Adolescents need to be understood as complex individuals who bring diverse perspectives to the learning context (McCombs and Whisler 1997). Varied and random biological and environmental factors have affected how they feel about themselves and how they view school in general. Though all are capable of learning, none responds uniformly to one style of teaching, one curriculum, one mode of assessment, one cultural perspective, or, necessarily, one language. A sensitivity to their differences lends validation to who they are and what they have to contribute as learners. Teachers who respect differences among adolescents create caring classroom communities that show students they are valued, their ideas are supported, and their feelings are important.

Teaching with Adolescent Learning in Mind, page 3

Related Ministry of Education Publications and Websites

Grades 7 & 8 Reach Every Student Through Differentiated Instruction brochure
Think Literacy
TIPS4RM
Education for All
Me Read? No, Way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills
Supporting Student Success in Literacy, Grades 7-12 - Effective Practices of Ontario School Boards
Leading Math Success – Mathematical Literacy Grades 7-12
Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English Language Learners in Every Classroom – A practical guide for Ontario educators
www.ontario.ca/6ways
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/
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Teaching with Adolescent Learning in Mind, page 3

This is the Inside front cover
This Differentiated Instruction Teacher’s Guide represents the third step in a multi-stage provincial focus on differentiated instruction in the intermediate grades. The following provides a context and timeline:

**Spring 2007**
A project team is created consisting of a teacher, administrator and Student Success Leader from each of the six regions across Ontario. The teachers in the team work, with the support of Ministry staff, to adopt a single new action of their choice that they believe will increase the responsiveness of their teaching practice. Teachers journal their experience and each have a single lesson videotaped.

**Fall 2007**
This guide is provided to all grade 7 and 8 teachers. It incorporates a focus on grades 7 and 8 as part of a broader intermediate initiative.

A series of regional symposia provide a small team from each board with further information about differentiated instruction and their region’s differentiated instruction project.

Board teams are provided with a DVD of Differentiated Instruction Projects and an accompanying facilitator’s guide.

**Spring/Fall 2008**
Resources and materials continue to be developed to support grade 9 and 10 teachers with implementation of differentiated instruction.

**Purpose**
This Differentiated Instruction Teacher’s Guide is intended to assist teachers in:
• improving student learning by recognizing and addressing the diverse learning needs of students
• understanding differentiated instruction
• seeing the value of differentiated instruction
• recognizing that differentiated instruction does not mean doing everything differently
• taking new instructional actions, small or large, beyond current levels of implementation
Why differentiate?

...To help all students learn

Differentiated instruction, at its core, is a belief, a recognition, that we are teaching individuals, not “the grade 8’s” or “Mrs. Smith’s class.” Even young adolescents, concerned with “fitting in” with their peers, crave recognition for their uniqueness – as long as that recognition does not mark them as too different. We differentiate our instruction because doing so allows us as teachers to grow in our ability to ‘read our students’ and then to adapt our practice so we effectively teach all students.

...To increase student motivation and achievement

Recognizing students as individuals means seeing them for who they can become as well as who they are right now, and then working to address the gap. To do that, we grow our repertoire of instructional, assessment and evaluation strategies so we can provide appropriate learning experiences at the appropriate level of challenge for each student. We differentiate our instruction because when our students receive the appropriate levels of challenge and support, they are engaged, motivated and their achievement soars.

“Teachers who teach with adolescent learning in mind plan differently for instruction and create responsive environments for adolescents’ cognitive, social, and emotional development and learning. They model adolescent-centered instruction.”

p. 45, Teaching with Adolescent Learning in Mind

...To connect with adolescent learners

The intermediate grades mark the time when students are required to meet the increased demands of content in a variety of disciplines. It is a time when some students will develop a lifelong interest, perhaps leading to a career, in one or more subject areas. We differentiate our instruction because doing so allows us to forge strong connections between our subject and our students, and that improves student learning.

...To help adolescents become independent learners

We recognize and respond to individuals, but we teach classes of students. We cannot hope to teach one individual at a time and the young adolescents we work with would not want us to – they are social beings. So we work to build classroom communities of mutual support, where students understand their own needs and preferences as learners and respect the ways in which their peers are similar and the ways in which they are different. We differentiate our instruction because when students find out about themselves as learners they become more independent, and when they work as responsible members of a community, respecting and affirming the diversity of others, discipline problems decrease.
Teachers who recognize the unique strengths and weaknesses of adolescents and still make them feel that they belong provide the most critical support of all.
Dr. Bruce Ferguson, SickKids 2007

... Because it is personally satisfying
Differentiated instruction is a focus on effectiveness and big ideas. We think about our students’ strengths, not just their learning needs. We think about the essential understandings in the curriculum, not just facts and skills. We differentiate our instruction because some of the enthusiasm and pleasure we feel in teaching is renewed when we are working creatively and efficiently.

“Why do I differentiate? I have come to realize how diverse and complex the classroom can be. Differentiation, to me, is simply the task of trying to teach diverse groups of students so that all can benefit from the learning experience. I realize that if I taught traditional content with a ‘chalk and talk’ approach every single day, I would miss many opportunities to reach my students.
Differentiation can be boiled down to the idea that, as a teacher, I am willing to evolve my practice ... and be open to adapting my practice to reach as many students as possible.”

Why the focus on differentiated instruction in intermediate grades?

... it’s the perfect time
We are in the enviable position of teaching students at the perfect developmental time for them to begin to acquire the self-knowledge, metacognitive skills, independent work habits and collaborative skills of the capable and effective learner and citizen. Differentiated instruction supports all of these important qualities.

...to equip students for success
As students move from grade eight to grade nine, they are making what some researchers assert is the most challenging transition of their lives. To send them on that transition equipped with self-knowledge of what they are good at, what they enjoy, how to learn something that is challenging for them, and the conditions under which they can do their best work, is to provide the best possible support for their success in secondary school and beyond.

...to build on student experience
The intermediate grades mark the time when students are required to meet the increased demands of content in a variety of disciplines. It is a time when some students will develop a lifelong interest, perhaps leading to a career, in one or more subject areas.
We differentiate our instruction because doing so allows us to forge strong connections between our subject and our students, and that improves student learning.

...To help adolescents become independent learners
Differentiated instruction occurs in classrooms from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Students will come to our classrooms with a range of differentiated instruction experiences that we are in a prime position to extend.

What is differentiated instruction?

Definition
Differentiated instruction is effective instruction that is responsive to the learning preferences, interests and readiness of the individual learner.

Differentiated instruction is best thought of as an organizing structure or framework for thinking about teaching and learning. It is not an initiative, a program, or the latest fad. Nor is it simply a new label for something we are already doing.

When we respond to student needs, we differentiate, to some extent, some of the time. For optimal success, however, we need to be aware of the decisions that we make and take deliberate action to
meet the needs of all learners. Ultimately our aim is to shape the learning experience so that it is appropriate to the learning preferences, interests and/or readiness of each student.

- Examine the Differentiated Instruction Continuum.
- Which statements most characterize your planning and practice?

**A Differentiated Instruction Continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developing Instructional Routines and Skills</th>
<th>Expanding Instructional Routines and Skills</th>
<th>Developing the Routines, Habits and Skills for Differentiated Instruction</th>
<th>Sustaining A Differentiated Instruction Culture in the Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation and the learning environment for the class as a whole - all students - based on curriculum expectations and my own strengths and preferences. All students learn and demonstrate their learning in the same way all or most of the time. Examples: anticipation guide, exit card, graphic organizers, supplementary materials</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and a general sense of the learning needs of the class. Students experience, over time, a variety of ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning. Examples: activities for all that address different learning styles or intelligences on different days, multiple entry points for all (H. Gardner; see p. XXX) over time, varied supplementary materials</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and a general sense of the learning needs of the class. I try to design a variety of options for my students. Students have a choice of ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning on an ongoing basis. Examples: Differentiation structures that offer choice (see p. XXX): centres, choice boards, R.A.F.T.* assignments. choice of supplementary materials * role, audience, format, topic</td>
<td>I design instruction, assessment, evaluation and the learning environment based on curriculum expectations and on the specific learning needs of the students in the class. I try to ensure that the learning experiences I provide are a ‘good fit’ for each of my students. Students are routinely provided with or choose, when appropriate, ways to learn and/or ways to demonstrate their learning that are designed for their particular learning needs. Examples: Differentiation structures such as R.A.F.T.* and tiered assignments (see p. XXX), provision of or, as appropriate, student choice of supplementary materials based on their needs. * role, audience, format, topic Different options for different students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Models of Differentiated Instruction**

Two published models provide a graphic explanation of differentiated instruction. The first, by Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999), describes differentiated instruction from the perspective of the classroom teacher thinking about the individual learner. Teachers choose to differentiate the content (curriculum), process (what learning opportunities are needed to help the students learn the concept/skill/strategy) and/or product (how students show their understanding of the concept/skill/strategy) of a lesson or unit based on the readiness, interests and/or learning preferences of their students.

**A Concept Map for Differentiating Instruction**

- **Differentiation of Instruction**
  - is a teacher’s response to learner’s needs
  - guided by general principles of differentiation, such as
  - respectful tasks
  - flexible grouping
  - ongoing assessment and adjustment

**Teachers can differentiate**

**Content**

- according to student’s

**Process**

- Readiness

**Product**

- Interests

- Learning Profile

The second model, by Karen Hume (2007), describes differentiated instruction in terms of the components that are required for an effective and responsive classroom, school or district. Tomlinson’s components are incorporated into Hume’s inside diamond, while the outside diamond references conditions needed for effectiveness whether the teacher differentiates or not. The arrows connecting the inside to the outside diamond stress the critical importance of the learning environment, teacher beliefs, and essential understandings to the instructional decisions that we make when we are planning our work.

“Differentiated instruction is about ... working smarter by becoming more aware of your learners and, in turn, meeting their needs.”

“When I differentiate instruction, I find that students take more responsibility for their learning. They become active participants in a classroom that allows for success and failure, and that builds on both to produce better outcomes for all learners.”

Knowing Your Students

We can teach for understanding of big ideas, establish a positive, inclusive learning environment, work on building community in our classrooms, use powerful instructional strategies and design quality assessment tasks without necessarily differentiating instruction.

Differentiated instruction is teaching with student differences in mind. It requires us to have an understanding of our students as learners so that we can purposefully plan instruction, assessment and evaluation to best meet their diverse needs.

Nicole’s and Anita’s Story

Nicole teaches a Grade 6/7 combined class of 24 students, 12 in each grade and an even balance of boys and girls. Nicole’s classroom is in a small, mostly open-concept school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. She teaches most of her own subjects, and receives support from an educational assistant and a learning resource teacher.

Because Nicole works with a combined class and simultaneously teaches separate mathematics and social science lessons to the two grades, her classroom is physically organized so that all of the grade 6 students are on one side of the room and the grade 7 students on the other. When Nicole became interested in differentiated instruction this past year, the first thing she did was decide to change her fixed, grade level groupings for flexible cross-grade groupings based on her students’ stated preferences for visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning. Students determined their preferences by completing two different learning style inventories and by participating in whole class lessons that were, in turn, visual, auditory or kinesthetic.

Nicole knew about Robert Marzano’s (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock, 2001) assertion that teaching students about similarities and differences is a powerful way to highlight the critical attributes of a concept. She decided that she would introduce comparison, one of the four strategies within the category of similarities and differences, and she would do so by having her students compare and contrast two fractured fairy tales.

- Does Sherem prefer to work alone or in a group?
- Is Marie more interested in skateboarding or in playing video games when she has free time?
- What does Ricardo know that will help him understand algebraic equations?
In the past, Nicole had always designed the same learning experience for the whole class. This time, however, Nicole created three ways for students to work with comparing and contrasting. They were:

• Visual – Students read the texts independently and completed a paper Venn diagram individually.

• Auditory – Students listened to the texts on tape and discussed similarities and differences as a group before completing the Venn diagram.

• Kinesthetic – Students read the texts and then made their Venn diagrams with construction paper and string. Nicole observed that many of these students chose to lie down on the floor or to stand while they were working.

It took Nicole and her learning resource teacher partner Anita, some time to develop the three activities so that they would all be equally engaging and challenging. Differentiated instruction, just like any other change in thought or action, takes a bit of extra time to become comfortable thinking or behaving in a new way. Nicole and Anita were successful in their creation of three equally engaging and challenging activities, and they found that the time they had invested was worthwhile because “changing the process for students increased class participation and decreased frustration.”

See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 3, St. Pius X Catholic School

In this example, Nicole and Anita changed their practice based on knowledge of their students’ learning styles. Learning styles, along with intelligences, gender and culture together make up the category of learning preferences. When we ask ourselves, “Does Sherem prefer to work alone or with others?” or “How can we present a new geography concept so that Rishi, who prefers hands-on activity, will best be able to learn?” we are considering our students’ learning preferences and when we act on that knowledge, we maximize student learning because we are creating the conditions under which each learner learns best.

“Students recognize how knowing their learning style will help them in the future.”
Robert Sternberg’s Triarchic Intelligences Theory

We all have and use varying amounts of three intelligences:

• Analytical – the thinking required in schools – “Explain the causes of the Second World War.”

• Practical – real world applications – “Using your understanding of scale, design the perfect bedroom.”

• Creative – innovations – “What use might you make of a stethoscope if you were stranded on a desert island?”

The goal is to develop strength in and use all three intelligences. Since our students are stronger in some intelligences than others, it is important to address, when appropriate, their strongest intelligence when teaching new material.

Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences

We all have and use varying amounts of nine intelligences:

• Verbal-Linguistic (Say it/Read it)
• Naturalist (Investigate it)
• Musical-Rhythmic (Hum it/Tap it)
• Visual-Spatial (Picture it)
• Existential (Ponder it)
• Interpersonal (Talk about it)
• Logical-Mathematical (Count it)
• Intrapersonal (Reflect on it)
• Bodily-Kinesthetic (Move it)

It is most helpful to think of our students as possessing a profile of several intelligence preferences that interact, one with another, rather than a number of distinct intelligences.

Learning Centres/Stations

In Marc’s tenth-grade history classroom, students develop some of their knowledge about World War One by rotating through five centres, each centre allowing them to make use of different intelligences:

1) Students read a paragraph about trench warfare, then write a paragraph about how they would have felt living in such conditions (intrapersonal and verbal-linguistic).

2) Students listen to music from the World War One era and discuss the similarities to today’s music (musical-rhythmic and naturalist).

3) Students work as a group to choose one diagram of a World War One weapon from a number of diagrams, and then build that weapon (interpersonal, visual-spatial and bodily-kinesthetic).

4) Students are given a map of the Vimy Ridge offensive and must use the scale on the map to measure the different enemy machine gun turrets to help elaborate an offensive strategy (logical-mathematical and visual-spatial).

5) Students read a newspaper article from the era and decipher the message (verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical).

The centres are useful in helping Marc get to know his students. By observing them while they work, Marc is able to determine which intelligences are of particular interest to which students. To use learning centres as a differentiation structure (see page XXX), Marc could then use his knowledge of individual preferences to have his students do in-depth work at a single centre that best meets their needs.

Multiple Entry Points

Howard Gardner describes five entry points to learning. They include:

• Narrative (for example, tell a story)
• Logical-quantitative (for example, share a graph or organizer)
• Foundational (for example, consider the theory behind the concept)
• Aesthetic (for example, use an art form)
• Experiential (for example, involve students in a hands-on activity)

By teaching a new concept using as many entry points as we can, we substantially increase the likelihood that our students will be able to make connections between prior knowledge and the new learning. That is why the interdisciplinary or cross-curricular units that we develop with our teaching partners are so powerful. They provide multiple entry points to learning as well as multiple connections.
Remember that teaching only through multiple entry points, like rotating all students through multiple intelligences centres, is not differentiated instruction. However, whenever we provide the same rich range of experiences to all students, we are increasing the likelihood of student achievement and enhancing our understanding of learner preferences. This knowledge of our learners gives us the information we need to provide individual students with experiences that are ideally suited to their learning preferences.

Learning preferences are not limited to styles and intelligences. Preferences can be influenced by gender or culture, and they can be environmental as well. Some students prefer silence when working; others prefer sound. Some prefer a structured, brightly lit environment; some prefer a casual corner with subdued lighting.

**Student Interests**

A second piece of information that helps us in our teaching is knowledge of our students’ interests so that we can plan for engaging and meaningful learning opportunities. Attending to students’ interests ignites their motivation to learn. Some interests may, at first glance, seem irrelevant to the curriculum at hand. When we are talking about landforms in physical geography class, for example, Joe’s interest in cooking gourmet meals seems tangential at best! However, meaningful learning happens when new ideas are personally relevant, and relevance occurs when new information links to something the student already knows. In Joe’s case, learning is supported and enhanced when he receives the encouragement to make the connection between particular food items and the local, specific geography where the food is grown. Being aware of Joe’s interest in gourmet cooking becomes an inroad to providing Joe with access to the world through physical geography.

Student interests are relatively easy to determine. Questions asked before a new unit of study allow us to group students according to aspects of the unit that are of particular interest, and beginning of year interest questionnaires will help us to guide students when they are selecting texts for literature circles.

“Many students had more than one preferred learning style.”

“Way more of my students like kinesthetic activities than I had realized!”

**Student Readiness**

The final important piece of information is knowledge of a student’s readiness to learn a new concept. Readiness is different from ability and much more helpful to our work. Readiness varies for each of us whenever we are learning something new. If we have some prior knowledge, some point of connection, or even simply a positive feeling about the new material, we are in a better position to learn than if we are lacking in these. When we know a student’s readiness for a particular concept, we can introduce and work with that concept according to student need. When we differentiate tasks according to a student’s readiness, we are creating tasks that are a closer match to the student’s skill level and understanding of the topic than we would be if assuming that all students come to a new concept with the same background knowledge.

To determine a student’s readiness for a concept, we use diagnostic or pre-assessments. For example, we might administer a quick pre-assessment to determine what our students understand about fractions. We can then use the results of that pre-assessment to create short-term flexible learning groups that allow each student to develop new understandings about fractions from his/her point of readiness.

**Cristina’s Story**

Cristina teaches a grade 7 class in a high-needs Toronto elementary school. Coming from widely diverse cultural and family backgrounds, many of Cristina’s students lack the personal experiences and background knowledge that will allow them to make connections between school learning and prior knowledge and ultimately, to be successful at school.

Robert Marzano (2004) writes of four ways to build background knowledge for academic achievement. Cristina reviewed this work and decided that field trips, mentoring programs and committing significant chunks of time to sustained reading were all good ideas but costly and too slow for her purposes. Instead, she chose to work with Marzano’s fourth method – building background knowledge through direct instruction in the vocabulary important to academic success.

Cristina found that, just as she suspected, her students enjoyed the opportunity to do their work through a variety of modalities. The vocabulary activities and games honoured students’ diverse backgrounds and revealed the richness of their varied experiences. They contributed to building a stronger sense of community and a greater recognition of individual strengths, while simultaneously determining and extending all students’ readiness to learn new concepts.

See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 4, St. Wilfrid’s Catholic School
Beginning with the End in Mind

When we plan for teaching and learning, whether we are planning for differentiation or not, it is critical to ensure that the focus for instruction, assessment and evaluation is aligned with the content (i.e., knowledge and skills) of the set of curriculum expectations chosen for that particular lesson or unit.

Wiggins and McTighe, in Understanding by Design, provide a sequence of questions as part of their framework for designing instruction, assessment, and evaluation:

• What do I want students to learn?
• How will I know they have learned it?
• How will I design instruction and assessment to help them learn?

This up-front planning of evaluation tasks is essential to the design of differentiated instruction and assessment. These pre-planned evaluation tasks include (1) clear descriptions of ‘what it looks like when students demonstrate the intended learning’ as well as (2) criteria that helps us judge how well students demonstrate this learning. Although demonstrations of learning may differ from student to student in a differentiated classroom (e.g., one student may demonstrate understanding of a concept through an oral presentation; another through a written summary), the curriculum expectations on which they are based and the criteria on which the demonstrations are judged are the same.

‘Beginning with the end in mind’ guides the overall design of instruction, assessment, and evaluation for a unit or lesson.

What helps us differentiate instruction, assessment, and evaluation, is the knowledge we develop about our students’ learning preferences, interests, and readiness to learn new concepts.

Planning for Differentiated Instruction - Core Questions

The following questions guide our decision-making as we adapt our instructional practice to meet the learning needs of our students.

**The Learning Environment**

• How can I set up the classroom for differentiated instruction?
• What elements of the learning environment can I differentiate to help all of my students learn?
**Instruction and Assessment**

- How can I differentiate the ways that I help students learn new concepts?
- How can I differentiate the ways I assess student progress towards their learning goals?

**Evaluation**

- How can I differentiate the ways that students demonstrate what they understand and can do?

A lesson design framework can assist us in building in opportunities for differentiation or determining the opportunities that are already present in an existing lesson.

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**Making the Most of Planning Time**

As teachers, we have very real concerns about finding the time to deal with all curriculum expectations under any circumstance, never mind in a differentiated classroom where we recognize the importance of approaching and working with concepts using a variety of strategies and structures. In order to have the time we need and to more easily differentiate our lessons, there are a number of actions we can take when planning a unit:

- Identify the big ideas or essential understandings of the unit, clustering the specific expectations to the related overall expectations. Overall expectations in Ontario’s curriculum policy documents describe, in general terms, the knowledge and skills that students are expected to demonstrate by the end of the grade. They speak to the big ideas or essential understandings at the core of the discipline. When we cluster curriculum expectations from the curriculum policy documents and identify the big ideas of the unit, we can focus on those big ideas rather than on a list of specific expectations.

- Plan collaboratively, in interdisciplinary or cross-curricular teams as often as possible.

- Take an inquiry-based approach to learning whenever possible. When students inquire, they read, experiment, research and discuss, constructing knowledge by pursuing what Wiggins and McTighe call “essential questions” based on the big ideas. Inquiry learning is particularly useful to differentiated instruction because students automatically use multiple entry points and demonstrate their learning differently when they inquire.

- Pre-assess students’ understanding, knowledge, skills and/or attitude prior to planning the unit so you know where to start. This is particularly important so that you can surface any misconceptions students may harbour since research (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, p.50-55) shows that misconceptions, left uncorrected, will seriously hamper understanding.

- Be flexible in the unit design – plans will need to be adjusted based on assessment data gathered during instruction to support students who are struggling and those who learn more successfully than anticipated.

- We can continue to use our favourite lesson plans – by refining them based on the Core Questions (p.XXX), a lesson design framework such as the one on the previous page, and the knowledge we have acquired about our students.

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**Core Questions**

- How can I set up the classroom for differentiated instruction?
- What elements of the learning environment can I differentiate to help all of my students learn?
- How can I differentiate the ways that I help students learn new concepts?
- How can I differentiate the ways that students demonstrate what they understand and can do?
- How can I differentiate the ways that I assess student progress towards their learning goals?

---

**Sample Lesson Design Framework**

- **Minds On**
  - establish a positive learning environment
  - connect to prior learning and/or experiences
  - set the context for learning

- **Action**
  - introduce new learning
  - provide opportunities for practice and application of learning

- **Consolidation & Connections**
  - provide opportunities for consolidation and reflection

---

**Opportunities for Differentiated Instruction**

- Do I differentiate:
  - aspects of the learning environment?
  - ways to activate interest and connect to prior learning?
  - ways to introduce new learning?
  - ways for students to practice and apply their learning?
  - ways for students to consolidate their learning?
  - ways for students to reflect on their learning?

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**Opportunities for Assessment**

- pre-assessment (diagnostic)
- formative assessment
- self-assessment
- evaluation

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*adapted from TIPS4RM for Grades 7, 8, 9 Applied and 10 Applied Math, 2005.*
Making Instructional Decisions: The Teaching/Learning Process

Planning for Differentiated Instruction - Core Questions

The Core Questions on page XXX highlight the relationship between what we know about our students, how we create a supportive learning environment and how we instruct, assess and evaluate in the classroom.

Creating a Positive Learning Environment that Supports Differentiated Instruction

Val’s Story

Val came to her long term occasional position after Christmas. A thoughtful, soft-spoken and caring teacher, Val was the perfect choice for the students in her grade 7 and 8 class. The class was dispirited. They had lost their teacher to another school, and their classmates of many years to an arts school. The students Val greeted on the first day in January felt that they were the leftovers. Several had special needs, others came from challenging family situations. All behaved as if they were alone in the classroom; interactions with others were rare and usually negative. When asked to provide three words or phrases to describe her class, Val’s words were “diverse, egocentric, and challenging why we do anything and everything.”

Val realized immediately that she had a difficult choice to make. She could focus on the curriculum to be taught and push forward without taking time to build trust and opportunities for risk-taking. Or she could attend to building a classroom community that would provide safety and security for her students as they worked towards the curriculum expectations. She chose the latter.

Val built her classroom community by providing students with a great deal of talk time. She wanted to help her students learn to know themselves and trust each other, to be able to say - “here’s what I think/what I understand/how I connect.” To support this talk time, Val introduced routines and a physical layout that lent itself to different groupings and varied instructional activities. Students worked from desks that were in a circle, with chairs in the center part of the circle. Students were expected to “turn and tell” a partner their answers to Val’s questions. Several times each day, Val would ask students to form a sharing circle and talk about the work they were doing and how they were feeling. They used a talking stick to help them listen to each other without interruption. Val also involved the students in establishing ways of working together and learn and had reinforced and built upon these as opportunities arose.

See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 2, Keewatin Public School
A Positive and Inclusive Learning Environment
The creation and development of a welcoming classroom community is an important part of planning for learning in any classroom. Young adolescents need to work in classrooms where there is mutual respect and where all students support and encourage each other’s success. Diversity is respected and valued and seen as the foundation to interdependence and learning. All students want to feel that they belong, that their absence would be missed, that they have a voice, and that they have some ownership of and responsibility for the ongoing development of their community. When your students enter the classroom, they should be able to see themselves in it, believe that they are going to be treated fairly, and know that they can take risks and share their opinions because they are in a safe learning environment.

An Environment that Supports Differentiated Instruction
Differentiated instruction involves flexible grouping, resources and materials that meet the varied needs of students in the class as well as opportunities for students to learn in conditions that they prefer – e.g., individual reading, discussing with a partner, by the window with lots of light. Try creating a physical set-up to meet your students’ needs and establishing routines that provide easy movement from one learning experience to another.

Debbie’s Story
Debbie is an experienced, twenty-year teacher running an “Open Door” demonstration classroom at a K-8 school in Cambridge. She has in-depth knowledge of her 28 grade 7 students, gathered early in the school year through activities and through on-going use of a variety of learning preference inventories. Debbie knows that the majority of her students are visual and kinesthetic learners; very few are auditory.

Debbie’s new action for the differentiated instruction project was to provide explicit instruction in the teaching of summarization skills, one of Marzano’s top strategies (see page XX). However, in this story, we would like to emphasize Debbie’s development of a physical environment which supports the young adolescent learner and her masterful use of a wide variety of text supports for differentiated instruction.

Debbie’s new classroom was developed over the previous year as she refined and adjusted to meet the needs of her students. On entering Debbie’s classroom, one forms an immediate and accurate impression of comfort, thus allowing them to self-differentiate according to their learning preferences.

The materials on the walls scaffold student learning in the visual form that works for them. The resources students use are equally varied. For example, when Debbie assesses her students’ ability to summarize, she makes sure they are using a text that is at their reading level and is of interest to them so that her measurement of summarizing skills is not influenced by reading level or motivation. Debbie faces the same challenges we all face in finding appropriate material; you’ll notice in the DVD that she meets that challenge by using some of the Canadian Assessment and Skills Inventory (CASI) reading selections for group or individual tasks.

On entering Debbie’s classroom, one forms an immediate and accurate impression of comfort, organization, and productive intensity.

See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 6. Woodland Park Public School
Helping students learn, whether we are differentiating instruction or not, requires us to make decisions throughout the teaching and learning process – when we are planning outside of the classroom and ‘on the spot’ as we respond to the learning needs of our students in the classroom.

We decide how we will:

• Pre-assess what our students already know and can do (diagnostic assessment) so that we know where to begin

• Engage students in learning a new concept or big idea so that they make connections to prior learning and experience

• Help students reinforce and consolidate their new learning

• Build in opportunities for student self-assessment so that students are partners in the teaching and learning process

• Check for understanding along the way (formative assessment) to inform our next instructional steps

The final step in the teaching and learning process is evaluation (see Evaluation: Helping Students Demonstrate Their Learning – p. XXX). When we evaluate, we provide opportunities for our students to demonstrate what they have learned. We then judge the quality of this demonstration against previously identified criteria to determine the student’s level of achievement for a particular clustered set of curriculum expectations or learning goal for students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

The following ‘Key Features of a Differentiated Classroom’, ‘Differentiation Structures’ and Research-Based Instructional Strategies provide us with a rich assortment of tools and approaches to help with the decisions we make when we differentiate instruction.

### Planning for Differentiated Instruction - Core Questions

**Instruction and Assessment**

- How can I differentiate the ways that I help students learn new concepts?
- How can I differentiate the ways I assess student progress towards their learning goals?

### Key Features of a Differentiated Classroom

1. **Flexible Learning Groups**

   In a differentiated classroom, students are grouped and regrouped, frequently and flexibly based on their:

   - Readiness to learn a concept
   - Interest in a concept
   - Learning preferences in working with or thinking about a concept

   Flexible, short-term groups are sometimes determined by the teacher; sometimes by the students, and sometimes they are random, all depending on your purpose for grouping. When students learn in a variety of short-term groupings, they become comfortable working with all members of the class and a supportive community develops.

2. **Choice**

   We give our students choice in their learning because choice, as brain researchers confirm, is a great motivator. We cannot know all that students bring to our classrooms, so choice provides students with personalized opportunities to connect with their prior knowledge, interests and learning preferences. When students, particularly the age group we teach, have some choice, they feel a sense of ownership for and commitment to their learning that is not possible when it is being directed by us.

   Concern for peer approval can make it difficult for young adolescents to make appropriate decisions about the choices we provide. To support our students in their decision-making we can:

   - Teach them about their learning preferences so they have a better understanding of themselves as learners.
   - Engage them in assessing their own learning based on mutually established criteria - before, during and after a lesson or unit so that they are more aware of their learning needs.
   - Introduce choice gradually; for students new to making choices you may want to begin with allowing them to choose who they work with, the order of completion for a number of tasks, or what to do when they have completed assigned work.

Choice-based differentiation needs to be carefully constructed so that all choices address the same curriculum expectations (with the exception of students on an IEP whose task may focus on modified curriculum expectations), take approximately the same amount of time, and require all students to work at the edge of their current readiness. It is far more important to develop a few high-quality choices than to provide students with lots of choice. Too many choices are time consuming for you to create, monitor and assess and can prove to be overwhelming and confusing for your students.
When we provide students with choice, we are responding to individual needs and designing instruction and assessment so that students achieve a particular learning goal. Some considerations include:

- determining whether or not choice is appropriate
- giving different choices for students at different levels of readiness or with different learning preferences
- offering fewer choices to students who need help in learning how to make appropriate choices

Choice Board

A choice board is a common differentiation structure (See Differentiation Structures, P.XXX) used to provide students with choice. A choice board may be used to help students learn (i.e., instruction and assessment) or as a way for students to demonstrate their learning (i.e., evaluation). In either case, clear criteria are developed and shared with students prior to beginning the activity so that each ‘choice’ is assessed or evaluated using the same criteria.

Here is a sample multiple intelligences choice board, created for teachers in response to the ‘curriculum’ expectation:

‘Teachers will understand the key concepts of differentiated instruction.’

Assessment/Evaluation criteria could include:

- identify ways to know students
- identify aspects of instruction, assessment and evaluation that can be differentiated
- explain the connections between knowledge of students and instructional actions

"Providing students with choice that is focused and well thought out allows them to maximize their learning."

"Students were more engaged with the lesson."

"Students were more likely to complete tasks to the best of their ability."

3. Respectful Tasks

Jaime’s story

Jaime’s twenty-eight grade 7 students are warm, friendly, and fun. They enjoy working in a safe and supportive classroom where participation is encouraged and mistakes are accepted as a natural part of learning. Regardless of this positive and caring environment, however, there are a number of students in Jaime’s class who just don’t want to participate, to answer a question, to take a risk. If they are not convinced they have the right answer; they simply will not contribute.
Since risk-taking matters to learning, Jaime needed to nudge her students out of their comfortable complacency. She created flexible learning groups based on student readiness to work with the concepts of rate and ratio. Readiness was determined according to prior work in the topic of rate and ratio and to students’ overall scoring in mathematics. With students grouped according to their readiness for these concepts, Jaime had groups from grade 6 through to enriched grade 8.

Each group was presented with a rate and ratio problem appropriate to its readiness. The problem that each group was given was divided into four sections or clues. Each clue was required in order to solve the problem. As much as possible, students were given clues that were appropriate to their individual readiness to work with the concepts. Group members had to contribute their clues orally to the other members of the group to solve the problem. Students could not simply ‘hand over’ the clue to the others in the group.

Jaime found that when her reluctant participants were working with concepts at a degree of challenge that was appropriate for them, being supported and encouraged by their peers, and in sole possession of information that was necessary to successful completion of the activity, their contributions soared. Formerly reticent students not only assumed their share of responsibility for the work, but persisted - even in the group that struggled with the mathematics.

By paying attention to individual learners while remaining focused on curriculum expectations, Jaime was able to creatively address both the academic and the social/emotional needs of her students.

**See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 1, M.J. Hobbs Senior Public School**

In a differentiated instruction classroom, all students focus on their learning goals and learn in ways that are motivating, and challenging. Tasks are respectful when struggling students are engaged in learning opportunities that are just as interesting and appealing as those of other students. Respectful tasks support risk-taking in students at a time when they may be reluctant to take chances in learning for fear of appearing foolish in front of their friends. Students are more likely to feel secure in beginning and persevering with a task when everyone in the class is working on something that they find personally demanding and challenging.

“My students enjoyed the assignment more and tried to perform to the best of their ability more often. They felt successful.”

**4. Shared Responsibility for Learning**

As teachers, we not only have a responsibility to help our students achieve curriculum expectations; we also need to support students in developing the knowledge and skills required for them to learn independently. Students who are aware of how they learn best and who know how they are progressing towards a particular learning goal can inform our next steps as teachers. In addition, they develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and for the conditions that support their learning.

It makes sense, especially in a differentiated classroom which is based on responding to student learning needs, that we help our students develop the skills and habits they need to be their own best assessors - by presenting and modeling opportunities for students to assess themselves.

Any assessment opportunity requires knowledge of the learning goal and a set of criteria to help us gauge our progress towards the goal. For example, as teachers we are able to self-assess using the criteria listed for the Choice Board (See p. XXX). Whenever possible, it is important that students be involved in the development of assessment criteria - so that they understand what a ‘quality demonstration’ looks like and so that they ‘own’ the results. Criteria can be developed for a particular learning focus in a lesson or unit, for ways of learning and working together in the classroom or for various intelligence or learning style preferences.

Once the criteria is determined, a variety of strategies can be used to gather the assessment information from students such as Exit Cards, journals, checklists or simply listening to students share self-assessments after a ‘Think-Pair-Share’.

The self-assessment skills and the knowledge of their own thought processes (i.e., metacognition) that students develop by self-assessing not only serves to inform our instruction but results in a shared responsibility for learning in the differentiated classroom and an increasing independence of our students in their learning.

**Differentiation Structures**

While there are no approaches or processes that belong to differentiated instruction only, there are a number that work especially well when differentiating because they allow you to easily vary the complexity or the form of the task for different learners. Some of the more common differentiation structures include:

**Tiering** - When we tier an assignment, we are creating more than one version of a task so that we can respond to students’ varied levels of readiness. To create a tiered assignment, choose or create an activity that is what you would normally provide for your grade level, then create additional versions of that activity to meet the readiness needs you identified through pre-assessment. Remember that all tasks need to be respectful - engaging, interesting and challenging for all learners.
Learning Contracts – Teacher and student make a written agreement about a task to be completed. The agreement includes the learning goals and criteria for evaluation in student-friendly language, the format of the work, how it will be assessed, and organizational details such as the deadline and check in points.

Learning Centres or Stations – Centres provide different activities at various places in the classroom or school. Learning centres are not a differentiation structure if all students go to all centres and everyone does the same thing at a centre. In order to be differentiated, learning centres either need to be attended only by students who need or are interested in the work that is at them, or the work at the centre needs to be varied according to student readiness, interest, or learning preference.

R.A.F.T. is an acronym for Role, Audience, Format, Topic. These headings are written across the top of a grid and a number of options are created. Students choose an option or the teacher selects it for them. Students read across the columns to learn the role they are going to assume, the audience they will address, the format in which they will do the work, and the topic they are going to explore. For example, reading across a single row of a R.A.F.T. that is intended to have students work with a novel they have read, a student might assume the role of a book critic, for the audience of a daily newspaper. They will write their critique in the form of a column for the newspaper and will focus specifically on the topic of conflict within their novel.

R.A.F.T.s can be created to address student interests (especially in the ‘topic’ and ‘role’ columns), student learning preferences (in the ‘format’ column) and various readiness by altering the difficulty of some of the rows or creating separate RAFT assignments for different groups of learners.

Choice Boards – A choice board is a common differentiation structure used to provide students with choice. It is sometimes called a Tic-Tac-Toe assignment because of its design. (See the Multiple Intelligences Choice Board on page XXX as an example.)

Choice Boards can be used to help students learn (i.e., instruction and assessment) or as a way for students to demonstrate their learning (i.e., evaluation). When designing a choice board, all choices must address the same learning goal and may be based on interest (e.g., sports, music, art…) or learning preferences (e.g., learning styles or multiple intelligences). Each ‘choice’ is assessed or evaluated against the same assessment criteria.

Cubing – Students roll a cube and do the activity on the side that comes up. We can differentiate a cube according to any of student readiness, learning preference, or interest. Cubes can be designed for specific activities such as perspectives on a novel or different aspects of a history unit. Different cubes can be given to different groups and the activities varied to support readiness or learning preference. We can make cubes and write the activities on the sides, or we can simply use a standard die accompanied by a set of index cards with the matching numbers and activities recorded on the cards.

Research-Based Instructional Strategies

Robert Marzano reviewed thirty-five years worth of educational research studies using a statistical technique called meta-analysis which allowed him to combine the results of a number of studies and determine the impact of specific instructional strategies. (Marzano, 2003) What he and his colleagues found were nine categories of instructional strategies with a significant, positive and demonstrable impact on student achievement.

Think about your own instructional practice. You probably have some favourite strategies that you use more regularly than others (because they work!) – such as think-pair-share, mind maps, outlines or Venn diagrams. Examine Marzano’s nine categories of instructional strategies below then see if you can find a category for some of your favourite strategies.

Categories of Instructional Strategies that Impact Student Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Instructional Strategies</th>
<th>Sample Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Identifying similarities and differences</td>
<td>Venn diagram, metaphors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Summarizing and note taking</td>
<td>reciprocal teaching, outlines, webs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Reinforcing effort and providing recognition</td>
<td>goal-setting with teacher and peer feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Homework and practice</td>
<td>application of learning – e.g., in simulations, problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Nonlinguistic representations</td>
<td>graphic organizers – e.g., concept maps, pictures, physical or kinesthetic models - e.g., role play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Cooperative learning</td>
<td>think-pair-share, jigsaw, 3 step interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Setting objectives and providing feedback</td>
<td>rubrics or checklists with clear learning goal and previously established assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Generating and testing hypotheses</td>
<td>inquiry processes (e.g., labs), problem solving, decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Questions, cues and advance organizers</td>
<td>anticipation guides, exit cards, teaching vocabulary, thinking routines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marzano’s review of the research also noted that for instructional strategies to have a positive, visible impact on student achievement, it was necessary to provide students with ongoing explicit instruction in the strategy. In a differentiated classroom, one can provide instruction in a strategy for the whole class and then provide students additional experiences with the strategy in their differentiated learning groups.
One Strategy – Many Uses

Instructional strategies serve a variety of purposes within the teaching and learning process.

To illustrate this, consider the varied uses of Venn diagrams and concept maps.

These strategies can be used:
- for pre-assessment – to gauge students’ understanding of a concept prior to the start of a unit or lesson.
- for instruction – to help students make sense of new learning e.g., as they watch a video or read an excerpt from a text.
- for formative assessment – to help students show what they have learned so far – so that teachers can provide feedback and decide what they can do next to help students progress.
- for self-assessment – to help students to show what they have learned – as evidence of their achievement of the intended learning goal. The quality of this demonstration is judged and a value is assigned.
- for evaluation – used to help students to show what they have learned so far – as evidence of their achievement of the intended learning goal. The quality of this demonstration is judged and a value is assigned.
- for instruction - to help students make sense of new learning.
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- for formative assessment – to help students show what they have learned so far – so that teachers can provide feedback and decide what they can do next to help students progress.
- for self-assessment – to help students to show what they have learned – as evidence of their achievement of the intended learning goal. The quality of this demonstration is judged and a value is assigned.
- for evaluation – used to help students to show what they have learned so far – as evidence of their achievement of the intended learning goal. The quality of this demonstration is judged and a value is assigned.

This Venn diagram/concept map example clearly illustrates that assessment forms a significant part of the teaching and learning process. The process of differentiating instruction for students relies on the ongoing use of assessment strategies. The information that we gather from assessing continuously builds our knowledge of our students and informs our next teaching steps.

- Pre-assessment informs our starting place, our flexible groupings and our choice of resources.
- Pre-assessment is used to ‘diagnose’.
- Formative assessments, used throughout the learning process as students are building their understanding of concepts, let us know how our students are doing with respect to their learning goals, and where we need to provide additional support. Formative assessment is used to ‘take the pulse’ of student learning so that we can adjust our instruction to help students before they are evaluated.

Assessment strategies, whether they are diagnostic, formative or for the purpose of evaluation, can be written (e.g., exit cards, anticipation guides, quizzes, short reports), communicated orally (e.g., think-pair-share, role play or interview) or demonstrated (e.g., an illustration, physical model, simulation, musical performance).

Diagnostic and Formative Assessment

‘assess for learning’

Self-Assessment

‘assessment as learning’

Evaluation

‘assessment of learning’

“Ongoing assessment is an important part of maintaining differentiated instruction. Assessment should be used to guide the tasks each student is given to do.”

Louisa’s and Tracy’s Story

Exit Cards as a Formative Assessment Strategy

Louisa and Tracy teach at a large Grade 7-12 school in Ottawa. Their caring and concern for their students is evident in the rapport they have developed, and in the effort they make to provide varied and interesting activities. When they began to differentiate their instruction it was important to them to find out the understandings and misconceptions that each student had after a lesson so that they could use that information to refine their plans for the following day’s classes. Louisa and Tracy adopted the strategy of exit cards - simple, half page cards with a single question that students answer just before the end of a class. The questions vary according to what the teachers want to know each day. They may be as general as “Tell me three things you learned in today’s class, two things you enjoyed, and one thing you didn’t quite understand” or as specific as “Explain the difference between igneous and sedimentary rock.”

After each class, it becomes an easy task for both teachers to quickly review the exit cards, identify information to inform the next day’s lesson, determine student groupings and decide on ways to approach instruction with each group. They might also think about how they can partner learners to summarize the previous day’s work. In this way, exit cards have provided the information required for Louisa and Tracy to differentiate their instruction on the following day.

Louisa’s reflections on exit cards point not only to the value of this activity, but to the importance of the little details that can make a difference between a strategy’s success and failure.

“I find that exit cards have really helped me understand the way my students learn. They also allow me to keep tabs on those students who wouldn’t normally speak up in a class. It is like ongoing dialogue with the students.”

“When I first started exit cards, I explained what they were, and I gave them a plain white square of paper to write the information on. I noticed the effort put into the exit card was not very high. Then I thought that I might give them a plain green piece of paper with another question, and the effort was a little higher.”

Differentiating Instruction and Assessment

When we select a strategy to help students learn, we choose one that will serve the learning needs of students and as much as possible, match their learning preferences. For example, we might:
- select a strategy and modify it to meet the varied learning styles of students in the class.
  e.g., providing Venn diagrams on paper for visual learners and as physical models/manipulatives for kinesthetic learners or
- select a particular strategy for one group of students (e.g., a ‘jigsaw’ for students who learn best in larger groups) and an alternate one(s) for others (e.g., a ‘read-pair-share’ for students who are more likely to be successful in smaller groups.)

Ongoing assessment is an important part of maintaining differentiated instruction. Assessment should be used to guide the tasks each student is given to do.”

Assessment as a Formative Assessment Strategy

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The third time I used exit cards, I handed each student a bigger piece of paper, bright yellow, with the question typed on it and a graphic. I couldn’t believe the responses! My students saw that exit card as part of their learning, rather than a ‘scrap’ piece of paper cut out at the last minute.

I really understand now how important it is to put a little extra into creating the handouts given to students. A border or graphic ‘packages’ the assignment into a neat little bundle.”

See DVD: Student Success Grade 7 and 8 Differentiated Instruction, Chapter 5, St. Joseph’s Catholic High School

Evaluation: Helping Students Demonstrate Their Learning

As outlined in previous sections, most of the teaching and learning process is devoted to helping students learn. To do this we select strategies that:

• engage students
• help them gradually build and consolidate their understanding of particular concepts
• make their learning visible – to facilitate self-assessment and formative assessment – to guide next instructional steps

When we reach the point near the end of the teaching and learning process, we will want to select a strategy(ies) that helps students best demonstrate what they have learned so that as teachers we can:

• confirm what students have learned
• judge (i.e., evaluate) how well they have achieved the curriculum expectations or the goals of their individualized programs
• assign a value or grade to represent their levels of achievement

Note that the balance of finding out what students know and can do is very much tipped towards self, diagnostic and formative assessments. (See ‘Earl’ inset) These assessment components of the teaching and learning process are the very ones that are essential to helping us differentiate instruction to meet the learning needs of all students in our classroom.

Differentiating Evaluation

Just as we can select any number of strategies to instruct and assess, we have a wide selection of strategies to choose from when designing evaluation tasks. We can look to Marzano’s ‘Categories of Instructional Strategies’ for many of these. We select strategies that are appropriate to the curriculum expectations or learning goal and that help students best demonstrate their learning.

For example, a Choice Board provides a structure for a variety of strategies. Using a choice board similar to the one on p. XXX, students may demonstrate their understanding of a concept(s) through a role play, cartoon strip or short report.

Similarly, if one is asking students to analyse an historical event, a musical selection or an artwork, it is appropriate for students to demonstrate their understanding through an oral presentation (e.g., art critic), a newspaper article or performance/demonstration (e.g., ‘play and say’ for music analysis; storyboard or photo essay for historical analysis). The R.A.F.T. (p. XXX) could be used to structure these choices.

When we evaluate, we judge the quality of student work and assign it a value to indicate a level of achievement for the purpose of reporting. When we choose to differentiate evaluation tasks, student demonstrations of learning will differ.

Therefore, when we evaluate, it is critical that:

• each demonstration is based on the same set of curriculum expectations (or learning goals for students with an IEP) and
• the criteria on which the demonstrations are judged is the same

Fair vs Equal

Teachers of young adolescents tend to have an intense concern with perceptions of fairness, and it is little wonder – our students are not shy in telling us when they think something is unfair. We know that their definition of fairness is not yet refined. Students may think that fairness is about everyone getting the same thing, whereas we know it is about everyone getting the opportunities they need so they all have equal access to learning in a way that will lead to their success as well as opportunities to demonstrate their learning that maximize their potential for success.

“When we began planning, I was concerned that students would perhaps find it unfair since they were doing different activities. Students, however, did not question the process. They knew that everyone was getting what they needed.”

Balance
It is also important for teachers who differentiate instruction to provide a balance of strategies – so that all assessment and evaluation tasks are not written tests or reports, or all projects or all oral presentations. This, of course, supports a key principle of the differentiating teacher; namely the recognition that students learn in different ways and we allow those differences while still accurately and fairly assessing for further instruction and evaluating to make a judgment about achievement.

“Differentiated instruction allows teachers to teach the whole child. At the end of the semester, if all your marks reflect pencil and paper tasks, your assessment is not realistic. Those who do well with pencil and paper tasks will always achieve high marks and those who find these tasks difficult will not achieve to their potential. If all your term assessment revolved around dramatic tasks, then only the list of students who would excel would change. Therefore, using only one type of assessment is not reflective of the student’s true ability. It is only when you give students the opportunity to show their learning in different ways that you can really obtain a true assessment that is reflective of the whole child.”

Conclusion
Conclusion

Teaching is an ongoing investigation with the purpose of finding out who our students are so that we can support them in their learning. This guide provides questions, strategies and structures to focus this quest for those new to differentiated instruction and for those who are refining and honing their differentiated instruction skills.

Differentiated instruction benefits everyone, not just our students. It allows us to see learning from a variety of perspectives and provides countless, unexpected teachable moments that we would otherwise miss. As educators, differentiated instruction helps us learn.

When all is said and done, the purpose of differentiation is to work smarter as teachers - so that our students work smarter as students. The point is not to become overwhelmed by a myriad of instructional and assessment strategies but to be selective and purposeful in our use of them. In this way, we can provide opportunities for our students to take more responsibility for how they learn and in turn, what they learn.
Thinking About My Teaching Practice…

• What do I currently do to differentiate instruction in my classroom?

• What idea or action might I incorporate into my teaching practice so that I can meet the needs of more students?

• What do I know about my own teaching practice:
  • How do I/can I determine the learning needs of my students - based on:
    • their interests;
    • their readiness for a particular area of learning;
    • their learning profile

• What strategies and structures will I use, to respond to the diverse learning needs of my students, to:
  • create a positive, inclusive environment that supports each student's learning?
  • engage students by helping them make connections to prior learning or experiences?
  • introduce or reinforce new learning?
  • help my students self-assess?
  • help my students demonstrate what they understand, know and can do?

• How do I/can I:
  • help students share the responsibility for learning?
  • build communities of respect – respectful tasks, respectful interaction?
  • teach for deep understanding?
  • assess to inform my next instructional steps?
  • develop a varied repertoire of instructional, assessment and evaluation strategies?
  • implement flexible teaching and learning routines?

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: I teach five classes and can’t hope to know all of those learners. If I just provide kinesthetic activities and the five entry points as often as I can, will I be differentiating?

A: Teaching only through multiple entry points, like rotating all students through multiple intelligences centres, is not differentiated instruction. However, whenever we provide the same rich range of experiences to all students, we are increasing the likelihood of student achievement and enhancing our own understanding of learner preferences. This gives us the information we need to provide individual students with experiences that are ideally suited to their learning preferences… which is differentiated instruction.

Some ways to start – make a division-wide decision to share learning preferences information among teachers. A computer savvy teacher might set up a simple database that would allow all teachers to create flexible short term groups for learning based on learning style or intelligence preference. Alternatively, a low-tech option might be for each teacher to create and share a single page chart of their homeroom students clustered according to their strongest learning preferences.

Q: Some of my students who excel in class always choose the alternatives to writing just so they will finish quickly, yet they are capable of so much more. When should I limit a student’s choice? Am I being unfair to a student if I limit their choice of options?

A: Differentiation is about extending every student’s learning a bit beyond where they are comfortable. That space, the difference between what they can do now and what they could do with a little pressure and support, is called the zone of proximal development (zpd) (Vygotsky, 1978) and it is the place where learning happens. When students stay with what is comfortable, they can practice, consolidate, and feel good about themselves, but they do not learn. When they are pushed too far into work they can’t manage even with support, they will reach a frustration point. No learning occurs there either; it is the place where students, again particularly young adolescents, shut down in order to protect their sense of self.

You are being unfair to a student if you allow them to coast. Encourage students to choose differently, and re-examine your activities. In a differentiated classroom, all activities are respectful of learners. This means all activities take approximately equal amounts of time and they all require students to demonstrate understanding or skill to equally high levels. If your writing assignments take ages longer to finish than anything else, you need to think about how you can craft them so they are appealing and not onerous.
Are we being fair to students when we give them choice in how to complete an assignment and know they are not always going to have that choice?

If our students know who they are as learners, they will be better able to prepare for final evaluation tasks of all types. As adults, we know what works for us and we automatically do what works when we are in a situation that requires our best. Our students don’t know their strengths yet and need our help to discover what works for them. This information is important throughout their educational career and beyond as they enter the world of work.

How do you ensure that assessment is fair when students are performing different tasks?

Your curriculum expectations are the same for all students, or are appropriate to the individual in the case of a student with an IEP, so think of the different tasks as being different routes to the same destination. It does not matter if individual students took the scenic route or the highway as long as they end up in the same place. The key is to be very clear about the expectations and the specific knowledge, skills or understandings a student will demonstrate in achievement of them, and then create a common assessment tool that measures those three. That way one student can build a three-dimensional model of a cell, another can create a PowerPoint presentation and a third can write a report. As long as they are all assessed using the same criteria, the assessments will be fair.

Q: How do you ensure that assessment is fair when students are performing different tasks?

A: Your curriculum expectations are the same for all students, or are appropriate to the individual in the case of a student with an IEP, so think of the different tasks as being different routes to the same destination. It does not matter if individual students took the scenic route or the highway as long as they end up in the same place. The key is to be very clear about the expectations and the specific knowledge, skills or understandings a student will demonstrate in achievement of them, and then create a common assessment tool that measures those three. That way one student can build a three-dimensional model of a cell, another can create a PowerPoint presentation and a third can write a report. As long as they are all assessed using the same criteria, the assessments will be fair.

Annotated Bibliography


Hume, Karen (2007) Start Where They Are: Differentiating for Success with the Young Adolescent. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada. Combines theoretical and practical information about differentiation as the framework for an effective classroom for young adolescents; includes learning preference inventories and several dozen modifiable blackline masters.


Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001) Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD. A chapter for each of the nine strategy categories that have a positive and significant impact on student achievement; chapters include research and recommendations for classroom practice.

Northey, Sheryn Spencer (2005) Handbook on Differentiated Instruction for Middle and High Schools. New York: Eye on Education. Tips are organized according to differentiation of content, process or product; examples are provided from a variety of subject areas.

Silver, H. R. Strong and Matthew Perini (2000) So Each May Learn: Integrating Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD. Connects the usually separate models of learning styles and multiple intelligences to create powerful instructional and assessment activities; includes learning preference inventories.

Sternberg, R.J., Zhang, L. (2001). Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Presents a comprehensive coverage of theory and research on cognitive, thinking, and learning styles, including empirical evidence, and shows the application of these perspectives to school situations.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann (1999) The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners. Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD. The text that set out Tomlinson’s model and provided the rationale for differentiated instruction; includes differentiation structures, with classroom examples.


Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind in Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Develops Vygotsky’s idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) and indicates how the full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction.


Wormeli, Rick (2006) Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse. Deals with the assessment issues in our classrooms, including whether to grade homework, how to respond to requests for redos, and how to record grades in a differentiated classroom.

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Related Ministry of Education Publications and Websites

Grades 7 & 8 Reach Every Student Through Differentiated Instruction brochure

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