

WHAT Differentiated Instruction **IS—AND ISN'T**



Kids of the same age aren't all alike when it comes to learning, any more than they are alike in terms of size, hobbies, personality, or likes and dislikes. Kids do have many things in common because they are human beings and because they are all children, but they also have important differences. What we share in common makes us human. How we differ makes us individuals. In a classroom with little or no differentiated instruction, only student similarities seem to take center stage. In a differentiated classroom, commonalities are acknowledged and built upon, and student differences become important elements in teaching and learning as well.

At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means “shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In

other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.

In many classrooms, the approach to teaching and learning is more unitary than differentiated. For example, 1st graders may listen to a story and then draw a picture about what they learned. While they may choose to draw different facets of the story, they all experienced the same content, and they all had the same sense-making or processing activity. A kindergarten class may have four centers that all students visit to complete the same activities in a week's time. Fifth graders may all listen to the same explanation about fractions and complete the same homework assignment. Middle school or high school students may sit through a lecture and a video to help them understand a topic in science or history. They will all read the same chapter, take the same notes, complete the same

lab or end-of-chapter questions, and take the same quiz. Such classrooms are familiar, typical, and largely undifferentiated.

Most teachers (as well as students and parents) have clear mental images of such classrooms. After experiencing undifferentiated instruction over many years, it is often difficult to imagine what a differentiated classroom would look and feel like. How, educators wonder, can we make the shift from “single-size instruction” to differentiated instruction so we can better meet our students’ diverse needs? Answering this question first requires clearing away some misperceptions.

What Differentiated Instruction Is NOT

Differentiated instruction is NOT the “Individualized Instruction” of the 1970s.

We were probably onto something important in the '70s when we experimented with what we then called individualized instruction. At least we understood that students have different learning profiles and that there is merit in meeting students where they are and helping them move on from there. One flaw in the '70s approach was that we tried doing something different for each of the 30-plus students in a single classroom. When each student had a different reading assignment, for example, it didn't take long for teachers to become exhausted. A second flaw was that in order to “match” each student's precise entry level, we chopped up instruction into skill fragments, thereby making learning fragmented and largely irrelevant.

While it is true that differentiated instruction offers several avenues to learning, it does not assume a separate level for each learner. It also focuses on meaningful learning or powerful ideas for all students. Differentiation is probably more reminiscent of the one-room-schoolhouse than of individualization. That model of

instruction recognized that the teacher needed to work sometimes with the whole class, sometimes with small groups, and sometimes with individuals. These variations were important in order both to move each student along in his particular understandings and skills as well as to build a sense of community in the group.

Differentiated instruction is NOT chaotic.

Most teachers remember the recurrent nightmare (and periodic reality) from their first year of teaching: losing control of student behavior. A benchmark of teacher development is the point at which the teacher has become secure and comfortable with classroom management. Fear of losing control of student behavior is a major obstacle for many teachers in establishing a flexible classroom. Teachers who differentiate instruction quickly point out that, if anything, they exert more leadership in their classrooms, not less.

Compared with teachers who offer a single approach to learning, teachers who differentiate instruction have to manage and monitor many activities simultaneously. And they still must help students in developing ground rules for behavior, give and monitor specific directions for activities, and direct the sequence of events in each learning experience. Effective differentiated classrooms include purposeful student movement and some purposeful student talking. They are not disorderly or undisciplined.

Differentiated instruction is NOT just another way to provide homogeneous grouping.

Our memories of undifferentiated classrooms probably include the bluebird, cardinal, and buzzard reading groups. Typically, a buzzard remained a buzzard, and a cardinal was forever

a cardinal. Under this system, buzzards nearly always worked with buzzards on skills-focused tasks, while work done by cardinals was typically at “higher levels” of thought. In addition to being predictable, student assignment to groups was virtually always teacher-selected.

A hallmark of an effective differentiated classroom, by contrast, is the use of flexible grouping, which accommodates students who are strong in some areas and weaker in others. For example, a student may be great at interpreting literature, but not so strong in spelling, or great with map skills and not as quick at grasping patterns in history, or quick with math word problems but careless with computation. The teacher who uses flexible grouping also understands that some students may begin a new task slowly, and then launch ahead at remarkable speed, while others will learn, but more slowly. This teacher knows that sometimes she needs to assign students to groups so that assignments are tailored to student need, but that in other instances, it makes more sense for students to form their own working groups. She sees that some students prefer or benefit from independent work, while others usually fare best with pairs or triads.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher uses many different group configurations over time, and students experience many different working groups and arrangements. “Fluid” is a good word to describe assignment of students to groups in such a heterogeneous classroom. In the older, “three groups approach” to instruction, student assignment to tasks was more fixed. Flexible grouping will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Differentiated instruction is NOT just “tailoring the same suit of clothes.”

Many teachers think that they differentiate instruction when they ask some students to answer more complex questions in a discussion

or to share advanced information on a topic, grade some students a little harder or easier on an assignment in response to the students’ perceived ability and effort, or let students select which questions to answer or skip on a test. Certainly such modifications reflect a teacher’s awareness of differences in student profiles and, to that degree, the modifications are movement in the direction of differentiation. While they are not necessarily ineffective or “bad” strategies on the teacher’s part, they are a “micro-differentiation” or “tailoring,” and are often just not enough.

If the basic assignment itself is far too easy for an advanced learner, having a chance to answer a complex question is not an adequate challenge. If information is essential for a struggling learner, allowing him to skip a test question because he never understood the information is ineffective. If the information in the basic assignment is simply too complex for a learner until she has the chance to assimilate needed background information and skills, being “easier” on her when grading her assignment does not help her in the long run. In sum, trying to stretch a garment that is far too small or attempting to tuck and gather a garment that is far too large is likely to be less effective than getting clothes that are the right fit at a given time.

What Differentiated Instruction Is

Differentiated instruction is PROACTIVE.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher assumes that different learners have differing needs. Therefore, the teacher proactively plans a variety of ways to “get at” and express learning. He still needs to tailor or fine-tune instruction for individual learners, but because different learning options are available based on his

knowledge of varied learner needs, the chances are greater that the learning experiences will provide an appropriate fit for many learners. Effective differentiation will typically be proactively planned by the teacher to be robust enough to address a range of learner needs, in contrast with planning a single approach for everyone and reactively trying to adjust the plans when it becomes apparent that the lesson is not working for some of the learners for whom it was intended.

Differentiated instruction is more QUALITATIVE than quantitative.

Many teachers incorrectly assume that differentiating instruction means giving some students more work to do, and others less. For example, a teacher might assign two book reports to advanced readers and only one to struggling readers. Or a struggling math student might have to do only the computation problems while advanced math students do the word problems as well.

Although such approaches to differentiation may seem to have an adequate rationale, they are typically ineffective. One book report is too much for a struggling learner without additional support in the process of reading as well as interpreting the text. Or a student who could act out the substance of the book effectively might be overwhelmed by writing a three-page report. If writing one book report is “too easy” for the advanced reader, doing “twice as much” of the same thing is not only unlikely to remedy the problem, but it could also seem like punishment. A student who has already demonstrated mastery of one math skill is ready to stop practice related to that skill and begin practice in a subsequent skill. Simply adjusting the *quantity* of an assignment will generally be less effective than adjusting the *nature* of the assignment to match student needs as well.

Differentiated Instruction is ROOTED IN ASSESSMENT.

A teacher who understands the need for teaching and learning to be a good match for students looks for every opportunity to know her students better. She sees conversations with individuals, classroom discussions, student work, observation, and formal assessment as a way to gather just a little more insight about what works for each learner. What she learns becomes a catalyst for crafting instruction in ways that help each student make the most of his potential and talents. Assessment is no longer predominately something that happens at the end of a unit to determine “who got it.” Assessment routinely takes place as a unit begins to determine the particular needs of individuals in relation to the unit’s goals.

Throughout the unit, in a variety of ways, teachers assess students’ developing readiness levels, interests, and modes of learning. Then the teachers design learning experiences based on their best understanding. Culminating products, or other forms of “final” assessment, take many forms, with the goal of finding a way for each student to most successfully share what he or she has learned in the course of the unit.

Differentiated instruction provides MULTIPLE APPROACHES to content, process, and product.

In all classrooms, teachers deal with at least three curricular elements: (1) content—input, what students learn; (2) process—how students go about making sense of ideas and information; and (3) product—output, how students demonstrate what they have learned. These elements are so important in differentiating instruction that they are dealt with in depth in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. By differentiating these three elements, teachers offer different approaches to *what* students learn, *how* they learn it, and how

they *demonstrate what they've learned*. What these different approaches have in common, however, is that they are crafted to encourage substantial growth in all students.

Differentiated instruction is STUDENT CENTERED.

Differentiated classrooms operate on the premise that learning experiences are most effective when they are engaging, relevant, and interesting. A corollary to that premise is that all students will not always find the same avenues to learning equally engaging, relevant, and interesting. Further, differentiated instruction acknowledges that later understandings must be built on previous understandings and that not all students possess the same understandings at the outset of a given investigation. Teachers who differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms seek to provide appropriately challenging learning experiences for all their students. These teachers realize that sometimes a task that lacks challenge for some learners is frustratingly complex to others.

In addition, teachers in differentiated classes understand the need to help students take increasing responsibility for their own growth. It's easier sometimes in large classrooms for a teacher to tell students everything rather than guiding them to think on their own, accept significant responsibility for learning, and develop a sense of pride in what they do. In a differentiated classroom, it's necessary for learners to be active in making and evaluating decisions. Teaching students to share responsibility enables a teacher to work with varied groups or individuals for portions of the day. It also prepares students far better for life.

Differentiated instruction is A BLEND of whole-class, group, and individual instruction.

There are times in all classrooms when it is more effective or efficient to share information

or use the same activity with the whole class. Such whole-group instruction establishes common understandings and a sense of community for students by sharing discussion and review. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the pattern of instruction in a differentiated classroom could be represented by mirror images of a wavy line, with students coming together as a whole group to begin a study, moving out to pursue learning in small groups or individually, coming back together to share and make plans for additional investigation, moving out again for more work, coming together again to share or review, and so on.

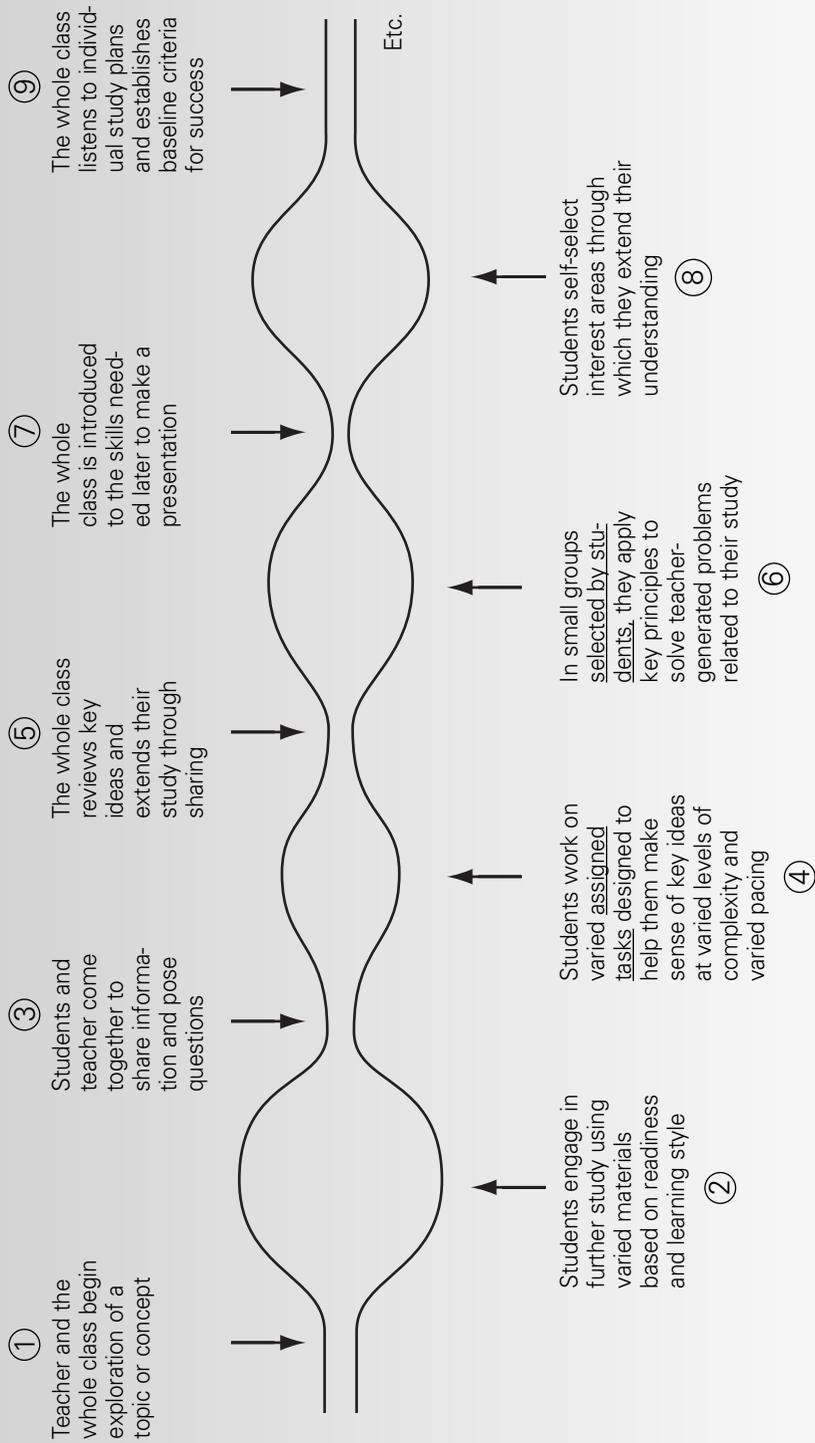
Differentiated instruction is “ORGANIC.”

In a differentiated classroom, teaching is evolutionary. Students and teachers are learners together. While teachers may know more about the subject matter at hand, they are continuously learning about how their students learn. Ongoing collaboration with students is necessary to refine the learning opportunities so they're effective for each student. Differentiated instruction is dynamic: Teachers monitor the match between learner and learning and make adjustments as warranted. And while teachers are aware that sometimes the learner/learning match is less than ideal, they also understand that they can continually make adjustments. Differentiated instruction often results in more effective matches than does the mode of teaching that insists that one assignment serves all learners well.

Further, a teacher in a differentiated classroom does not classify herself as someone who “already differentiates instruction.” Rather, that teacher is fully aware that every hour of teaching, every day in the classroom can reveal one more way to make the classroom a better match for its learners.

Finally, such a teacher does not see differentiation as a strategy or something to do when

Figure 1.1
The Flow of Instruction in a Differentiated Classroom



A differentiated classroom is marked by a repeated rhythm of whole-class preparation, review, and sharing, followed by opportunity for individual or small-group exploration, sense-making, extension, and production.

there's extra time. Rather, it is a way of life in the classroom. She does not seek or follow a recipe for differentiation, but rather combines what she can learn about differentiation from a range of sources to her own professional instincts and knowledge base to do whatever it takes to reach out to each learner.

A New Image to Keep in Mind

As you continue reading about how to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms, keep this new image in mind:

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs.



The practical strategies in this book should crystallize this new image for you as you work at differentiating instruction in your classroom.