The Path Leading to Differentiation: An Interview With Carol Tomlinson

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Abstract
The author interviewed Dr. Carol Tomlinson, who is a well-known academic scholar in gifted education. The interview focused on Dr. Tomlinson's work on differentiation, how she started, and what her suggestions for teachers are to differentiate instructions for gifted students in general education classrooms.

Keywords
differentiation, differentiated instruction and curriculum, effective teaching strategies

What you really need to do is to create a small world in your classroom. In this world, everybody is taken into account, everybody has a voice, and everybody has a space.

Carol Tomlinson

Introduction
Carol Ann Tomlinson is the William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Prior to this position, Carol was a public school teacher for 21 years, including middle school, high school, and preschool. She was named Virginia's Teacher of the Year in 1974, Outstanding Professor at Curry in 2004, and received an All-University Teaching Award in 2008. In January 2012, Carol was named as one of the top 100 education scholars in the United States listed in Education Week. She has served as President of Virginia Association for the Gifted as well as President of the

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National Association for Gifted Children. She is author of 17 books on the topics of
differentiated instruction and curriculum as well as many professional development
materials and more than 200 articles. Her books have been translated into 12
languages.

**Interview**

Wu: How did you start differentiation in your classroom?
Tomlinson: When I first started teaching, the students I taught in high school had
quite a range of differences among them. I didn’t pay much attention to the
differences; I had never been in a place where I saw a teacher really address students’ differences. I knew that some of the high school kids were having a hard
time in learning, and I knew some were brilliant. I knew the students had different
dreams and fears. It was a complex teaching situation, but I really didn’t
know how to deal with the differences other than trying to know the kids and
communicate with them individually. Then I moved to teach in a preschool. By
the end of the 1st year I taught there, we had kids from probably 20 languages
groups. They were 3 or 4 years old, and some of the kids were English speakers
and some not. Some were quick learners and some required longer to learn.
Some were a little older than others, and therefore sometimes had more experi-
ences. Certainly, all the different languages and cultures meant that there were
huge differences among the kids. I tried hard to make sure all the kids were
developing their skills, and I worked extra with kids who were struggling with
prelearning skills. I tried to know the children and understand their families and
where they were coming from. But I didn’t really start to do anything that resembles what we now call differentiation until I was at my 3rd year of teaching,
which was my 1st year of teaching in a middle school.

In that year, even at the beginning, I realized that I had a lot of kids who were aca-
demically way behind, and a lot of kids who were way ahead—almost nobody in the
middle. I discovered, about the 3rd week of school that there was a kid coming into my
class who was 15 and didn’t know the whole alphabet yet. He actually whispered that
to me in the hall, and I understood instantly that it was a cry for help. I could barely
imagine how difficult it was for this kid to come up and admit that. I began to ask
myself how I could be of help, and how I could do different things in the class with
different kids at different times. Much later that year, I became conscious of another
kid in the class who was incredibly bright. And I realized for the first time that this
child knew so much, that I had actually not taught him anything more than what he had
already known. All he had been doing was waiting patiently for me to finish.

The experiences with those two boys were really what caused me to start to think
about a classroom where the teacher can help all children, in a class where there are a
lot of kids in trouble and a lot of kids who are advanced. Some other teachers and I had
a grant by then that enabled us to do some research with control groups in other schools
along with the groups in our own classes that we were differentiating for in our
teaching. The research project was very successful, showing quite significant gains for students in the experimental groups. Certainly, we could also observe that differentiation (which didn’t have a name then) made a big difference in the kids’ attitudes about learning. By then, I was routinely teaching classes that had such diversity in them that I realized that if I just did one thing for all the students in the same way and at the same time, I was missing nearly everybody.

Wu: How did you start to disseminate your ideas on differentiation and to have the mission to help teachers internationally?

Tomlinson: When I was teaching in the public school, I began teaching with one colleague and we had the students for two periods a day. So, the two of us figured out together what to do, and it worked well. Then the school asked us to help other schools do what we were doing. Early on the way that I disseminated my work was helping other teachers in my district to teach in the same grade by modeling what the two of us had been doing, and I presented that in conferences sometimes. But when I came to the university, I started to work with groups of teachers in the first 2 or 3 years. In life, sometime luck is a good thing, and being in the right place at the right time is a part of success. A colleague of mine who had been here for a lot longer than I had was asked by ASCD (the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), which is a great publishing group and professional organization in the US, to work with them on a video. and she asked them to come talk to me. That was the starting point of my work with ASCD. I’ve also published books with Solution Tree and Corwin. Each video or book on differentiation has enabled me to reach out to more and more people—and to hear from them as well. That’s a powerful way to learn from the experiences of others.

Wu: Teachers would often ask this question, so can you please explain what the differences between grouping and differentiation are?

Tomlinson: If you’re talking about the difference between differentiation and what we sometimes call “ability grouping,” the differences are huge. Differentiation, as I envision it, does not seek to label and segregate students, but rather to serve them effectively in heterogeneous classrooms that are responsive to their varied needs. Within differentiated classrooms, it’s quite useful to use small group instruction, so that kind of grouping is a part of differentiation. Differentiation for me is a way of teaching, and it begins with an idea that every student in the class is extremely important. They don’t have any choice but to trust us, and we know quite clearly that if the work we ask them to do is way too hard or too easy, they simply cannot learn properly. It would be okay if it is a little hard, but if it is way too hard, they will not be able to fill in all those gaps, and that just gets worse as they move along. Almost all regular classrooms have a spread of kids working at different levels, and we know that they learn in different ways. Not everybody is going to learn in a lockstep fashion, no matter how well you teach. If you are teaching well, they will do better than if you do not, and if they are working hard, they will do better than if they do not. To teach in only one way will inevitably benefit some students and disadvantage others. So differentiation
proposes that we teach not out of habit or teacher preference but in response to the students we serve.

Honoring students’ interests is also beneficial because it boosts students’ motivation to learn. Sometimes that means supporting a student in exploring a topic of particular personal passion. Sometimes it means connecting what we teach to what kids care about. Sometimes it means creating enough flexibility in an assignment that students can explore one aspect of a topic more deeply or use a mode of expressing learning that is particularly compelling for the student. None of those things is especially difficult to do, and often they can make a profound difference in a student’s receptivity to learning.

Another factor that affects academic growth is learning profile, which has to do with how students approach learning. For instance, if a child does not process information orally very well, but a teacher teaches orally most of the time, then the student is not going to learn well. So attending to learning profile helps with efficiency of learning, as readiness helps with growth in learning, and interest benefits motivation to learn. All this points to the need to have a flexible classroom that allows students to take in information, make sense of it, and express learning in different ways. Some kids may come to us speaking languages other than the language of the classroom, some are extra smart and want to pursue something at a more advanced level, some struggle with a few or many aspects of learning. All these variations in learning need should cause teachers to be more flexible in terms of using space and time and using small groups and other strategies. In effectively differentiated classrooms, then, teachers would flexibly group students—sometimes based on readiness needs, sometimes on interests, sometimes on approach to learning, sometimes heterogeneously, sometimes homogeneously, sometimes by teacher choice, sometimes by student choice, sometimes randomly. That variety of grouping enhances both teaching and learning. Flexible grouping is just a small part of differentiation, but it is important. Flexible grouping means grouping and regrouping students frequently and mindfully so that they have opportunities to work with many peers in a variety of settings and with a variety of purposes. In a way, what you really need to do is to create a small world in your classroom. In this world, everybody is taken into account, everybody has a voice, and everybody has a space. Purposeful, focused, and flexible groupings allow that to happen.

Sometimes it is easy just to give a struggling kid practice to do, over and over with no purpose that is clear to the learner. In that sadly common scenario, students are not learning new things, and often conclude that they are not capable, that academics are not worthwhile—or both. So one of the principles of differentiation is making sure that all kids have “respectful tasks”—tasks that respect their interests, their entry points, and their humanity—tasks that focus on important understandings or principles, tasks that require students to think and that engage their curiosity. Advanced learners, too, need tasks that extend their thinking and push forward their understanding, knowledge, and skills. They, like all students, should expect to have to work hard and to grow vigorously as a result. Flexible grouping is one part of the goal of using all
classroom elements more flexibly to address varied learner needs, so that we would get better as teachers at using space, time, small groups, and materials more flexibly.

Wu: What are the differentiation strategies you would suggest for teachers to use in their daily classroom teaching?

Tomlinson: There are a lot of instructional strategies that teachers can use to differentiate. In fact, almost any good instructional strategy will allow you to do different things at different times with different students. One of the most important ones is a teacher working with a small group of students. When you sit down with 6 or 8 students in close proximity, it is much easier to really see what the students understand and what they do not. In a big classroom with 30, 40 or even more students, a teacher may not even know where a student physically is at a particular moment. But in a small group, a teacher can ask individual questions and hear students’ voices and know where they get stuck or where they are ready to move ahead. In that context, teachers know their students in a different way, and can extend students’ learning much more effectively. So it’s important that when the rest of class is working on one task, or several, the teacher uses some of the time to work with small groups.

A lot of teachers find learning stations to be useful for differentiation. A learning station is a place in the room where the kids go, to do specified work. Instructions at the station provide guidance on how to complete work appropriately, how to get help, where to put completed work and so on. For instance, you may have a station that focuses on basic map skills that some kids really need to learn, but other students may have already mastered. So another station focuses on more advanced map skills. Perhaps everybody will go to the two stations some time during a week, but will do one of two different pieces of work there based on students’ current learning trajectories.

Learning contracts are another helpful strategy. Learning contracts allow teachers to design tasks targeted to particular student needs and also to give all students some in-common tasks. Typically students have the same number of tasks on their contracts and are all working on the same fundamental learning goals. But the work can emphasize a student’s particular next steps toward those goals. Some tasks are readiness-based, but other tasks may be student choice. Some may be interest-based, some readiness-based, some based on approach to learning or learning profile. The flexibility gives teachers a great opportunity to match work to student need. Tiered lessons are also very effective in providing work for students at challenge levels that stretch a particular student or group of students without assuming that what’s challenging for one student will be challenging for all of them. In tiered lessons, everybody works with essential knowledge and skills but at different degrees of difficulty or different levels of complexity. So if I have students who are struggling with a skill or an idea, they will still be working on whatever is important for them to learn that day, but perhaps with more directions, or more step-by-step instructions, or with an application
task that is more concrete, or that provides a model of effective work. Simultaneously students who are more advanced may work on the same ideas but at a more abstract level, with more decisions to make or more open-endedness, or more complex skills, or more abstract ideas. That means everybody can work on the same essential understandings, but at different readiness levels to make it possible for each of them to move ahead smoothly.

Wu: Can you give some examples of what challenges teachers may encounter when they are doing differentiation, especially to those new teachers who have just started?

Tomlinson: I think when you start to differentiate, most people, but not everyone, will need to start slowly. When I started differentiating in my seventh-grade classroom many years ago, I didn’t have the option to start slowly because I had that whole group of kids who needed me to differentiate my teaching immediately. It was simply not possible for the class to work with them with a one-size-fits-all approach. Their needs were vastly different. I just worked on differentiating all the time in that year because it took every spare minute I could muster to stay ahead of the need. The 2nd year was good, though, because I had so much to build on from the previous year. Generally, though, I think it really helps to take small steps, and ask yourself, “Where do I want the kids to end up? Where are they now? What are the little steps I can take to get each of them to achieve greater success?” That means you need to start with some strategies that don’t radically change the way you teach. In that way, neither planning nor management seems beyond your grasp. Then you can move on from that point a step at a time. The teacher’s job is to help each of the students understand that everybody has a next step in learning. When everybody’s next step is the same, great. But if next steps differ for different students, which is typical, then it becomes the teacher’s role to create more than one “next step.” Help students understand the classroom routines. Tell them why and what you are doing. It is my experience that when kids understand the game plan, they can work with you very well. In fact I find that most kids understand and enjoy differentiation more quickly than many teachers do, so bringing them along is not so hard.

To be effective with differentiation, you need to think about practical things like how students can move around in the room without disturbing the work of others, how you will give directions for multiple tasks effectively, how students can get help if you’re working with a small group, and so on. At the same time, it’s pivotally important that you spend time understanding how students are progressing in their learning trajectories, so that both informal and formal assessment becomes central in your work. It’s a juggling act, but then all good teaching is a juggling act. To master the art, you have to move in the direction of your vision of the classroom—persistently but in a reasoned way.
Wu: In a big modern city like Hong Kong, students are often from diverse family backgrounds, such as new immigrants, low-income families, or single-parent families. What are your suggestions to teachers regarding differentiation in such a situation?

Tomlinson: I went to Iceland a few years ago to present there, and on the way, I was thinking "Why do people in Iceland want to hear about differentiation?" And I thought "Well, I am sure they have some economic diversity and certainly they would have students with special education needs, so maybe that's the reason." What I discovered when I got there was that, at the time, Iceland had the lowest unemployment rate in the world, so people from all over the world were going there to live and work, because they could get a job and have a good standard of living. We're rapidly becoming one world everywhere. In that context, it's important for teachers to learn about the various cultures represented in their classrooms. Cultures may emphasize individualism or collectivism, reflection or action, collaboration or competition, strict attention to time or looser attention to time. Those things impact how students view the world and how they learn. It's never smart to assume people from a particular culture are homogeneous in those ways, but it's very helpful to create a classroom that respects varied approaches to learning so that students from any culture have opportunities to learn in ways that feel natural to them—that support learning for them. It's also important for teachers to develop strategies boosting academic vocabulary for students whose first language is not the language of the classroom and the text—approaches like front-loading vocabulary, for example. Similarly, it's very helpful to use strategies like close reads or even highlighting key portions of text to enable students to develop proficiency with reading text materials. Really, developing a broad range of really good teaching and learning strategies can make the classroom a better fit for many kinds of learners.

Wu: What are your suggestions for teachers who teach a big crowd of 40 or 50 students, like in China?

Tomlinson: I have never taught a group of 50 students in K-12, although I taught 40 on many occasions. Certainly larger classes are more complex. But there are a lot of things that you can do to make such classrooms a better fit for the students in them. Using quick formative assessment strategies can give you a reasonable read on how well students are progressing, individually and as a group. It’s also critical to make students your partners in the classroom. They can do many jobs—play many roles—that a teacher might just automatically take on. It’s a bit like having a large family. Parents with many children become very skilled at teaching their children how to take on responsibilities around the house because it’s necessary for the family to function. A large classroom is much the same in that way. Further, it’s good to help students understand that your goal is to help each of them grow each day as learners from whatever their starting points are, and to teach them to be their own advocates toward that end. Kids often know much better than we can when something is working for them, when it's not, and even know what might work better. Giving students that kind of voice in the
classroom makes large classes, and smaller ones too, much more manageable in terms of addressing learner need.

Wu: You mention in one of your books that young people are facing more difficult issues nowadays. Can you explain a little bit?

Tomlinson: Modern technology is certainly one example. Twenty-four hour television, radio, and Internet give kids opportunity to access wonderful things, but terrible things, too. We need to teach them to be intelligent and critical consumers of information and to use the power of technology to benefit themselves and all of us. Experts tell us, too, that today’s students will likely have many jobs in their lifetimes as the world changes at unprecedented speed. Those jobs will often be markedly different from one another. Further, it’s likely that today’s young people will have to become savvy citizens of a world community—seeing issues from diverse perspectives, working with people from quite varied backgrounds, refining skills of collaboration. We have every reason to assume they will also need to be keen thinkers and problem solvers—analytically and creatively. Those things are all bad news in the sense that contemporary classrooms place primary emphasis on working alone to master right-answer information to give it back on a test. The challenges ahead of young people are steep, to be sure, but they also offer unprecedented opportunity, if we can shape schools to prepare them for the challenges.

Wu: I could tell that you have passion when you teach, and as a professor and a leader, you have the ability to influence people around you. What suggestions do you have for teachers to play the leadership role?

Tomlinson: I think it's important to understand the difference between being a leader and being a drill sergeant, or even a manager. A leader articulates a compelling vision for people around them, invites people to join the vision, and then works diligently to make sure the vision works for those who invest in it. A leader needs to win the trust of followers and then do whatever it takes to honor that trust. I think teachers who profoundly shape students' lives for the better invite them to be part of a team that works to make everyone the best he or she can be as a learner and as a person. Good teaching is not following a syllabus or "covering" curriculum. It's certainly not managing behavior. It's inspiring young people to discover their strengths and to invest fully in cultivating them. That requires having a dynamic vision of a classroom and a desire to collaborate with the people who share classroom space and time with you.

Wu: When I was a student in your class, I was always amazed by how engaging your classes were, and how many pertinent and funny stories you had to share with us. What would you describe about your teaching style?

Tomlinson: I'm not sure if anybody really develops a teaching style purposely. I think you teach, and then sketch yourself around your personality. Young adolescents shaped my teaching, and that makes me a bit peculiar at a university.
They certainly taught me to be very clear with the line of logic I use in teaching. They taught me that positive humor can defuse a great deal of tension. I suspect they taught me to be a storyteller. Stories are far more memorable than litigations of information and can help students remember the information, or at least the point of learning it. It’s absolutely the case that my students gave me the gift of their stories. Maybe above all, the students taught me the fragility of humanity, in other words, that I teach human beings first, not content first. The paradox, of course, is that attending to human beings first generally results in better content mastery than attending to content first.

Wu: Can you describe yourself in one or two sentences? What kind of person you are?
Tomlinson: I’m a worker bee. I enjoy what I do and that’s good because I tend to blur the line between work and pleasure. I love reading, am a fanatic about dogs. I used to love to travel, but I’ve had so much airport time in recent years that that particular aspect of travel has worn a bit thin. It’s always great to be in new places and work with people in new places. Getting there, however, leaves something to be desired.

Wu: What’s your vision for school?
Tomlinson: I’d like to see schools be “dream keepers”—places where adults say to students, “Let’s figure out what you can grow up to be.” I’d like to see them be places where we work to create the kind of world many of us aspire to live in—communities of respect, where human differences are as valued as human commonalities, where it’s not necessary to categorize and separate people, places that concentrate on helping young people become architects of good lives. I’d like to see schools more as zones of creativity than as factories—places that dignify learners and learning.

Wu: Thank you so much for your time and insight!
Tomlinson: You are very welcome. I appreciate your work, and I’m so glad to see you.