

Why Differentiate Instruction?

A single seventh grade English language class at your College is likely to include students who can read and comprehend as well as most college learners; students who can barely decode words, comprehend meaning, or apply basic information; and students who fall somewhere between these extremes. There are students whose primary interests lie in science, sports, music, or a dozen other fields. There are students who learn best by working alone and those who are most successful working in groups. Further, the learning profiles of young adolescents often change rapidly as they develop. There simply is no single learning template for the general school class. If our school students differ in readiness, interest, and learning profiles, a one – size – fits - all model of instruction makes little sense. Rather, differentiated instruction seems a better solution for meeting the academic diversity that typifies the students of our multicultural school.

The absence of differentiation in a Christian school class shows that the teacher is assuming that all students' needs are the same, and all students learn in the same way at the same rate.

What does a differentiated lesson look like?

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In a differentiated class, the teacher uses

- (1)a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content,
- (2) a variety of sense - making activities or processes through which students can come to understand and "own" information and ideas
- (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned.

It is not appropriate to have more advanced learners do extra maths problems, extra book reports, or after completing their "regular" work be given extension assignments.

Asking them to do "the regular work, plus" inevitably seems punitive to them.

Did the master teacher Jesus teach all in the same formula way?

When we teach the same things to all students at the same time 1/3 already know it, 1/3 get it and 1/3 don't so 2/3 of them are wasting their time.

Scott Willis

Some characteristics shape teaching and learning in an effective differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 1995)

The differentiated classroom

1. Instruction is concept focused and principle driven. All students have the opportunity to explore and apply the key concepts of the subject being studied.

All students come to understand the key principles on which the study is based.

Such instruction enables struggling learners to grasp and use powerful ideas and, at the same time, encourages advanced learners to expand their understanding and application of the key concepts and principles. Such instruction stresses understanding or sense-making rather than retention and regurgitation of fragmented bits of information

2. On - going assessment of student readiness and growth are built into the curriculum. Teachers do not assume that all students need a given task or segment of study, but continuously assess student readiness, providing support when students need additional instruction and guidance, and extending student exploration when indications are that a student or group of students is ready to move ahead.

3. Flexible grouping is consistently used. In a differentiated class, students work in many patterns. Sometimes they work alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups. Sometimes tasks are readiness - based, sometimes interest - based, sometimes constructed to match learning style, and sometimes a combination of readiness, interest, and learning style. In a differentiated classroom, whole - group instruction may also be used for introducing new ideas, when planning, and for sharing learning outcomes.

Strategies for Managing a Differentiated Classroom

Among instructional strategies that can help teachers manage differentiation and help students find a good learning "fit" are the following:

- use of multiple texts and supplementary materials;
- use of computer programs;
- interest centres that are built on the understanding that students learn differently
- learning contracts;
- compacting (pre test screens out those who already know/are skilled)
- tasks and products designed with a multiple intelligence orientation
- independent learning contracts with a variety of assessment options to demonstrate that the key learning /skill mastery is achieved
- group investigation, individual learning and flexible grouping
- product criteria negotiated jointly by student and teacher;
- all students participate in "respectful" work so that no special needs student is just doing busy work
- assessment is an ongoing diagnostic activity that guides instruction

“NORMAL” IS ONLY A SETTING ON A WASHING MACHINE

From the writings of Carol Tomlinson