



DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH: INCLUSIVENESS OF LEARNING STYLES IN BUSINESS EDUCATION FOR SKILLS ACQUISITION IN DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

Despite the pivotal roles of business education on manpower and economic development, research findings have continued to show that business education students still graduate without vocational skills, which aggravated the increasing rates of unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria. Many factors have been adduced to be responsible for this regrettable trend. An issue however, yet to be given serious attention to is the instructional approach used by business educators that seems not to have produced the required result. The traditional method that emphasized one instructional method applied to all students without due concern to learner's characteristics have been grossly accused in literatures of instructional design. The strategies of differentiation are of current interest to educators particularly in the digital era. With increasing pressures of No Child Left Behind, educators are often left wondering if individual instruction is the best instructional practice. The extent to which these strategies impact on student learning is also controversial. Differentiation can be time consuming and tedious on educators. Teachers often struggle to provide all students access to specific learning activities that work best for them and what works best for some students may not work for others. Differentiating instruction makes sense because it offers different paths to understanding content, process, and products, considering what is appropriate given a child's profile of strengths, interests, and styles. This paper is, therefore, a modest attempt to clarify the concept of differentiated instruction, and acquisition of skills in business education in digital era. The paper finally advocates for and clarifies differentiated instruction approach in business education, approaches of ability grouping and tiering using differentiated instruction in digital era, draws conclusion and recommends among others that, there should be awareness creation by Business educators for the adoption of differentiated instructional approach as a prospect of acquiring skills in digital era in Nigerian institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Business Education, Learning Styles, Skills Acquisition and Digital Era



Introduction

An important aspect of human beings is that they differ. In schools a class is a collection of individuals that are different from one another. Individuals differ morphologically, physiologically and psychologically. Because individuals differ, teachers especially business educators should differentiate instruction. Differentiated instructional delivery is all about tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. It consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience that teacher is differentiating instruction. Ekpenyoung (2012) noted differentiated instruction as an instructional approach which seeks to provide a curriculum design and instruction by assessing the strengths and weakness of the students in order to link up the two aspects. According to Davis as cited in Ekpenyoung (2012), differentiated instruction is the term for creating student-centered diverse lesson plans that fit different learning styles of each child in the classroom. Business education programme being a programme for self-reliance requires that business educators should use differentiated instruction like brainstorming, joint problem solving, structured group learning, peer tutoring, demonstration, role-playing and exercises, case studies, critical incident analysis, snowballing, discussion groups, structured exercise among others in their instructional delivery to enable students acquire the necessary skills and competencies required of a student in the digital era.

Business education is concerned with the teaching of skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary for a successful career in the office and business world. Business education programme involves training students in the areas relevant to the business world such as accounting, marketing and office management technology. In the opinion of the researchers, the relevance of business education in the digital era cannot be over-emphasized because of its potential in equipping the recipients with the relevant skills for self-employment or paid jobs.

Despite the importance of business education on manpower and economic development, research findings have continued to show that business education students still graduate without vocational skills, which aggravated the increasing rates of unemployment and underemployment. This unpleasant situation appears to be attributed to the dysfunctional nature of business education in Nigeria. However, efforts to improve the quality and standard of business education to help in reducing these complex social problems appear to have been slowed down by a number of factors. Adegoke (2017) listed some of these factors among others to include: inadequate funding, improper planning and management, lack of inclusive education, inadequate infrastructure, irrelevant curricula to meet industrial needs and inadequate commitment on the part of students and teachers.

A major reason for the increasing rate of unemployment among business education graduates appears to be lack of requisite skills required by employers of labour. This apparently may not be unconnected with the poor instructional design which relied heavily on traditional classroom instruction which has failed to yield the expected result. Traditional classroom instruction is designed to meet above-average level learners which does not cater for the below-average learners with different learning abilities in the classroom. In a traditional classroom, lessons are taught through whole-group instruction, where the same teaching method is used to teach the whole class at once. Instead of constant whole-group instruction, differentiated instruction uses several group types for instruction like pairs and small groups. The same learning goal is applicable to all the students but the instructional approach varies based on students' interests, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. Differentiated instructional design is believed to improve the instructional quality of business educators. The extent to which differentiation instruction approach could impact on instructional quality of business educators is however not known. This informed the quest for this study.



Conceptualizing Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is not a new concept in the field of education. For years, educators have been trying to meet the needs of their students. Howard Gardner was one of the first to suggest that students have different abilities in the context of multiple intelligences. Some students might be better visual learners while other students might be more apt to learn in a musical setting (Gardner, 2009). Teachers often administer interest inventories at the beginning of the year to find out which style or styles a student has. Finding the student's interest allows the teacher to provide curriculum that is relevant and meaningful.

The process of differentiated instruction starts with the teacher assessing where their students are academically (Schlemmer, 2008). The teacher can then modify assignments to adapt to each individual student. This might mean making the worksheet more challenging or eliminating unnecessary content. It also means that each student is getting the same content with flexibility and making sure it meets curriculum standards (Heacox, 2002). Differentiated instruction is aimed at making sure the students are being challenged and are being taught at their true academic level (Sprenger, 2003).

Making curriculum challenging through differentiation allows students to use higher cognitive thinking skills (Gregory, 2004). It also meets the needs of lower ability students by allowing the teacher to modify the content. Students can learn the basic content at their own pace and then work into the higher level when they are ready (Tileston, 2004). Students who are at a higher level often become bored when basic content is taught and thus create problems in the classroom when they are finished with their work early (Guild, 1998). Differentiating instruction will allow those students to be academically engaged in their work because they are presented material that engages the thinking process.

Student achievement has been an issue raised by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Student achievement is a concern among parents, teachers, students and at the community level. Tomlinson (2001), a leading expert in the field of differentiated instruction, stated that "a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively"

This approach requires active and continuous planning on the teacher's part that considers and reflects understanding of student differences, and that accommodates the various ways that students learn. To accomplish this approach, teachers must be knowledgeable in the theory and research of contemporary education (Tomlinson, 2015). Differentiated instruction is a systematic approach to planning curriculum and instruction for academically diverse learners. It is a way of thinking about the classroom with dual goals of honoring each student's learning needs and maximizing each student's learning capacity (Osuafor and Okigbo in Tomlinson, 2015). Differentiating instruction, therefore, depends significantly on teachers' professional knowledge and ability to ensure that what they do in their classrooms involves meeting the needs of all learners. The approach takes both expertise and insight.

Because each student is different, so then are the ways in which they learn; as such, teachers must recognize what opportunities for learning are appropriate for each child within the classroom and how to provide those opportunities. Osuafor and Okigbo (2013) suggested that differentiated instruction means creating multiple parts of a learning outcome, "so that students of different abilities, interests or learning needs experience equally appropriate ways to absorb, use, develop and present concepts as a part of the daily learning process. This enables students to take greater responsibility and ownership for their own learning and provides opportunities for peer teaching and cooperative learning. Osuafor and Okigbo's study was conducted to determine whether differentiated instruction would improve the understanding and performance of Nigerian students if employed by biology



teachers. They determined that in a setting with students who had previously received only a traditional style of instruction led by lectures, there were significant improvements made by all students who received differentiated instructional methods. The findings helped to define differentiated instruction and further support differentiated instruction as a means to deliver a quality education.

Chamberlin and Powers (2010) discussed the research concerning the core principles that guide differentiated instruction. The first tenet of differentiated instruction is for teachers to identify clearly what students must learn about a particular subject, which links assessment to curricular outcomes and to instruction. Next, teachers must attend to student differences. While doing this, they are accepting students as they are, while simultaneously challenging them to reach and then to expand their full potential. Furthermore, students participate in respectful work as they are challenged at an appropriate academic level. Working at an appropriate level promotes critical thinking. Moreover, teachers and students work collaboratively while maintaining a balance between the teacher-led and the student-led roles. Additionally, teachers are flexible; they use groups and whole-class discussions interchangeably. Students are placed in groups that are based on their readiness, levels, interests, and/or learning profiles. A final tenet of differentiated instruction calls for teachers to be proactive as opposed to reactive. Initially, teachers prepare lessons beforehand that consider learners' differences, which ultimately saves time and effort to adjust instruction when all aspects of the lesson do not work out. As well, space, time, and materials are used flexibly to suit the needs of students. When combined, these principles of differentiated instruction can guide teachers as they incorporate this practice into their teaching repertoires.

Differentiated instruction is a critical component in the education of all students, and it is important that all teachers especially business educators consider and use it in order to deliver a quality education. This approach to teaching requires active planning and continuous assessment of one's own practice, while continuously providing opportunities for different avenues to acquire and apply knowledge that is meaningful for students. As teachers engage in this reflective practice, it is imperative to distinguish between what differentiation is, as outlined in this section, and what it is not. Ekpenyong (2012) identified the differences between traditional instructional design and differentiated instructional approach as follows:

Traditional Instructional Approach

One instructional method is applied to the needs of individual
In traditional approach teachers prefer large classes which consider instruction to be fast and less time-consuming

Traditional approach to instruction is considered to be effective in large and above-average student but not stratified student groups

Traditional approach tends to encourage rote learning of facts and of recalling them and synthesizing of information

Differentiated Instructional Approach

Instruction is directed toward meeting all the students

Differentiated instruction is more effective in stratified student's groups

Differentiated approach is more beneficial to average and below average groups

Differentiated approach tends to encourage information processing

Business Education

Business education as a component of vocational education prepares individuals for career in business and also to be intelligent consumers of economic goods and services. Iwuh (2016) saw



business education as a study that equips the individual with the occupational skills and knowledge that will enable him/her fit into, and finds job satisfaction in the labour market. It is a programme that prepares its students with skills and competencies needed for self-reliance and employment. Agbionu as cited in Nwogu (2015), defined business education as that form of instruction that both directly and indirectly prepares the businessman for his calling. This definition confirms with the vocational nature of business education.

Etoneyeaku (2009) opined that in this digital era that business education had contributed a lot in the economic development of every nation in areas of provision of employment. Nevertheless, business education is an educational programme that equips individuals with the functional and saleable skills, knowledge, and attitude or values that will enable them operate in the environment they find themselves. According to Afolabi (2003) business education is a type of training with the main goal of making people ready for entrance into a business career, and on having entered upon such a career making them capable of rendering efficient services therein, with the ability to advance their present levels of employment to high levels. Udo and Babangida (2017) averred business education as that aspect of vocational education which provides skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes necessary for effective employment in any specific business occupations. Aliyu in Umezulike (2015) defined business education as education for the development of skills/competencies, attitudes and attributes which are necessary for the efficiency of the economic system.

Objectives of Business Education

Business education has been designed to help attain sustainable development. Ekpenyoung (2010), listed the following as objectives of business education. Develop individuals who will be properly equipped with the pre-requisite knowledge and skills for productive work life; develop a pool for competent and reliable technical manpower, capable of being mobilized in times of national economic emergency; develop individuals who will be capable of meeting the modern business and technological challenges; develop in the youth the right attitudes and skills towards work; equip the youth with the requisite knowledge skills for paid or self-employment; prepare the youth for meeting community, state and national economic aspirations; enable the youth to choose and perfect on those areas of business education for which they have interests and aptitudes among others.

In order to realize these noble objectives, business educators therefore need to employ effective instructional approach such as differentiated instructional for better employability skills acquisition by business education students in digital era.

Skill Acquisition

Skill acquisition is the main focus of business education programme for self-reliance and more employable motives. Omidiji and Ogwu (2019) defined skill acquisition as a systematic and sequential development of skills that promotes efficiency and effectiveness in the performance of a specified job. Skill acquisition is the process of developing capacities through all levels of education and training, occurring in formal, non-formal, and on-the-job settings, which enable individuals in all areas of the economy to be fully and productively engaged in livelihoods and to have the capacity to adapt their skills to meet the changing demands and opportunities of the economy and labour market especially in the e-world (Enang and Okute, 2019). Skill acquisition is the ability to be trained on a particular task or function and become expert in it. Some of the needed skills in business education for one to be self-reliant include communication skills, reading skills, and manipulative skills. Skill acquisition has been described by many as the recipe for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by creating avenue for employment, thereby creating job opportunities and wealth creation. Gumbari in Mshelia (2019) asserts that skill acquisition in Nigeria should be perceived as a catalyst to increase the rate of



economic growth, create job opportunities, reduce import of manufactured goods and decrease trade deficits that result from such import.

Ezeji and Okorie as cited in Nwanaka and Amaehule (2011) assert that while stressing the importance of skill acquisition in the national growth, emphatically contended, “that Nigeria’s social and economic problems will drastically reduce if people are given adequate vocational training in skills, raw materials, machineries and equipment”. It is only with skilled men that materials can be harnessed, manipulated and transformed into products with quality skill acquisition programme. Oluwadare (2019) saw skill acquisition as the ability to learn a skill, which can be intellectual such as learning to listen, speak, read and write or manual such as learning to build or make something. Business education courses should be delivered using differentiated instruction to enable students acquire these skills, competencies, values and attitudes that are needed in the digital era.

The Digital Era

In a digital era, we are surrounded, indeed, immersed, in technology. Furthermore, the rate of technological change shows no sign of slowing down. Technology is leading to massive changes in the economy, in the way we communicate and relate to each other, and increasingly in the way we learn. Yet our educational institutions were built largely for another age, based around an industrial rather than a digital era. Thus, teachers especially business educators are faced with a massive challenge of change. How can we ensure that we are developing the caliber of graduates from our courses and programmes that are fit for an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future? What should we continue to protect in our teaching methods (and institutions), and what needs to change? To answer these questions, it requires we re-examined our teaching methods

Differentiating Instruction in Digital Era for Skill Acquisition in Business Education

It is very important and timely to consider the need for Business Education to be repositioned and enhanced its comparative advantage to its recipients in this digitalized and global era. The ability of business educators to use differentiating instructional approach to transmit digital skills and applications, and the knowledge of various network to manage and access information to its recipients would set the students apart in the world of business. It will enable business educators to create and share digital content, communicate and collaborate, and solve problems for effective and creative self-fulfillment in life, learning, work, and social activities

A typical example of this multidimensional concept is the Information and Communication Technology, which has created new global networks, dismantling national boundaries and barriers, thereby generating a global village where one can access information from any part of the universe within seconds (Olaniyi, 2015). The COVID-19 lockdown measures have made digital skills even more relevant. The use of differentiated instruction via digital technologies has substantially increased, largely because many people with varying learning abilities, now work and learn from home at their own pace and time.

It is not out of place to state that the modes or approaches of instructions of skills acquisition in digital era are changing the way people learn in recent times. There is a paradigm shift from the traditional instruction approach that heavily relied of lecture method of instruction to differentiation of instruction bearing in mind individual differences in learners. Diversity in learning abilities, the idea that students learn differently from one another, is the new order of instruction. One size does not fit all when instructing students because students differ in a number of ways. To meet student needs, teachers especially business educators must adjust both curriculum and instruction for various groups of students. Tomlinson and Jarvis (2009) noted differentiation as an approach to curriculum and instruction that systematically takes student differences into account in designing opportunities for each student to engage with information and ideas and to develop essential skills.



Differentiation in instructional approach in Business Education programme in the digital era will go a long way in developing the students' ICT skills, intellectual competencies needed in the establishment of business enterprise and also make them employable in the work force. For effective entrepreneurial practice in the present technological dispensation, the acquisitions of the basic digital skills by graduates of business education are of paramount importance as well as the organization and management skills.

Business educators therefore, who employ differentiated instruction should adjust their teaching for students of differing abilities in the same class with the intent of maximizing each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is and assisting in the learning process. (VanTassel-Baska, 1997). Dai (2010) argued that when curricular content and process fall outside of a student's zone of proximal development (i.e., it is too easy or too hard), differentiation is called for.

The Impact of Differentiated Instruction on Skill Acquisition in Business Education

Differentiated instruction can be used to impart digital skills in business education students. Digital skills are set of skills that allow a person the strategic use of information through information technology. These are abilities required to use digital technologies. They can also be said to be set of skills, tools, and knowledge necessary to use networks, digital devices and different applications on online mediums that facilitate the management of information according to specific requirements of working environment, learning environment, and problems solving situations. Digital skills refer to an individual's ability to find, evaluate, and clearly communicate information through typing and other media on various digital platforms. It is evaluated by an individual's grammar, composition, typing skills and ability to produce text, images, audio and designs using technology.

Existing studies on the practice of differentiated instruction have been conducted on numerous academic subjects and different groups of learners revealing varied outcomes especially on the students. Lawrence-Brown (2004) and Tieso (2005) had previously found differentiated instruction as beneficial for gifted students. Kondor (2007) however, found a slight increase of student engagement and motivation. Martin and Pickett (2013) utilized differentiated instruction strategies such as pre-assessment, flexible grouping, and learner interest among gifted Math and Music students, and found that the students' perceptions of their engagement and motivation changed positively. Marotta-Garcia (2011) however, revealed that teachers still face challenges in their experience of differentiation in "applying theory they have learned in professional development training into practice." Despite trainings provided for, teachers will not simply become expert as the new knowledge learned takes time to result in appropriate and proper implementation of differentiation, and that continuous practice and support are necessary (Marotta-Garcia, 2011).

Approaches to using Differentiated Instruction for Skills Acquisition in Digital Era

A number of reviews report on specific operationalization of within-class differentiated instruction. One of the most frequently reviewed forms is ability grouping. In within class ability grouping, teachers cluster students into different homogeneous groups based on their abilities or readiness. In her narrative review, Tieso (2003) summarized that ability grouping has a potential influence on student achievement when grouping is flexible, and teachers adapt their instruction to the needs of different groups.

Another possible approach to differentiated instruction is tiering. Tiering refers to using the same curriculum material for all learners, but adjusting the depth of content, the learning activity process, and/or the type of product developed by the student to students' readiness, interest or learning style (Pierce and Adams, 2005; Richards and Omdal, 2007). Teachers design a number of



variations or tiers to a learning task, process or product, to which students are assigned based on assessed abilities.

Alternatively, turning to heterogeneous grouping as an organizational structure for differentiated instruction, there is evidence that students of varying backgrounds working together may learn from each other's knowledge, from observing each other, and from commenting on each other's errors (Nokes-Malach et al., 2015). However, based on their narrative review about differentiated instruction in secondary schools, Coubergset al. (2013) concluded that there is little known about the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in heterogeneous settings. They found that guiding heterogeneous groups is challenging for teachers, and that it is difficult to address the learning needs of all students in these mixed groups.

From the overall summary of the previous review studies, we can draw the conclusion that there is some evidence that differentiated instruction has potential power to affect students' academic achievement positively with small to medium effects. However, the evidence is limited and heterogeneous in nature. The effectiveness of some approaches to differentiated instruction, such as ability grouping, has been reviewed extensively, while other approaches have received less attention. Furthermore, most studies were executed some time ago and were executed in the context of primary education, while only few studies focus specifically on secondary education

Conclusion

Differentiated instruction is not a recipe for great teaching, but it is a process that integrates several core principles in instruction and learning. That there is no single way to teach, and to differentiate means to offer a multitude of ways for students to learn. Differentiation in education is an ongoing process that takes planning and dedication into consideration. As research has indicated, differentiated instruction is a necessity in education because it is an approach to teaching that addresses student differences such as learning styles, intellectual abilities, and personalities. There are numerous ways that teachers may differentiate their instruction, because this pedagogy may be approached with the use of a variety of strategies.

A common misconception about differentiated instruction is that it is extremely complicated. When addressing differentiation, Strahan, Kronenberg, Burgner, Doherty, and Hedt (2012) noted that many educators mistakenly think that differentiation means teaching everything in at least three different ways – that a differentiated classroom functions like a dinner buffet. This is not differentiation, nor is it practical. This misbelief about differentiation is what discourages teachers from even considering the possibility of incorporating it into their teaching pedagogy. It is imperative that administration teams are themselves conversant with differentiated instruction, and that they properly inform and effectively train teachers to use differentiated instruction. While differentiated instruction may initially seem difficult to implement, it is the duty of all teachers to ensure that they work to their full professional potential as they educate each child to achieve to the best of his/her ability. Differentiating instruction is a means to fulfill one's duty as a teacher. There is substantive research available for access by teachers as they learn the use of differentiated instruction in education.

Recommendations

Based on the critical issues raised by researchers in the study, the paper recommended that:

1. There should be awareness creation by Business educators for the adoption of differentiated instructional approach as a prospect of acquiring skills in digital era in Nigerian institutions of higher learning.
2. Business Educatorsshould be willing to upgrade their instructional approach on regular basis so as to be able to impart the required skills and knowledge to students. Hence, there should be



training courses for teachers especially business educators on differentiated approach to instruction to ensure effective transfer of relevant skills in digital era.

3. Computer laboratories with internet facilities should be provided for all business education departments in universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in Nigeria.
4. Business Education students should upgrade to digitization of their existing skillsets and the creation of new digital skills because remote and flexible working are more possible than ever

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