



**McCarthy, J. (2017). *So all can learn: A practical guide to differentiation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.**

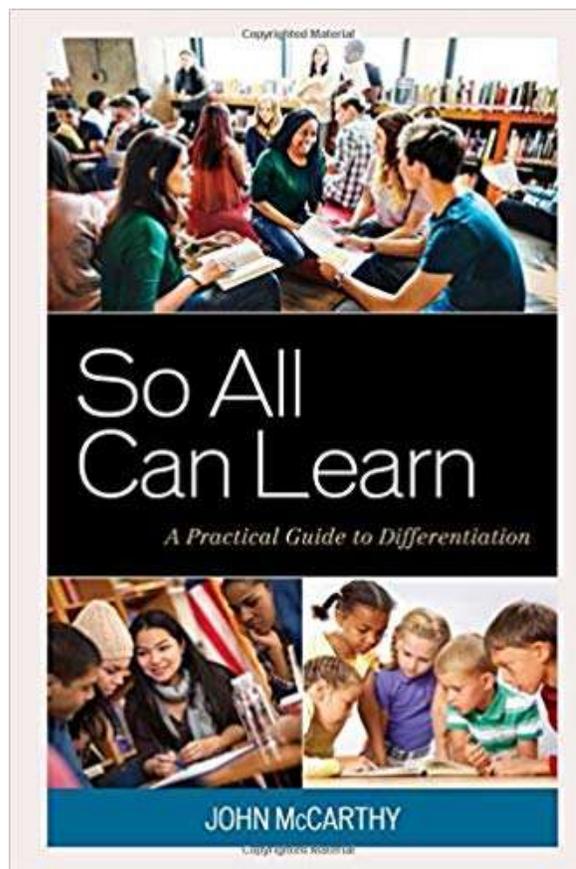
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Like most methods professors tasked with teaching 18-to-22-year-old newly minted teachers, I feel more and more pressed with each passing decade, each fleeting initiative, each set of standards. The understatement of the century follows: teaching the pre-K-12 population in the US has become increasingly difficult in an information age. Professors must be judicious and cunning when deciding what to teach in a class that might otherwise be labeled “Everything You Need to Know in 14 Easy Weeks Full of Other Upper-Division Demands.”

The greatest challenge for any 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher in the US is differentiation. The lesson plans may be online for anyone to follow (they may even be scripted, egads); the curriculum maps may ping us every couple of days to check our pacing; the online formative assessments are so sophisticated and precise that they can pinpoint a certain set of skills to reteach – but today’s classroom of 25-plus students is more characterized by difference than anything else. The task of meeting all children where they are has become so overwhelming that some researchers question



if differentiation is even possible; some even question if it is *concept* worthy of the support it garners. I see differentiation as not only real but also vital. My commitment, however, does not change the fact that my pre-service teachers are beginners for whom everything is abstract, but differentiation is an abstraction at another level. These undergraduates tend to view my lessons on differentiation as separate from the “basics” of teaching – a perception that, while reasonable, is dangerous at worst and, at best, makes them expend more energy than they should in order to differentiate well. Teaching each learner is just good teaching – a point that is obscured by how teacher educators sometimes discuss the concept of differentiation.

In *So All Can Learn: A Practical Guide to Differentiation*, author John McCarthy solves many of the dilemmas that I experience when conveying this concept. I recommend the book to any methods instructor to be viewed as a supplement, a workbook in a sense, to bolster many of the mainline and popular comprehensive texts we use to teach methods classes today. John McCarthy describes himself as first a classroom teacher who now travels and writes as an expert lecturer on project-based learning and differentiation. He states in his preface what I think is conveyed well throughout the entire book: “differentiation just becomes how learning happens” (p. xi). Unlike other texts that treat differentiation as a lofty and somewhat vague goal, McCarthy doubles down to offer a truly practical and useful nine chapters. He combines academic rigor with specifics and beginner-minded examples to offer valuable insight to anyone trying earnestly and effectively to understand how to reach all learners.

In this review, I identify four major contributions of this book. First and foremost is McCarthy’s helpful central metaphor, one that speaks to his core premise that differentiation is essentially figuring out how

to teach the whole child. This metaphor McCarthy terms “airplane mode.” He explains that

When passengers get seated for their flight, one of the first messages they receive is to turn off their phones or place them in airplane mode. . . . When the plane lands, usually even before the announcement is made, passengers take their phones out of airplane mode. There is a cacophony of buzzes and rings . . . that were waiting for access to be restored. When students enter school, much of their lives is left outside the doors. The expected focus is academics and achievement. The only student factors considered are where they are academically and any behavior and activities inside the building. Unlike the staff, the students are kept in airplane mode. This environment makes [it] difficult to attend to the whole child for learning important college and career readiness skills. (pp. 57-58)

Any master teacher reading this central metaphor – one to which McCarthy returns as a shorthand for why the differentiated strategy works – quickly realizes the power in this simple and relatable comparison. Long before this 2017 title, educators were discussing Maslow and the myriad needs children bring to school. Wrap-around services, child psychologists, school resource officers, and even DARE programs have long attended to physical, psychological and social needs of the children in our care for a large portion of their waking hours. However, McCarthy’s examples are more subtle and targeted to learner needs and interest. For example, McCarthy posits, if Michael is out of his seat most of the time and works on late work instead of focusing on the lesson at hand, does it matter that at home he manages his house and three younger siblings while his parents work three jobs to survive? What might he need, and how might he learn differently, when we consider that fact? If Angel struggles and completes only half of her work, what might watching her social media

accounts – with a million plus YouTube followers – tell us about how she might value school more if we knew about her social justice causes? By switching the conversation both to academics and to needs that operate more like a switch than a constant, McCarthy provides a different take on how to address the factors that affect student learning differently in each day, each context, perhaps down to each learning standard. Through this central metaphor, he explains how “fair instruction is not equal. Learner needs are diverse. While there is an overlapping of needs that are common to some part of a group of learners, differentiation is an integral component” (p. 64).

A second strength of this book is the plainspoken basics about good teaching in general, not just the pedagogy surrounding differentiation. The text is refreshing in its ability to integrate solid and essential information – sometimes in the form of process, sometimes in a simple list of well-defined steps – precisely when the novice teacher might need it. Whether it is through a simple chart that displays aspects of learner preference (something McCarthy handily entitles “learner preference guidelines”) or even through a simple, step-by-step procedure of how to align learning outcomes with assessment (also aptly titled as a “formative assessment cycle” or FAC), McCarthy’s plainspoken and user-friendly text conveys helpful synthesis, positivity, but never condescension. A prime example lies in his matter-of-fact explanation of wait time, another example of how McCarthy caters to new teachers. He explains, “By waiting 5 to 15 seconds, the teacher insists that all students take the time to consider their ideas. This pause levels the playing field so that a teacher does not have to ask for volunteers; they can call on them” (p. 159). In two sentences, McCarthy covers so much: what it is, how long it might take, why it’s vital these days, and how it increases critical thinking *and* in some ways levels the field while raising the

expectation. These insights, scattered throughout, are unassuming, straightforward, natural, and precise extensions of what McCarthy tries to accomplish throughout. He proves in big ways and small that differentiation is constant, basic, valuable, integrated, and easily attainable for anyone who wants to reach every student.

Not only does McCarthy provide the basics to bolster the masterful in his book, but he also formats the text in a way that provides maximum ease and effectiveness for deciphering and digesting his essential themes. Each concise chapter supplies descriptive subheadings, and sub-sections often have a definition of the new concept, followed by a rationale, a leaner connection, and specific examples framed by various classroom scenarios and contexts. Visual representations and models help reinforce the theories and concepts through multimodal avenues. By even a conservative estimate, there are more than 25 models, figures, or tables to explain the information and strategies in different ways. Finally, each chapter is supported by several and varied prompts for individual reflection, listed after the “final thoughts” at the end of the chapter. McCarthy concludes with two helpful appendices. The first is a complete description of the EdCamp program, an experiment created and orchestrated each year at an elementary school that McCarthy touts as a way to engage students in a weeklong research symposium. The second appendix offers a concise but helpful list of resources he entitles “Differentiation and Research.” In a book that could be perceived as full of dense and potentially abstruse ideas, McCarthy returns to central concepts and organizes the text in a way that reinforces without being overly repetitive.

*So All Can Learn* puts both students and student voice at the forefront. Each chapter uses individual interests, readiness, and preference as an essential backdrop to the discussions on differentiation, all while

maintaining an emphasis on the rigor and challenge that traditionally characterize the concept. Three of the chapters frame differentiated strategies with a student focus. Even the best of us sometime forgets such a focus as we become bogged down in the metaphorical weeds of the classroom, standards, and pressure both internal and external. McCarthy's text invites us back. There is little chance by its conclusion that we haven't been reminded that all of this work is for the benefit of an actual child, and that actual children have to be considered one at a time, sometimes minute by minute.

Discussing important touchstones such as growth mindset and control, McCarthy also emphasizes fundamental truths about teaching all students and recognizing all developmental stages while empowering students to articulate what they both want and need from their own education.

As solid as the McCarthy text is, I do see small areas that might give educators pause either when reading the book for professional development in best practice, in a group setting such as a professional learning team (PLT), or with a group of pre-service teaching candidates. McCarthy is plainspoken and clear when he skillfully explains some of the finer points of differentiation. However, there are areas where explanations seem much less clear, generally occurring perhaps when McCarthy assumes the reader knows the shorthand of some pedagogical strategies. As the text progresses, the reader can decipher some of these strategies through context clues. As the chapters stack on top of each other, McCarthy includes more notes on certain, more ambiguous strategies used as examples throughout the text. This placement seems unusual, however, when we contrast this placement with other repeated, concise, and clearly-articulated descriptions of the strategies that are perhaps more relevant or more closely tied to differentiation. Perhaps the text might benefit from an index at the end of the book

so that teachers who remember a strategy can find a paragraph or two in order to refresh their memory before implementing it in class.

Another, perhaps more easily remedied disconnect, concerns the author's approach to tiered assignments. The practice of tiered assignments is certainly not new, and there are multiple, reliable texts that support the construction and facilitation of this kind of differentiation. At points in the book, McCarthy seems to support assigning students to a certain tier for assignments based on preliminary data and under the umbrella of proximal development. Top challenge tiers, he sometimes indicates, are not useful for some students. However, I, as well as many other teacher educators, have come to believe that any layer of an assignment should be offered to everyone in the class as much as conceivably possible. Having taught many Paideia classrooms and likewise heterogeneous literature courses, it seems that assigning tiers, even based on good assessment data, is a tricky business. In the interest of meeting student challenge and understandably varied student interest, I model the practice of assigning tiered assignments, but I often make the highest tier available as extra credit to anyone who feels she is ready for it, not just for the honors or advanced students. Because McCarthy is so adept at explaining basic, good pedagogy along with differentiated strategies, it seems worth noting when there is even a small point that might need further discussion on differing paradigms, or more elaboration regarding context, or modeling. That said, this addition is an easy fix.

The book is a great support to two often-distinct types of reader. First, this text has solid impact as a supplementary text for beginning and pre-service teachers. As seniors in college or pre-service teachers in a professional licensure program, students need several iterations of the same material and concepts. They also need material that can work on a few different levels depending on

their development as professionals and on the task at hand. The text serves to reinforce concepts and solid activities from the typical methods textbooks as well as to introduce yet another sometimes-abstract concept like differentiation as an attainable and necessary goal. In addition to providing a bolster as a supplementary text or workbook to methods classes, the book serves equally well for seasoned educators – either alone or in a professional learning team – who want to grapple anew with what some perceive as the monumental task of differentiating materials. For teachers whose undergraduate educations were finished long before talk of learning styles (and the ensuing debates over them), growth mindsets, or even differentiation all together, the content-rich and layered scope of the text and its easy format will serve them well. When he discusses growth mindsets, for example, McCarthy asserts that “persistence to find a solution by the teacher tells students that they are not allowed to give up on themselves – as a stream of remedies are arriving until an effective solution is found” (p. 67). The intersection and synergy of McCarthy’s ideas prove fruitful, and there is little doubt that everyone will come away learning something. Just as with beginning or pre-service teachers, I see real potential for integration and paradigm shift if needed in this solid supplementary text.

*So All Can Learn: A Practical Guide to Differentiation* by John McCarthy proves to be a book worth reading and discussing with educators interested in the serious yet accessible pursuit of differentiating their classroom. It is potent in the ways that count most, and McCarthy consistently brings home the central message that “because they [the students], not me, are in control of learning . . . differentiation becomes just how learning happens” (p. xi). McCarthy reaches his wide audience in many ways: by subheadings that break down information systematically; by definitions that for the most part come at an authentic teachable moment; or by providing activities, reflection questions, or recurring concepts guided by the essential questions on differentiation. More importantly, one of these recurring concepts stands as an anchor for all: that differentiation is an integral, as-you-mean-to-go part of planning in a manner that serves every student, plain and simple. For the teachers who plan every day for every child and who understand that growth is possible for each one if given proper time and resources, the book affirms that planning is key, that differentiation is central to it, that practicality and short bursts of differentiation pack a best-practice wallop, and that it absolutely can be done. The shift from afterthought or add-on to the essence of good pedagogy is exciting to me, and, in my mind, the part that moves the discipline forward.

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### About the Reviewer

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