

STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY AS A DIFFERENTIATED STRATEGY



To start, the instructor selects a topic with two different viewpoints (e.g., "Nuclear energy should be used more/less in this country."). Students form groups and divide into two pairs. Each pair is assigned an advocacy position, and depending on available time, either receives supporting documentation or researches the topic. If the instructor wishes, student pairs from different groups with the same positions can compare ideas after becoming familiar with their positions. The student pairs highlight the main arguments for their position and prepare a short presentation.

Each student pair then presents their position to the other pair in their group. The students listen and take thorough notes but are not permitted to ask questions, disagree, or debate. After the presentation, the other pair presents their position. After the presentations, the students discuss their positions and provide more supporting evidence. With their notes as a guide, the students switch advocacy positions and prepare and give a new presentation. Finally, students drop their advocacy role and generate a consensus report addressing the original question posed.

Academic controversy can enhance student skills including:

- researching issues
- organizing information
- preparing a position
- advocating a position
- being able to rationalize one's position
- learning to debate
- evaluating strengths and weaknesses on both sides of an issue
- seeing issues from other perspectives
- reconceptualizing one's position
- synthesizing information
- reaching consensus

STEPS TO CONDUCT THE CONTROVERSY

1. Assign each pair of students the following tasks:

- a.) Learning their position and its supporting arguments and information
- b.) Researching all information relevant to their position
- c.) Giving the opposing pair any information found supporting the opposing position
- d.) Preparing a persuasive presentation to be given to the other pair
- e.) Preparing a series of persuasive arguments to be used in the discussion with the opposing pair

- Pairs research and prepare their positions, presentations, and arguments. Students are given the following instructions:
- Plan with your partner how to advocate your position effectively. Read the materials supporting your position.
- Find more information in the library reference books or online to support your position.
- Plan a persuasive presentation.
- Make sure you and your partner master the information supporting your assigned position and present it in a persuasive and complete way so that the other group members will comprehend and learn the information.

2. Have each pair PRESENT ITS POSITION to the other. Presentations should involve more than one medium and persuasively advocate the best case for the position. There is no arguing during this time. Students should listen carefully to the opposing position. Students are told:

- As a pair, present your position forcefully and persuasively.
- Listen carefully and learn the opposing position.
- Take notes, and clarify anything that you do not understand.

3. Have students openly DISCUSS THE ISSUE by freely exchanging their information and ideas. For higher-level reasoning and critical thinking to occur, it is necessary to prove and push each other's statements, clarify rationales, and show why their position is a rationale one. Students refute the claims being made by the opposing pair and rebut the attacks on their own position. Students are to follow the specific rules for constructive controversy. Students should also take careful notes on and carefully study the opposing position. Sometimes a "time out" period needs to be provided so that pairs can caucus and prepare new arguments. Teachers encourage more spirited arguing, take sides when a pair is in trouble, play devils' advocate, ask one group to observe another group engaging in a spirited argument, and generally stir up the discussions. Students are instructed:

- Argue forcefully and persuasively for your position, presenting as many facts as you can to support your point of view.
- Listen critically to the opposing pair's position, asking them for the facts that support their viewpoint, and then present counterarguments.
- Remember that this is a complex issue, and you need to know both sides to write a good report.

4. Have the pairs REVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND POSITIONS by presenting the opposing position as sincerely and forcefully as they can. It helps to have the pairs change chairs. They can use their own notes, but may not see the materials developed by the opposing pair. Students' instructions are:

- Working as a pair, present the opposing pair's position as if you were they.
- Be as sincere and forceful as you can.
- Add any new facts you know.
- Elaborate their position by relating it to other information you have previously learned.

5. Have the group members drop their advocacy positions and REACH A DECISION BY CONSENSUS. This process will likely require looking at the nuances of both sides and seeking a moderate position between the two extreme positions. The group should prepare a consensus paper, project, or other statement that expresses the collective understanding and opinions of all group members. Students are instructed:

- Summarize and synthesize the best arguments for both points of view.
- Reach consensus on a position that is supported by the facts.
- Change your mind only when the facts and the rationale clearly indicate that you should do so.

This collaborative learning structure has been thoroughly researched (Johnson, et al., 1991) and many positive academic outcomes have been observed including complex reasoning skills, higher quality decision making, increased motivation and energy to take action. Other positive outcomes are enumerated in Johnson, et al. (1991, 1994) and Millis and Cottell (1998).

Here are some helpful suggestions to give your students:

- be respectful of each other
- disagree with another person's position and ideas but don't be critical of the person
- don't take criticism of your ideas as a personal attack

- listen to everyone's ideas, especially if you don't agree with them
- change your mind when the evidence supports this
- try to understand both sides of the controversy
- understand the position differences before trying to reach consensus
- focus on reaching the best outcome, not on winning

Possible topics for Structured Academic Controversy

1. **The Civil War and Reconstruction** – Overall, Reconstruction was a success vs. Overall, Reconstruction was a failure.
2. **US Metric Conversion** - The metric conversion is necessary for the health of the US economy vs. The need for metric conversion is obsolete and would actually harm the economy if businesses were mandated to change.
3. **Genetic Engineering** – Genetic engineering is destructive vs. Genetic engineering is creative.
4. **Hamlet** – Hamlet is a hero vs. Hamlet is a villain.

5. **Historical Inquiry Question: “Were the Nineteenth-Century Entrepreneurs ‘Robber Barons?’”**

Secondary Reading Sources taken from *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in United States History, Vol. 2* (McGraw-Hill, 2013).

YES – Howard Zinn, from “Robber Barrons and Rebels,” in *A Peoples History of the United States* (HarperCollins, 1999).

NO – John S. Gordon, from “Was There Ever Such a Business!” in *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power* (Harper Perennial, 2004).

TASK 1: You and a partner are going to take on one side of this debate by reading the above secondary source written by a historian who holds that particular view. After reading that source, you will complete the below handout to support your assigned view.

TASK 2: After becoming an expert on your assigned side, you will connect with another pair or students who had the opposing view. You will share the evidence you gathered on Task 1. You will take notes on the opposing side as it is presented.

TASK 3: After both sides present, first you, and then the group of four, must come to a consensus on the evidence presented and answer the historical question as a group. Be prepared to share your group’s consensus (or lack of) view!

6. **On the following pages are 2 articles about differentiation that would be good to do as a structured academic controversy with the teachers in your building – to come to consensus about beliefs about differentiation in your school. While you are waiting for the other groups to finish, read the articles and start the debate within your group.**

Differentiation Doesn't Work

By James R. Delisle

Let's review the educational cure-alls of past decades: back to basics, the open classroom, whole language, constructivism, and E.D. Hirsch's excruciatingly detailed accounts of what every 1st or 3rd grader should know, to name a few. It seems America's teachers and students are guinea pigs in the perennial quest for universal excellence. Sadly, though, the elusive panacea that will solve all of education's woes has remained, well, *elusive*. But wait! The solution has arrived, and it's been around long enough to prove its worth. What is this magical elixir? Differentiation!

Starting with the gifted-education community in the late 1960s, differentiation didn't get its mojo going until regular educators jumped onto the bandwagon in the 1980s. By my count, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (now known simply as ASCD) has released more than 600 publications on differentiation, and countless publishers have followed suit with manuals and software that will turn every classroom into a differentiated one. There's only one problem: Differentiation is a failure, a farce, and the ultimate educational joke played on countless educators and students.

In theory, differentiation sounds great, as it takes several important factors of student learning into account:

- It seeks to determine what students already know and what they still need to learn.
- It allows students to demonstrate what they know through multiple methods.
- It encourages students and teachers to add depth and complexity to the learning/teaching process.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? The problem is this: Although fine in theory, differentiation in practice is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.

Case in point: In a [winter 2011 *Education Next* article](#), the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Michael Petrilli wrote about a University of Virginia study of differentiated instruction: "Teachers were provided with extensive professional development and ongoing coaching. Three years later the researchers wanted to know if the program had an impact on student learning. But they were stumped. 'We couldn't answer the question ... because no one was actually differentiating,' " the researcher, Holly Hertberg-Davis, told Petrilli. And, Ms. Hertberg-Davis herself wrote in a [2009 article in *Gifted Child Quarterly*](#): "It does not seem that we are yet at a place where differentiation within the regular classroom is a particularly effective method of challenging our most able learners."

Too, Mike Schmoker, in a 2010 Commentary for *Education Week* titled "[When Pedagogic Fads Trump Priorities](#)," relates that his experiences of observing educators trying to differentiate caused him to draw this conclusion: "In every case, differentiated instruction seemed to complicate teachers' work, requiring them to procure and assemble multiple sets of materials, ... and it dumbed down instruction."

As additional evidence of the ineffectiveness of differentiation, in a [2008 report by the Fordham Institute](#), 83 percent of teachers nationwide stated that differentiation was "somewhat" or "very" difficult to implement.

It seems that, when it comes to differentiation, teachers are either not doing it at all, or beating themselves up for not doing it as well as they're supposed to be doing it. Either way, the verdict is clear: Differentiation is a promise unfulfilled, a boondoggle of massive proportions.

The biggest reason differentiation doesn't work, and never will, is the way students are deployed in most of our nation's classrooms. Toss together several students who struggle to learn, along with a smattering of gifted kids, while adding a few English-language learners and a bunch of academically average students and expect a single teacher to differentiate for each of them. That is a recipe for academic disaster if ever I saw one. Such an admixture of students with varying abilities in one classroom causes even the most experienced and conscientious teachers to flinch, as they know the task of reaching each child is an impossible one.

It seems to me that the only educators who assert that differentiation is doable are those who have never tried to implement it themselves: university professors, curriculum coordinators, and school principals. It's the in-the-trenches educators who know the stark reality: Differentiation is a cheap way out for school districts to pay lip service to those who demand that each child be educated to his or her fullest potential.

Do we expect an oncologist to be able to treat glaucoma? Do we expect a criminal prosecutor to be able to decipher patent law? Do we expect a concert pianist to be able to play the clarinet equally well? No, no, no. However, when the education of our nation's young people is at stake, we toss together into one classroom every possible learning strength and disability and expect a single teacher to be able to work academic miracles with every kid ... as long as said teacher is willing to differentiate, of course.

The sad truth is this: By having dismantled many of the provisions we used to offer to kids on the edges of learning (classes for gifted kids, classes for kids who struggle to learn, and classes for those whose behaviors are disruptive to the learning process of others), we have sacrificed the learning of virtually

every student. In the same Fordham Institute report cited earlier, 71 percent of teachers reported that they would like to see our nation rely more heavily on homogeneous grouping of advanced students, while a resounding 77 percent of teachers said that, when advanced students are paired with lower-achieving students for group assignments, it's the smart kids who do the bulk of the work.

A second reason that differentiation has been a failure is that we're not exactly sure what it is we are differentiating: Is it the curriculum or the instructional methods used to deliver it? Or both? The terms "differentiated instruction" and "differentiated curriculum" are used interchangeably, yet they are not synonyms. Teachers want and need clear guidance on what it is they are supposed to do to reach differentiated Nirvana, yet the messages they receive from the "experts" are far from consistent. No wonder confusion reigns and teachers feel defeated in trying to implement the grand goals of differentiation.

Differentiation might have a chance to work if we are willing, as a nation, to return to the days when students of similar abilities were placed in classes with other students whose learning needs paralleled their own. Until that time, differentiation will continue to be what it has become: a losing proposition for both students and teachers, and yet one more panacea that did not pan out.

Differentiation Does, in Fact, Work

By Carol Ann Tomlinson

It will not surprise educators who know my work to learn that my experiences and beliefs regarding academic diversity in classrooms differ from those of James R. Delisle, who recently made the case in an *Education Week* Commentary that differentiated instruction can't work in today's classrooms. Based on a conviction that conversation around differing vantage points is beneficial, I'd like to respond.

I'll begin with the idea that teachers don't differentiate instruction. In fact, they do. I work with teachers regularly—in the United States and around the world—whose teaching consistently reflects the principles and practices of differentiation. It's how they do business. They don't, as Mr. Delisle writes, "beat themselves up for not doing it as well as they are supposed to be doing it," but they do understand that the pursuit of expertise in teaching is a career-long endeavor. They aren't sprinters expecting quick success, so much as marathoners in the race for the long haul.

Then there's the assertion that the only people who think differentiation is doable are those who have never tried to implement it. Speaking first for myself, I taught for 20 years in differentiated middle school classrooms, greatly enriched by working with a group of colleagues who did the same. Like many other teachers, then and now, we invented instructional approaches we hoped would benefit our diverse learners, keeping those practices that worked and jettisoning or modifying those that didn't.

In my second life at the University of Virginia, I continue to differentiate in my classes. I also work often with school-based academic coaches and principals who share with colleagues the practices of differentiation they used successfully in their own classrooms. And there are many specialists—in special education, English-language learning, reading, gifted education—who continue to differentiate in particular settings, even as they share what they know while working alongside teachers in general education classrooms.

Mr. Delisle's fundamental argument, however, doesn't seem to be so much that differentiation can't work under any circumstances, but rather that perhaps it could if we'd just group students by ability. While I know of no aspect of education on which all studies are in total agreement, this one comes close.

For many reasons, students in lower-track classes don't achieve as well as they do in heterogeneous settings. Those classes tend to be taught by newer or less engaged teachers. The quality of curriculum

and instruction is less robust than in most heterogeneous settings. The intellectual climate in tracked classes is further damped by students who know they are siloed because adults consider them to be less able than many of their peers—and they respond accordingly.

Common sense and experience tell the story, as well. As the wise Bart Simpson told his teacher in one episode of "The Simpsons": "You think I'm not smart so you're gonna put me in a remedial class and slow down what I do. At the same time, the other kids will keep moving ahead, and you think someday I'll catch up?" Follow a remedial class throughout several school days, and it becomes very difficult to assert that students in all tracks have any degree of equitable access to excellent educational opportunity.

One outcome of tracking that should be of particular concern in the current school year—the first in which "minority" students became the majority in U.S. schools—is the reality that low-track classes continue to be disproportionately composed of students of color and/or low-income students, while high-track classes remain disproportionately white and/or Asian and middle class.

Educator Martin Haberman spoke of low-track classes as supporting a "pedagogy of poverty," a label he used to reflect two realities. First, most students in the low-track classes are from low-income backgrounds. Second, the quality of learning in those classes seems a guarantee that the students in them will remain poor.

Later, Helene Hodges, a former official of the education association ASCD, wrote about "a pedagogy of plenty," describing the nature of rich learning experiences in high-track classes, where more privileged students are the norm. Detailing the kind of intellectually rich environment typical of those classes, she concluded that they were not only heavily populated by students whose lives were marked by "plenty," but that continual engagement with the kind of learning opportunities in those classes predicted a continuing life of plenty for students in them.

Recent work in neuroscience and psychology reveals two findings that should be central in educational planning. First, virtually all brains are malleable. When we teach as though students are smart, they become smarter. Second, a related but separate body of research indicates that teachers who believe firmly in the untapped capacity of each learner, and thus set out to demonstrate to students that by working hard and working smart they can achieve impressive goals, get far better results than teachers who believe some students are smart, others are not, and little can be done to change that. It's difficult to grow brains and help students develop growth mindsets in remedial contexts.

That undermines a chief point of Mr. Delisle's argument that bright learners can't fare well in heterogeneous classrooms. Studies have shown, after all, that advanced learners achieve more in homogeneous settings. I am a firm believer that schools owe every student what the noted researcher John Hattie calls "plus-one learning" in his book *Visible Learning for Teachers*. With plus-one learning, teachers are obliged to ensure that each learner—including those who are most advanced—moves forward consistently from his or her starting point.

I have no more patience with classes where advanced learners stagnate than I do with classes that shortchange kids who struggle with school. Here are a couple of points worth considering, however. The **studies most cited** in terms of benefits of homogeneous instruction for bright learners examined two conditions: heterogeneous classrooms in which little or nothing was done to provide plus-one learning for advanced learners, and homogeneous classrooms in which teachers regularly planned for plus-one learning.

In the two decades since those studies, I've observed and studied schools in which the entire faculty focused on providing a third condition: differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms where regular planning for a full spectrum of learners—including advanced learners—was a given.

Teachers in those schools typically "teach up," planning first for advanced learners, then scaffolding instruction to enable less advanced students to access those rich learning experiences. Further, they extend the initial learning opportunities when they are not sufficiently challenging for highly advanced learners. In those schools, achievement for the full spectrum of learners—including advanced learners—rose markedly when compared to peer schools where this approach was not pervasive.

For the record, I've never felt differentiation was a panacea. I have never advocated what I'd call "Noah's Ark" classrooms assigned two of every kind of learner in the school. I absolutely understand that differentiating instruction well is not easy. But then, I've never felt that teaching should be easy.

I work with a growth mindset about teachers, as about students. I believe that with intelligent, sustained support, most teachers can learn—step by step and over time—the attitudes and skills necessary to provide plus-one learning in the context of classrooms that are both academically rich and academically diverse.