Differentiated Instruction: Ten Common Questions and Answers
by Carolyn Chapman and Rita King

Introduction

Differentiated instruction provides a strategic guide to lead students to their potential. Whether you are a beginner or an expert in your professional journey with differentiation, Carolyn Chapman and Rita King will extend your knowledge of the philosophy and strategies. The co-authors have several books on differentiation. They serve as international consultants and trainers for state departments, school districts, teachers and organizations to assist educators in meeting individual student needs.

In the following article, Carolyn and Rita respond to questions they are frequently asked about differentiated instruction. If you are setting up a differentiated classroom, you can adapt the techniques and strategies. If you are an expert in using differentiated instruction, add the ideas and activities to your treasure trove of instructional tools.

1. What is differentiated instruction?

Differentiated instruction is based on assessment data, strategic planning, and interventions to meet the needs of every student. Each time a lesson or activity is customized to teach or assist an individual who is working independently or in a small group, the learner benefits from the approach. Differentiation includes using tapping into a student’s interest area, presenting challenging activities, providing choices and creating moments of wonder and discovery.

Use the following components of instruction to design and tailor instruction before, during or after learning to reach or teach a student.

Differentiating Content

Select age-appropriate, high interest instructional resources, including multi-leveled materials. Provide a variety of informational texts and supplementary reading materials in different genres to convey content. Use textbooks as resources and then select the most effective materials to teach the information.

Differentiating Assessment Tools

Differentiated Assessment occurs before, during and after learning using formal and informal tools. The collected data is analyzed to identify student needs and the results to keep the learner on track in his or her academic excursions.

Design or select assessment tools for the learner opportunities to show what he or she knows about the targeted skill, concept or topic. Examples of performance tasks include projects, exhibits and demonstrations with manipulatives.

Differentiating Instructional Strategies
Personalized strategies and activities provide the best approach for the individual to work with and learn information. Plan instruction that is based on the student’s knowledge base, learning styles, modalities, intelligences, and interests. For example, you may ask a learner to use the information in an illustration, a role-play or to put the details to a beat in a jingle, rap or cheer. Select a variety of ways for the individual to learn. Remember, you may have to move out of your instructional comfort zone to teach the way a student learns.

Many differentiated models are available as blueprints for planning. The guides can be adapted to tailor instruction for the individual’s unique needs. To effectively differentiate demonstrate your belief that all students can learn. Identify students who lack prior knowledge, those who are ready for grade level material and those who are ready to extend and enrich their knowledge.

Use the assessment data to guide your selection of differentiated instructional strategies. Select the most appropriate resources, strategies and activities for each learner. To accomplish this, you must know the grade level standards, content information, materials, required skills and concepts for the subject area and grade level. It is equally important to know the students and use differentiated interventions.

2. **How does a differentiated classroom look?**

A first time visitor observing a differentiated lesson may see individuals and small groups working at desks, tables, stations and on floor spaces. Each student is involved in an engaging activity. Each task is designed on the appropriate level to fill in learning gaps, to work with grade level information or skills or to extend and enrich learning. The teacher is not center stage but is a learning facilitator who encourages, provides instruction, guides questioning and gives advice.

The lesson can begin with total group instruction to share new information, basic knowledge. During captivating “lecturettes”, the teacher introduces skills, concepts or information using a variety of strategically designed instructional strategies. Learning altitude is controlled by the teacher’s attitude, so the instructor’s passion for the topic and energy is observable.

Students then move from the total group instruction to individual, partner or small group for guided practice. Each strategy is planned to target specific ways the students learn.

It is evident to students that the teacher knows the subject, understands them as individuals, and appreciates their age-level characteristics and interests. They respond to the teacher’s “withitness” as their interests, fads, learning strengths and humor are infused in lessons and interactions. They use personalized lessons and communications. Everyone is treated with respect.

Students have unique needs and the desire to learn, so the differentiated classroom is not boring. They want to expand their horizons and develop their skills and talents. They thrive on intriguing opportunities that create wonder and anticipation. The teacher maintains a positive, inviting place to instill the love of learning in each student. This is evident every day where the general atmosphere says, “You are welcome here and you will learn!”
In the differentiated classroom, the teacher personalizes instruction for extroverts and introverts, for the unmotivated and motivated. Use novelty to create anticipation and develop curiosity so students are always wondering what will happen next.

3. **How do you use the assessment data?**

Data gathered from on-going assessment guides differentiated instruction. Formal and informal assessment tools are used selectively before, during and after learning. Pre-assessment provides the data for strategic planning.

Analyze and interpret the assessment results to know the student. Use the information gathered to tailor assignments and activities for the learner.

Use the following statements to guide your application of assessment data.

- Identify the learner’s knowledge base and ability in relation to the upcoming skill, concept or topic. Use the results to diagnose specific learner needs.
- Maintain a variety of formal and informal assessment tools, to gather data. Add to your assessment toolbox to create a wide variety of tools to gather information. Continually add to the assessment treasure chest.
- Use an informal assessment tool when it provides the needed information.

4. **Do I need a different assignment for each learner to differentiate?**

No! There are many ways to differentiate. Giving a different or leveled assignment is one way to differentiate. Effective differentiation is based on a pre-assessment. The data targets the learner’s needs to use in planning, adjusting and revamping instruction.

One of the most complex tasks in the differentiated classroom is planning lessons for students with varying prior knowledge levels in relation to the skill or concept. Lessons are designed for students to receive self-directed, tailored lessons. Assessment data is analyzed to place students in appropriate groups. Leveled assignments are planned to meet the needs of students who are working below grade level, on grade level or beyond grade level.

Assignments are adjusted to address the student’s needs, knowledge base, and interests. The following scenarios illustrate how adjustable assignments can be used to differentiate instruction.

We recommend the following terms to identify the three most common learning levels:

- **Curriculum Fast-Forwarding:** Use this approach when the data reveals that a student(s) knows the information and will find the lesson to be boring or redundant. These learners need an alternative assignment to entice and challenge them. Assign a contract, agenda of selected activities, or a project to enrich and extend knowledge related to the current study.
- **Grade Level:** Select grade level resources and strategies when the gathered data identifies learners with the proper knowledge base and background for the upcoming lesson. These students are ready for the selected standard, concept or skill.
- **Curriculum Rewinding:** Make provisions in the plan to fill gaps in the students’ knowledge when they do not have an adequate background knowledge in relation to the skill or topic. They are not ready for the information. Use guided instruction, revamping and readjusting, as needed, with alternative ways of approaching the skill or concept.

Maintain fluid, flexible groups. For example, if a student does not understand a grade level concept when the lesson begins and later demonstrates deep understanding, move the learner to the higher, more appropriate fast-forwarding level. Use continuous assessment and monitoring of student understanding to maximize learning. This is a key to differentiation.

**5. What is flexible grouping and how is it used in a differentiated classroom?**

Flexible grouping places students in the most appropriate arrangement for learning. Students are monitored and moved for productive engagement. Use the following “TAPS” acronym to plan flexible groups.

- **T** = Total Group
- **A** = Alone
- **P** = Partner
- **S** = Small Group

Incorporate a nice blending of these ways to organize students for activities. This “TAPS” into individual needs to work independently and in groups. Keep the following statements in mind when planning flexible groups:

- If a group works well together socially, they will accomplish the assigned task.
- When possible, allow students to have a voice in choosing team members.
- Give clear and concise task directions. Students need to know how to carry out the job without assistance.

Form effective groups according to knowledge base, interest or ability. Use peer tutoring, cooperative teams or place students randomly. When it is appropriate, use multi-age and multi-ability groups so students learn from each other. Select the most effective learning scenario to match the student with the assigned activity. Use knowledge base groups are for instruction on a standard or skill.

**6. How can I use productive transition strategies to create an organized classroom?**

Differentiated classrooms engage students in various work areas before, during and after instruction. Develop a collection of various strategies to use in planning activities that require students to make smooth transitions from one task to another. Introduce the transition strategy with guidelines and expectations before implementing it. Adapt the following suggestions to create orderly transitions.

*Bell Ringer*

Use this strategy to jump-start a class or school day. Post an activity or assignment that immediately engages students when they enter the room or before the class begins.
Select an activity to bridge or reinforce a previous lesson, to present a challenging problem to solve or to hook learners on an upcoming topic, skill or concept.

_Sponge Activity_
A sponge activity is designed to productively absorb time. It does not relate to the current lesson, but is selected to enhance the students’ knowledge, skills, physical or emotional needs. Examples of a sponge activity include a stretch break, a song, a walk, a movement exercise, a game, a dance, or a sharing time to learn more about classmates or the teacher.

_Focus Activity_
A focus activity directs students to the upcoming lesson. It is always content related. It prepares, stimulates and excites the mind.

A focus activity can be designed for bridging yesterday’s learning to today’s lesson, to review before a test, to create mystery or excitement for an upcoming lesson or event, to develop a list or to assess learners. Use a focus activity to introduce a unit, topic or lesson with a mystery question, to make personal links to the new information through creative discussion, or to make visual connections with artifacts, props, costumes, poems or music.

_Anchor Activity_
An anchor activity is set up in the room to engage students when they complete their work. The activity meaningfully engages the learners, but it does not have to be unit or topic related. Some anchor activity examples include working on an ongoing project, using the computer for research, completing a puzzle, designing a bulletin board, working at a station, creating a class mural or developing an exhibit.

_Closure or Exit Activity_
Choose a closure or exit activity to end each class with a metacognitive, motivating experience so students yearn to return for the next session. Use a variety of activities such as reflective journal entries, sharing the lesson highlights with a partner or small group, adding a comment to a bulletin board, placing information gained on an exit note or using important facts in cheers and celebrations.

7. **How do I motivate the unmotivated learner?**

Some students are not excited about learning and often choose not to be active participants in the classroom. The off-task behaviors are troubling to teachers. Implement the following strategies to motivate learners:

- Communicate and build rapport.
- Find out as much academic and personal information as possible about individual students.
- Use the information to personalize assignments and tie the learner’s interests to instruction.
- Provide assignments that present a challenge.
• Give unexpected tasks such as enjoyable, leadership roles and responsibilities.
• Exhibit your passion and be genuine.
• Make each learner feel important and valued.
• Remember, students who like and respect you work harder to please you and meet your expectations.
• Reward effort and accomplishments.
• Celebrate and praise the learner for specific behaviors, accomplishments and success.
• Remember, success creates success!

8. How can I provide choice in activities and assignments?

Choice provides learners input in assignments creating a sense of belonging. They feel that their opinions are valued. Choice activities are motivational. Use the following ideas to provide quality choice activities.

Responding to learning

• Write a paragraph.
• Illustrate or draw it.
• Plot information on a graphic organizer

Solving a problem

• Write the steps in the process.
• Show it using a manipulative.
• Illustrate it.
• Create a mini poster using color-coding to identify each step.

Responding to a question

• Answer one of the three following questions.
• Select three questions from the chart to answer
• Pull a question from the jar.

Making a presentation

• Report
• Role Play
• Display
• Interview
• Use Power point
• Demonstrate

Learning a skill

• Illustrate it
• Write it
• Put it to a beat in a poem or chant
• Place it on a graphic organizer
• Color-code the steps
• Draw it on a mini poster

Identify practical, no cost places to provide choice in the classroom. Try one of these!

• Homework
• Activity choice from a list
• Center, station, or project assignments
• Questions on a test
• Partner selection
• Working alone, with a partner, or in a small group
• Task completion at a table, on the floor, at a desk or computer

9. What are some techniques I can use to know my students?

Knowing the learner is essential for planning differentiated instruction. Gain valuable information through informal assessments including daily observations and interactions. Use informal chats to reveal useful information.

Adapt the following activities and ideas to know your students.

• Use surveys and inventories with students and parents throughout the year.
• Engage students in a scavenger hunt to discover personal information such as favorite colors, interests and talents.
• Identify students at-risk and give each individual some one-on-one attention.
• Vary assignments for journal entries such as the following:
  o Write a letter.
  o Create a musical lyric, poem, jingle or rap.
  o Design a graphic organizer to record the information.
  o Create an illustration and explain it.
• Use personal “Sharing Blasts”. Encourage students to bring in objects and photos to showcase family members, pets, friends and skills. Don’t forget to share personal aspects of your life.

10. How do I plan a differentiated lesson?

Strategic planning guides differentiated instruction. Whether working with a team or alone, it takes time to plan. Use an outline similar to the following to include the lesson components:

Planning a Lesson

1. Pre-assess the upcoming information or skill using a formal or informal assessment tool.
2. Analyze and interpret the gathered data.
3. Identify the lesson’s purpose or objective.
4. Choose a motivational hook or strategy for the lesson to intrigue learners.
5. Present an instructional “lecturette”.
6. Provide guided practice.
7. Continually assess individual students during tasks. Intervene as needed to
   revamp and adjust for the learner’s needs.
8. Engage students in focused activities
9. Provide specific feedback for improvement with opportunities for reflection and
   self-evaluation.

Conclusion

Use assessment data to guide your selection of differentiated instructional strategies and
activities for the unique needs of individuals and small groups. Design adjustable assignments
for students who are on varying levels of basic knowledge in relation to the targeted standard or
skill. Customize tasks by engaging the individual’s strengths, ways of learning and interests.
On-going assessments, strategic planning, interventions and personalized assignments will keep
the learner on track in his or her learning journey.

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