by Stephanie L. Standerfer

Differentiation in the Music Classroom

Abstract: Differentiating music instruction can be done well with a bit of forethought and creativity. When strategically used, music educators can better meet students' needs and make great strides in individual and overall student achievement. A variety of K–12 choral, instrumental, and general music examples is included.

Keywords: curriculum development, differentiation, lesson plans

The principal's memo read, "Carl—I'll be observing your fourth period band next Monday. Please have a lesson plan for me at the beginning of the class including a description of how you have *differentiated your curriculum.*"

What?! Carl had attended all of the differentiation in-service workshops for the past two years. He always sat in the back thinking that it was just another fad for other teachers to deal with. Never was there mention of how to differentiate for music classes. Not one example. How could it apply to his bands?

Carl is not alone. Schools and districts across the country have invested in training teachers how to differentiate curriculum. Music educators are at a loss because there is an extreme lack of examples or resources for music. This article provides explanation and multiple examples of what differentiation can look like in music classes.

What Is Differentiation?

The term *differentiation* is being batted about with increasing frequency. Many of the interpretations and applications, however, are erroneous in light of the original research and model developed by University of Virginia professor Carol Ann Tomlinson.[1] It is this model that school districts across the country are adopting for K–12 implementation. An exploration of this model in light of music instruction may be beneficial.

Tomlinson's work is rooted in the philosophy that we should structure learning to fit the students rather than require that students adapt to fit the curriculum. The teacher must preassess students in multiple ways to determine the many types of characteristics within any given group of students. On the basis of that knowledge, the teacher then structures learning experiences that best meet the needs of that group.

Differentiation is the recognition of and commitment to plan for student differences. A differentiated classroom provides varied avenues to acquire content, process information, and develop final products. By giving students an appropriate challenge that meets their needs, student growth and success is maximized.

Differentiation is *not* individualized instruction. It does *not* require a dozen lesson plans to meet one learning objective. Instead, teachers look for shared characteristics among students within a class in order to group students in ways that make the most of the learning experience.

If you are asked by administrators to differentiate instruction in your music classes, they may be making assumptions about you and your program:

Be ready when your administrators ask you how you adapt your teaching to a wide variety of students.

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TABLE 1

Center Content

Center	Content 1	Content 2	Content 3
Computer	Rhythm error detection game	Note name practice	Grand staff game
Recorders	Song review	New songs	Composition (with keyboard option)
Teacher Directed Instruction	Rhythmic instruction	Melodic (solfège) instruction	

- You are a *musician* and a *teacher*.
- You have a plan for what needs to be taught for each ensemble or class as well as a plan for assessment of skill and knowledge achievement.
- Every piece of music is chosen to teach specific skills and knowledge in accordance with your curriculum.
- The goal for teaching any piece of music is to further students' musical understanding.

It is important to understand these assumptions and that Tomlinson's model originated through nonmusic curricular areas. Application of differentiation in music instruction can be effective if your philosophy of music education can accommodate these assumptions.

What Are the Benefits of Differentiated Instruction?

As teachers, we understand that no two students are the same. Differentiated musical experiences allow the struggling learner, the advanced learner, and on the on-grade-level learner to experience appropriate levels of challenge as they work to master essential information, ideas, and skills.

Differentiation not only recognizes that students are at different levels of readiness, but it also recognizes that students vary in how they process new information or skills as well as in what their interests are. Teachers differentiate instruction to make appropriate accommodations to ensure that the curriculum is engaging and appropriate for all learners.

Music teachers may unknowingly differentiate by students' readiness levels or by their musical abilities. Carl already differentiates by student readiness level with his system of chair placements. Students who are first or second chair are given more difficult parts and solos. Students with less developed skills are given easier parts to play to develop rudimentary skills. There are benefits to addressing students' interests and learning profiles to engage students in learning new ideas and gaining greater understanding of the music.

Three elements of instruction can be differentiated: the *content* to be taught, the learning *processes* in which students are engaged, and the final *product* to demonstrate what they have mastered. Let us take a look at each of these elements within a musical teaching context.

Content *refers to what the students are to learn and the means through which that is accomplished*. For music educators, the content is most often the music we teach, whether it is "The Old Brass Wagon," Palestrina's "Sicut servus," or "Let's Go Band!" Differentiating the content in music classes is most useful when there are disparate levels of musical skill or understanding. By grouping students to work on music at different levels of difficulty, all students are given an appropriate challenge. It can allow students with skill deficiencies to focus on fundamentals; this, in turn, can accelerate their learning and bring them up to an appropriate skill level. It also provides advanced students the opportunity to work on something that is challenging and engaging.

By using music centers in elementary music classes, students can be grouped to strengthen specific musical skills. At the beginning of the school year, Maggie had several students new to the school in one particular fourth-grade class. These students' music reading skills were not up to that of her returning students. She designed learning centers to allow all students in the class to work with different content. Each group attended three centers. The content of each center was adjusted to meet the needs of the group (Table 1).

The group of new students began at a center at which Maggie led them through a focused series of rhythm-reading activities. In the second center, these students began to sight-read short phrases using solfège. At the third center, students played a rhythmic error detection game on computers.

Two on-grade-level groups cycled through two computer centers that allowed students to review note names of the treble clef and practice rhythmic error detection. At the recorder center, students reviewed recorder songs from third grade and two new songs using the same notes.

The last group of Maggie's students had advanced music skills due to their private instrument studies. This group began practicing notes of the grand staff at the computers. At the recorder center, they worked on two new folk songs with challenging rhythms. They ended at a composition center, at which they composed melodies for either recorder or keyboard (Table 2). Notice that not all students experienced the same centers. Students were grouped and matched to carefully designed experiences that optimized their learning.

Content can also be differentiated for secondary ensembles. An innovative choral director had her select chamber choir work on solo repertoire for the first quarter of the year. Each student prepared a different art song chosen to fit his or her voice. Class time was used for a master class process, and every student performed in the final public recital. The teacher was able to work on specific vocal issues with each student. The master class process fostered the sense of individual responsibility as well as a positive, supportive team mindset for the rest of the school year. The same format or small

TABLE 2

Learning Centers with Differentiated Content

Center	Group 1: New Students	Group 2: On-Grade-Level Students	Group 3: On-Grade-Level Students	Group 4: Advanced Students
First Station	Beginning rhythm reading	Rhythm computer game	Recorders	Grand staff computer game
Second Station	Beginning melodic reading	Note-name computer game	Rhythm computer game	Recorders
Third Station	Rhythm computer game	Recorders	Note-name computer game	Compositions

ensembles would work well for band and orchestra.

Process *refers to the activities designed to allow application and practice of new skills and information.* Good music teachers will incorporate multiple teaching strategies to allow students to have various ways to process new information or practice new skills. If students are grouped for a specific purpose or are allowed to choose the most appealing task, they can process the new information or practice the new skill in a way that matches their skill level, interests, or preferred learning style.

Maggie, the elementary general music teacher, designed four note-naming tasks for her third-grade students. While she had introduced the letter names of the treble clef notes to all of her third-grade students with whole-class instruction and they would all take the same test in a few weeks, she knew students needed to process and practice the note names using different methods. Some students were very active (kinesthetic) and had difficulty sitting in one place for very long. Another group of students needed to see information presented in multiple ways. Other students loved to be creative and perform for others.

For the kinesthetic students, she laid a giant staff on the floor on which students would spell various words on the staff using their bodies. The visually oriented students used the Music Ace computer program to practice naming treble clef notes. The more creative group used keyboards with earphones to compose melodies, notating them on staff paper.

Cheryl wanted her high school choral students to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and style of the text from one of their pieces, a poem by e. e. cummings. She designed a project in which students studied the poet with a choice of (1) perusing biographical information and poems by cummings, (2) comparing poems of this poet with those of a contrasting style by another poet, or (3) comparing the song text with an original poem they would write on the same topic. Each task led students to a deeper understanding while giving them three different avenues to process the information.

Product *is the means by which students demonstrate what they have learned.* Students may learn the same music (content) using the same processes, but giving students a choice in how they demonstrate what they learned can reduce their stress level related to assessment and allow them to shine.

Adam used composition and performance as a means of assessing students' skills in performing rhythms with sixteenth notes. Students selected one of five groups in which to create rhythms using words from the Harry Potter books, carmakers, sports teams, animals, or cartoons. Using a set of 3- by 5-inch cards, each with one beat of rhythm, each student in the group created a four-measure rhythm using at least one set of sixteenth notes. Words related to the group topic were used to add a vocal aspect to the composition. The first group used the name Harry Potter for every set of four sixteenth notes, *nimbus* was used for eighth-note pairs, and *zap!* was used for quarter notes. The group then practiced piecing each rhythm together and performing it as a through-composed composition. Each group chose how its final composition would be performed: using voices, body percussion, percussion instruments, or a combination. As each group performed for the class, Adam assessed the accuracy of each student's performance using sixteenth notes.

After every concert, Maggie has her elementary students complete a self-evaluation of their performance. She has three versions of the evaluation form. One uses smiley face icons for ratings and simple words, like *words*, *faces*, and *playing* (instruments) to rate. Another form uses short words or phrases, such as *pitch*, *rhythm*, and *text*, as well as columns for a plus sign, check mark, or minus sign. The third form uses more complex musical terminology, such as *intonation*, *rhythmic accuracy*, and *diction*. Maggie designed the forms to be used with various grade levels, but the forms also allow differentiation for varied reading abilities within upper-grade classes.

Carl worked with his principal to design a differentiated project for his eighth-grade band. On the basis of results of a simple learning-styles survey, Carl designed the project for three groups of students most prevalent in his band: one group was very academic by nature, another group was very artistic, and a third group was creative but also very technologically savvy. The differentiated product gave students a choice in how they demonstrated their new knowledge of the composer they had studied throughout the concert preparation. Students could write a biographical essay, create a visual display, or design a PowerPoint presentation. Students researched the same composer using the same resources but demonstrated what they

learned about the composer in a different way. All of the final products were displayed in the auditorium lobby the night of the concert.

Examples thus far show how the content, processes, or products can be differentiated in three ways: by students' *readiness levels*, by their *learning profiles*, or by their *interests*.

Readiness level *describes how students' ability levels vary for different tasks.* Students may have a wide variety of skills in reading text, reading music notation, moving creatively, improvising, or playing instruments. Because of the wide variety of readiness levels in music classes, this is the most common strategy for differentiating content, processes, or products.

In a typical second-grade class, some students are ready to play rhythmic ostinatos with a song, while other students in the same class still need practice playing the steady beat. Elementary music teachers may assign specific Orff ensemble

parts to students on the basis of their skill level. Maggie's learning centers are an excellent example of differentiating content by readiness level. In Carl's eighth-grade band, students may challenge to move up in chair placements as they improve their playing skills and demonstrate that they are ready for more challenging parts. This is also an example of differentiating by readiness level.

Learning profile *describes a variety of preferences students have for processing information.* There are many lenses through which teachers can view students' learning preferences. Perhaps most common are the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning modes.[2] Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is another popular framework teachers can use to identify student preferences.[3]

Patrick Freer provided a research-based explanation of many common behaviors exhibited by boys in middle school choral programs. He presented

many research-based examples of how the adolescent male brain processes information differently, given a music classroom context. It was a convincing argument for allowing mixed choirs to perform separate men's and women's pieces.[4] This is an example of differentiating the musical content (the choral repertoire) by student learning profile (gender-based brain processing).

Maggie's third-grade students practiced treble clef note names at one of three stations. The visually oriented learners practiced with a computer program. Kinesthetic students spelled words with their bodies using the large staff on the floor. Auditory students created melodies on keyboards with earphones and notated their compositions on staff paper. She differentiated the process of practicing note names by student learning profiles (visual, kinesthetic, and auditory learning styles). Students were engaged in an activity that was most comfortable for them.

Interest is an avenue to tap student hobbies and passions to create heightened curiosity, attention, or motivation. Hannah Montana, Spider-Man, baseball, blogs: there are many topics that can motivate students as they learn music. Students' interest in your music class may stem from an interest in a particular style of music. Tapping into what your students are interested in can provide an exciting connection to music.

As you may recall, Adam had his students practice sixteenth-note rhythms using the five most popular topics in his sixth-grade general music classes: Harry Potter, car makes or models, sports teams, animals, and cartoons. Teachers may also allow students to choose their own topic. Judy's high school chamber choir will perform an art song recital in the fall. Her students may choose from many styles and composers, including Italian light arias, German lieder, or English ballads.

The Cornerstone: Preassessment

Differentiating music instruction requires teachers to know their students well. In order to determine students' readiness levels, learning profiles, or interests, music teachers need to conduct preassessments to identify meaningful characteristics for flexible student groupings.

It is imperative that any differentiated lesson or assignment be based on the applicable characteristics of a particular group of students with regard to their readiness levels, interests, or learning profiles. Just as all students are unique, each class of students has a unique group dynamic. What works with one fifth-grade class may not work for every fifth-grade class.

For young students, assessment of musical knowledge and skill can take place during whole-group instruction through a series of questions. Many gamelike activities allow for students to perform in small groups or as soloists in vocal or instrumental performances.

For older students, a written pretest of musical terms and notation can provide important information about what students have learned and what they still need to practice. A nongraded vocal and/ or instrumental performance can also provide important information about students' musical skills.[5]

There are several learning preference surveys that will allow you to glean information about how your students learn best. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is a popular framework teachers can use to view students' learning and thinking preferences.[6] Barbe, Swassing, and Milone's learning modalities (auditory, visual, kinesthetic) have influenced many learning-style inventories, such as those designed by Diane Heacox.[7]

Interest inventories are perhaps the easiest to design. Asking students about their favorite cartoons, books, sports, hobbies, or music will give you a wealth of information that can help you design learning experiences that motivate your students toward success.

Matching Differentiation to Student Needs

Once a teacher has collected the preassessment information, he or she needs to think about matching the teaching or assessment method to meet student needs. Three questions can guide this process:

- What are the characteristics of students in this class regarding readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles?
- Which elements of this lesson are important for each student: content, processes, or products?
- What elements of this lesson are most flexible: content, process, or product?

Determining the most important student needs and the most flexible lesson element provides the framework for differentiation. Creativity is necessary to design experiences that will engage students and deepen musical learning.

Finding a great project idea for your students, tossing it into the copier, and giving it to your students is *not* necessarily differentiating instruction. If the project design happens to fit the needs of your students, you are in luck. This, however, is a rare occurrence.

Careful planning is required to determine how content, learning processes, or products may be differentiated with respect to students' readiness levels, learning profiles, or interests. Differentiate when you see a student need that can be attended to with a more focused learning activity. It is impossible to differentiate everything. To begin, choose a manageable experience to differentiate.

Students at the Center

This particular model of differentiation features a philosophy of teaching and learning that advocates design and delivery of instruction based on student needs. Students' needs become a central factor for designing instruction. Teachers need to make modifications for students rather than assume that students will modify themselves to fit the curriculum. Musical content, learning processes, and final products can be differentiated by student readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests. With some creative thinking and some trial and error, music teachers can effectively differentiate instruction to better meet student needs.

NOTES

1. Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999).
2. Walter B. Barbe, Raymond H. Swassing, and Michael Milone, *Teaching through Modality Strengths: Concepts and Practices* (Columbus, OH: Zaner-Bloser, 1979).
3. Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
4. Patrick K. Freer, "Between Research and Practice: How Choral Music Loses Boys in the 'Middle,'" *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 2 (2007): 28–34.
5. For additional information on assessing musical performances, responses to musical content, and student-created musical products, see the seminal text by Timothy Brophy, *Assessing the Developing Child Musician* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2000).
6. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*.
7. Barbe, Swassing, and Milone, *Teaching through Modality Strengths*; Diane Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, 2002).