

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

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What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated Instruction is a process of teaching and learning that begins with the premise that not all students are alike. Based on the readiness, learning preferences and interests of the student, it requires you to vary your approach and adjust the curriculum and the presentation of the material to give students access to multiple paths to the same goals or outcomes. Differentiation meets each student where he is and maximizes his opportunities for success.

Figure 1 – Chart of Dependencies



Pre-assessment

Pre-assessment of readiness, interests and learning preferences is a necessary component of differentiation. Without it, there is a good chance that instruction will continue to be delivered as a “one size fits all” approach. You must systematically gather and utilize information about individual students to make instructional decisions about student strengths and needs.

To determine readiness, this information can be gathered by using the usual assessment tools such as pre-tests, standardized test information, checklists, quizzes, class discussions, student products and portfolios. To assess interests and learning preferences, give Interest and Learning Style inventories.

Using the results is the next important component of pre-assessment. These results will help you determine the best way to deliver the instruction so all students have opportunities for success. Pre-assessment will give you information in three broad areas: 1) need for support, 2) need for enrichment and 3) learning styles and interests.

For students that need support, use these strategies:

- Modified Directions
- Listening Centers
- Modeling
- Reading Buddies
- Manipulatives
- Graphic Organizers
- Leveled Reading Materials
- Adjusted Questions

• Flexible Grouping

If pre-assessment reveals that some students would benefit from enrichment, use these strategies:

- Compacting
- Adjusted Questions
- Anchoring Activities
- Flexible Grouping

When you determine that there are a variety of learning styles and different intelligences and interests within a class, you have these options:

- Flexible Grouping
- Product Choices
- Adjusted Questions
- Contracts

Flexible Grouping

Students can learn content, processes and skills in ways other than whole-group instruction; small-group work is one of those ways. But it's important that students work in *differently mixed* groups, and Flexible Grouping provides those opportunities.

Group and regroup your students according to specific goals, activities and needs as determined by pre-assessment.

Flexible Grouping includes: whole class, ability or readiness groups, cross ability or heterogeneous groups, student selected groups, topic interest groups and students working independently.

Long-term grouping is not acceptable—grouping should be for short periods of time to meet specific instruction needs. It should be fluid. This keeps students from being pegged.

Before groupwork begins:

- establish clear guidelines for group functioning.
- let students know what group they'll be in a day ahead.
- demonstrate how students will move in and out of their groups.
- review the rules governing when a student can ask for your help.
- define the role of each student in the group.
- describe where each group will work.
- explain how the groups will be graded.
- establish guidelines for brainstorming and group discussion.

Adjusted Questions

In mixed-ability classrooms, all students need to be accountable for all the essential concepts, skills and information plus thinking at higher levels, whether it is in class discussions, tests, activities, laboratory investigations, homework or projects. Some students will be challenged at the knowledge and comprehension levels, while others will be challenged by questions that require analysis and interpretation.

A differentiation strategy here is to use student readiness as the basis of the kinds of questions you ask.

Once you've determined the readiness level, develop sets of questions for activities, class discussion and homework at the varying levels of challenge and difficulty.

Examples of Levels of Difficulty

Knowledge – Identification and recall of information

Example – Who, what, when, where, how?

Comprehension – Organization and selection of facts and ideas

Example – What is the main idea?

Application – Use of facts, rules and principles

Example – How is ____ related to ____?

Analysis – Separation of the whole into component parts

Example – Outline/diagram/web

Synthesis – Combination of ideas to form a new whole

Example – What would you predict/infer from _____?

Evaluation – Development of opinions, judgments, or decisions

Example – Do you agree with _____?

Be sure that the questions require all students to focus on the same essential questions, concepts or skills and that they challenge each student at his instructional level. Regardless of the level, grade students equitably. Don't give students lower grades because they are working on lower-level questions.

When assessment reveals that the student is ready to go to a different level, be prepared to change the level of questions you give to a student. Adjusting questions in this way provides opportunities for success for all students and motivates them to do more.

Product Choices

One of the keys to a differentiated classroom is that all students are regularly offered choices to demonstrate what they have learned. Students naturally will make choices based on what is compatible with their individual learner profiles.

A well-designed product choice allows varied means of expression and alternative procedures, and provides varying degrees of difficulty, types of evaluation and scoring.

When designing a lesson that gives students choices, provide a list of two or three different products—too many choices can be overwhelming and confusing to students. Base the types of products for a particular assignment on a pre-assessment of learning styles, interests and learning preferences of the students in the class. Give choices that will reach the most number of students.