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# MAKING DIFFERENTIATION A HABIT

In the years since the publication of *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, I have had the privilege to work with teachers across the United States and Canada. I have also met teachers via technology in classrooms in Asia, Great Britain, Germany, India, and Singapore who use ideas and resources in the book. And regardless of where they originate from, the questions and concerns these teachers raise about differentiation seem to be similar.

“How do I make differentiation more doable given the limitations of time and resources? How do I develop greater independence and responsibility in my students so that differentiation can be more easily managed?”

“With all the ‘tips and tricks’ publications on differentiation, how do I know I am implementing research-based strategies in my classroom?”

“How can differentiation inform the work that I do with IDEA’s Response to Intervention in my classroom?”

“Are the needs of gifted learners being appropriately addressed with classroom level differentiation?”

“Is grading different in a differentiated classroom?”

The purpose of *Making Differentiation a Habit* is to respond to the burning questions of teachers and school leaders as they work in differentiation. This book’s intent is to help teachers make differentiation a routine part of their work with

students. When differentiation becomes a habit, it becomes the way in which we go about “school.”

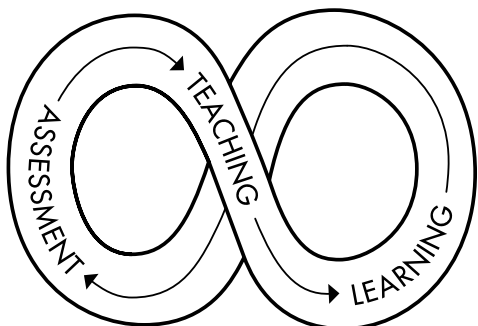
When teachers effectively differentiate instruction, there is a continuous flow in the processes of teaching, learning, and assessment.

The teaching and learning process becomes fluid and flexible as we consider the differences in our classrooms and plan for them.

When teachers effectively differentiate instruction, there is a continuous flow in the processes of teaching, learning, and assessment. These components operate not as steps that we follow, but rather as a continuous cycle, each process informing the next. **Figure 1** on page 2 shows this cycle.

The purpose and goal of teaching is student learning. The cycle typically begins with formal or informal preassessment in the **assessment** phase. Based on what you learn about your students’ needs, you plan and enter the **teaching** phase. At this point of the cycle, students are engaged in **learning**. As the students are engaged in learning as well as after the learning sequence, you again enter an **assessment** phase, this time using formative assessment strategies. You reflect on whether the students have accomplished learning goals. At this point in the cycle, you may need to enter another phase of teaching and learning utilizing further strategies in

differentiation. Or, if goals are accomplished, you move into a new cycle with new goals. Each phase of the cycle informs your responses to and plans for your students. This book provides strategies for each of these phases.

**FIGURE 1****The Cycle of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment****Critical Elements for Success in a Differentiated Classroom**

Much has been written about differentiation as teachers take on the challenges of academically diverse classrooms. Critical to effective responses to student learning differences is an understanding of what differentiation *is* and *isn't*. It is assumed that teachers recognize that the academic diversity of their classrooms and standards/goals-based education, along with initiatives such as Response to Intervention, demand authentic differentiated approaches in order to increase the likelihood of student success in learning. But what exactly do these differentiated approaches look like? Following are the 12 critical elements for success in a differentiated classroom. These provide the framework for this book.

Authentic differentiation requires you to:

1. Identify learning goals, or KUDO's (what your students need to **K**now, **U**nderstand, and be able to **D**o).
2. Examine your professional practices in light of your students' needs.

3. Apply practical, doable, and valid assessment strategies.
4. Create differentiated learning plans.
5. Use choice opportunities to motivate student learning.
6. Prescribe tiered assignments and use flexible grouping as necessary and appropriate.
7. Maintain flexibility in your planning and teaching.
8. Develop student responsibility and independence.
9. Use ethical grading practices.
10. Differentiate instruction for gifted students with their particular and specific learning differences in mind.
11. Integrate strategies for differentiation and RTI into your classroom practices.
12. Commit to a leadership framework for differentiated classrooms in your school.

**About This Book**

This book provides specific ideas, strategies, templates, and formats that reflect authentic differentiation. The ideas in the book evolved from both my professional practice as a classroom teacher and facilitator of opportunities for gifted learners, and from my work with academic underachievers. Some strategies come from the practical ideas of teachers I have had the pleasure to work with. The specific goals of the book and chapter descriptions follow.

**THE GOALS OF MAKING DIFFERENTIATION A HABIT**

- To identify critical elements for success in academically diverse classrooms
- To distinguish authentic differentiation from random teaching tips and tricks
- To provide a format for writing learning goals that increases your clarity about what you want your students to know, understand, and be able to do

- ▶ To examine professional practices to enable educators to develop plans for the next steps in the development of the habit of differentiation
- ▶ To present practical, informal assessment strategies
- ▶ To present a differentiated learning plan that better reflects the kind of planning essential for success in academically diverse classrooms
- ▶ To examine the ways in which choice can motivate student learning
- ▶ To provide simple, timesaving techniques for designing differentiated activities, including tiered assignments
- ▶ To develop flexible lesson routines that build in responses to learning differences
- ▶ To provide strategies and routines to promote greater independence and responsibility in students
- ▶ To explore issues around grading practices in academically diverse classrooms
- ▶ To distinguish the ways in which differentiation for the gifted and talented varies significantly from strategies used for other learners
- ▶ To make clear the connections between differentiation and Response to Intervention
- ▶ To provide guidance to teacher leaders and administrators in supporting differentiation in their classrooms and schools.

**Chapter 1** presents the first critical element: identifying your learning goals. The chapter describes the connections between standards-based education and differentiation. Many teachers working with state standards or provincial goals in the classroom put them into the more practical language of KUDo's, what students will *know*, *understand*, and be able to *do* by the end of the unit or a lesson. The how-tos of KUDo's, the critical first step in differentiation, are explained, and examples in a variety of curriculum areas are provided. Finally, a process for thinking through when and how to differentiate is presented to clarify the flow of actions in a differentiated classroom from standards to summative assessment.

The second critical element, examining your professional practices, is addressed in **Chapter 2**. In this chapter, you will thoughtfully reflect on the curriculum practices and strategies for differentiation you currently use in your classroom. You will have an opportunity to examine your practices in light of a continuum of teacher development in differentiation. You will also be provided with a survey to help you recognize the different needs of your students.

**Chapter 3** addresses the critical element of assessment. A variety of practical strategies for preassessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, and student self-reflection are offered. Distinctions are made between formal and informal methods of assessment. The focus of the strategies presented in this chapter is on quick, informal assessment.

The fourth critical element, the differentiated learning plan, is introduced in **Chapter 4**. In today's diverse classrooms, the lesson plan structures developed in the 1960s and 1970s no longer work. This chapter presents a nine-step process to think through and design differentiated learning plans.

**Chapter 5** extends your understandings and application of the fifth critical element: student choice. Although many formats for providing student choice are being used in classrooms, not all meet the standard of authentic differentiation. For example, distinctions must be made between a differentiated tic-tac-toe board and a randomly assembled collection of activities. Essential characteristics of differentiated choice boards are described. Additional formats and templates are introduced and ideas for best managing the use of choice in the classroom are offered.

Your understanding of and practices in tiering assignments and using flexible instructional groups will be extended in **Chapter 6**. This sixth critical element describes the most prescriptive strategy in differentiation and encourages you to try new ways to tier assignments. Two templates are offered to make designing tiered assignments quick and easy to do. Criteria for well-designed tiered assignments are also presented.



**Chapter 7** describes the importance of maintaining flexibility in planning and teaching, the seventh critical element. It asks you to examine your lesson routines and then suggests ways that planning for differences can be accomplished by modifying your routines.

Increasing student responsibility and independence is a crucial endeavor in a differentiated classroom. **Chapter 8** addresses this critical element by providing procedures, management structures, tips for flexible use of space, and strategies to get your students working in ways that take less time, less direction, and less supervision from you.

**Chapter 9** examines the grading dilemmas in differentiated classrooms. This critical element is discussed through responses to 10 burning questions about grading. In this chapter, you will explore your values, beliefs, and practices related to grading.

**Chapter 10** explores the challenges of differentiating for gifted learners. Because of their particular and specific learning differences and needs, differentiation for gifted learners varies significantly from strategies used for most other students. Templates, formats, and strategies are offered that link best practices for gifted learners to your practices in differentiation.

**Chapter 11** focuses on the eleventh critical element: examining the connections between differentiated instruction and IDEA's Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI procedures are used for students who are having difficulties academically as well as those who might be experiencing behavioral issues. The strategies of differentiation form the foundation of Response to Intervention.

**Chapter 12** discusses the final critical element: providing a leadership framework for differentiated classrooms and schools. A variety of tools, including classroom walk-through protocols, are provided to allow a teacher leader or school administrator to gather specific data about differentiation. In addition, an action-planning format is offered that can be used with members of a school's faculty or with a school's leadership team.

Finally, the **Conclusion** reviews all 12 critical elements of differentiation and offers examples of ways to make differentiation a daily habit and routine.

## How to Use This Book

*Making Differentiation a Habit* presents critical elements for success in academically diverse classrooms. Its focus is to extend the work of my previous book, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, as well as to address topics that have arisen from the questions and concerns of teachers I have worked with over the past few years.

My intent is to support the work of classroom teachers, gifted and special education specialists, as well as those in school leadership positions, such as curriculum directors, building principals, teacher leaders, and professional development trainers. I also hope that the book will become a valued resource for college faculty working with preservice teachers. The habit of differentiation should begin before our first teaching position.

You may choose to go through the book chapter by chapter, examining your practices and adding new ideas and strategies. Or you may want to target a particular area for professional growth and go straight to that chapter. For example, if you want to extend your practices in tiered assignments, you may go immediately to Chapter 6.

If you are in a specialized role, you may wish to review chapters with the greatest practicality and concern for you and your school. Do you need to

Although practical in its intent, this book strives to deepen your understandings of differentiation and extend your practices to the benefit of your students.

know where and how gifted learners “fit” into a differentiated classroom? Are you wondering how RTI and differentiation can work together? Does your school need to set up a building-wide plan for moving toward a more comprehensive implementation of differentiation? Are you looking for ways to respond to some teachers’ apprehension about grading in academically diverse classrooms? You will find your answers within these chapters.

Although practical in its intent, this book strives to deepen your understandings of differentiation and extend your practices to the benefit of your students. I hope it becomes a trusted resource for you as you develop the habit of differentiation. Enjoy browsing its pages for what will make differentiation more doable for you and ensure success in your academically diverse classroom!

Diane Heacox, Ed.D.

