

# What is Differentiated Instruction? Examples of How to Differentiate Instruction in the Classroom

Posted October 1, 2014 by Cathy Weselby in [Teaching Strategies](#)

Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, each student has an individual style of learning. Not all students in a classroom learn a subject in the same way or share the same level of ability. Differentiated instruction is a method of designing and delivering instruction to best reach each student.

Carol Ann Tomlinson is a leader in the area of differentiated learning and professor of educational leadership, foundations and policy at the University of Virginia. Tomlinson describes differentiated instruction as factoring students' individual learning styles and levels of readiness first before designing a lesson plan. Research on the effectiveness of differentiation shows this method benefits a wide range of students, from those with learning disabilities to those who are considered high ability.



Differentiating instruction may mean teaching the same material to all students using a variety of instructional strategies, or it may require the teacher to deliver lessons at varying levels of difficulty based on the ability of each student. Formative assessment is an essential ingredient of this method.

Teachers who practice differentiation in the classroom may:

- Design lessons based on students' learning styles.
- Group students by shared interest, topic or ability for assignments.
- Assess students' learning using formative assessment.
- Manage the classroom to create a safe and supportive environment.
- Continually assess and adjust lesson content to meet students' needs.

## History of differentiated instruction

The roots of differentiated instruction go all the way back to the days of the one-room schoolhouse, where one teacher had students of all ages in one classroom. As the educational system transitioned to grading schools, it was assumed that children of the same age learned similarly. However in 1912, achievement tests were introduced, and the scores revealed the gaps in student's abilities within grade levels.

In 1975, Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ensuring that children with disabilities had equal access to public education. Educators used differentiated instruction strategies to reach this student population. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2000 further encouraged differentiated and skill-based instruction.

## Ways to differentiate instruction

It makes sense to provide different avenues of learning for students to reach the same destination. Research by educator Leslie Owen Wilson supports differentiating instruction within the classroom. Wilson found lecture is the least effective instructional strategy, with only 5 to 10 percent retention after 24 hours. Engaging in a discussion, practicing after exposure to content and teaching others are much more effective ways to ensure learning retention.

According to Tomlinson, teachers can differentiate instruction through four ways: 1) content, 2) process, 3) product, and 4) learning environment.

## **1. Content**

Fundamental lesson content should cover the standards of learning set by the school district or state educational standards. Some students in a class may be completely unfamiliar with the concepts in a lesson, some students may have partial mastery, and some students may already be familiar with the content before the lesson begins.

The teacher may differentiate the content by designing activities for groups of students that cover various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (a classification of levels of intellectual behavior going from lower-order thinking skills to higher-order thinking skills). The six levels are: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating.

Students who are unfamiliar with a lesson may be required to complete tasks on the lower levels: remembering and understanding. Students with some mastery may be asked to apply and analyze the content, and students who have high levels of mastery may be asked to complete tasks in the areas of evaluating and creating.

Examples of differentiating activities:

- Match vocabulary words to definitions.
- Read a passage of text and answer related questions.
- Think of a situation that happened to a character in the story and a different outcome.
- Differentiate fact from opinion in the story.
- Identify an author's position and provide evidence to support this viewpoint.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation summarizing the lesson.

## **2. Process**

Each student has a preferred learning style, and successful differentiation includes delivering the material to each style: visual, auditory and kinesthetic and through words. Not all students require the same amount of support from the teacher, and students could choose to work in pairs, small groups or individually. While some students may benefit from one-on-one interaction with a teacher or classroom aide, others may be able to progress by themselves. Teachers can enhance student learning by offering support based on individual needs.

Examples of differentiating the process:

- Provide textbooks for visual and word learners.
- Allow auditory learners to listen to audio books.
- Give kinesthetic learners the opportunity to complete an interactive assignment online.

## **3. Product**

The product is what the student creates at the end of the lesson to demonstrate the mastery of the content. This can be in the form of tests, projects, reports or other activities. Teachers may assign students to complete activities that show mastery of an educational concept in a way the student prefers, based on learning style.

Examples of differentiating the end product:

- Read and write learners write a book report.
- Visual learners create a graphic organizer of the story.
- Auditory learners give an oral report.
- Kinesthetic learners build a diorama illustrating the story.

#### **4. Learning environment**

The conditions for optimal learning include both physical and psychological elements. A flexible classroom layout is key, incorporating various types of furniture and arrangements to support both individual and group work. Psychologically speaking, teachers should use classroom management techniques that support a safe and supportive learning environment.

Examples of differentiating the environment:

- Break some students into reading groups to discuss the assignment.
- Allow students to read individually if preferred.
- Research shows differentiated instruction is effective for high-ability students as well as students with mild to severe disabilities.
- When students are given more options on how they can learn material, they take on more responsibility for their own learning.
- Students appear to be more engaged in learning, and there are reportedly fewer discipline problems in classrooms where teachers provide differentiated lessons.
- Differentiated instruction requires more work during lesson planning, and many teachers struggle to find the extra time in their schedule.
- The learning curve can be steep and some schools lack professional development resources.

### **Pros and cons of differentiated instruction**

#### **Pros**

- Research shows differentiated instruction is effective for high-ability students as well as students with mild to severe disabilities.
- When students are given more options on how they can learn material, they take on more responsibility for their own learning.
- Students appear to be more engaged in learning, and there are reportedly fewer discipline problems in classrooms where teachers provide differentiated lessons.

#### **Cons**

- Differentiated instruction requires more work during lesson planning, and many teachers struggle to find the extra time in their schedule.
- The learning curve can be steep and some schools lack professional development resources.
- Critics argue there isn't enough research to support the benefits of differentiated instruction outweighing the added prep time.

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