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Why Use Type for Differentiation?

Before you read on . . .

Think of a student you've struggled to reach academically.

- Why do you think that student struggles?
- What academic strengths does the student have?

About two weeks into the school year, a middle-school math teacher asked me to observe a class of students whose test scores the previous year were low. "I'm trying out a new number sense activity," she said. "I'd like your opinion."

I sat on the back ledge of the classroom, watching the 17 students estimate, measure, and take notes. Within two minutes I knew one boy's name. "Alex,¹ where's your notebook?" "Alex, please write this down." "Alex, head off the desk." "Alex, put that away!"

Later, the teacher commented, "I've tried moving Alex close to me, pairing him with my best student, calling his home, but he won't work on the basic skills he needs to progress."

Next door in Language Arts, another boy named Carl stared into space, completing only two of a dozen worksheet questions on a story the teacher had read aloud. "He has to be ADD," the teacher whispered. "Unless I'm on him every second, Carl does nothing."

For the final project on that story, I helped the Language Arts teacher plan several options from which the students could choose. Alex and Carl decided to work together on a picture book. They made up an entirely new adventure tale about the story's characters. They turned it in on the due date. Their drawings were detailed and humorous. They even spent a precious lunch period adding color with the teacher's art supplies. We took pictures of the two boys, grinning broadly, their book open to their favorite illustration.

¹Throughout these pages, names and details have been changed to protect both teachers and students.

What happened? As the teachers and students on that team learned about themselves and their learning styles, the teachers discovered that Alex and Carl's learning styles were opposite their own. Alex spoke English as a second language, and the teachers hadn't noticed how creative he yearned to be. And Carl was so quiet that he never shared any of his imaginative thoughts.

DIFFERENTIATION: HELPING STUDENTS FIND FLOW

Like Alex and Carl, *all* of us seek activities that are interesting enough to engage us. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) found that flow experiences occur when activities

- Allow for focus on clear goals
- Provide immediate feedback
- Are neither too hard nor too easy—they engage a person's abilities
- Present an interesting task.

For schoolwork, one might use the following equation to designate how student can attain flow:

$$\text{Ability} + \text{Interest} = \text{Flow}$$

The art of differentiation is creating this equation. Listen to comments from students who were considered at-risk for academic achievement:

I tried out for a higher-level humanities class instead of regular language arts, but I didn't make it because of a test score. Those kids get to keep learning new things, while we get stuck with same old.

[My teacher] thinks I should be in a low one . . . I told her, "I can do the green packet." And she's like "No, you can't" and I'm like "Don't tell me what I can't do . . ." That's nothin' to be tellin' us.

I don't like my reading class. We do this easy work. Cat, mat, sat, fat. What is that? [laughter from other students] And then we got these big old books and you gotta do these little listening journal things and you need to put this cat, rat up on the things . . . Oh yeah, if I see a real good book, I'd be like I wish I was in that book, I wish I could meet those characters, I wish I was flying with them and all that.

How can we differentiate the instruction students receive, on the basis of their needs, while keeping students engaged?

"We aren't here to entertain them," teachers rightly protest. Fortunately, flow isn't about being entertained but being engaged. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) reports that flow most often occurs during studying and active leisure time and at work.

Very rarely do people report flow in passive leisure activities, such as watching television or relaxing. But because almost any activity can produce flow provided the relevant elements are present, it is possible to improve the

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quality of life by making sure that clear goals, immediate feedback, skills balanced to action opportunities, and the remaining conditions of flow are as much as possible a constant part of everyday life. (p. 34)

Tomlinson et al. (2002) point out that when students work on tasks just slightly above their ability, but are provided with scaffolding, coaching, or other support, their ability to work independently expands. They need harder tasks. They call “that escalating match between the learner and curriculum ‘ascending intellectual demand’” (p. 13). The more we can create flow, engaging student interest while stretching their abilities, the more we can accelerate the ascending intellectual demands for all students.

ABILITY VERSUS FLOW

For the middle-school students I’ve worked with, the ones who most need to practice basic skills are least likely to engage at a sufficient level to achieve anything close to flow—if they choose to complete the activity at all.

Important as foundational skills are, two things keep ability levels from being a wise focus for differentiation. First, Mueller (2001) notes that in the vast majority of reading programs, when skills are emphasized, keyed to hierarchical scope-and-sequence charts, authentic reading activities that allow students to make meaning are lost. Students lose the point of why anyone would read. The tasks aren’t engaging, and the students soon give up.

Second, in many classrooms, students’ basic skills proficiency determines their access to higher level thinking opportunities. For example, several teachers I’ve worked with read aloud to students who are poor readers and then have them either discuss or complete worksheets to clarify the facts of the story. “Knowledge is the first level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. We need to start them there,” they say.

Do we? Do students really struggle with facts? Test them. Show a feature movie and ask the same kinds of questions. “Describe . . . who . . . where . . .” Stop the film and ask them to make predictions or discuss a theme, questions from the second level of Bloom. They can do it, can’t they? They can probably also judge, compare, summarize, conclude—in other words, they can “evaluate,” the top level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. They struggle with *reading*, and it keeps them from practicing the other skills.

A FRAMEWORK GROUNDED IN RESEARCH

This theory of how people take in information and make decisions has been the subject of research for over eight decades. Used widely for teambuilding, career development, and other applications, the evidence of its implications for education is growing. In other words, type differences are real. Further, analyzing data through the lens of type reveals invisible biases in how we measure intelligence, creativity, and academic achievement.

- Type demonstrates a measurable bias in standardized tests. For example, 82 percent of the National Merit Scholarships go to students with one particular personality preference (Intuition), even though they make up only 30–35

percent² of the population (Myers, 1993). A 140-point “Intuitive gap” exists on the PSAT, with a 250-point gap between the top three personality types in score and the bottom three types. The test favors their innate style of guessing (Wilkes, 2004)!

- Tests of giftedness and creativity identify certain personality preferences over others and ignore other ways of being creative (Robinson, 1994). Certain personality types are overrepresented in our gifted and talented programs.
- Teachers create assessments that favor students whose learning styles match that of the teacher (Murphy, 1992).
- A compendium of research on type in education (Hammer, 1996) concludes that teacher beliefs about how students learn correlate with their own personality preferences.
- Teacher subject area and instructional practices vary according to their type preferences (Hammer, 1996). Therefore, the preferred methods in many disciplines are biased against students with other learning styles. This includes mathematics, writing, reading, science, and many other disciplines.

In other words, who you are is how you teach. Type helps you understand and meet the needs of students whose informational needs are opposite to your own.

- Teachers are more likely to discipline students who do not share their type preferences (O’Neil, 1986).
- Multiple studies, confirmed in my own work at many schools, show that students with certain personality types are vastly overrepresented in alternative schools and other programs for at-risk students. Further, these same types are vastly *under*represented among teachers.
- Students with certain personality preferences drop out of school at a much higher rate than students with other preferences—and are least likely to become teachers (Giger, 1996; Hammer, 1996). This means that their knowledge of how students learn is largely absent from the educational debates, perpetuating the problem.

To summarize, type is an essential tool for examining our current educational system, revealing disturbing patterns in how we measure intelligence, creativity, and even behavior. How do schools favor certain students? How can we better differentiate to meet the needs of *all* learners if it is true that our current practices put students with normal, positive personality preferences at a disadvantage, let alone students whose home situations put them at risk academically or who are learning English as a second language?

WHY PERSONALITY TYPE?

Why not other models? For a framework for teaching and learning to be truly effective, it needs to meet several criteria. In fact, most schools end up using multiple frameworks because they haven’t chosen one that

²All of the information on percentages of people with different type preferences comes from the data bank of the Center for Applications of Psychological Type, Gainesville, Florida.

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- Describes teaching and learning in nonjudgmental ways. No one should feel labeled. *All* personality preferences are normal, good ways to be.
- Is strengths-based, emphasizing how each person teaches and learns rather than limiting what they can do. Type research shows that students with all preferences can master reading, writing, math, and higher level thinking if teaching practices meet their early needs and help them build academic confidence.
- Describes which students a practice will reach, so that discussions focus on student learning. So many educational battles have been either/or when the truth is both/and (whole language versus phonics is one example). Type moves the discussion away from right and wrong to who and how.
- Applies across cultures and to both adults and students. Chapter 10 discusses the cross-cultural uses of type.
- Provides bridges among varying staff development efforts. Type gives you one toolkit for finding and implementing research-based strategies for
 - Classroom management
 - Differentiation
 - Student work habits and study skills
 - Basic skills remediation
 - Working with difficult students
 - Collaboration with colleagues
 - Building relationships with students
 - Motivating students for academic achievement
 - Enriching and accelerating learning for all students.

CONCLUSION

Personality type meets these criteria. It isn't a panacea, but a framework that helps tie together what teachers see in their classrooms, learn about in staff development, discuss with colleagues, and experience in their own ongoing professional learning.

Further, differentiating using type lets you start with your own strengths and style. You can use some concepts right away even as you continue to learn the theory. You'll find that it makes sense of what has worked—and didn't work—in your classroom in the past. You might feel less guilty about some of your struggles, perhaps even discovering natural pathways to avoid burning out in this demanding profession.

Is type really that useful? To find out, the first step is understanding yourself and how you teach, the subject of Chapter 2.