

Differentiated Instruction

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To differentiate instruction, teachers must acknowledge students' differences in background knowledge, current reading, writing, and English language skills, learning styles and preferences, interests, and needs, and they must react accordingly. There are a number of general guidelines for differentiating instruction, including:

Link assessment with instruction. Assessments should occur before, during, and after instruction to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with what students do and do not know.

Clarify key concepts and generalizations. Students need to know what is essential and how this information can be used in their future learning.

Emphasize critical and creative thinking. The content, process, and products used or assigned in the classroom should require that students think about what they are learning.

Include teacher- and student-selected tasks. A differentiated classroom includes both teacher- and student-selected activities and tasks. At some points in the lesson, the teacher must provide instruction and assign learning activities. In other parts of the lesson, students should be provided choices in how they engage with the content.

Plan for flexible grouping patterns Differentiated classrooms are notable in the use of many types of grouping patterns. In particular, students should experience:

- whole group instruction to introduce material and model strategies;
- small group work for collaborative learning with peers. Small groups are often made up of four to six students at a time, either heterogeneous or based on identified needs.
- individualized learning for independent work and teacher-directed instruction.

Tips for Instruction

The following tips for instruction can support your efforts to help all students reach their maximum potential.

- Use interest inventories to discover students' individual differences.
- Be sensitive to language differences in the classroom. Accept that all students do not yet speak standard English, as in the case of students who speak African American vernacular English.

- Be a model for respecting others. Your behavior will set the classroom tone.
- Provide a variety of instructional activities to expand opportunities for success.
- Establish measurable objectives and decide how you can best help students who meet them.
- Celebrate successes, and make note of and praise “work in progress.”
- Keep it simple. Avoid overwhelming students with too many goals at one time.
- Assign cooperative group projects that challenge all students to contribute to solving a problem or creating a product.

Supporting Individual Students

The vast majority of students will thrive in a classroom based on differentiated instruction. However, wise teachers recognize that no single option will work for all students and that there may be students who require unique systems of support to be successful.

How do I reach students with learning disabilities?

- Provide support and structure. Clearly specify rules, assignments, and responsibilities.
- Practice skills frequently. Use games and drills to help maintain student interest.
- Incorporate many modalities into the learning process. Provide opportunities to say, hear, write, read, and act out important concepts and information.
- Link new skills and concepts to those already mastered.
- If possible, allow students to record answers on audiotape.
- Allow extra time to complete assessments and assignments.
- Let students demonstrate proficiency with alternative presentations, including oral reports, role plays, art projects, and musical presentations.
- Provide outlines, notes, or tape recordings of lecture material.
- Pair students with peer helpers, and provide class time for pair interaction.

How do I address language differences in the classroom?

- Students’ ability to speak standard English does not reflect their academic abilities. Recognize that students might exhibit a range of language differences. Some come from homes where English is not their primary language, English Language Learner. Others speak other forms of English, such as African American vernacular English. Your goal is to move all students toward using and understanding standard English for academic tasks.
- Try to incorporate the students’ cultural experience into your instruction. The help of a bilingual aide may be effective.
- Avoid any references in your instruction that could be construed as cultural stereotypes.

- Preteach important vocabulary and concepts.
- Encourage students to preview text before they begin reading, noting headings.
- Remind students not to ignore graphic organizers, photographs, and maps since there is much information in these visuals.
- Use artifacts and photographs whenever possible to build background knowledge and understanding. An example of this would be coins in a foreign currency or a raw cotton ball to reinforce its importance in history.

How do I reach gifted students?

- Make arrangements for students to take selected subjects early and to work on independent projects.
- Ask “what if” questions to develop high-level thinking skills. Establish an environment safe for risk taking in your classroom.
- Emphasize concepts, theories, ideas, relationships, and generalizations about the content.
- Promote interest in the past by inviting students to make connections to the present.
- Let students express themselves in alternate ways such as creative writing, acting, debates, simulations, drawing, or music.
- Provide students with a catalog of helpful resources, listing such things as agencies that provide free and inexpensive materials, appropriate community services and programs, and community experts who might be called upon to speak to your students.
- Assign extension projects that allow students to solve real-life problems related to their communities.

Research

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