

Teachers as Coaches

I recently taught a class on Differentiating Instruction for Diverse Learners. I'll be the first to admit that meeting the needs of a wide range of students is hard work! There are many misperceptions about what differentiation entails. First of all, it is NOT individualized instruction. You don't have to create 30 different lessons for your 30 students!

It occurred to me that perhaps the best way to imagine differentiating for various learner needs is to watch what good coaches do. They use a lot of common sense in managing and grouping kids. Although I don't coach a sport, I have sat on hard bleachers and benches for many years watching my sons participate in various sports. Here are some things I have observed good coaches doing:

- Narrowing the instructional range (flexible grouping based on skill level)
- Maintaining high standards (they don't lower the hoop so everyone can make a basket)
- Allowing students to set their own pace and excel to the level at which they are capable (they don't ask the fastest athletes to slow down and wait for the others to catch up)
- Having a common purpose but supporting individual strengths (once you've learned how to play the sport, focus on your strengths, i.e., if you're a good quarterback, you don't have to spend hours perfecting your goal kicking skills)
- Encouraging students to achieve their personal best by assessing where they are and setting goals for improvement
- Allowing different groups to be working on different skills at the same time.
- Working together as a team and analyzing your efforts in order to continually improve.

Some of these strategies might be controversial in the classroom; for instance, grouping by skill level. There is a reluctance to allow students of similar ability to work together. In fact, bright students are often paired up with struggling students in learning tasks. Let's project this to an athletic situation. As an intermediate tennis player, it would be helpful to me to play someone of similar or slightly better ability. We could challenge each other and both improve our skills in the process. However, if I had to play against Venus Williams, it would embarrass me and annoy her. We would both be frustrated and neither of us would improve. As a positive role model I may admire or even idolize her, but she is too far out of my realm to imagine that I could emulate her. Even if I played doubles with Venus against another team, I would constantly rely on her ability and diminish my own role as a team member.

Another athletic metaphor that comes to mind is downhill skiing. If a group of skiers start together at the top of a mountain, they all clearly know their goal: ski to the bottom at an appropriate level of difficulty. Each person may choose to take a different path to get there. In fact, the same person may choose an easier route one time and a more difficult one the next depending on a variety of factors such as the conditions, fatigue,

confidence, etc. They may not all end up at the chair lift at the same time. For those who arrive early there are opportunities to explore new territory or work on different skills.

Perhaps if we used the athletic model as a source of inspiration in managing classrooms, our students would have a greater sense of empowerment and efficacy. Even though this is not easy, it IS rewarding for both the teacher and the students. Instruction is not individualized, but it is more personalized because it is aimed at the learner's needs. It also allows for more student choice and decision-making in the learning process. It may appear to be more work for the teacher, especially at first, but it actually puts more responsibility on the student. And it is definitely more motivating because when the focus is on your personal best, everybody wins!

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