

Differentiation for Successful Noticing: From Instruction to Assessment

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The best assessments, whether formative or summative, strive to be as authentic as possible. An assessment that asks learners to respond to the material through a real-life situation or scenario is most likely to gauge not only mastery and application of the material, but also relevance and internalization of the material.

Educators have long emphasized the importance of considering multiple learning intelligences when designing learning. Yet for all the attention paid to differentiating instruction, we often do not consider the ways in which it is important to differentiate the assessment of that instruction. Just as a student has a preferred, more instinctive way of understanding material, that same student also has a preferred way of responding to the material.

Rather than concluding from one assessment that a learner has met the outcomes, we must first examine whether the assessment itself allowed that learner to best express the mastery, application, and internalization of the material. After learners are able to respond to the material in the way most comfortable to them, they are in an ideal mindset for meaningful reflection.

The tools of Gardner and Bloom are ubiquitous in lesson design. A constructivist educator would not sit to plan the procedures of a lesson without incorporating multiple intelligences, Bloom's taxonomy, or differentiated instruction. These tools are just as useful in helping to determine what learners have gained or gleaned from the lesson.

Consider the theory of multiple intelligences: there are eight distinct ways of applying problem-solving skills to any given lesson or problem.¹ Gardner himself wrote that "it should be possible to identify an individual's intellectual profile (or proclivities) at an early age and then draw upon this knowledge to enhance that person's educational opportunities

¹Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. 2nd ed. London: Fontana Press.

and options,”² and indeed this is how educators most often use his work, to assist in the design of instruction and classroom activities.

The underlying assumption, however, holds true for all aspects of learning. If we cannot expect a linguistic learner to master material presented through images or music, we should equally not expect them to respond to the material through a foreign or difficult intelligence.

In the interest of making an assessment more “fun” or “engaging” a teacher might ask her students to draw a picture that would allow her to see whether or not they have met one of the goals/noticing targets of the lesson. It happens in many of these instances that most children respond very positively to this assignment, several try to complete the task after complaining that they “aren’t good at drawing,” and a few scribble something quickly or refuse to do the task at all.

Using the evidence in front of her, that teacher would conclude that the students who produced good or detailed drawings took the assignment seriously and internalized the material. The teacher could also assume that the students who spent time on the assignment understood the point of the lesson, regardless of the quality of their artwork. Yet the same teacher might look at the work of the students who scribbled something quickly and determine that they missed the point of the lesson, did not care to reflect on the material, or are “bad” students.

This common conclusion, though logical, is not the only one. In our scenario, several of the students said that they were “not good at drawing.” These students may very seriously struggle with responding to the material in this way. Moreover, they may be embarrassed by their inability to demonstrate comprehension and reflection—regardless of the fact that they may have a sophisticated understanding and internal response.

It is in this way that assessment could learn a great deal from differentiated instruction. Indeed, assessment is an important component of successful differentiated instruction, as it facilitates a teacher’s noticing of his individual students’ learning preferences and

² Ibid.

challenges.³ Once a teacher has determined how to best present material and learning activities to meet the needs of the class, he will be able to use those same insights to develop appropriate assessments.

Moreover, just as an understanding of multiple intelligences can be a useful framework for differentiating instruction, it is also useful here:

Intelligence type	Learns and/or Expresses Best
Linguistic	Words and language
Logical-Mathematical	Logic and numbers
Musical	Music, sound, rhythm
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Body movement control
Spatial-Visual	Images and space
Interpersonal	Other people's feelings
Intrapersonal	Self-awareness

It is important to consider how a learner might be able to best express his or her opinions and understanding, and that it may or may not be the same way that learner best acquires knowledge. As with all efforts to differentiate, choice and dynamism are key.

Ideally every assessment, just like every lesson, would allow for as much choice and self-directed learning as possible. This is not always prudent in reality. Moreover, too much choice can be overwhelming for many learners. Educators may find it most helpful to think about different methods and assessment tools over the course of a unit rather than one lesson.

Certainly no amount of choice or variation will ever be as valuable as knowledge and appreciation of one's students. If an educator notices the students' strengths and weaknesses in order to differentiate instruction, those same observations and care will enable that teacher to similarly differentiate assessment.

³ Tomlinson, C. A. (2006). Differentiating instruction for academic diversity. In J. M. Cooper (Ed.)