

Preface

“I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.”

—(often attributed to) Albert Einstein

Why Did I Write This Book?

When I think of students’ boredom in school (and many teachers’ reactions to students’ boredom), I can’t help but recall Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* comic, which depicts first a bored and then frustrated Calvin finally belting out “BORRRING!!!” in utter frustration. The next frame shows Calvin muttering, “Yeah, yeah . . . kill the messenger,” as he heads to the principal’s office (Watterson, 1993). I think of this cartoon to remind myself that I first must engage my students before I can expect them to learn anything, and our students’ voices can tell us so much as long as we are willing to listen.

As a student, I loved school. However, even though I liked school, I never quite understood why my day was composed primarily of marathons of boredom aside from a few bursts of time when I was really “engaged” in what I was learning. I often wondered why it was generally acceptable for so many students to find school boring when humans are inherently designed to seek knowledge and to master skills.

I continued to ponder the idea of boredom in school when I became a teacher. During my first year as a teacher, I taught in a fashion similar to how I was taught. I vividly remember one winter afternoon standing at my overhead projector, scribbling notes for my students to copy (to take home and memorize) and thinking to myself, “*This is so boring.*”

I knew that students deserved more. If I was bored, my students surely were, too. I also questioned how much my students were *learning* rather than *memorizing*. I knew that if I was going to last in the field of education, I needed to do things differently. I needed to teach in a way that engaged and sustained the interest and attention of *all* my students, while ensuring they were learning.

I quickly learned that the primary contributor to boredom in the classroom was the factory model, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning. The classic markers of “school” (tests, memorization, and homework) needed to be replaced with classic markers of the “real world”

(variety of assessments, spaced practice, and a passion that drives you to do work outside of mandated hours).

Now, as a veteran educator, and a mother of two school-aged children, I have an additional impetus for sharing the content of this book.

1. The push for an overhaul of the factory model of education excites me. However, what I often see is simply a shift to the same old (boring, inefficient) methods of teaching with the addition of technology. In a time of educational movements and common district initiatives, many teachers seek guidance as to how to marry movements and mandates. *How can we throw out the textbook and ensure students are learning all the content? How can we promote innovation through our assessments and then assess our students with a standardized test? How can we meet the needs of all our students when they are required to meet the same standards?*
2. I have witnessed the profound impact that using student voice as the driver of instructional decisions has on student success.

There is a way to marry educational trends and mandates while allowing our students' individual and collective voices to permeate our decision-making process. The way to do this is through student-driven differentiation.

This book is unlike any other book you have ever seen on differentiation. I will not use the word *differentiation* as often as you may guess a book on differentiation would because, with student-driven differentiation, differentiation is not an afterthought or something else "to do." It's deliberate. It makes sense. It is vital. It embodies the words of John Hattie (2012) in *Visible Learning for Teachers*:

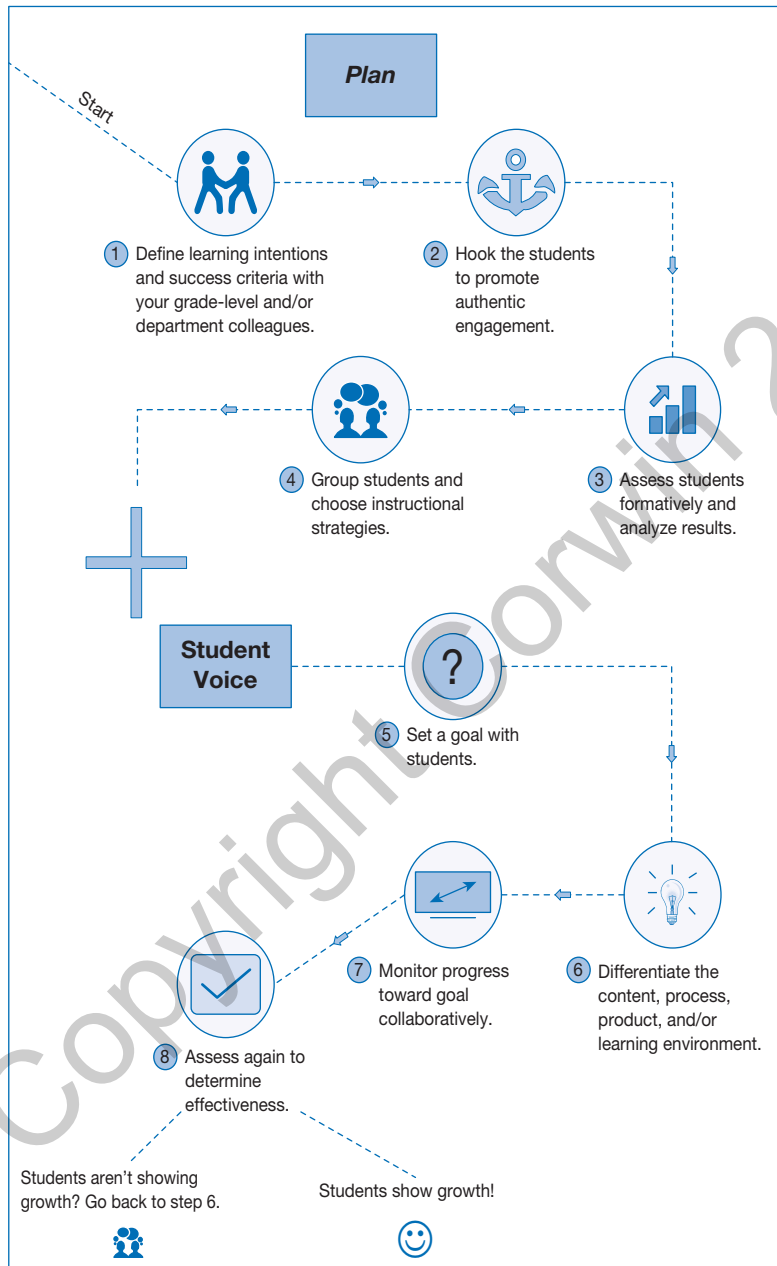
The key is for teachers to have a clear reason for differentiation, and relate what they do differently. (p. 110)

What Is Student-Driven Differentiation?

Differentiation is traditionally defined as 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 educational field is lacking tangible information and action plans on how to differentiate for students in today's classroom. The vast majority of literature available on differentiation prescribes methods of differentiation that apply to the factory model of teaching complete with worksheets or traditional lesson plans.

Figure P.1 Student-Driven Differentiation Road Map



Student-driven differentiation shifts the focus from what students are going to *do* to what students need to *learn*. The focus also shifts from the teacher as the owner of the knowledge and the students as

the receivers of such knowledge. Student-driven differentiation requires teachers to find a healthy balance in their relationships with *all* students, use multiple types of evidence to ensure student growth, and partner with students in the process (see Figure P.1).

This method centers on creating learning environments where the students have control over their learning. Differentiation is not an afterthought, nor is it determined without student feedback. Student-driven differentiation shifts teacher planning from “what do I do with these students?” to “what do these students need?”

When differentiating instruction (student driven or not), teachers are mindful that some students will master *content* (what is to be learned) and skills more quickly, while some students will struggle to learn the same content and skills. With student-driven differentiation, rather than plan in advance how to address student needs, students’ voices (collective and individual) are sought to craft the plan.

Student-Driven Differentiation

- Shifts the focus from what students are *going to do* to what students *need to learn*
- Requires teachers to find common ground with all students
- Creates learning environments where students have control over their learning
- Gives students the autonomy to create, learn, and grow at their own pace
- Requires honest and mutually respectful teacher–student relationships
- Students’ voices (collective and individual) are sought to craft the plan

Students’ needs are then considered and organically embedded into units that are designed to address the progression of learning standards, while simultaneously giving students autonomy to create, learn, and grow at their pace.

Student-Driven Leadership: A Crucial Component to Student-Driven Differentiation

To ensure a school system (rather than individual teachers) embodies a culture of student-driven differentiation, student-driven leadership is a crucial component. We must not forget that teachers do not teach in isolation; *all stakeholders play a part in the success of our students*. Throughout this book, you will hear the voices of teachers, building administrators, central office administrators, students, and parents. Educational leaders who grant their teachers autonomy and genuinely encourage them to take risks will find that student-driven differentiation will spread throughout their organization organically.

Furthermore, student-driven leadership relies on the hallmarks of traditional differentiation (using formative assessment and making data-informed decisions). However, student-driven leaders allow teachers leeway to figure out, sometimes through trial and error, the best ways to do this and provide them the appropriate supports (including time) to do so. Student-driven leaders seek the voice of their learners (*teachers*) and encourage more teachers to become leaders.

In turn, student-driven teacher leaders focus on positivity, celebrating each other's successes, and collectively building their organization's professional capacity to meet the needs of all students. Lastly, and most importantly, student-driven leaders ensure they either know each student personally, or that all students have teachers who seek to understand them and incorporate their wants and needs into the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

How to Read This Book

This book is not prescriptive. It has checklists with guiding questions and real examples of how practitioners have been able to weave together the controllable and uncontrollable factors we face as educators and relinquish control of fears that may have subconsciously prevented us from reaching our ultimate goal: the success of all students.

Most importantly, the examples shared in this book are all relevant to the real world. Simply put, students perform better when they are working toward *something*—not a grade, not a bell, but a culminating event, an audience, or building their own efficacy as *they reach their learning goals*. This book will illustrate many examples of authentic learning using student-driven differentiation as the foundation for these experiences.

To aid you in implementing student-driven differentiation in your classroom, we have placed several of the book's resources online for easy access. You can view these resources by visiting the companion website at <http://resources.corwin.com/studentdrivendifferentiation>.

This book is divided into three parts:

Part I: Lays the foundation for student-driven differentiation

Part II: Describes the process of planning and student-driven differentiation

Part III: Motivates and supports you in your student-driven differentiation journey

Before we get started, I offer you a few important pieces of advice, and I insist you remind yourself of these suggestions frequently:

1. The goal of differentiation is to meet the needs of all students. That is your starting point and ending point. There is no "messing up" student-driven differentiation as long as you are constantly asking yourself, "Is this student growing?" And, more importantly, *asking the student*, "What do you need to grow?"
2. Try one thing at a time. Think surgeon over ER doctor: Get really good at one thing, then move on to another. I encourage you to pick the area that interests you most.
3. If it feels like you are trying to stick a square peg in a round hole, you probably are, and that's ok. Just stop. Cut yourself some slack and find a new peg or a new hole.
4. If you are reading this book, you care about students! That is the most important skill to have when incorporating student-driven differentiation into your practice. And guess what—*you* have the highest impact on your students' success. Be proud of yourself!
5. I am not a researcher. I am a practitioner, like you. I have worked diligently to apply the findings of research in a practical way. My goal for this book is to share how I have done this and help you discover ways to use student voice to drive differentiation, too.

Finally, (*spoiler alert*) the best part of reading this book is that, over time, differentiating instruction in this method will ensure you continue to *love* your job. You will be energized when you enter the classroom each morning, and you will go home feeling proud of the learning you facilitated. Most importantly, your students will feel the same way.

Happy reading!