

NEWSLETTER

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A Teacher's Guide to **DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION**

Does effectively teaching 30 students in one classroom require teachers to develop 30 lessons, one tailor-made for each student? Or should teachers “aim for the middle” and hope to reach most students in a given lesson? The answer is not simple.

While most would agree it is impractical to try to individualize every lesson for every child, research has shown that teaching to the middle is ineffective. It ignores the needs of advanced students, often leaving them unchallenged and bored, while it intimidates and confuses lower functioning learners. Best practice suggests an alternative: differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is an approach that assumes there is a diversity of learners in every classroom and that all of those learners can be reached if a variety of methods and activities are used. Carol Tomlinson (2000), a noted expert on differentiation, points out that research has proven that students are more successful when they are taught based on their own readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.

This month's newsletter examines the characteristics of differentiation and offers suggestions for how teachers can use it to improve student achievement.

What Is Differentiation?

Simply stated, differentiation is modified instruction that helps students with diverse academic needs and learning styles master the same challenging academic content.

Although it might seem like a daunting task, designing and applying a variety of strategies within one classroom can be done at a variety of levels. Teachers can differentiate instruction with an individual student, within a small group, or with a whole class. Differentiating does *not* mean providing separate, unrelated activities for each student but does mean providing interrelated activities that are based on student needs for the purpose of ensuring that all students come to a similar grasp of a skill or idea (Good, 2006).

How to Start

Four planning steps set the stage for effective differentiated instruction. First, teachers must have a thorough understanding of the academic content or skill they want their students to learn. Second, they must determine how much their students already know—and what they do not know—about that content. Then they must decide which instructional methods and materials will most successfully address those needs and, finally, design ways to adequately assess student mastery of what is taught.

Teachers who effectively reach all of their students stay focused on teaching challenging academic content but vary the materials and strategies they use.

Taking stock of student knowledge and understanding is a key first component of successful differentiation. While end-of-year tests provide some information that can help differentiate instruction, regularly used, classroom-based assessments are much more effective in achieving this purpose. These assessments help teachers accurately measure their students' academic strengths, weaknesses, and interests on a day-to-day basis and provide a roadmap for next steps in instruction. An initial skills assessment can be conducted at the beginning of the school year, but teachers also should gauge student knowledge and needs before introducing a new concept, starting a new unit, or when developing lessons to review or expand on topics already covered. These assessments can be formal, such as diagnostic tests that evaluate specific skill levels, individual student performance notebooks in which teachers keep track of objectives or skills the student has or has not mastered, or student surveys and questionnaires that determine interests and preferences. But skills assessments also can be informal. Teachers can review existing student work such as writing samples or test results, conduct conferences with students, or observe them to get a sense of their current skill level. (See The Center's December 2006 newsletter, *Using Classroom Assessment to Improve Teaching*, at www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Dec06.pdf for more information.) Formal or informal, the key to the successful use of these assessments is keeping track of the findings and using them to design instructional strategies tailored for the individual student. Figure 1, created by differentiation expert Tracy Hall, illustrates the process of planning and implementing differentiated instruction.

Vary Materials

Author Joyce Van Tassel-Baska (2003) suggests that the selection of materials for use in the classroom is a crucial next step to effective differentiated instruction. For instance, students in a third-grade class might be learning how to determine main ideas as a part of the language arts curriculum. A variety of materials can be used to support instruction in that concept, including the following:

- Nonfiction and fiction, written at a variety of reading levels. For struggling readers, the text

might be accompanied by a spoken version. The use of leveled materials challenges accomplished readers but does not intimidate students who are less skilled.

- Pictures that invite students to identify the visual "main idea."
- Video clips.
- Newspaper or magazine articles that reflect student interests or cultural backgrounds.

The use of varied materials will encourage these students to understand the concept of "main idea" not only within language arts but in other settings as well.

Vary Process

When teachers differentiate instruction, they vary not only the materials students use but also the way students interact with them. Varying instructional activities allows all students to learn the same concepts and skills with varied levels of "support, challenge, or complexity" (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 2). And differentiating does not mean teaching students one by one. Good (2006) suggests that teachers plan "several activity options, not one for each student. Instead of generating isolated tasks, on any given day the teacher may work with the whole class, small groups, individual students, or a combination of all three" (p. 14). When introducing new content, for example, the teacher might address all students but make use of graphs, pictures, or artifacts in addition to lecturing. At another time, teachers might ask most students to work in pairs or independently while they assist a small group of students, using questioning that encourages critical thinking or assesses the students' level of understanding. For literature instruction, small groups can be arranged by achievement level, but they also can be grouped by a common interest in the subject matter even if materials at varying reading levels are used (Willis & Mann, 2000). Teachers can differentiate even in their one-to-one work with students, teaching the same concept but using an interview with one student and flashcards with another. As always, the keys to choosing the "right" strategies are capitalizing on student strengths and possessing a clear understanding of students' current academic needs.

Vary Assessment

Teachers who effectively reach all of their students stay focused on teaching challenging academic content but vary the materials and strategies they use. They also give students options when it comes to demonstrating their mastery of that content, and these options allow for another form of differentiation. Teachers might vary the length of time a student has to complete a task or allow a written essay rather than an oral presentation. Making use of rubrics—guides that identify the criteria for demonstrating mastery of assigned work—can empower students to choose how they will show what they know and also provide them with a way to assess the quality of their own work. Willis and Mann provide concrete examples of how to differentiate the means by which students demonstrate mastery, from creating a newsletter in which students write stories on a topic of their choice to staging a mock trial to demonstrate their understanding of the concept “beyond reasonable doubt.”

Conclusion

Differentiating instruction alone will not automatically improve student performance. Tomlinson (2000) points out that efforts to differentiate are most successful when they are combined with the use of a high-quality curriculum, research-based instructional strategies, well-designed activities that address the needs and interests of students, active learning, and student satisfaction with the lesson.

Tomlinson (1999) also notes that moving from traditional instruction to this approach takes time and recommends that teachers introduce differentiation strategies gradually. Schools and districts can support teachers in learning these new skills by designing professional development activities that “provide clear models for...differentiated instruction in action” (p. 115). The consistent, effective use of differentiated instruction also requires considerable amounts of practice and feedback. To increase their repertoire of skills, general education teachers also

Figure 1. Process of Planning and Implementing Differentiated Instruction

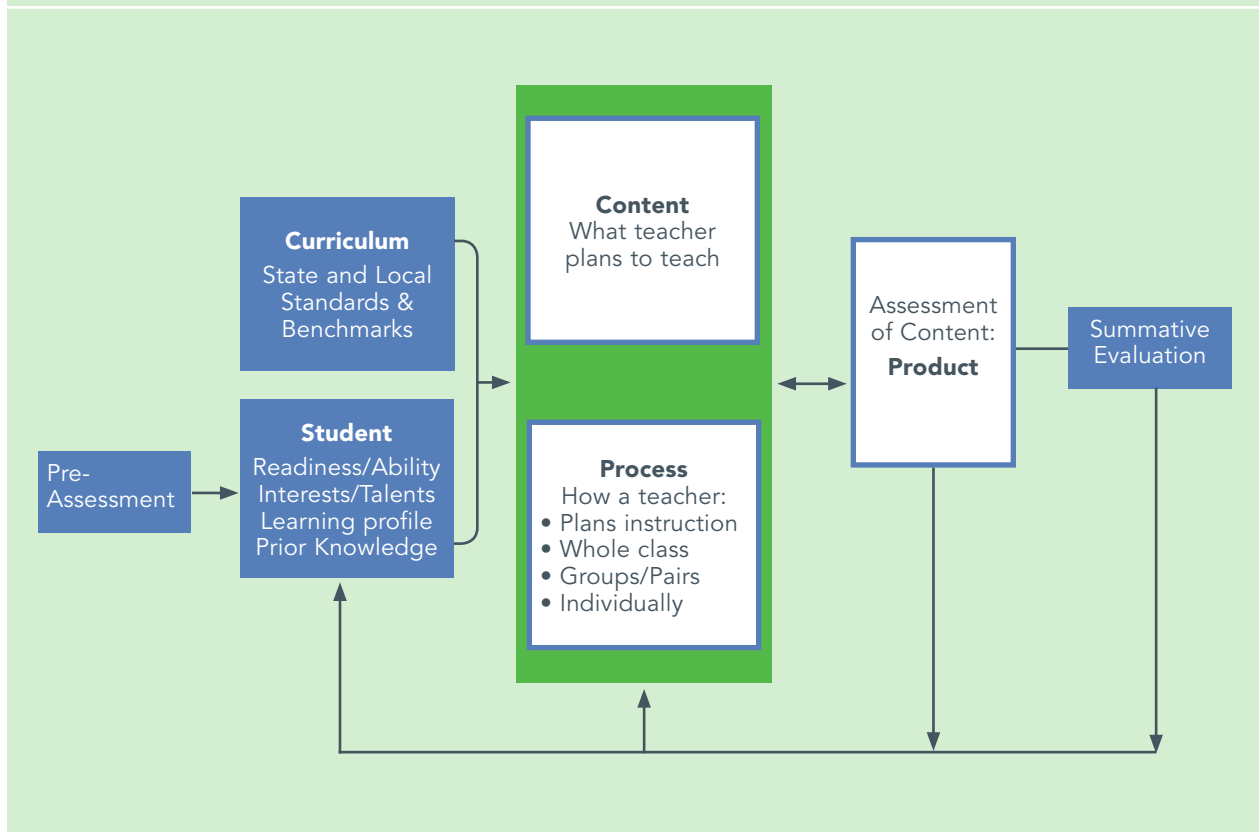


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can consult with colleagues with specialized training in differentiation, such as special education teachers and teachers of gifted students.

Keck and Kinney assert that once teachers learn the needs of their students and incorporate strategies to meet those needs into their instruction, differentiation ensures “equity in the learning process” (2005, p. 15). Although it requires attention, skill, and commitment to its use, differentiated instruction is a practical and attainable method of facilitating learning and academic growth in all students.

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