The Access Center
Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8

Strategies for Differentiating Instruction

Differentiation is a process through which teachers enhance learning by matching student characteristics to instruction and assessment. Differentiation allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes that are tailored to students' needs. In a differentiated classroom, variance occurs in the way in which students gain access to the content being taught (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003).

Teachers can differentiate content, process, and/or product for students (Tomlinson, 1997). Differentiation of content refers to a change in the material being learned by the student. For example, if the classroom objective is for all students to write persuasive paragraphs, some of the students may be learning to use a topic sentence and supporting details, while others may be learning to use outside sources to defend their viewpoint. Differentiation of process refers to the way in which the student accesses material. One student may explore a learning center while another student collects information from the web. Differentiation of product refers to the way in which the student shows what he or she has learned. For example, to demonstrate understanding of the plot of a story, one student may create a skit, while another student writes a book report.

When teachers differentiate, they do so in response to students' readiness, interest, and/or learning profile. Readiness refers to the skill level and background knowledge of the child. Teachers use diagnostic assessments to determine students' readiness. Interest refers to topics that the student may want to explore or that will motivate the student. Teachers can ask students about their outside interests and even include students in the unit-planning process. Finally, the student's learning profile includes learning style (for example, is the student a visual, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic learner), grouping preferences (for example, does the student work best individually, with a partner, or in a large group), and environmental preferences (for example, does the student need lots of space or a quiet area to work). When a teacher differentiates, all of these factors can be taken into account individually or in combination (Tomlinson, 1997).

The table in this document provides descriptions of eight differentiation strategies, ways in which the strategies are primarily used to differentiate instruction, and guidelines for their use. Teachers should select differentiation strategies based on the curriculum taught and the needs of students in their classrooms.

Differentiation Strategy[1]	Primary Use	Description of Strategy	Things to Consider
Tiered Assignments and Products	Readiness	Assignments and products are designed to instruct and assess students on essential skills that are provided at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. The curricular content and objective(s) are the same, but the process and/or product are varied according to the student's level of readiness. For example, students with moderate understanding about a topic are asked to write an article. Students with a more advanced understanding are asked to prepare a debate.	• Focus task on a key concept • Use a variety of resource materials at different levels of complexity and associated with different learning modalities • Adjust task by complexity, abstractness, number of steps, concreteness, and independence to ensure challenge and not frustration
Compacting	Readiness	Compacting is the process of eliminating teaching or student practice due to previous mastery of learning objectives. Compacting involves a three step process: 1. assess the student to determine his/her level of knowledge on the material to be studied and determine what he/she still needs to master 2. create plans for what the student needs to know, and excuse the student from studying what he/she already knows	• Thoroughly pre-assess the learner's knowledge and document findings • Explain the process and its benefits to the student • Create written plans and timelines for study • Allow student choice in enrichment or accelerated study

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[1] This chart was adapted from *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Tomlinson, 1999).

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		3. create plans for freed-up time to be spent in enriched or accelerated study For example, a third grade class is learning to identify the parts of fractions. Diagnostics indicated that two students already know the parts of fractions. These students are excused from completing the identifying activities, and are taught to add and subtract fractions.	
Independent Study	Interest	The student and teacher identify topics of interest to the student. Together they plan a method of investigating the topic and decide upon the outcome of the independent study. The result of the project will be based on the needs of the student and the curricular content. Guided by the teacher, the student completes his or her own research on the topic and develops a product to share with classmates. For example, in a unit on ocean life, a student indicates that she wants to learn more about sharks. With the teacher's guidance she develops research questions, collects information, and presents an oral report to the class about the feeding patterns of great white sharks.	• Base the project on student interest • Provide guidance and structure to ensure high standards of investigation and product • Use timelines to help student stay on track and prevent procrastination • Use process logs or expert journals to document the process • Establish clear criteria for success

Differentiation Strategy	Primary Use	Description of Strategy	Things to Consider
Interest Centers or Interest Groups	Interest, Readiness	Interest centers (usually used with younger students) and interest groups (usually used with older learners) are set up so that learning experiences are directed toward a specific learner interest. They allow students to choose a topic and can be motivating to students. If they are used as enrichment, they can allow the study of topics beyond the general curriculum. Groups address student readiness when they are differentiated by level of complexity and independence required. For example, in a unit about the Civil War, students can choose to work in groups on one of four topics: free labor vs. slave labor, a biography of Robert E. Lee, women's role in Reconstruction, or how trade was impacted.	• Incorporate student interest • Encourage students to help create tasks and define products • Adjust for student readiness • Establish clear criteria for success • Adjust blocks of work time based on student readiness
Flexible Grouping	Interest, Readiness, Learning Profile	Students work as part of many different groups depending on the task and/or content. Sometimes students are placed in groups based on readiness, other times based on interest and/or learning profile. Groups can either be assigned by the teacher or chosen by the students. Students can be assigned purposefully to a group or assigned randomly. This strategy allows students to work with a wide variety of peers and keeps them from being labeled as advanced or struggling. For example, in a reading class, the teacher may assign groups based on readiness for phonics instruction, but allow students to choose their own groups for book reports, based on the book topic.	• Ensure that all students have the opportunity to work with other students who are similar and dissimilar from themselves in terms of interest, readiness, and learning profile • Alternate purposeful assignment of groups with random assignment or student selection • Ensure that all students have been given the skills to work collaboratively • Provide clear guidelines for group functioning that are taught in advance of group work and consistently reinforced

Differentiation Strategy	Primary Use	Description of Strategy	Things to Consider
Multiple Levels of Questions	Readiness, Learning Profiles	Teachers adjust the types of questions and the ways in which they are presented based on what is needed to advance problem-solving skills and responses. This strategy ensures that all students will be accountable for information and thinking at a high level and that all students will be challenged. Finally, all students benefit from this strategy because all can learn from a wide range of questions and responses. For example, the teacher prepares a list of questions about a topic that the whole class is studying. During a discussion, the teacher asks initial questions to specific students, based on readiness. All students are encouraged to ask and answer follow-up questions.	• Use wait time before taking student answers • Adjust the complexity, abstractness, type of response necessary, and connections required between topics based on readiness and learning profile • Encourage students to build upon their own answers and the answers of other students • If appropriate, give students a chance to talk to partners or write down their answers before responding
Learning Contracts	Readiness, Learning Profiles	Learning contracts begin with an agreement between the teacher and the student. The teacher specifies the necessary skills expected to be learned by the student and required components of the assignment, while the student identifies methods for completing the tasks. This strategy allows students to work at an appropriate pace and can target learning styles. Further, it helps students work independently, learn planning skills, and eliminate unnecessary skill practice. For example, a student completes a learning contract for a science project. He indicates that he will research the topic of mitosis, create a visual model to share with the class, and write a report. The learning contract indicates the dates by which each step of the project will be completed.	• Match skills to the readiness of the learner • Allow student choice in the way in which material is accessed and products are developed • Provide the contract in writing, with a clear timeline and expectations • Include both skill- and content-based learning in the contract

Differentiation Strategy	Primary Use	Description of Strategy	Things to Consider
Choice Boards	Readiness, Interest, Learning Profiles	Choice boards are organizers that contain a variety of activities. Students can choose one or several activities to complete as they learn a skill or develop a product. Choice boards can be organized so that students are required to choose options that focus on several different skills. For example, after students read *Romeo and Juliet*, students are given a choice board that contains a list of possible products for each of the following learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. Students must complete two products from the board, and must choose these products from two different learning styles.	• Include choices that reflect a range of interests and learning styles • Guide students in the choice of activities so that they are challenged, but not frustrated • Provide clear instruction in the use of choice boards

References

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