using technology for school vs. technology for play.

2. How do teachers accommodate a student who is not physiologically comfortable learning in a stayed position for a long period of time?

Teachers need to integrate physical and intellectual breaks in the online presentation that provide a productive time to "contemplate and jot down "a response to an open-ended relevant question or idea to share with peers, stand up and stretch, or take a thoughtful stroll around the home.

3. How does the teacher accommodate the diversity among learners as a consequence of academic, cultural, linguistic differences?

Consideration of instructional strategies that introduce and/or reinforce learning from the online program can include "prior viewing" techniques such as identifying key words to "look and listen" for during the program. Use a sentence frame that can be completed during and/or after viewing. Utilize a range of home experiences and contexts for thoughtful learning. For example, survey families about what types of activities the family engages in at home; students can summarize, analyze, problem solve, and think creatively about what they saw or experienced. These are English/language arts standards met through a student-centered context.

4. How do teachers plan to engage students in productive and active learning experiences during the online presentation?

Teachers can consider "stop and go" techniques during a presentation for the purposes of creating opportunities to debate an idea or statement derived from the presentation, to initiate a "what happens next" discussion, or to illustrate and share the interpretation of an idea that is presented. For example, the teacher might introduce some information on a topic. After a few minutes, stop and give the group a chance to think and talk about what they heard, think about things that are connected or related, challenge what they heard, engage in critical discussions about the information. This can continue throughout the presentation to build depth of understanding rather than just coverage of material.

5. How do teachers prepare students to attain assistance from peers without involving parents who may not be available to assist in the completion of assignments related to the online presentation?

Identifying "study buddies" based on appropriate criteria to work together during planned "teacher-in-attendance time frames." Meeting with students in small groups can help teachers target the unique needs of learners across content areas.

Thanks to Eugenia and Sandra for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org

. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at @Larryferlazzo

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Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching

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or RSS Reader.

And if you missed any of the highlights from the first eight years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below. The list doesn't include ones from this current year, but you can find those by clicking on the "answers" category found in the sidebar.

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