Strategies for Differentiating Instruction v1

Classrooms that successfully meet the needs of all learners are highlighted by differentiated instruction. Teachers can differentiate lessons by offering a variety of learning environments and methods for students to access content, engage in the learning process, and meet assessment standards. This increases the opportunity for the entire spectrum of students in the classroom to learn and achieve.

Strategies for Differentiating Instruction in the Classroom

Environment: Organization of Learning Environment

- Utilize flexible grouping of students that is task specific, i.e. when students are assigned a research task create small groups with students who are both strong and weak in related skills.
- Clearly post steps and expectations for the day where all students can see them.
- Post and regularly update a calendar with both short and long term due dates.
- Display work and information that reinforce curriculum and learning strategies.
- Have materials for students at all levels readily available, i.e. extensive classroom library, computer access.
- Classroom design should allow for maximum student participation, flexible grouping, and freedom of movement for the teacher, i.e. tables arranged in a horseshoe.
- Incorporate independent and small group learning centers into the design, i.e. computer stations, study carrels.
- The arrangement of the classroom should be purposeful and predictable.

Content: Learning Objectives & Access to Materials

- Provide materials at varied levels of difficulty.
- Provide a variety of medias through which students can access curriculum, always including both text and non-text sources, i.e. magazines, internet, political cartoons, personal journals, audio tapes, film, etc.
- Utilize engaging, richly detailed sources (not just the textbook!) in every lesson, i.e., primary source materials, picture books, interactive computer programs, video clips, biographies, etc.
- Provide students with unit organizers/lesson plans, rubrics, assignment guides and models of excellent performance before the lesson.
- Utilize manipulatives and models; tangible objects that can help students better understand abstract concepts.
- Identify specific objectives for technology use and preview films, software, websites, etc. before use.

Process: Delivery and Organization

- Use inquiry, problem-based and project-based learning whenever possible to enhance student engagement and provide multiple entry points into learning. Students have the opportunity to engage in learning that matters to them and to use their skills in real-world contexts.
- Designing units around a central issue, problem or question provides students with coherence between lessons and makes the work both engaging and intellectually challenging. Lessons throughout the unit should be connected to the central issue, problem or question with the purpose of providing students with understanding that will help them respond to the central issue, problem or question.
- Utilize cooperative learning activities which require active participation by all members of the group, while also including individual student responsibilities. Cooperative learning decreases academic competition, and instead establishes systems of collaboration, cooperation and support. For

example, to create a concept map, each team works on a large piece of chart paper, identifying core ideas that relate to a pre-determined central concept, then add supporting details and make connections. Each team member works with a different colored marker.

- When planning the lesson, design it to access student strengths. Anticipate student weaknesses and plan ahead to provide necessary supports.
- When planning, consider individual student's IEP's and plan for necessary accommodations, modifications, and adaptive technology.
- Anticipate the organizational, study, and learning skills required to participate in learning and complete the assignment(s) successfully, and embed the pre-teaching and/or review of these skills into the lesson plan.
- At the beginning of and throughout the year, explicitly teach students strategies for note-taking, reading and comprehending text, solving math story problems, etc. Establish routines for completing the writing process (pre-write, first draft, revise, edit, publish) and provide students with strategies for pre-writing, revising, and peer editing.
- Locate materials that are engaging and accessible to students at all levels.
- Make the transition to new material by helping students to make connections between the new material and their prior knowledge and personal experiences, i.e. KWL chart.
- Preview the lesson by connecting it to the larger unit.
- Prepare students to be successful by providing and discussing lesson guide, rubric, and models of excellent performance.
- Pre-record upcoming due dates as an entire class in student's individual planners and on a classroom calendar.
- Begin units with an opening piece (can be as short as ten minutes) that will grab their attention and interest and preview the unit's central problem, issue or question.
- Vary the format of lessons through a unit to maintain student engagement and interest, i.e., simulation activities, cooperative learning, class debates, interactive lecture-discussions, work in pairs, etc.
- Break lesson into workable units/steps; post and review "To Do" steps each day.
- Present information both visually and orally.
- Utilize the workshop model.
- Model the process for an activity before asking students to complete it individually or in groups.
- Provide students with, and model the use of, planning think sheets, graphic organizers, concept maps, story maps, study guides, etc. to support reading and writing activities.
- Conference with individuals and small groups while students are working.
- Warn students of impending transitions and prepare them to effectively move from one activity into another.
- Be aware of low frustration levels. Help students address the problem individually and guide them to materials and activities they can be successful with.
- Adjust accommodations and modifications for individual students throughout the lesson when necessary.

- Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson throughout and be flexible with time, instructional delivery, activity design to improve student learning and engagement when necessary.

Product: Assessment

- Assessments need to be conducted throughout the unit, not just at the end, to monitor student learning and progress. Teachers should assess students' progress toward developing understanding about information related to the unit's central issue, problem or question, as well as students' development of learning, thinking and study skills built into the unit.
- Primarily use performance-based assessments which allow students to demonstrate their knowledge through authentic tasks that are presented in real-world contexts. For example, when probability in math class, rather than having students solve pre-designed problems from the textbook, have students work in small groups to create math games based on probability and conduct a "Carnival Day" where students play each other's games and provide feedback.
- Rubrics should clearly state the purpose and goal of the project, steps for completing the project, and expectations for the final product so students know what they need to do to be successful.
- Utilize exhibitions, which allow students to demonstrate their learning through a variety of media, and portfolios, which demonstrate student learning in relation to their personal growth and academic achievement over time.
- Design assessment options that will allow students to demonstrate their learning by utilizing their strengths. Whenever possible, final projects should include cooperative learning formats and public presentation of knowledge gained, i.e., a skit or play, a live or videotaped interview or newscast, a debate, an oral presentation, a PowerPoint display, etc.
- Include an additional challenge or enrichment activity which can be either optional or required depending on the individual student.
- Practice standardized testing in context, analyze the results to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and utilize this data to guide study, thinking and basic skills instruction.
- Teach students test-taking skills, i.e. chunking, mnemonics, keyword method, throughout the year.

Classroom Climate & Routines

- Setting up daily routines in your classroom provides students with a structure that is both stable and predictable. Students know what to expect, which encourages positive behavior and success, while increasing learning time and reducing time off task. Routines may include beginning each class with ten minutes of silent reading or a five minute review of the previous day's content, having specific procedures for completing science labs, writing due dates in student planners at the start of each week, etc.
- In order for an inclusive classroom to be a successful and productive one, it must be a "safe space" where both students and teachers respect and trust one another. Take the time at the beginning of the year to create a caring, collaborative classroom culture. Continue to both foster positive communication and collaboration and recognize student successes throughout the school year. When negative behaviors do occur, try to solve them one-on-one with the student(s) to avoid public embarrassment and/or a power struggle. Creating a positive classroom environment will drastically reduce the number and seriousness of negative behaviors throughout the school year and will increase effective learning time.