**What Is Differentiated Instruction?**

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Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Whether teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping makes this a successful approach to instruction.

At its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction.

**Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile**:

* ***Content*** – what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information;
* ***Process*** – activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content;
* ***Products*** – culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; and
* ***Learning environment*** – the way the classroom works and feels.

**Content**

Examples of differentiating content:

1. Using reading materials at varying readability levels;
2. Putting text materials on tape;
3. Using spelling or vocabulary lists at readiness levels of students;
4. Presenting ideas through both auditory and visual means;
5. Using reading buddies; and
6. Meeting with small groups to re-teach an idea or skill for struggling learners, or to extend the thinking or skills of advanced learners.

**Process**

Examples of differentiating process:

1. Using tiered activities through which all learners work with the same important understandings and skills, but proceed with different levels of support, challenge, or complexity;
2. Providing interest centers that encourage students to explore subsets of the class topic of particular interest to them;
3. Developing personal agendas (task lists written by the teacher and containing both in-common work for the whole class and work that addresses individual needs of learners) to be completed either during specified agenda time or as students complete other work early;
4. Offering manipulatives or other hands-on supports for students who need them; and
5. Varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task in order to provide additional support for a struggling learner or to encourage an advanced learner to pursue a topic in greater depth.

**Products**

Examples of differentiating products:

1. Giving students options of how to express required learning (e.g., create a puppet show, write a letter, or develop a mural with labels);
2. Using rubrics that match and extend students' varied skills levels;
3. Allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their products; and
4. Encouraging students to create their own product assignments as long as the assignments contain required elements.

**Learning environment**

Examples of differentiating learning environment:

1. Making sure there are places in the room to work quietly and without distraction, as well as places that invite student collaboration;
2. Providing materials that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings;
3. Setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs;
4. Developing routines that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately; and
5. Helping students understand that some learners need to move around to learn, while others do better sitting quietly (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999; Winebrenner, 1992, 1996).

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**Differentiation is…**

* Having high expectations for all students
* Adjustment of the core content
* Assigning activities geared to different learning styles, interests, and levels of thinking
* Providing students with choices about what and how they learn
* Flexible because teachers move students in and out of groups based upon students' instructional needs
* Acknowledgment of individual needs
* Articulated, high level goals reflecting continuous progress
* Assessment to determine student growth and new needs
* Adjustment of curriculum by complexity, breadth, and rate
* Educational experiences which extend, replace, or supplement standard curriculum

**Differentiation is not…**

* Individual learning plans for each student
* More problems, questions, or assignments
* Get it on your own
* Recreational reading
* Independent reading without curriculum connections
* Free time to draw or practice your talent
* Cooperative learning groups where the gifted kid gets to be the leader
* Activities that all students will be able to do
* Interest centers unless linked to core content and at a complex level