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Summary and Review of a Professional Text

Turville, Joni. (2007). *Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. (173 pages).

Joni Turville, author of *Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies*, is an award winning author, teacher, and speaker. Turville lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and is currently the Coordinator for the Alberta Initiative School Improvement program in St. Albert, Alberta, Canada. She is very intelligent and well rounded, having worked as a technology consultant, administrator, and university instructor. Turville has also taught a variety of grade levels and subjects, including special education.

Turville has authored and co-authored four books. She focuses on effective instructional strategies, technology, and differentiated instruction (DI). Her books are titled *Teach My Kid – I Dare You!*, *Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies*, *Differentiating by Student Learning Preferences: Strategies and Lesson Plans*, and *Differentiating by Readiness: Strategies and Lesson Plans for Tiered Instruction, Grades K-8*. The books on differentiated instruction include personal experiences, great tips, illustrations, and sample lesson plans for teachers to enjoy.

*Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies* is a book written as an instructional guidebook for elementary school teachers. The first chapter is made up of mostly text, and the remainder of the book is a mix of text and illustrations, diagrams, and charts. An “Annotated Webliograpy” and a list of references are found at the end of the book. Furthermore, Turville has provided thirty-four Blackline Masters in her book. These Blackline Masters are worksheets, charts, and checklists that match up with the example activities that Turville has included in the book. These Blackline Masters can be easily printed and distributed in book buyers’ classrooms.

The first chapter is titled “Differentiating by Interest” and covers the definition of differentiated instruction that focuses specifically on student interest. Turville starts out by showing the relationship between content, process, and product and students’ readiness, interest, and learning profile. She explains what DI entails and also touches on the two types of interest. Situational interest is something that captivates the student’s attention; social interaction and hands-on activities can influence situational interest. Personal interest is something that the student is internally inspired to learn. Examples of personal interests are animals, cars, and drawing. Teachers can and should use activities that tailor to both types of interest.

According to Turville, research has shown that a link exists between student interest and motivation. One particular study proved that “giving students the choice and responsibility for selecting something that would further their own education was a powerful, motivating force” (5). Students will naturally be more excited to learn about something that they are interested in. Furthermore, it has been found that giving students choices about activities gives them a sense of power while creating autonomy and self-determination. Students feel more intrinsic motivation and less external control when given choices. Yet another study has shown that “students who feel empowered become independent, thoughtful, creative risk takers” (6). When students feel confident in one subject, they will be more likely to take risks in other subjects.

The second chapter, titled “Assessing Interest and Building Classroom Climate,” starts by explaining how to effectively assess interest. Turville claims that it is important to realize that there are a variety of tools and techniques that can be used to assess student interests. Some students are very verbal in sharing personal information, while others are not as comfortable doing so. This is where the different techniques come in handy. One great tool explained by Turville is interest inventories. For students who have trouble reading and writing, tape-recorded or drawn responses can be helpful. Students who are able to read and write well can take written and/or online surveys. All inventories will reveal information that will be helpful to both students and teachers.

Following the section on assessing interest is a section about building a climate that supports differentiation. Turville writes, “Part of what makes differentiation possible is creating an environment where differences and unique talents are recognized and celebrated” (14). Turville includes several activities to help create such an environment and points out that these activities will be most effective if used throughout the entire school year. She also encourages teachers to participate with their students in the activities. Three of the suggestions Turville includes are The Treasures of Me, VIP Venn Diagrams, and Interest Bingo. For The Treasures of Me activity, students bring in a small box and fill it with objects and pictures that represent who they are and what they are interested in. The boxes are then shared with the class. VIP Venn Diagrams are Venn Diagrams that are created in pairs. Student pairs interview one another and make a Venn Diagram representing their individual and shared interests. Interest Bingo is a fun twist on bingo. Students fill out a blank bingo card with their interests. The teacher calls on students to name one of their interests, and the students cover any interests that match theirs until bingo is called. All three examples, as well as the others included in the book, will help to create a welcoming and fun environment for the students while showing the teacher her students’ passions.

Chapter 3, titled “Lesson Structures that Support Differentiating by Interest,” describes the many lesson structures available for teachers and gives instruction for DI that creates opportunities for and supports student learning. Turville first writes that learning outcomes are a key part of any differentiated lesson. Making clear what students should know, understand, and be able to do once a lesson has been delivered is crucial. Diane Heacox refers to these concepts as KUDos. K stands for know, U stands for understand, and D stands for do. All three of these concepts can be traced back to Bloom’s Taxonomy (knowledge, understand, and application.)

The second part of planning lessons that Turville addresses is choosing activities that will help differentiate instruction. Three examples of activities are choice boards, cubing, and learning contracts. Choice boards are simply templates or grids that give students a choice in the activity they want to do. Cubing involves making a three-dimensional cube with task choices on it for students to roll and pick from. Learning contracts are teacher-student contracts that outline tasks the student will complete in order to achieve certain learning goals. It is important that teachers choose activities that will bring students to understand and reach certain goals and outcomes.

The remainder of the book is split into four sections: lesson plans, assessments, how to start DI, and Blackline Master. Turville provides dozens of sample lesson plans, each complete with learning goals and illustrations. The next chapter provides strategies for assessing students using both formative and summative assessments. In the next section, titled *Where to Start*, Turville gives tips for getting started on what seems like a daunting task. She encourages readers with her own advice and then wishes them well on their “journey to differentiate by interest” (124).

*Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies* is a helpful and well-written book. Turville thoroughly accomplishes her goal of showing elementary school teachers how to differentiate instruction based on students’ interests. Turville starts by providing her definition of DI and explains the two types of student interest. DI “is a philosophy – a way of thinking about teaching and learning,” she says (3). Turville also writes that DI “encompasses many different fields such as multiple intelligences, brain research, and cooperative learning” (3). She includes several studies that have linked interest and motivation, backing up her purpose of differentiating by interest. Turville does not stop here; she also shows teachers *how* to assess interest and constructs a section explaining how to build a classroom climate that supports and encourages differentiation. She writes, “Creating a caring, respectful learning environment is an essential component in creating a successful differentiated classroom” (11). The lesson plans are simple, but can be very beneficial. Teachers can use these lesson plans, tweaking them to fit their content, standards, and student needs. Turville’s section of Blackline Masters is also a wonderful, free tool for teachers to utilize.

This book has many strong points. The opening chapter gives an overview of Turville’s thoughts and goals for the book as a whole. On the second page, she provides a great figure that illustrates the connection between teachers’ use of content, process, and product, and students’ readiness, interests and learning profiles. Turville also explains the two types of interest, personal and situational, and links interest to motivation by providing results from several studies. By including illustrations, charts, and diagrams in her book, Turville gives countless tools to teachers to use in their classrooms. Another strength of this book is the inspirational quotes at the beginning of each chapter; it is always enjoyable to read motivational quotes, especially when they directly relate to one’s vocation. Also notable is the “Tying Things Together” section at the end of each chapter. These paragraphs neatly summarize the chapters and also include a short list of reflection questions.

There are only a couple weak points in *Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies*. One thing that Turville could have expanded on is the definition of differentiated instruction. She lightly explains what DI is, but does not go into too much detail. A finer definition of DI would be helpful, especially to new teachers. Another point that can be stronger is the set up of the lesson plans. Some plans contain learning goals, hooks, activities, and closure, while others do not have all these parts. For example, a certain lesson plan about math includes all four parts, but a science lesson plan only contains the learning goals. While these lesson plans are just simple examples, it would be nice to have the plans be uniform in format and presentation.

Joni Turville’s *Differentiating by Student Interest: Practical Lessons and Strategies* is a wonderful book that addresses differentiating instruction according to students’ interests and gives great examples of how to do so. I would definitely recommend this book to elementary school teachers. I gained much knowledge by reading it, and seeing all the visual aids helped me to better visualize how I can differentiate instruction in my own classroom someday. Something that I learned that really stood out to me is the fact that a definite link exists between interest and student motivation. The more interested a student is in the topic or lesson, the more motivated he is going to be to participate and put forth effort. Turville includes this quote by French poet Anatole France: “The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.” I love this quote because it is indeed the teacher’s job and goal to “awaken” students’ curiosity and endeavor to satisfy it. That is what I hope to do someday to each and every student that I teach.