

Differentiating Instruction: Rethinking Traditional Practices

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Differentiating instruction invites educators to rethink traditional educational practices that were based upon a time when students were more similar in background and readiness. Educators today must embrace differentiated instruction for students and assume a confident attitude that they can organize and manage this instruction.

Differentiation is a well known educational practice that is often talked about, sometimes not well understood, and frequently implemented ineffectively. Differentiation is difficult for some educators to implement and some parents to understand because their own school experiences incorporated little differentiation.

What is and is not intended in Differentiated instruction

When readiness levels differ, so must the complexity of instruction provided for students. In a differentiated classroom, instruction is customized to match students' readiness levels and enable all students to experience continuous learning. While focusing on important concepts and skills, teachers fashion instruction to learners' needs by:

- Modifying the pace and level of instruction,
- Incorporating flexible grouping, and
- Varying the products of learning to reflect students' best ways to learn.

Differentiated instruction recognizes and acts upon the reality that children learn differently. It is not a question of good or bad classrooms; it is not a question of which teachers are working harder. It is doing what is instructionally the right thing to do--beginning where students are and trying to take them as far as they can go in their learning.

Learning takes place only when students experience instruction at a level of difficulty that is appropriately challenging and attainable (Tomlinson, 2003; Wolfe, 2001). Figure 1 charts the elements of differentiation by comparing what differentiated instruction involves, what is intended in that instruction, and what is not intended. Use this chart to prompt discussions among faculty. Share these elements, or variations you customize to your objectives, with parents to increase their understanding of differentiation and their appreciation of teachers' objectives for children in mixed-ability classrooms.

Figure 1:
THE ELEMENTS OF DIFFERENTIATION

<i>Differentiated instruction involves:</i>	<i>Differentiated instruction is intended to:</i>	<i>Differentiated instruction is not intended to:</i>
Student differences	Analyze students' readiness to determine instructional decisions.	Label students.
Instructional groupings	Flexibly grouping and regrouping students according to instructional objectives and in response to students' needs.	Primarily deliver instruction in a whole-class group.
Materials and texts	Present multiple levels and kinds of learning materials.	Predominately use a single, grade-level text.
Learning assignments	Differentiate learning experiences to present respectful ways to learn. The contrast is in the depth and complexity of tasks.	Generally, assign the same learning task for all students to complete. The contrast is the degree of difficulty experienced by different students in response to the task.
Students' interests	Incorporate students' interests to increase their motivation to learn and to maximize individual potential.	Assess interests less often because the curriculum is predetermined.
Assessment and evaluation	Implement multifaceted, continual assessment to guide instructional decisions and focus students' learning goals. Evaluate and determine grades when required.	Predominately complete evaluations to produce grades in a grade book or scores on tests.
Excellence	Reflect students' personal best and the degree of individual growth from each learner's achievement level at the entry point of instruction.	Designate the students with the highest grades and achievements.
Standards	Integrate standards into the curriculum.	Teach standards as separate learning components.
Teachers' roles	Enable teachers to facilitate and coach students' learning. Customize instruction to seek ways for all students to succeed in learning.	Primarily provide direct instruction through delivering the curriculum only as designed by the texts.
Students' roles	Enable students to actively participate in learning, producing, and assessing own learning.	Require students to dutifully complete learning tasks designed for inclusion in the grade-level curriculum, regardless of individual readiness, learning profile, interests, or dispositions for learning.

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Students are individuals. In a differentiated classroom, teachers perceive the differences that make students unique, not to distinguish one as better or less than another, but to form instructional objectives that effectively match each student.

Rather than whole-class instruction dominating, small groups of students frequently work together or with the teacher on different levels of concepts and skills. By instructing in flexible groups, the teacher is able to effectively vary the level and kinds of instructional materials as well as customize learning assignments--many of which directly respond to learners' interests.

Differentiation switches the assessment and evaluation focus from competition among all students to a student competing with self. District-wide and class-wide competition focuses on how many students are behind, how far behind they are, how many are on level, and how many are ahead. That information is significant to the accountability of learning standards but does not effectively help individual children to succeed. In a differentiated classroom, documentation of standards is acknowledged, yet the driving question for each student becomes: How are you doing in relation to your readiness and potential, and what instructional intervention do I use to enable you to progress toward our learning goal?

Students are recognized for current levels of achievement and then challenged to strive toward their personal best. Excellence is not defined only as the grade received, such as an A, but rather as achievement growth over time. How have I changed as a learner? is the metacognitive question that determines excellence in learning achievements for an individual. The intent is to enable students to experience success that motivates future effort.

Differentiated instruction personifies great teaching and what many great teachers aspire to do. Teachers want to differentiate instruction because they want to do what is best to enable students to be their best. Their instruction engages students as partners in learning who share the responsibility of being active participants in learning and assessing growth.

Guidelines for Differentiating Learning Experiences

The quality of the learning opportunities offered students determines the level of their responses. If we fail to ask high-level questions and provide students opportunities to engage in challenging tasks, we must be content with basic student responses instead of excellence. I know of no teacher who recommends a yearly goal of bringing students down to basic responses! Consider the following guidelines to stimulate discussions among educators regarding appropriate and attainable challenge for students.

- Avoid trying to differentiate what was not effective in the first place.
- Recognize, respect, and respond to learner differences as learning experiences are planned. Vary the types of learning experiences so different kinds of learning styles and intelligences can be observed, identified, and then acted upon in lesson planning.
- Integrate learning standards. In differentiated classrooms, teachers skillfully integrate clusters of learning standards in engaging learning tasks that enable students to demonstrate understanding. The standards are viewed as springboards for discussions and learning experiences instead of ends in themselves.
- Prompt high-level thinking and responses for all students. Challenge students to continually analyze and synthesize as they work to construct solutions. Encourage multiple responses from students instead of suspending discussion after only one response. As appropriate, follow up multiple responses with evaluative thinking by involving students in ranking the list of generated ideas based on effectiveness or some other pertinent criterion.
- Promote content integration. Selected learning experiences should allow students to connect prior knowledge and new information rather than stress isolated skills. Select interesting activities

with multiple opportunities for integration and application of concepts and skills. Busy teachers do not have time for activities that are merely fun to do. The goal is for every task to engage students and expand their content understanding.

- Encourage complexity and challenge. Provide tasks that involve varying levels of difficulty and incorporate appropriate levels of challenge to account for individual readiness levels.
- Support students' interests and choices. Provide multiple opportunities for students to choose topics to study, products to develop, and an array of applications and extensions to enhance their learning.
- Elicit active mental engagement in learning. Select learning experiences designed to actively engage students' minds and bodies in learning. Students who are mentally engaged are seldom bored; active involvement increases their learning and personal connections to the content. The goal is for most of the students to be actively engaged most of the time.
- Continually share criteria for success and high achievement with students. Clearly established criteria are communicated to the students in advance of the learning experience and used for self or collaborative evaluation. Some examples of criteria include: complexity of content or solution, accuracy and depth of information, quality, group cooperation, evidence of understanding, appearance, originality, integration of skills, organization, time management, applications of technology, and presentation.

In a marvelous picture book entitled *Winnie the Witch* by Korky Paul and Valerie Thomas, a witch lives in a black house with her black cat, Wilbur. Unfortunately, Wilbur's color blends in too well in the house and Winnie frequently trips over him. Her solution is to change his color to green and later to multiple shades so he is highly visible. The results are catastrophic to Wilbur; he is miserable. Because Winnie cares about Wilbur, she returns him to his original color and changes the color of the house instead!

At first, Winnie tries to make Wilbur change to fit her environment. But that does not work. Because she truly cares about him, she learns to change the environment so she can see him better.

Educators are changing the learning environment so they can see students' readiness levels, learning profiles, needs, and interests more clearly. Through differentiated instruction, teachers are rethinking what they personally experienced in their schooling and working to customize the complexity of instruction so all students experience learning success.

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