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Summary and Review

Wormeli, R. (2007). *Differentiation from planning to practice, grades 6-12* (pp. 1-163). Portland, Me.: Stenhouse ;.

Rick Wormeli was one of the first Nationally Board Certified teachers in America. He taught multiple subjects, such as physical education, health, history, science, math, and english for over 33 years. His work in the field of education has brought him national acclaim. His works have been reported in National Geographic and Good Housekeeping magazines, “Good Morning America” and “Hardball with Christ Matthews” on ABC, and the Washington Post. He wrote many books including “Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom”, “Differentiation: From Planning to Practice” and “Meet Me in the Middle”. Currently, Wormeli is a columnist for Middle Ground magazine and a writer for the Educational Leadership magazine on Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Because of his sense of humor and alternative approaches to education, Rick Wormeli has been asked to present to teachers and administrators all over the world. He offers a plethora of knowledge and experience having been a staff development educator, human growth and development teacher, and worked most of his life as a middle grades teacher. In 1996 he was the winner of Disney’s American Teacher Award for English. He now resides in Herndon, Virginia with his wife, Kelly, and two children, Ryan and Lynn.

*Differentiation: From Planning to Practice Grades 6-12* was written mainly for those teaching middle or high school students. This book specifically outlines how to teach diverse learners in those grade levels. It is written as an instructional guidebook with many example scenarios included. The book does not contain a glossary, but lists references. Wormeli begins with giving some background knowledge on how prevalent diversity in the classroom is. There are most culturally, economically, emotionally, physically, and intellectually diverse students in the school system today than ever before. Unfortunately, the public holds educators responsible for the success of a student, regardless of the circumstances. As our global economy grows, students must be prepared to compete in their careers, which requires more knowledge and skills than ever before.

Teachers who want excellence in their classroom look for ways to bridge or even close the gap between knowledge and action. When we differentiate we do not only tweak instruction to meet the needs of the students, but prepare them for the different ways of learning and life situations they will inevitably face. In the world after school, people drift toward activities and careers in which they excel; they self-differentiate. However, within the school system, society expects and requires each student to learn and do well in everything, no matter his/her inclinations, readiness, cultural barriers, learning styles, or learning deficiencies. Differentiation is not defined as requiring less from certain students; differentiation means to do what it takes in order for every student to learn.

It is not best to dive right into differentiating everything – there are small steps to take in order to get there. “For first-timers, creating an effective differentiated unit or lesson might take one or two *weeks.* This extended time period may be necessary to (a) understand the content yourself and (b) make sure you are teaching what the school, governing body, and experts in your discipline expect” (p. 17-18). There are few things that are as frustrating than spending weeks on a topic only to find out there is one short question about it on the state exam. *Before* designing the learning experiences, identify questions, essential understandings, objectives, skills, benchmarks, standards and/or learner outcomes. It is crucial to do what is developmentally appropriate for students. It may be different per teacher, but identify what is important to teach including content and skills related to those ideas. Figure out which students have special needs and work out adaptations to instruction to ensure they can endure and achieve. Do not use only one kind of assessment. As common sense as this may seem, it is an important part of the differentiation process. Use both formative and summative assessments. Create preassessments based on summative assessments. When creating the assessments, alter objectives and tests based on further thinking.

Next are steps to take *while* designing and implementing the altered instruction into the classroom. Brainstorm ideas of prospective strategies or learning techniques. Once completed, check again that the strategies meet standards and then that they meet the needs of the students who need them. It is best to have a routine, so put the strategies in order and teach accordingly.

Differentiation does **not** mean more or less. Instruction must be altered based on results and data from assessments. Do not separate assessment from instruction, though. The teacher must modify. There are many parts of the classroom that can be modified other than instruction. For example, modify product, content, and learning environment. It is also good to keep in mind that teaching is not a one-way street. Students are partners with the teachers in the learning process. Students are not just the recipients of our knowledge. If a student does not engage, learning will not take place no matter how good of a lesson is taught. Wormeli suggests to teachers that if they are struggling to find effective ways to get students engaged to consider asking the students for ideas. One way to start off is to tier. Tiering is the way a teacher modifies instruction/assessment in concordance with the learner’s readiness level, interest, and learning profile.

Effective teachers know their students. They understand how the brain operates at the grade or age they teach. A good teacher knows the students backgrounds and also helps students build their own background knowledge. A teacher must give a student context on every lesson. Let the students explore differences and similarities, examples and things that may not work. For the average adolescent most new information is processed in the part of the brain with the emotional response centers; this is called emotional content. Once the information is processed it moves to the cognitive centers, but only if the learning environment is appropriate developmentally. If a student is comfortable and feels safe, they will be more comfortable talking to the teachers about their needs. Adolescents are willing to try new things if they understand they are in a safe and caring place. Innovation is actually very exciting to the brain of a young adolescent! A switch up in the routine, a new perspective to look at something old, or a different classroom setting can stimulate learning. There are going to be easy ways to teach that will work for a while, but it is so good to shake things sometimes.

The teacher must help students learn in every way possible. Before the brain can do anything else it must meet survival needs. Humans seek self-preservation. If student’s needs are not being met, then teaching them is a waste of time. Teachers must help the students memorize. The human brain is innately social, especially those of young adolescents, and thus it takes interaction for them to remember things well. One of the finest ways to help students remember data is to have them engage in conversations about what it is they are learning.

Wormeli concludes with summarizing his own book into a couple simple and concise steps. Step one is start small. Take baby steps; do not try to differentiate everything for everyone at once. It will not work! Focus on one element at a time. Step two is to work with a colleague. It does not have to be someone who has already gone through the process of differentiation, but it is always good to have two heads rather than one. The two can swap experiences and ideas, what worked and what did not.

I found Rick Wormeli’s book, *Differentiation: From Planning to Practice Grades 6-12*, helpful and instructional. I learn best by hearing, or in this case reading, stories and scenarios. This is how Wormeli illustrates each of his points. Many of his stories, I am assuming, he got from years and years of experience.

I believe one of the strongest points made in this book is that when differentiating, the teacher must be able to change the lesson plans as the teacher responds to the students. Even the best lesson will need to be adapted based on how the students respond. Wormeli stresses the importance of deviating from the script. The script is there to be a guideline, not a mandatory rule. If the teacher and the students are not connecting or the students have a sudden spark of interest in one particular area, then by all means change the original plan. “These impromptu decisions often lead to some of our most effective teaching moments” (p. 53).

Wormeli emphasized throughout the book that differentiation does not mean more, nor does it mean less. “With differentiation we strive to change the nature of our assignments, not the quantity. If we give bright students double the normal number of assignments they will start playing dumb to avoid the excess” (p. 65-66). Rather than adding to the amount, vary the complexity of each problem. Students who begin to excel will realize they will only be “rewarded” with more work to do and so will slow their own learning process. Differentiation is meant to incentivize, not repel.

Another strength I found with this book is that a good teacher will figure out what they can do to “bridge the gap”. Wormeli also gave so many steps on exactly how to get to the end goal. He gives lists of how to teach certain subjects based on levels of complexity; he starts with how to teach them at an introductory level and goes all the way down until you get to teaching them at a sophisticated level. Wormeli equates teaching at a variety of levels simultaneously to a football. Most people see teaching as being linear, or step-by-step. “The football metaphor comes from the way we think about the lesson’s sequence: a narrow, whole-class experience in the beginning, a wider expansion of the topic as multiple groups learn at their own pace or in their own ways, then a re-narrowing as we gather again to process what we’ve learned” (p. 91).

I found the book very strong in everything Wormeli touched on. The only weak point I found was that he really did not talk much about actually getting to know your students. As the saying goes, “they don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care” is so true. I understand that this book focuses mainly on differentiating instructional techniques, but it could have gone deeper. Students will be more apt to engaging or learning when they know that the teacher wants to see them succeed. If a teacher does not show interest in his/her students, he/she is failing the class as a whole. I would have liked to see Wormeli describe specific ways that show students their teacher deeply cares.

I would recommend this book to other teachers, but only if they had a lot of time on their hands to read something. There are probably better books out there that are more relevant depending on what grade level you want to teach. If someone was really struggling for ideas on how to differentiate for older grades, I would suggest skimming this book. I learned that there is a plethora of ways to differentiate and that differentiating does not just mean to switch up the content. The teacher can differentiate the methods and even the environment.

Works Cited

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