

From 2016 - 2020, I worked as a tutor at a tutoring company called TeachME in Taiwan. As a tutor, my goal was simple: work with one student at a time, and help them improve their academic understanding of a subject in school. I now work as a teacher, serving 27 unique students at a time, and my goal is much less simple. My students come from various different educational backgrounds, with students having a wide variety of strengths and needs. As a developing educator, still figuring out my teaching style, pedagogies, and systems, there are certain practices that I know are important to me, and others I'm still trying to figure out. I know I want to hold high standards for my students, allowing them to achieve in ways they'd never thought possible; I know I want to make education relevant and interesting to each student, providing voice and choice, I know I want students to work together to collaborate in creative and meaningful ways; and I know that I want students to take control of their education and not rely on me as the teacher to be the vehicle for learning. What I still don't understand is how to do all of this effectively with such an academically diverse group of students. This predicament leads to the research theme for this paper: *How do we, as teachers, differentiate lessons to make classes engaging and accessible for all students?*

For this assignment, I read an article on Differentiated Instruction and had a conversation with a veteran teacher at my school, Pat Holder. The article titled, "*Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction: Narrowing Gaps Between Best Pedagogical Practices Benefiting All Learners*" by Lorri J. Santamaria (2009) discusses best practices for Differentiated Instruction (DI), and compares DI to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), recognizing pedagogical differences between the two while also finding common ground. My discussion with Pat Holder, a fellow Humanities teacher at High Tech High who has been teaching for over 15 years, centered around ideas of differentiating instruction by using structures where students can self-modify, while still being part of the collective conversation. In both the article I read and the conversation I had with Pat, the underlying question behind differentiated instruction seemed to be the same: how can we, as teachers, get a group of students from various academic backgrounds and skill levels do what *WE* want them to do, so they can learn what *WE* want them to learn. While reading the article and reflecting on the conversation, a different question kept circulating in my mind: how can I create systems and structures in the classroom that allow students from various academic backgrounds and skill levels, do what *THEY* want to do so they can learn what they want to learn? What if differentiated instruction becomes less of an issue if students are doing the kind of work they are intrinsically motivated to do? And is there a way to let students have this much freedom in their academic workload while still maintaining generally high standards and expectations as a whole? I believe there is. I believe that classrooms should be areas where students are encouraged to take control of their own learning, design their own projects, and set their own standards. Teachers should be less concerned about teaching direct content, and more actively facilitating students' process of designing modes of learning that they find personally meaningful. Teachers should teach students how to learn, how to scaffold their own learning, and how to design standards for themselves that measure success in new and exciting ways. Though neither the article nor the conversation led directly to this more radical idea of what education could look like, both provided insight to thinking about differentiated instruction in new ways.

In the article, "*Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction: Narrowing Gaps Between Best Pedagogical Practices Benefiting All Learners*" Santamaria explains a "how-to" approach for practical application of DI, "identifying five guidelines situated within a framework with the goal of making differentiation possible for general education classroom teachers to attain" (p. 219). The guidelines, in short, go like this: 1. Clarification and focus of key concepts and generalizations 2. The use of

assessments as teaching tools before, during, and after the learning takes place. 3. Emphasizing critical and creative thinking when designing lessons. 4. Engaging all learners within a variety of tasks. 5. Creating a balance between teacher-assigned and student selected-tasks during a project (p. 219). So what could this look like in a classroom where students are more in control of their own learning? We live in an age where access to information is no longer limited to a thesaurus or an expert. If a student wanted to learn about the history of pirates, I may ask them to clarify what they mean specifically by pirates - creating a space for them to clarify and research definitions on their own. I may then ask students what they already know about pirates, what they're learning during their research, and ask them to create through their own choice of medium a way to show what they've learned. I might ask them to think critically about how life on a pirate ship was better or worse than life on a cruise ship today, and have a discussion or casual debate, playing devil's advocate to advance their thought process on the topics discussed. I then may ask them to create an idea for a project based on what they've learned and help lead them through creating a rubric that they think is fair and just for determining high quality work. In all of these situations, I don't need to be an expert on pirates, I just need to be an expert on helping guide students through their learning, and show each student that I care about them as individuals and validate that their interests are worth pursuing. Another teacher who teaches with a radical approach to education, and has succeeded in differentiation in his own way is Pat Holder.

Pat Holder runs a Humanities classroom that is far removed from the normal idea of general education. Pat is known for his woodworking projects at HTH and the high quality work that the students produce in his room. Pat is big on projects, and like me, agrees that project work looks different from classroom work in its structure and form. In Pat's class, there are usually two main things going on: students discussing a reading or students working on their wood projects. Pat shared with me a structure that he uses to help students of all different skill levels tackle the readings and discussions. Pat's goal is for all students to be able to engage in a common conversation at the level they're comfortable with. Pat will introduce a text to the class, with a focus question. Right now, in Pat's current project, the question is, "Why do we build gardens?" Next, Pat will introduce a text, and explain that the goal for every student should be to fully tackle and understand the focus section of the text. If the text they're looking at is a chapter of a book, the focus section may be 5-7 important pages relevant to the focus question. If a student can only get through two paragraphs, that's okay as a starting point, and that student is still part of the conversation when they engage in group discussions. The main idea here is that all students, regardless of skill level, are all part of the common conversation, and therefore are all seen as equal agents who can add meaningful value to reading discussions. In the woodworking part of his class, Pat explains that when students have agency to design their own pieces of work, they are able to set the parameters of what success looks like on an individual level. It's when students aren't given different access points that the need for differentiation arises.

One of the reasons I enjoyed tutoring was that I felt less like a teacher directly teaching content to a student, and more of a facilitator framing questions and constructing scaffolding that would lead students to the right answers on their own. What if individualized and group learning, in this way, was the standard for a great classroom? Both Santamaria's article and my conversation with Pat reminded me that there are successful classrooms out there that do things radically different, and that having a passionate teacher who is excited about different ways of learning, and cares about their students' education goes a long, long way.

Annotated Bibliography

P. Holder, personal communication, Jan 18, 2024.

Santamaria, Lorri J. "Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction: Narrowing Gaps between Best Pedagogical Practices Benefiting All Learners." *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, no. 1, SAGE Publications, Jan. 2009, pp. 214–47. *Crossref*, doi:10.1177/016146810911100105.