

Tiered Assignments in an Online Learning Environment

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Need for Idea

Each student comes to class with certain learning experiences, expectations, and needs to be addressed (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2012). Instructors should be sensitive to those needs in order to maximize students' learning experiences. For the online instructor, facilitating engagement and learning styles can be challenging. Mupinga et al. suggest online learning is primarily evaluated through written communication. However, online instruction may provide an opportunity for instructors to reexamine the way in which coursework has been typically structured (Conner, Stripling, Blythe, Roberts, & Stedman, 2014), and include varied methods of engagement and learning. It is important to structure the course objectives and assignments in order for students to interact with the content to maximize learning.

Tiered assignments (Tomlinson, 1999), a method of differentiated instruction, allow instructors to teach the same objective to all students and for that objective to be achieved through various levels of difficulty and/or modalities. Instructors identify the concepts and objectives all students should know, determine a standard for what all students should be able to do following a lesson, and identify deeper applications or extensions that create advanced assignments (Tomlinson). Assignments are created by the teacher to appeal to the multiple intelligences of the students that can range from simple to complex (Danzi, Reul, & Smith, 2008). Students then choose the level of challenge that will help them maximize their learning. There are multiple approaches to tiered assignments. For this course, assignments were tiered for product, rather than challenge level, complexity, resources, outcome, or process (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999). Based on student learning preference and objectives for the assignment, students worked at varied degrees of difficulty, explored the same essential objectives and processed the objectives through different types of product.

How it Works

Thirty-three students enrolled in a 16-week online graduate course were from a variety of backgrounds, experiences and employment. They included current teachers in agriculture, family and consumer sciences, technology and engineering, and business, extension, community college instructors, and industry professionals.

Students were given a pre-assessment during the initial introductions in class. These were individual, short, written responses to questions about experience, year's teaching/training, expected outcomes for class and learning modalities. Two assignments were identified to be part of the tiered product approach due during week three week eight. The standard for all students to meet was achieved through a discussion board post. Both of the assignments allowed for all students to further explore the main objective of the assignment, yet create a product unique to their learning style. Students were given the option to select the most appropriate product for their learning style. The options included; tier one - written paper (verbal-linguistic), tier two -

text with graphic (visual-spatial), and tier three: audio/visual or text/photo/audio (visual-spatial/interpersonal).

Results to date/Implications

Many students continued to use a text only or written form of the assignment (75% Assignment 1; 63% Assignment 4). When given the opportunity for choice, one-third of the students in this online class chose to developed assignments that tapped into the multiple modalities of the tiered approach (Danzi et al., 2008). Further, the end of the eighth week of class, four additional students completed an assignment utilizing a different modality (see Table 1). Assignments submitted included written papers, PowerPoint, Prezi, and Adobe Spark videos with text, photo, and audio; videos of students and their classrooms, and infographics. The products were evaluated for meeting the main objective of the assignment, connection to experiences, and completeness.

Table 1
Products of Tiered Assignments

Week	Written Paper	Text/Photo/Audio	Audio/Video	Text/Graphic
Week three:	25	4	4	
Week eight:	21	2	8	2

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Future plans include integrating additional tiered assignment approaches. Implementation of the product tiered assignment format (Tomlinson, 1999) into the select assignments will continue. However, providing an opportunity to share, peer review, or collaborate on tiered assignments will be applied. To assist in clarity of requirements, continue to provide one rubric for each tiered assignment that meets the educational objective. However, provide guidelines for the tiered aspect of each product including specific requirements for the written paper, PowerPoint/Prezi/Adobe Spark with audio, video, and infographic. This will provide additional structure to assignments and opportunities for students to interact with the content, each other, and the instructor to augment learning. Instructors should use technology to transform courses into more personal and engaging learning experiences by using digital materials to increase access and create opportunities for collaborative and project-based learning (USDE Office of Educational Technology, 2017). Further, exploring opportunities for enrichment in online learning communities is essential, integrating differential instruction and assignments may one way to accomplish this.

Resources Needed

The recourses needed to implement the tiered assignment are an online learning environment, instructor time and flexibility.

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