Differentiation in the Online Classroom

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by John Englander and Lisa Micley Issue: Differentiation The Virtual High School

Train a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it.

This simple advice from Proverbs fosters a style of teaching that helps students reach their fullest potential as learners, and it speaks to the crucial development of a lifelong love of learning. It states a basic and profound truth: Each of us is unique; each of us learns “according to his [or her] way.” Who would have thought that one of the buzzwords in education, differentiated instruction, has been a part of the ancient canon of Jewish wisdom all along?

Yet believing in the value and power of differentiated instruction and actually implementing it are two very different endeavors. Consider this definition of differentiated instruction from ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) that begins to reveal some of its inherent challenges:

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching in which educators actively plan for students’ differences so that all students can best learn. In a differentiated classroom, teachers divide their time, resources and efforts to effectively teach students who have various backgrounds, readiness and skill levels, and interests.

The effort to differentiate instruction may overwhelm teachers. Getting through the content and standards that need to be taught to their students can take major focus and effort, let alone trying to cater to the learning styles and abilities of each individual student. Preparing different types of lessons for different types of students, to make the learning more effective and efficient, can be a monumental task. For some teachers, this is a paradigm shift in how they teach.

Today, online classrooms can provide the means to address the demands of differentiated instruction. Online learning can be an ideal environment for differentiation because teachers are able to customize the way students access information, vary the course pacing for individual students, and quickly assess the manner in which individual students—or groups of students—demonstrate understanding of the content.

The very experience of learning in an online classroom is, in itself, a personal and individual one for each student. Lesson content can be easily adapted for different populations. New technology tools in online courses, such as the text reader ReadSpeaker, can be used to support students with limited English skills or proficiency in reading, as well as students who are visually impaired.

The scheduling flexibility of online learning provides another nuanced strategy for differentiated instruction. Each of us experiences fluctuations in our capacity to process information. Perhaps you are a “night owl,” most energetic and alert late at night. Maybe you experience peak levels of concentration and focus in the morning hours when brain activity is humming along like a
well-oiled machine. Or maybe each day is different for how and when you learn best. For teens, such fluctuations are amplified as factors such as brain development, hormones, diet and lack of sleep lead to varying levels of engagement and processing throughout any given day. The asynchronous online classroom can capitalize on student motivation and inspiration as the student can engage in learning at times when he or she is most alert and open to receiving information.

Imagine if teachers could clone themselves to be in several locations in their classroom at the same time, teaching distinct groups of students various types of lessons that cater to the group’s needs. Sounds like something you might read in a Harry Potter novel! In essence, the asynchronous online classroom offers this very possibility. Multiple teaching strategies and lessons that address the same learning objective can be created before the course even begins. Teachers then monitor student performance to determine which lessons might be best for which students, and can individualize the learning pathway for their students. This allows students at both ends of the spectrum, and anywhere in between, to benefit from online learning.

In the Online Judaic Studies Consortium’s (OJSC) introductory course on Mishnah, teachers tailor the activity to the skillset of the student, providing slightly different assignments to students based on their ability to synthesize and interpret information. For example, students may be asked to demonstrate their understanding via a structured worksheet while others are pushed to identify and articulate the reisha and seifa of the text on their own. Advanced students might be asked to incorporate additional commentaries into their explication to the class in a paragraph, podcast or vlog. When shared with the class via a structured class discussion, struggling learners benefit from the models of more advanced learners, while reflecting and commenting on their contributions to the activity.

Of course, even in the world of online learning, no technology or algorithm can approach the effectiveness of student-to-teacher communication and interaction, whether online or off. For the majority of students, building a relationship and getting direct feedback and guidance from a competent teacher will always be a major ingredient for learning, especially when it comes to Judaic studies course work. A private online discussion area, for example, can provide the ideal environment for the teacher to suggest modifications for the student and for the student to articulate challenges he or she is having with the material and or its presentation. The same opportunity can be offered to any student who is hesitant to share his writing with the class. As the student grows in confidence in response to the feedback of the teacher, he or she can return to the class discussion and participate with the group.

For those students who can handle—and might require—more challenging materials, teachers in an online setting can easily adapt instruction by adding lesson content and additional exploratory resources. These materials are part of the course as it is developed and are available to any student seeking greater challenge, while individual students requiring more challenge can be encouraged to explore the additional materials. These additional materials might be source sheets with related texts and commentaries or supplementary readings and discussion prompts or other activities through which the students reflect on what they have read.
Perhaps the most important aspect of differentiated instruction in the online classroom is demonstrated through varied assessment strategies. Student understanding can be assessed in both traditional and innovative ways: through discussion and journaling, group projects, activities that require students to produce works of art or creative writing, and many other types of teaching strategies that are assessed. In the context of Judaic studies courses online, this might take the form of practicing introspection in a prayer journal, demonstrating creativity in a Siddur Companion project, or even practicing the middah of gratitude in their own lives by creating gratitude lists and reflecting on the experience. Using varied assessment strategies is good practice in any classroom, be it online or face to face. The online course provides flexibility for the teacher to deliver the most appropriate assessment approach based on the student’s needs.

Each year at Pesach we are instructed in the pedagogy of differentiated instruction. The importance of training the child “according to his way” is the core pedagogic approach in the section on the Four Children. We are not instructed to give each child the same response to his or her inquiry about the history of our people. Rather, we are shown that the most effective means of teaching is always to meet the learner where he or she is, to take into consideration the perspective and current developmental stage of the child. And in so doing, we hope our message reaches the student and helps him or her grow in understanding and critical-thinking skills. If we’ve done our jobs and we’re lucky, “when he grows old, he will not turn away from [the learning].”