Artist as visionary: Eisner’s Conceptions of Differentiated Instruction and their Contribution to Jewish Education

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Abstract

Just as the artist sees beyond the present to that which exists only in potential, so Elliot Eisner proposed several theories as early as 1963 that find a comfortable landing in today’s educational landscape. This article examines Eisner’s notions of qualitative intelligence, expressive outcomes, and multiple forms of literacy through the modern lens of differentiated instruction, and suggests that these concepts support current needs in Jewish education.

Key words: Eisner, differentiated instruction, Jewish education, spirituality, arts education
Differentiated instruction: Evolution and challenge

Early differentiated instruction

What today we call “differentiated instruction” has been debated as a teaching strategy for more than fifty years, intermittently enjoying enthusiasm or defending criticism. In the current decade, support for differentiated instruction has soared. According to Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (2006), a full 70 percent of U.S. middle and high school students would benefit from differentiated instruction.

The term “differentiated instruction” (DI) derives from the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson, who in 1998 wrote to the educational community calling for support of “differentiated” instruction in the classroom (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Though first operationalized for educational use by Tomlinson, the notion of differentiated instruction reflects inquiry on the subject of individual differences for centuries. It gives voice to the practices of the 19th century “one room schoolhouse,” and more recently follows decades of theories emerging from the cognitive revolution. On the heels of intelligence exams and resulting labels of “gifted” and “learning disabled” (1921; 1938; Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008), the cognitive revolution of the 1950s introduced the notion of differing styles of cognition, suggesting that no one group exhibited superior skills to another, but that individuals possessed a range of thinking styles. In application to studying how students learn, educational psychologists developed “learning styles” (Shuell, 1978).

For decades, however, theories surfaced regarding how to identify these differences. In their work for ASCD, Pat Guild and Stephen Garger (1998) identify overlap between the varying theories of “differentiated learning” including learning style, cognitive style, multiple intelligences, teaching style, leadership style, and psychological type. Each of the models advocates the acknowledgment of diversity among individuals, and urges that teachers adapt instruction away from a “one size fits all” group technique to a combination of strategies adjusted to the different ways individuals learn (Brandt, 1990; Dunn, 1990). According to learning styles pioneer Rita Dunn, students risk failure when they are taught in an instructional style dissonant with their strengths, but those same students can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with approaches responsive to their learning style strengths (Dunn, 1990).
Throughout the years in which learning style theories developed, however, the mainstream American educational community was focused on the creation of curricular standards as a way to fulfill President Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which aimed to provide all children equal opportunity in education through the establishment of standards and accountability to those standards. A growing pressure for accountability took hold, and throughout the 1980’s, few ideas were more central to educational reform in America than that of standards, as ESEA mandates persisted with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, *America 2000* and *Goals 2000*, and the 2001 reformulation of the ESEA, *No Child Left Behind*. Almost everyone viewed standards as necessary and thought that efforts to improve schools would fail unless they were developed (Eisner, 1993).

Mainstream acceptance of the need for differentiating instruction faced additional challenges. Although teachers did experiment with various methods in classrooms, practitioners rarely published their results, thus even positive reports did not reach widespread audiences (Guild & Garger, 1998). It was into this climate that Tomlinson contributed her article offering compelling anecdotal evidence as well as research from the field of brain science to support the notion of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1998). Igniting the latent beliefs some educators had been holding for decades, the concept of “differentiated instruction” gained traction. Over the last fifteen years, differentiated instruction has developed as an independent area of research, and effectively, become mainstream, taught in schools of education and sometimes embraced by some passionate teachers or administrators. When TED Talks featured Sir Ken Robinson’s call for alternative views of educational reform (2006), the topic garnered even more attention. In only the last few years, new publications provide practical guidance for employing differentiated strategies and action research on classroom use of DI continues to appear in educational literature. The innovation of differentiated instruction has become one of the most widely adopted instructional orthodoxies of our time (Schmoker, 2010).

**Challenges of differentiated instruction**

One obstacle teachers face in deciding to use the techniques of DI is selecting the measures by which students will be differentiated. Although they share the theme that one way of teaching won’t work for everyone, each model for differentiation offers a competing view of the
same concept (Guild & Garger, 1984). In 2010, a review of learning style theories revealed a total of twenty-three different conceptualizations of the idea (Cassidy, 2010). In his review, Simon Cassidy points out that the volume, diversity and disassociation of writing, theory and empiricism in the field results in almost as many definitions as there are theorists. He notes attempts to integrate the various theories (DeBello, 1990; Riding & Cheema, 1991), but concludes that the field's failure to agree on style characteristics most relevant to learners and instructional settings, weakness in reliability and validity, and confusion surrounding definitions and terminology make operationalizing learning style a problematic endeavor for the classroom teacher (Cassidy, 2010).

Reflecting these as well as other concerns, some educators see the prospect of differentiated instruction as not only confusing in practice, but also logistically complicated and time consuming (Guild & Garger, 1984). Results of a recent study indicate that teachers do understand the categories as well as instructional methods to match curriculum to student academic strengths, but only use the methods on a limited basis due to insufficient time to prepare the lessons (Green, 2011). According toTomlinson and the Institute of Academic Diversity, the agency responsible for supporting teachers in DI strategies, differentiating instruction does require “proactive planning” to accommodate student differences. In advance of teaching any lesson, using DI implies the development of several approaches to the learning process, the assessment of work, and presentation of the same content (Tomlinson, 2013; IAD, 2010).

Although teachers may believe theoretically in differentiating instruction to learner needs, the practice of teaching with differentiated methods represents the independent creation of new curricula, the manipulation of potentially unfamiliar educational technology, and strong ability in creative thinking to determine the teaching strategy best for each student. For some teachers this is an exhilarating and meaningful task – for others, an insurmountable challenge. The obstacles of inadequate planning time, confusion in how to differentiate, or the overwhelming task of crafting differentiated lessons effectively deter many teachers from embracing DI techniques in practice. Kathie Nunley’s Differentiating in the High School lists eighteen reasons why teachers may resist or give up on the practice of differentiating, including additional concerns such as the difficulty in both assessing and managing students engaged in multiple tasks at the same time (Nunley, 2006).

Even teachers who have embraced DI despite the extra effort
face obstacles unanticipated by Tomlinson, such as student resistance to tiering and skill-based groups (Pappano, 2011; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). Some research suggests that differentiation practices might restrict student opportunities to learn and achieve (Fenwick, 2012). Within the last few years, Tomlinson’s ideas have also been challenged publicly. In December of 2010, dissenter Mike Schmoker claimed that DI methods not only requires too much from a classroom teacher, but that its methods are even detrimental to the common core curriculum. Observing teachers utilizing differentiated instruction, Shmoker noticed that instructors found it “almost impossible” to provide sustained, properly executed lessons for every child or group. As a result, he claimed that differentiated instruction corrupted both curriculum and effective instruction (Schmoker, 2010).

According to critics, differentiated instruction has been running on enthusiasm without reliable evidence of its effectiveness (Shmoker, 2010; Willingham, 2014). Writing to the public just this year, Daniel Willingham explains that students may have preferences about how to learn, but no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning (Willingham, 2014). Yet differentiated instruction remains an established orthodoxy, as districts have invested enormous amounts of time, treasure, and hope in this pedagogical approach (Shmoker, 2010), and in many schools and even some teacher training institutions, learning styles are treated as proven fact (Willingham, 2014). Willingham claims that this approach persists due to confirmation bias: we want to believe it.

The theory promoted by differentiated instruction and learning style theory is that “everyone has value.” This appeals to our sense of democracy, equality, and human rights: we want it to be true. Despite the obstacles and criticism, we want to differentiate. Despite the ease in teaching one lesson to all, we want to be educators who “teach students, not subjects.” As Schmoker himself admits, student understanding is “the soul of a good lesson” (Schmoker, 2010). We know that wide variance exists within any group of learners (Tomlinson, 2001), and Tomlinson asks, how can we meet our students’ needs without varying our lessons? The field of education is filled with compassionate teachers who ask this question, and the solution of differentiating instruction, to use Tomlinson’s 1999 metaphor, is a “route” that points us in the direction we want to go. However, it also leaves us with obstacles that, compounded by resistance from critics as well as students in class, deter even the most supportive teachers.
Adopting differentiation instruction in the Jewish school

In a Jewish school setting, the challenges of adopting differentiated instruction techniques loom even larger. The curriculum is stretched to capacity with a dual curriculum of religious as well as secular studies. Teachers can be overwhelmed with the breadth of material to cover and lack the time to prepare multiple lessons. New ideas – even pedagogical concepts that may seem harmless – may be viewed with caution.

However, it is within Jewish education that the strongest argument for the necessity of differentiated instruction can be found. The Jewish religion teaches that education may be most successful when a student is taught according to “his way” or ability (Mishle 22:6; Tehillim 18:26-27; Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 25) and proposes a range of student types, known commonly as “The Four Sons” in the Passover Hagadah. These four “sons” do not exist in one family, but represent types of people who can be reached through varied teaching methods (Shemot 12:26-27, 13:8, 13:14, Devarim 6:20-21; Yerushalmi Pesachim 37:4). Jewish teaching suggests that there may be up to a staggering seventy variations on any singular idea (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15).

This motif of diversity embedded within Jewish texts reveals that the religion has supported the practice of differentiated instruction from its inception. It is therefore imperative that even if the current trend of differentiated instruction was to fade from history, nevertheless for the Jewish school, an effective and lasting method of differentiating instruction should be found.

Eisner’s alternatives to Tomlinson

Elliot Eisner, writing over five decades from 1961, raises several ideas that address the recognition of student differences. His ideas complement Tomlinson’s conception of differentiated instruction or offer alternatives to it, and have not yet been discussed in this context in educational literature. His ideas come from years of reflective practice teaching “diverse” learners in classes of art education. The proposals he suggests are not limited to the application of teaching techniques, but offer fresh approaches to how we can differentiate our students even in the absence of varied lesson plans. And, in particular application to the Jewish school, rather than impose greater requirements on teachers already managing a dual curriculum or suggest theories foreign in their modernity, Eisner’s techniques reflect practices already valued within traditional Jewish education.
First, rather than allowing students to learn according to their preferred learning modalities which may limit their abilities to grow, and in order to accommodate the variance in student ability, he proposes, rather, to expand the curriculum to include additional subjects, which he calls “multiple forms of literacy.” Second, he suggests a formal construction of space for flexibility in curriculum planning whereby all student outcomes are not predetermined, which he refers to as “expressive objectives.” And third, rather than view differentiation as a practice, Eisner discusses the idea of differentiation as a skill that can be learned, which he calls “qualitative intelligence.” Eisner’s ideas contribute to the field of differentiation in proposing alternatives to the current conceptions of differentiated instruction, and in addition, offer to the field of Jewish education tools for enabling DI in the Jewish school, as well as perspectives that may serve as catalysts for improvement in key areas.

Multiple forms of literacy

Although the movement to develop “standards” has dominated the field of education for the last three decades and remains prevalent in American K-12 classrooms (Hamden, 2013), Eisner cites concern with this movement, arguing that setting standards ignores natural variability among children (Eisner 1978; 1991; 1992; 1993). He notes weak research support for a positive outcome of setting standards, and points out that when curriculum is developed on the basis of subject matter, it is often aligned with the convenience of a teacher rather than in accordance with the needs of students (Eisner 1970).

He even suggests that standardization may be more harmful to the country’s interests than good. Predating Ken Robinson, in his essays The Kind of Schools We Need (1984), Cognition and Representation (1997) and Questionable Assumptions About Schooling (2003), Eisner questions assumptions that “the aim of schooling is to get all students to the same place at about the same time.”

The idea that getting everyone to the same place represents a limitation on our aspirations. It does not serve democratic purposes to treat everyone identically or expect everyone to arrive at the same destination at the same time. Some students need to go farther in one direction, and others in another because that’s where their aptitudes lie, that’s where their interests are, that’s where their proclivities lead them (2003, p.649).
His concerns, if all learning were to be based on linguistic forms of measurement, are the losses that would be incurred both by individual students and by full school communities.

_As long as the nonlinguistic expression of human intelligence is marginalized in school programs, our programs will fail to develop the rich varieties of human potential that our students possess. We will also continue to emphasize curricular content and aims that create educational inequities for students whose areas of greatest potential are either marginalized or absent from school programs_ (2003, p. 650).

Rather than strive for a climate of homogeneity and standards, Eisner asserts that good schools should increase rather than decrease the variance in student performance. He makes a compelling argument for differentiated instruction in his concept of multiple forms of literacy. He asserts that literacy should not be restricted to decoding text and number (2002) and laments that our general conception of cognition relies only on linguistic forms of mediation when others also exist (2003). Meaning can be engendered through dance, music and the visual arts. The visual arts offer a forum for meanings that cannot be expressed in language or in quantitative form (1991). Schools often neglect the arts.

For this deficiency, Eisner points not to a modern cause, but to Plato’s thought that has shaped western philosophy and its educational institutions. He claims that Plato’s elevation of abstract thought over material experience is responsible for the relegation of non-linguistic forms of expression to the periphery of education (1980), and argues that schools today no longer require conformity with a practice that may be damaging to students’ education. Challenging Plato, Eisner takes up instead a position of Aristotle that all citizens should not only learn to appreciate art passively but to create and perform (Allen, 2002). He suggests that, rather than relegate arts and physical education to the periphery, the core instruction should include nonlinguistic forms of student expression (1979b). Following this prescription, it would not be enough for schools to offer gym as time for free play or music as a class for learning songs. Rather, he suggests, as part of the common core, all students should be trained in music theory and composition, physical movement and choreography.

Like philosophers Wittgenstein and George Collingwood, Eisner looks at the various forms of art as “language.” In the form of art, language communicates through metaphor and expresses emotion through the
“charge” it engenders (Kemp, 2012). However, to adopt the perspective of “art as language” requires both the speaker and listener to be versed in the same tongue (*ibid*). One problem schools may have with adopting this approach is that for the mainstream consumer, let alone for the student, the language of art has not yet been defined or operationalized to the point of clear understanding. Schools may be reluctant to teach students a language that will not be understood by others clearly, but if and when a delineation of terms in a “language of art” does develop, as Eisner recommends, students should learn to speak it as well.

Felicity McArdle, writing in 2005 for *Every Child*, suggests that art is a language that everyone in the world can understand with proper training. She attributes our inability to view art as language to the way the subject is taught initially.

Imagine if we were teaching children to learn to read and we announced that, since they had been working with letters and words for a few weeks, we were going to change things. They will not work with letters and words, but instead, with a piano and a basketball. Instead of teaching children the skills and techniques for successful use of the basic tools for artistic communication—brushes and pencils—we urge them to communicate with feathers, balloons and marbles. Such gimmicks produce random results, not deliberate communication (McArdle, 2005, p.6). She continues to argue that as a result of our childhood gaps in learning, we have grown into artistic illiterates through no fault of our own. As children, we intuitively felt that art was a medium for communication, but as we matured, we gave up on the prospect of learning to speak.

*What if you really wanted to learn the language, so you could read, speak and write it, but nobody would teach you? Eventually, you would feel disempowered, foolish, constrained and inadequate, and give up trying to communicate. You might even convince yourself that the language is silly, and that you have no interest in it (McArdle, 2005, p.7).*

Like McArdle, and as an artist himself, Eisner sees more potential in the ability of art to convey meaning, and although a minority voice, he calls out to the educational community to appreciate the value of the arts as forms of literacy. He proposes that these non-cognitive areas currently considered as alternative modalities for “diverse” learners and employed only in settings where learning is differentiated can really be taught to all students in the same way other subjects are taught. Rather than
limit students with proclivities to learning in their preferred medium and preventing their growth in areas of weakness, as research suggests may happen, Eisner proposes an expanded curriculum for all students. Students with innate ability in these subjects will gain top grades and confidence in their “academic” abilities, and – as in most core subjects, those with less ability will require additional help. Just as some students naturally excel in math while others require remediation, so it will be that artistically talented students will excel in art while others learn basic skills and improve their abilities over time.

**Spiritual ability**

Eisner, primarily observing students with artistic talent, proposes that the additional forms of literacy worth considering are those of artistic mediums. While the arts do warrant attention as important forms of literacy, “spiritual” ability may be considered an additional form of expression relevant to religious education. In Judaism, this ability termed the “service of the heart” is considered a pillar of religious service (Avot 1:2), but in recent years, several scholars have identified a void in Jewish education where proper training in this area should exist (Haber, 2014; Rothstein, 2012; Weinberger, 2012).

Rabbi Allan Haber notes several causes of this weakness, including a superficial or absent discussion of G-d in Jewish studies classrooms (Haber, 2014). Similar to McArdle’s critique of art education, Haber contends that student learning may be compromised due to adult discomfort with the subject (*ibid*). It may be that spirituality and prayer, topics more abstract than concrete, elude even expert Jewish studies teachers. However, in the case of spirituality, similar to mainstream subjects, some individuals may have a greater proclivity towards connecting to a reflective, or “spiritual” state than others. But where some will struggle, others may excel, in application to both students and adults alike. Finding a teacher skilled in this area would parallel the process of finding a math instructor skilled in math or *Tanach* (Bible) instructors expert in text analysis: so a teacher of spirituality must possess strong affinity for spiritual awareness.

Eisner’s theory nurturing “multiple forms of literacy” contributes to the conversation about spirituality in day schools, recommending that although spiritual ability may be easier for some students than others, it should nevertheless be taught to all. Students with greater natural ability will excel, and others will improve their skills. According to Eisner’s
construct, all students will gain in “spiritual” ability, and those for whom it comes easily will be duly praised.

**Expressive outcomes**

The potentially irreconcilable problem between the movements of differentiation and standardization is that where differentiation welcomes students’ interests and experiences, standardization limits the ability to fully connect with students’ unique inquiries and experiences since it dictates an outcome, preventing the discovery of knowledge and ideas outside the pre-determined end. In addressing this, Eisner proposed the establishment of two different kinds of objectives (Eisner, 1979). The first reflects the carefully planned standards for cognitive attainment to which the educational system is accustomed. The second, what he titles “expressive outcomes,” refers to achieved objectives that emanate from the student and are unanticipated. These outcomes are spontaneously achieved objectives resulting from what most educators recognize as “teachable moments.”

Due to differences in interests, needs, and preferences, teachers cannot anticipate the learning agenda and rich experiences that students may bring to the classroom. Therefore, in their curriculum planning, teachers should remain open and plan for these opportunities. As Eisner contends, “Purpose need not precede action.” While the differentiation movement currently acknowledges varied interests and passions, its recommendations still fall within the realm of predetermined outcomes. Eisner’s boldness breaks free of outcomes entirely and suggests that, even within a curriculum-driven lesson plan with predetermined, measurable outcomes, a percentage of space can be left for students’ actions and ideas to lead the way in determining some learning outcomes as well.

**Finding “a” derech (path) rather than “the” derech**

While this might seem foreign to some traditionalists who search for one right answer, Jewish schools may take consolation in evidence that precedent for this concept can be found within the Jewish religion itself. Similar to Eisner’s conception of expressive objectives, the standardization process of formulating halacha (Jewish law) results in not one, but a range of “right” answers; within the framework of mandate, space is created for several options of practice. Jewish law recognizes that individuals differ in their ability to complete a task in
the rabbinic ordinance of *heter* (dispensation), and the Biblical text itself supplies examples of “accommodation” in areas of compromised technical ability (Numbers 9:7-11), economic depravity (Leviticus 5:7), and interest in participation (Exodus 25:2 and 35:2). It is in understanding this construct that educators can approach curriculum design with the knowledge that differences exist in student ability and that serving diverse needs within a larger framework of “correct” goals and achievements finds support in Jewish law and Torah.

Further, the concept of expressive outcomes helps address a significant problem in the Jewish community today. No small number of Jewish students is at risk of leaving traditional observance. While many factors may contribute to this phenomenon, the student who questions a teaching in class may find him or herself penalized for having irreligious ideas, when the challenge emerged from simple curiosity or creative thinking. According to the research of E.P. Torrance and others, teachers who prefer conformity were frustrated by many characteristics of creative students (Davis & Rimm, 1994; Oliphant, 1986; Torrance, 1963). In a religious setting, measures may be taken by a school or parents to reform what began as reflective inquiry that may push a student to abandon faith altogether.

Engaging Eisner’s construct of expressive objectives allows for space within a curriculum to welcome new questions emerging from class discussion or inquiring minds. When these students who may feel marginalized from class discussion see that religious teaching accommodates what may be challenging questions, they may feel less compelled to leave. Eisner’s concept of flexible – “expressive” outcomes along with the understanding of *heter* can enable Jewish studies teachers to decrease emphasis and expectation for one correct outcome from all students alike and enable wider diversity of practice or thought in any Jewish school.

**Qualitative intelligence**

As early as 1963, Eisner looked at the educational research available to him and noted that although developments in instructional practice abound, he could not be sure they would lead to more efficient learning. In pursuit of resolution, Eisner proposes a theory that he terms “qualitative intelligence.” He suggests that one reason researchers have found it so difficult to identify the conditions that make for effective teaching is that they have neglected to consider the qualitative aspects of

Eisner describes what he terms “qualitative intelligence” as the ability to differentiate qualities, and uses the example of the musician and the visual artist to illustrate his concept. These people, he says, are most concerned with the qualitative, with the conception, control, and organization of qualities. Eisner claims that this type of intelligence is exercised in increasing degrees as man discriminates between more and more complex and subtle qualities, such as the discriminations required in making and appreciating art and music.

Eisner notes that John Dewey, in *Art as Experience* distinguishes between the kind of knowledge and intelligence employed in the production of art from that engaged in scientific inquiries. Dewey calls the knowledge of an artist, who “knows” color because he “feels” it, qualitative knowledge, in that the artist perceives its qualities to a higher degree than the non-artist. The concept of qualitative knowledge may be foreign to the western sensibility, which is based on Aristotle’s formulation of knowledge and does not include the “perception of qualities” as a form of knowing, but Eisner is proposing that the ability to discern subtle qualities may be exercised more easily by some people than others, warranting the term “intelligence.” He asserts that the ability to differentiate constitutes the primary identifying feature of this intelligence, such that a teacher with “QI” is one with expert abilities in the *skill of differentiation*.

**Connoisseurship**

Eisner also likens qualitative intelligence to the concept of “connoisseurship,” as he observes that this state of ability “consists of recognizing and appreciating the qualities of a particular” to the degree that one is able to discern qualities and relationships that others, less well differentiated, are likely to see (1979a, 1979c). Eisner notes, however, that only after a range of experiences in a particular mode of expression will sophisticated levels of connoisseurship be developed (Eisner, 1979c). This notion of connoisseurship can be identified in K. Anders Ericsson’s idea of expertise that is cultivated as a result of deliberate practice, whereby even among elite performers, what would be called “innate” talent is actually the result of intense practice (Ericsson et al., 1993).

In the same way, Eisner proposes, educators can develop qualitative intelligence, or connoisseurship in education by practicing the differentiation of qualities in student learning on a regular basis.
However, similar to Ericsson’s proposal of a “deliberate” practice, Eisner cautions that the length of time spent in a classroom alone is not an indication of the level of connoisseurship. Rather, “to develop connoisseurship one must have a desire to perceive subtleties, to become a student of human behavior, to focus one’s perception” (Eisner, 1979c, p. 194). So it is that, not only with years of teaching, but with years spent teaching as deliberate — or, “reflective” practice, with awareness of action and focus on improvement, teachers can develop qualitative intelligence, or become “connoisseurs” in differentiation. Striving for “connoisseurship” in teaching through deliberate practice in differentiation may not only improve teaching in mixed ability classrooms, but also help teachers persist through difficult first years by clarifying a “skill” for which they can observe improvement and eventually master.

**Differentiation in action**

Eisner notes that educators have long considered the planning of curriculum and the construction of lesson plans, but paid less attention to the type of immediate decision-making that happens during the act of teaching. Although teachers consider theory an important tool for making teaching decisions, he suggests that if pressed, most would admit that the majority of teaching decisions in the classroom are not made on the basis of theoretical considerations at all, but made in the moment based on a perception of immediate need (1963).

Eisner likens the ability to perceive and decide quickly to the process employed by comedians and improvisational actors in their ability to rapidly manipulate qualities of pace, emphasis, flow and timing of speech and action. The unique product of improvisational performance, notes R.K. Sawyer (2000), is the creative process itself as it occurs. Sawyer finds in the work of both John Dewey and R.G. Collingwood the belief that improvisation constitutes an essential but overlooked skill of a teacher. In his non-fiction work, Malcolm Gladwell (2005) calls the ability to quickly perceive qualities “rapid cognition” or “thin slicing,” and notes that it does not necessarily show up in the measures used to pre-screen teachers for hire, such as test scores, graduate degrees, and certifications (Gladwell, 2005, 2008). Amanda Ripley (2010) corroborates that when evaluating teacher excellence we tend to ascribe excellent teachers’ gifts to some mystical quality that we can recognize and revere, but not define or replicate. What Eisner proposes is that the ability of a superstar teacher
we consider to be “mystical,” may be the skill of qualitative intelligence. Further, in application to effective classroom teaching, the ability to discern a wide range of nuanced qualities in the responsiveness and behavior of students may be the skill most useful in differentiating instruction. Is a quiet student in the back of the class exhibiting contentment with the pace of the class, or is she bored and would benefit from additional challenge, or confused and requires further explanation? Cultivating the ability to read the subtle qualities of a student response can be essential to providing them a meaningful educational experience.

Differentiating instruction may extend beyond the ability to construct a multi-tiered lesson plan, and apply to the ability a teacher has to differentiate on an ongoing basis between the subtle qualities of her students’ reactions and needs. If regularly attempting to identify nuanced student differences, a teacher may be able to slowly gain the skill of differentiating such qualities in his or her students. Even if not factoring into a grade, the identification of such differences among students will aid teachers in offering fluctuating degrees of scaffolding in the presentation of material.

The adjustments teachers make to accommodate such differences will happen during the process of teaching, spontaneously, and not with advance preparation. Developing the skill of differentiation will aid the teacher in his or her ability to make such adjustments. With deliberate practice, this skill will improve over time, and after several years, the teacher will become the expert differentiator of student needs in the classroom; the art of teaching will be synonymous with the art of differentiating instruction.

Cultivating the skill of differentiation through Talmud study

Eisner addresses the concern that although the skill of differentiation or qualitative “intelligence” may come naturally, it can also be developed. He believes that qualitative intelligence is exercised in all walks of life by practically everyone. Although teachers may not be trained currently in the skill, a high volume of hours spent in deliberate identification of the learning needs of students gives them the ongoing opportunity to practice and eventually excel in such an exercise.

In addition to learning from a range of subject areas, the Jewish school itself can be a training ground for the development of differentiation skills. For students and faculty alike, opportunities to cultivate the skill of qualitative intelligence occur throughout the school
day in the halls of the Beit Midrash. Trained to appreciate and identify complexities in the act of textual analysis – whether in Talmud study or parshanut (Bible interpretation), Jewish studies teachers and students practice a skill that can allow them to appreciate detail. Recognizing and respecting differences precedes the difficult task of teaching to them, but the teacher who is capable of seeing and analyzing these differences will have advantage over those unpracticed in the skill of discernment.

Differentiation as the “art” of teaching

In a theoretical work by Hilary Austen, qualitative intelligence can be likened to “artistry” (Austen, 2010). It represents not only the able execution of a task, but the manipulation of qualities to create something more than previously existed. Through the lens of Eisner’s theory, differentiating qualities among students is the “artistry” of teaching. Eisner’s suggestions remain bold and new. More than fifty years ago he suggested that cultivating the recognition and control of qualities would better the field of teaching. What might satisfy Eisner today is the possibility that the deliberate application of differentiation in the classroom may assist the conversion of teaching from a scientific practice to an “art.” Further, if differentiation is indeed practiced in classrooms to the point of expertise, research in the field of education may impact the greater academic community as well. As the tide in the field of education turns from valuing the “sage on the stage” to the guide who wishes to honor the varied abilities of his students, cultivating among teachers the skill of differentiation becomes an important need for the practice and training of new teachers now and looking forward. As differentiation is a relatively new practice, current teachers may have had only classical instruction techniques modeled for them though their own years in school. However, as teachers slowly adopt new skills in differentiation, they will become the models for generations to come.

Differentiation in the Jewish school

Over the course of their twelve years of schooling, Jewish students may spend countless hours engaged in the analysis of text. However, if they do so without the intention to develop their skills of analysis, they may not advance as quickly as one who engages in the practice of analytical thinking deliberately. When a course is constructed to transmit the content of material only and neglects the opportunity to advance a
skill that comes as a byproduct of the learning, with only a change of awareness, the hours spent in such a course can be transformed into skill building time as well. Students beginning their studies are offered the opportunity to develop skills in discernment if they deliberately work to sharpen their analytic skills as they learn and discuss their material. If the study of Tanach and Talmud in day schools can be taught not only for content, but also for the development of skill in differentiation, Jewish students today will strengthen their own “qualitative intelligence” through the natural course of their schooling.

Typically, in their years of experience studying Talmud, Jewish studies teachers have spent hours of time devoted to sharpening their own analytic ability. Their skill in identifying minutia within text has been practiced for the hours required to develop expertise, giving them a unique advantage in differentiating the needs of students after this experience. While analyzing text may not transfer directly to the analysis of students, nevertheless an awareness of concepts learned in the process, such as “gray area” – questions for which there may be multiple right answers, and familiarity with navigating complicated material may aid Jewish studies teachers in appreciating and navigating the terrain of students with varying needs. Rather than resist the notion of a diverse classroom, the most orthodox Jewish studies teachers are more prepared than their colleagues to embrace the practice of differentiation.

Conclusion

In light of the difficulty many teachers have when attempting to apply differentiated instruction techniques, and the lack of convincing research demonstrating that differentiated lessons leads to better learning, we are searching for answers. As Tomlinson notes to support her argument, differentiating seems like “common sense” (1998, 2011). And yet, if it means creating multiple lessons according to an undefined theoretical framework, the practice of differentiating instruction may continue to struggle against critics and resist mainstream practice. Humans have studied individual differences throughout history, and teachers will acknowledge the student variance in every classroom: the question under consideration is not whether to address variance among students, but how to work with it most effectively to enable maximal student learning.

As the field of general education continues to pursue a “common core” of standards as well as debate the value of differentiation, what we
all mean, on both sides of the argument, is that all students should be given fair opportunities to learn in the most effective way. Although methods for planning differentiated instruction have been developed, such as tiering lessons and anchor activities, we have not been able to resolve the clash between over- or under-accommodating the variance that naturally occurs in every classroom. These issues are no less relevant for Jewish schools. It may be that some of the suggestions proposed by Eisner throughout his long career as both a professor and an artist can help the field of differentiated instruction even today, and especially today, as the concern – and its conflict – only grow stronger.

As an artist himself, what Eisner offers are several unique approaches to managing that variance. Each of his suggestions can be applied both in the presence or absence of Tomlinson’s recommendations for differentiating lessons. Rather than compete with her solution, he suggests new perspectives on the process of differentiation entirely. According to Eisner, how we interact with students in every moment can be considered the practice of differentiation. We can build into the curriculum the freedom for variance in learning outcomes. And we can work with multiple modalities to expand rather than proscribe student learning.

Eisner’s theories have particular value to the field of Jewish education. In light of his notion of multiple forms of literacy, spiritual education may be viewed as a subject among the others, taught by a faculty member “gifted” in this field, and providing the needed spiritual connection skills that many educators have noted are lacking in day school education. To neglect educating students in the “service of the heart,” day schools fall short in preparing students sufficiently to become educated Jewish adults and leaders.

Furthermore, recognizing differences in ability and approach to spirituality is an important dimension of Jewish education. Jews have played their role best through a range of abilities dating to the time of the Bible. The twelve tribes of Israel received twelve unique strengths (Genesis 49:28): each of these unique types was equally beloved and honored by G-d, and when seeking resolution to a confusing question during this era, any of these twelve unique perspectives could be considered correct (Exodus 28). Although at times, criticism has damaged the peace between groups taking different positions, serving G-d through a range of methods has been a hallmark of traditional Judaism. While some lawmakers do seek and mandate what they believe to be the “most”
correct answer, they also run the risk of losing the student who questions this answer. While the determination of law remains important, the Jewish community cannot afford such a risk, making Eisner’s proposal all the more pressing. Tolerance for variance may be vital to the future of Jewish continuity. Eisner’s concept of “Expressive Objectives” enables the Jewish school to formally allot space within lessons for new questions, directions, and learning objectives that can accommodate the needs of a wider range of students.

Last, Jewish studies faculty are preconditioned to excel in the area of differentiated instruction, having spent requisite hours in the study of subjects which expand their relevant skills and perspectives. As Eisner conceives of qualitative intelligence, the skill of differentiation, the dialectic employed in traditional text study betters the perception of qualitative differences and thus enables faculty to more effectively teach to these differences. Further, if acknowledged in Jewish day school courses in Talmud and Tanach – and practiced deliberately – this ability may improve among students as well, affording Jewish students an advantage in the development of qualitative intelligence in addition to their acquisition of content knowledge.

Lessons can be gleaned from Eisner to improve day school spiritual education, capitalize on the analytical skill developing from hours of text study, and open traditional teachers to the possibility of sustaining multiple perspectives on the same topic. Creative students, rather than set a traditional teacher off track with answers diverging from mainstream opinion, can feel welcome to propose new ideas even within a religious classroom. Most significantly, Eisner’s theories propose ways to expand differentiated instruction in accordance with the Jewish concept that a student must be taught in a way that works best for him, “al pi darko.”

Ever an artist, Eisner conceived of tactics to solve problems decades before the mainstream community identified their existence. It is Eisner the art instructor who spent the many hours engaged in work with “diverse” learners who can offer us advice in addressing the needs of such students – and in the current educational climate which prizes innovation as a standard 21st century skill – all students. Although he did not coin the term, Eisner became a connoisseur of “differentiated instruction,” not only in his teaching, but also reflecting on his work through decades of thoughtful writing. His proposals, which offer new perspectives to both the community of differentiated learning and the Jewish community, push us all to be more tolerant and more creative.
Although predating our current issues by more than half a century, they are now essential to the educational practice and research that will benefit our children.
References


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