

Everyone Wins: Differentiation in the School Library

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During the course of an average day teacher-librarians touch the lives of hundreds of students, teachers, administrators and parents in their school communities. They rarely stop to think about it or take the time to add up the impact of their work because this is what librarians do; they assist others on the road to learning. The school library is a learning centre common to all students and staff. The physical walls are no longer barriers to learning as school librarians and districts develop extensive support through virtual libraries that are open to patrons 24/7. Among the physical and virtual resources, technologies and support materials all students and teachers can find what they need when they need it.

The teacher-librarian, an uber responsive educator, is the magician that makes all this happen with seeming ease. They build inclusive collections, designing physical and virtual work spaces for different kinds of tasks, supporting all students in research and independent reading quests, learning and acquiring the best technology tools, and all the while dancing to the tune of individual teacher, school, district, and provincial needs. It is time to stop, reflect on and celebrate all the ways TL's currently provide for differentiation effective teaching and successful learning.

The library media center has long been a beloved and specialized learning environment for students, a place rich with opportunities to pursue specialized inquiries, interests, and ideas. It is the most natural venue in schools for differentiation, integration of technology, and collaboration. In recent years, state and national standards for information literacy and technology have delineated a framework for what students are expected to know and be able to do as a result of their work in the library media center. Noted education researchers, system leaders, and authors as well as foundations have further bolstered the importance of the library media center as an integral part of 21st century learning so that students are prepared for the demands of the workplace. There has never been a more exciting or potentially powerful time to be a library media specialist.

,Allison Zumunda Where Does Your Authority Come From? Empowering the Library Media Specialist as a True Partner in Student Achievement.

The high praise of Allison Zmuda is a needed tonic for the school library world. Zmuda understands that within the school library is a curriculum specialist with a distinct array of teaching strategies, a wealth of resources, technologies, strategies and facilities that can be applied to the benefit of all teachers and learners. Classroom teachers and administrators who are struggling to address the needs of their diverse learners often overlook this obvious bank that is common to the entire school. Teacher –Librarians who are so busy ‘doing it’ also need to be reminded that they are big players in ensuring that

all learners have the opportunity to excel, and that they contribute to learning, through the expertise that they bring to the school.

Connecting kids and content in meaningful ways is the work of all educators. Helping every child achieve is our mutual goal. Addressing the special learning styles, intelligences, interests, needs and abilities of every learner is the challenge.

*Education is about learning. Learning happens within students not to them.
Learning is a process of making meaning that happens one student at a time.*

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*.

Carol Ann Tomlinson, a leader in this field, tells us that differentiation is acknowledging that kids learn in different ways, and responding by doing something about that through curriculum and instruction. She explains that differentiating instruction is not an instructional strategy nor is it a teaching model. It is in fact a way of thinking, an approach, to teaching and learning that advocates beginning where students are at and designing experiences that will better help them to achieve.

In their book *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*, Tomlinson and McTighe suggest that teachers first need to establish standards for student achievement and then design many paths of instruction to enable all learners to be successful. To reach desired learning standards, Tomlinson and McTighe encourage teachers to differentiate for students through the following design elements:

- **content** (what students learn and the materials that represent that)
- **process** (activities through which students make sense of key ideas using the essential skills)
- **product** (how students demonstrate and extend what they understand and can do as a result of a span of learning)
- **learning environment** (the classroom conditions that set the tone and expectations of learning)

In school libraries across the country, daily, TL's are addressing each of these elements of differentiation. This rich potential could be spread more equitably throughout the entire school community if we provided TL's with more knowledge of differentiated instruction and honored their role in contributing to student achievement. It is our hope that this article will provide a starting point for teacher-librarians and initiate discussions and actions that bring the school library, in a formal more conscious role, to the differentiation table.

How does the teacher-librarian contribute to differentiated instruction for all students?

The school library is a learning lab, a literacy classroom, a common space for students and teachers to study, research, read, think, question, argue, discover, connect to the

world or just curl up and relax with a good book. The school library is an information and technology rich learning environment that all students should have ready access to whenever they need it. The rich diverse resources, flexible spaces, technology tools and the expertise of the teacher librarian provide a goldmine of assistive choices for teachers and students. It is just not possible to offer all these options to learners in an isolated classroom.

If we look at the elements of differentiation that Tomlinson identifies in her work and examine the potential impact of the school library program we can build a pile of evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of teacher-librarians on learning for all. Everyone wins at the library. We have brainstormed a few ways that teacher-librarians differentiate in the library in order to support learning for all in the classroom. We hope that this will be a beginning for school librarians to build on.

Content

The classroom teacher identifies the content to be taught and often has some classroom resources to support content learning. The teacher- librarian can enrich classroom resources and help teachers with the diverse materials and learning supports needed to ensure differentiation by:

- developing topic explorations in the library to ensure working knowledge of background information and to build related vocabulary.
- assembling resources and sources that challenge and excite but are accessible and meaningful to a range of abilities.
- ensuring that a variety of resource types, (at varying levels of difficulty and sophistication), are available to support content in all subject areas E.g. fiction, non-fiction, magazines, newspapers, databases, reference, websites, multimedia and contact with experts etc.
- building diverse collections that reflect and enhance school demographics.
- introducing students to a wide range of reading genres to expand their reading horizons.
- connecting students to experts on topics and enhancing their ability to network with the world community.
- developing reading lists and pathfinders to support specific lessons and units.
- teaching students to examine all relevant perspectives when exploring issues.
- providing students with techniques for evaluating sources for relevance and reliability.
- helping student to be responsible users of information and ideas.

*Classroom teachers can work to the benefit of many more students by implementing **patterns of instruction** likely to serve multiple needs.*

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*

Process

When classroom teachers partner with the teacher-librarian, to design, facilitate and evaluate learning experiences, the opportunities for differentiation are doubled. Together they can design and provide:

- “fail-proof” scaffolding such as topic specific graphic organizers, question or thought prompts, student contracts and checklists, and assessment tools.
- resource-based challenges that build critical and creative thinking processes (research, solve a problem, make a decision, invention etc.).
- high think learning models that align with/match the learning need (compare/contrast, jig-saw, timeline etc. See Beyond Bird Units 2007).
- information literacy instruction infused as needed.
- a range of both student and teacher directed learning opportunities.
- instructional strategies for interdisciplinary learning.
- supportive groupings for collaborative learning experiences (discussion groups, book clubs -both face to face and virtual, reading /learning buddies, blogs, wikis, e-projects etc.).
- assessment tools and strategies that help students grow.

Product

The school library is arguably the most real world learning centre in any school. Consequently within the library there are many resources that will help students learn about preparing effective products and presentations. The teacher-librarian can provide opportunities for differentiating the product by:

- sharing many authentic product exemplars with students (e.g. posters, pamphlets, articles, video, power-point, archived speeches etc.).
- introducing students to a range of effective presentation types (press release, photo essay, skit, interactive game, etc.).
- teaching students to plan and providing spaces for rehearsal of sharing.
- assisting students to learn about their best presentation style.
- teaching students how to use and integrate effective multimedia in their product/presentations.
- providing authentic venues for building and sharing expertise.
- helping students extend sharing or take action beyond the school walls (e.g. letters, proposals, surveys, blogs, etc.).

Learning Environment

Educators strive to ensure that every classroom provides a safe, supportive, nurturing learning environment for students of all abilities and learning styles to thrive in. In all learning spaces we expect and encourage the highest possible levels of achievement for

all learners. The school library is one of those classrooms that meets these standards but also, by its very nature, contributes to more opportunity for differentiated instruction by:

- offering a real world setting for relaxing and working.
- providing multiple spaces for individual small group and whole class learning.
- matching resources to students whatever their skill level.
- creating flexible open spaces for drama, circle activities and presentations.
- maintaining computer pods/labs with Internet access and productivity capabilities.
- acquiring simple to complex software tools.
- budgeting for multimedia tools(cameras, printers, scanner, smartboard etc.).
- arranging quiet areas for study and relaxation (soft seating, study carrels, seminar rooms).
- designing virtual library spaces for study, support and relaxation, available 24/7.
- supporting students with homework help from the school library webpage
- helping students manage their information resources and work spaces both physical and virtual.
- providing students with self evaluation tools and helping them set goals for improvement.

How does the teacher-librarian contribute to differentiated instruction for special students?

Differentiation accommodates all student needs including students with low skill levels, second language deficits, limited background knowledge and gifted learners. The following chart from *Beyond Bird Units: Thinking and Understanding in Information-Rich and Technology-Rich Environments*, provides some specific examples of how teacher-librarians can differentiate for specialized student needs.

In summary we have a few suggestions for next steps. We encourage teacher-librarians to:

- celebrate what you do already to address the learning needs of your school community.
- analyze the demographics of your school population and their achievement levels so that you can build even stronger, more supportive, library collections.
- learn all you can about differentiated instruction and related topics such as learning styles, multiple intelligences, multiple literacies, and brain based learning.
- build on your toolbox of instructional strategies so that you have a rich range of interventions to offer students and teachers.
- use the elements of differentiation as a framework for developing long range plans and budget proposals.
- gather the evidence of your successes as you support learning for all through your library facilities and programs. Share your story with your administration and staff.
- **Keep everyone winning at the library!**

References

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