

Keeping Current

Research-Based Ideas for Teachers from the Editors of *Better Teaching*®

Differentiated Instruction

Unlike one-size-fits-all instruction where all students are expected to learn the same material in the same way, differentiated instruction provides options. Teachers use an array of instructional strategies, including multiple texts and supplementary materials, interest centers, independent learning contracts, group investigations, assignments with varying levels of complexity or guidelines for evaluating student work along a range of abilities.

There is no recipe for differentiation. Rather, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that focuses on the individual needs of individual learners. However, some broad principles can be applied in all differentiated classrooms:

- **Assessment is ongoing** and linked clearly to instruction.
- **All students are working** on worthwhile and valuable learning tasks.
- **There is flexible grouping.**

Depending on what they are doing, students work with others who are at the same level, in mixed groups, with students who have the same interests or learning styles, etc.

Getting started

The most important thing to remember when moving toward differentiated instruction is to think small. Remember that you are not adding things to your curriculum. You are making fundamental changes in the way you teach.

Elementary school teachers might

begin in language arts or social studies. Subject area teachers might begin with an objective from a favorite unit. The bottom line is that you need to feel comfortable with and competent in the content with which you are working.

Technology

Make the most of technology when planning different learning activities for your students. Technology provides some excellent tools and resources, many of which are free. There are a number of Web sites (www.math.com, for example) where students can practice required skills. Students can create PowerPoint® presentations, HyperStudio® stacks or Word documents as they build knowledge or demonstrate what they have learned.

Think differently

The move toward differentiated instruction begins with a different way of thinking about teaching. It means developing a range of instructional strategies that respond to the mix of students in your classroom. Rather than asking yourself, “What am I going to do in class tomorrow?” consider the following:

- **What do I expect** my struggling learners to know and be able to do tomorrow?

- **What do I expect** my most advanced learners to know and be able to do?
- **What do I expect** my typical learners to know and be able to do?

Planning

Here are some questions to use as a guide when planning for differentiated instruction:



1. **Do you know what you want** your students to do? What facts will they learn? What principles and ideas will they understand? What will they be able to do as a result of the learning experience?
2. **Have you selected** a variety of resources as you decide on the content? Have you planned for a variety of support systems (reading buddies, direct instruction, digests, recordings, etc.) and varied pacing?
3. **Have you planned** for pre-assessment of student readiness so you can prepare appropriate content and learning activities?
4. **Do the activities** you have planned call for high-level thinking? Will your students find them interesting? Do they address students' various readiness levels? Do they address various modes of learning? Is each focused on one, or a very few, key concepts? Do you have a plan for assessing activity outcomes? Do you have a plan for bringing closure to the tasks?

Concept-based teaching

It's necessary to have a basis from which to work before you can begin to differentiate instruction. If instruction is based on facts, the only way to differentiate is to give students either more facts or fewer facts.

If instruction is based on concepts, however, there are many ways to help students learn. Some students may need a concrete approach while others do better with a more abstract or complex approach.

Strategies

Following are some of the many strategies that can be used to differentiate instruction:

- **Adjusting questions**—discussion, test and homework questions that are based on the varied readiness levels, interests and learning profiles of your students.
- **Agenda**—a personalized list of tasks that a student must complete in a specified time.
- **Flexible grouping**—students join different groups or work alone based on the match of the task with their individual strengths and needs.
- **Independent study**—student and teacher identify an area of interest, a method of investigation and the type of product the student will develop as a result of the independent work.
- **Problem-based learning**—a strategy that places students in the role of active problem solvers.

- **Learning centers**—stations or collections of materials that students can use to explore topics or practice skills.
- **Literature circles**—student-led discussion groups that allow students to share with other students who have done the same reading.
- **Tiered assignment**—an assignment that includes tasks and/or resource materials of varied levels of complexity.
- **WebQuests**—teacher-designed Internet lessons that involve using specified and relevant Internet links as students use research and problem solving skills as they find information, draw conclusions and develop a product.

Keep parents informed

When parents hear about any change in how a classroom will operate, they naturally ask one question: How will this affect my child?

Differentiated instruction is designed to meet the needs of all children. As you inform parents about differentiated instruction in your classroom, you can and should invite them to work with you.

Here are some ways teachers can help parents feel more at home in a differentiated classroom:

- **Let parents know** that your goal is to help each student make progress in all areas. Parent input and involvement will make it easier to do that.
- **Talk frankly with parents** about how differentiated instruction can help their child develop other qualities such as independence and self-discipline. Ask for their help as you work to promote those character traits.

- **Work with parents** to develop goals for their child's learning. When parents clearly understand where you're going, they will worry less about how you plan to get there.
- **Let parents know** that students will learn how to evaluate their own work in your classroom. Encourage family conversations about what is going on in class.
- **Let parents know** how you plan to measure their child's progress. In a differentiated classroom, regular assessment is essential for planning.
- **Be sensitive to the concerns** of parents of advanced learners. These parents often worry that their child may simply mark time and be asked to tutor other youngsters. Show parents how you plan to challenge their child during the year.

Assessment

Ongoing assessment is an essential element of differentiated instruction. Before beginning a unit, conduct a pre-assessment (oral questioning, written journal prompts, objective tests, webbing, etc.) to find out what your students already know.

During the lesson, ask students to rate themselves on their degree of understanding. Some students may be ready to build on the concept, some may need reinforcement and some may need more intensive or explicit instruction.