

Differentiated Instruction – What it is & What it is not

Prepared by Katie Taylor, Clover Park High School, and based on the article “Different Learners, Different Lessons” by Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Scholastic Instructor*, September 2002.

<i>What it is</i>	<i>What it is NOT</i>
<p>Differentiated Instruction is proactive. The teacher assumes that different learners have different needs and plans for this ahead of time.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT the “individualized instruction” of the 1970s. We cannot do something different for each of our 30+ students in each classroom – it is too exhausting! It does not assume a separate level for each learner.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction is more qualitative than quantitative. Simply adjusting the quantity of an assignment will generally be less effective than adjusting the nature of the assignment to match student needs.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT chaotic. It isn’t a free for all of students doing whatever they want. Instead, teachers manage and monitor many activities simultaneously. The classroom includes purposeful student movement and talking, not a disorderly or undisciplined atmosphere.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction is rooted in assessment. A teacher who understands the needs of students sees assessment as an opportunity to learn more about student learning and how to modify instruction to meet those needs. Assessment no longer happens at the end to see “who got it” but happens throughout the unit to inform the teacher about students’ developing readiness, comprehension and application.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT just another way to provide homogeneous grouping. It is not separating the class into thirds – advanced, middle and struggling. It is not segregating by putting all the “bluebirds” in one group together all the time. It the use of flexible grouping, where students may be in many different groups depending on the task and objective. Sometimes groups are formed by a common link, but most often they are groups that mix strengths and weaknesses of all students.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction provides multiple approaches to content, process and product. Teachers offer different approaches to what students learn, how they learn it and how they demonstrate what they’ve learned.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT “tailoring the same suit of clothes.” It is often more than just asking a few students to answer a more complex question in a discussion or to research and share more advanced information on a topic. While these are not “bad” strategies, they are often not enough to really differentiate instruction.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction is student centered. Classrooms operate on the premise that learning experiences are most effective when they are engaging, relevant and interesting, recognizing that students will not always find the same avenues to learning equally engaging, relevant or interesting. Additionally, teachers in a student-centered classroom understand the need to help students take increasing responsibility for their own growth.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT teaching to the lowest common denominator. Though the temptation is to slow down to not leave the struggling learners behind, it does not serve the interest of our advanced learners or our struggling learners to do this. Differentiated instruction is offering powerful teaching and learning opportunities for all students – not just for some.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction is a blend of whole-class, group, and individual instruction. Method of instruction and organization of an activity is predicated upon what the most effective and efficient way to learn the information might be for students, and arranging the class activities accordingly.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT adding extra work to keep advanced students busy. Adding work is only adding to the workload – the way this challenges an advanced learner is that it challenges their time management skills. It may be assigning advanced learners a more complex task to begin with so that they will finish in about the same time as the other students.</p>
<p>Differentiated instruction is organic. Students and teachers learn together. Teachers continually make adjustments to plans based on the dynamic in the classroom.</p>	<p>Differentiated instruction is NOT a strategy that is “done.” Teachers see that differentiated instruction is not something that is done when there is extra time or that has one application in one aspect of teaching – it is a philosophy about teaching and learning that permeates every aspect of the classroom.</p>

Three questions to consider when differentiating curriculum and instruction:

- What is the teacher differentiating?
- How is he or she differentiating?
- Why is he or she differentiating?

Differentiate What refers to the curricular element the teacher has modified in response to various learner needs (content, process, product or learning environment).

Differentiate How refers to the student trait to which the differentiation responds (readiness, interest, or learning profile).

Differentiate Why addresses the teacher’s reason for modifying the learning experiences (access to learning, motivation to learn, and efficiency of learning).

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	DIFFERENTIATED CLASSROOM
Student differences are masked or acted upon when problematic	Student differences are studied as basis for planning
Assessment is most common at the end of learning to see “who got it”	Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic
A relatively narrow sense of intelligence prevails	Focus on multiple forms of intelligence is evident
A single definition of excellence exists	Excellence is defined by individual growth from a starting point
Student interest is infrequently tapped	Students are guided in making interest-based choices
Whole-class instruction dominates	Many instructional arrangements are used
Coverage of texts and curriculum drives instruction	Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction

In differentiated classrooms, teachers ensure that a student competes against himself as he grows and develops, more than he competes against other student.

- Carol Ann Tomlinson