

DI-workshop - explanation

During the Differentiated Instruction workshop, students are first introduced quickly to what literature says differentiated instruction is. The idea is to show them some important characteristics:

- You can tune DI practices to the readiness, interests, and learning profile of students (Tomlinson et al., 2003)
- You can differentiate convergently and divergently (Bosker & Doolaard, 2009)
- You can differentiate between and within classes (Bosker & Doolaard, 2009)

Already taking these characteristics together, shows students that there is a lot to take into account when differentiating. Still, there is more to take into account, as becomes clear, looking at a definition of differentiated instruction: A pedagogical approach in which teachers proactively take into account differences between individual students in the process, product, and content of education (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

This first introduction makes sure students are made aware of what differentiated instruction is and some theory behind it. Then, we want students to make sure students get something out of it for their own practice, so we do a little exercise, making this 'scary' big definition a bit more practical for them.

First, we look for a volunteer wanting to share some of their ideas plenary. The workshop leader then asks 5 different questions, all one-by-one, letting students answer in between and providing some feedback or asking follow-up questions until a clear answer is reached:

1. What do you already do in your own practice?
The idea is to get an answer where students explain what in their own teaching practice might be related to differentiated instruction. This should open their minds to what small teaching activities might be counted towards DI. This makes DI a little less scary.
2. Why do you do this?
Find out why they do what they do. Mainly: is it intentional or not? If it is not intentional, these questions have already helped to make their unconscious practices more conscious.
3. What is your end goal for DI?
Ask students about an ideal final situation. This might be a situation far out of reach. Again, this might make unconscious assumptions or thoughts more conscious for the students. Or it gets them to think about something bigger. Having an end goal helps when deciding on what steps next to take.
4. What do you need to know to get there?
Get students to think about what knowledge and/or skills they need to go towards that envisioned end goal. This makes reaching the end goal more practical.
5. What is your next step? When you get in your classroom tomorrow, what will you do then?
This way students will immediately start doing. Instead of making plans, which might again be put aside when something else comes up. Having a plan for tomorrow, no matter how small, gets people into action mode.

After having done this plenary, students are asked to team up into duos and have this conversation amongst each other for approx. 10-15 minutes. It really depends on when they are finished.

As a wrap-up, I remind students that DI is an approach that contains a lot, that asks a lot of a teacher. That is why the exercise asked them both to think big, but also to make it smaller. It helps to stay close to their own practices, what they already do and take small steps towards their envisioned end goal within that current practice. It helps then to keep reflecting on what they do both individually as well as together with someone else, for example their supervisor. One 'tool' that might help them reflect on their own practices and see where room for changes is, is a stimulated recall interview.