



Differentiating Instruction *in the* *Regular* Classroom

How to Reach and
Teach All Learners

Updated
Anniversary
Edition

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How to Reach and
Teach All Learners

Diane Heacox, Ed.D.

Foreword by Cindy A. Strickland

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Anniversary
Edition



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Dedication

To my husband, John Bloodsworth, for his continual and steadfast love and support, without which I could not “be.”

To my daughter, Kylie, for her patience and unconditional love. Your commitment to excellence is a model for your mother.

To all the teachers I have had the privilege to work and learn with worldwide. Your enthusiasm for teaching and your commitment to the success of all students is my continual inspiration.

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The late Linda King first introduced me to differentiated instruction when I was a novice teacher. Her extraordinary work continues to live with me and those teachers I have the pleasure to serve.

Always thinking about what is good for kids, Judy Galbraith has given me the opportunity to share these ideas with teachers who can make a difference.

My mother, Gloria Heacox, who consistently and persistently supported my personal and professional growth. Proud, positive, loving, and strong, she will continue to be my reference point as I follow my life's journey.

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Foreword

by *Cindy A. Strickland*

Recently, I began taking water aerobics at our local pool. As is typical in any group setting, there is a wide variety of participants. Our class includes some who are young, some not-so-young; some already in shape, some hoping to become more so; some who have experience with water aerobics, some who do not; some who love the water, others who are more hesitant. Our instructor, Margaret Ann, sets a welcoming tone as we enter the pool area. She greets everyone with equal enthusiasm, works to quickly learn our names, our backgrounds, and our body “quirks.” She makes sure we all have sunscreen and water to drink. Margaret Ann also lets us get to know her—her background, her interests, her own fitness goals. This promotes a feeling of “We’re all in this together.” Every time this class meets I find myself thinking about ways in which this class models the principles of good teaching in general, and good differentiation in particular.

Margaret Ann’s classroom acknowledges and honors differences in learners. She differentiates her lessons almost constantly. Whenever she introduces a new move, she describes three different levels for the exercise. For example, when doing a cross country ski move in the water, she explains that level one is done with shoulders out of the water and a slight bounce on the toes as you “ski.” Level two requires that you keep your shoulders underwater and not bounce. Level three is done while not touching the bottom of the pool at all. She tells us to choose the version that is right for us in terms of level of fitness. Here are some examples of what we hear:

“It’s *your* choice. Do what feels best to *you*.”

“If you are ready for a more cardiovascular workout, try level two.”

“Level three will work your obliques especially hard.”

“If this doesn’t work for you, try it this way. The main thing is to keep moving.”

“Raise your arms above your head if you want to work on balance as well.”

“Use the side of the pool if you need to.”

“When you finish your three laps, try adding this move . . . ”

“Listen to what your body is telling you.”

These kinds of statements provide participants with the information needed to make good choices. Margaret Ann’s matter-of-fact tone and body language indicate a total lack of judgment about the decisions any individual may make. As our teacher, her job is to provide excellent modeling, generate excitement and enthusiasm, and provide the individualized feedback we need to improve and to avoid injury. Our job is to identify our own goals and to use her as a resource to help us grow. In this class, we feel empowered and in charge of our own learning. Our teacher shows us that she trusts us and we rise to the occasion.

Granted, my aerobics class is made up of mature adults who have chosen to take the class and are therefore presumably quite motivated. Experienced teachers know that this is not necessarily the case in a typical classroom! The children do not always want to be there. Their level of commitment to doing their best work varies a great deal (sometimes minute by minute!). They may not know how to make good choices when they are offered. Teachers in differentiated classrooms work hard to provide variety and choice, *when appropriate*, and work to teach their students how to make good choices and to value pushing themselves to do things that are just a little bit beyond their current comfort level. All human beings appreciate having a say in what they do and how they do it. If a teacher says to students, “Here is a really onerous assignment for

you,” they will moan and groan. But if a teacher says, “You have a choice of onerous assignment A or onerous assignment B,” students are somehow happier. We must remember that our students live in a world where there is an almost ridiculous level of variety and choice available to them. (A good example is the cereal aisle in the grocery store. Choices include high fiber, low fat, gluten-free, chocolate, strawberry, blueberry, marshmallows, generic, brand name, etc. You name it, they’ve got it!) When schools focus on a one-size-fits-all, take-it-or-leave-it curriculum, it feels forced and artificial—and maybe even insulting—to our students. No teacher differentiates everything every day. But those of us who are committed to maximizing student learning strive to add to our repertoire of differentiation over time.

Over a decade ago, I took my very first class in differentiation from Diane Heacox. Although that course was a part of a certificate program in teaching gifted students, I remember thinking, “Oh my goodness, all students need and deserve this kind of instruction. I wish I had known about this when I started teaching!” Nevertheless, the first time I consciously tried to differentiate, it took me three hours to plan a 45-minute lesson! If it had continued to take me that long, I probably would have given up and with good reason. But as with any skill set, the more one practices,

the better and faster one gets. I’m at the point now where I can’t plan *without* differentiating; it has become such a part of who I am as a teacher.

In this updated anniversary version of *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners*, Diane provides a multitude of practical, teacher-tested tools and templates to help you begin or refine your own journey toward more fully differentiated instruction. She helps us see how current topics in education such as the Common Core State Standards, Response to Intervention, curriculum mapping, and essential questions fit with differentiated instruction. She gives suggestions for gathering information about student needs and preferences. She offers step-by-step approaches to planning lesson content, processes, and products. Throughout this book, Diane’s simple, down-to-earth instructions in how to handle the challenges of setting up and running a differentiated classroom helped me, and I am confident they will help you, no matter where you are in your own journey. I wish you well (and don’t forget your sunscreen)!

Cindy A. Strickland has been a teacher for 30 years, working with students of all ages from kindergarten to master’s degree candidates. In her consulting work, she has provided workshops on differentiation throughout the United States and internationally. Cindy is the author of *Exploring Differentiated Instruction* and the coauthor of *Differentiation in Practice*.

Introduction

The Challenges of Today's Diverse Classrooms

What is your biggest challenge as a teacher? For many, it is attempting to respond to an increasingly broad spectrum of student needs, backgrounds, and learning styles. We know a lot more than our predecessors about why some students learn easily and others struggle. We have useful information about thinking and learning strengths and limitations; about the influence of socioeconomic and family factors on children's school performance and on their access to resources and learning experiences, both within and outside the home; and about the role of gender and cultural background in learning preferences. We know the importance of a student's readiness, learning style, motivation, interests, regard for learning, and confidence. All these factors broaden the range of student needs within a single classroom. But how do we address those needs? And what about the influence of state curriculum standards, graduation requirements, and performance assessments?

Differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is also a collection of strategies that help you better address and manage the variety of learning needs in your classroom. How can you diagnose your students' learning needs accurately and practically? How can you provide learning opportunities that increase the likelihood of student success? The answers to these questions are what differentiating instruction is all about.

Differentiated instruction is not a new trend. It is based on the best practices in education. It puts students at the center of teaching and learning. It lets their learning needs direct your instructional planning.

The Goals of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction enhances learning for all students by engaging them in activities that better respond to their particular learning needs, strengths, and preferences. The goals of differentiated instruction are:

- To develop challenging and engaging tasks for each learner.
- To develop instructional activities based on essential topics and concepts, significant processes and skills, and multiple ways to display learning.
- To provide flexible approaches to content, instruction, and products.
- To respond to students' readiness, instructional needs, interests, and learning preferences.
- To provide opportunities for students to work in varied instructional formats.
- To meet Common Core State Standards and/or state or provincial content standards for each learner.
- To establish learner-responsive, teacher-facilitated classrooms.

About This Book

This book provides a wide variety of strategies for differentiating instruction. As a professional, you'll easily recognize those that make sense to you and the techniques that reflect your style of teaching. A strategy that's easy for one teacher to use may be burdensome for another. At the same time, the way you differentiate instruction for this year's group of students may differ from

what works next year. The intent is to introduce many options for differentiation so you're sure to find techniques that work and that you can make your own.

Please keep in mind that no one expects you to differentiate your entire curriculum in one fell swoop, nor is differentiation required in all areas at all times. Start small with a unit or two, or target a particular subject or curriculum area. Spot the places in your curriculum where you know, based on your experiences, that differentiation is urgently needed for your students' success. Use this book to build a repertoire of strategies for differentiating instruction a little at a time.

I believe it's easier to build new strategies on established foundations. Two theoretical models underlie all of the strategies presented here. Although educational research offers many models and frameworks for teaching and learning, I have chosen to differentiate instruction with the aid of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives¹ and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.² Most teachers are well informed about these two models and find them both sensible and highly applicable. Use them as lenses for differentiation, as productive ways to look at what you do in your classroom. Bloom's levels of thinking and learning enable you to recognize and enhance the challenge level in your teaching. Gardner's multiple intelligences provide a ready-to-go technique to increase the variety in how you teach and how you ask your students to learn.

This book will give you a foundation in the principles of differentiated instruction. It will also give you plans, formats, and strategies to make this way of teaching attainable and manageable. You'll find guidance and practical suggestions for addressing the instructional needs of all your learners. It can help you recognize learner diversity and respond instructionally to those differences.

Throughout the book are practical and easy-to-use strategies that you can implement right away; it also offers more comprehensive planning formats for differentiating curriculum units.

You'll find ideas about managing and evaluating differentiated assignments throughout the book. Everything in these pages comes either from my experience as a classroom teacher or from the practical advice of teachers I have worked with as an instructional specialist, professor of education, or professional development trainer.

Chapter 1 describes the diversity of learners in today's classrooms and the implications of these differences for teaching. It presents an overview of differentiating content, process, and product, and an overview of the role of the teacher in a differentiated classroom. It includes questions and answers about differentiation and concludes with an inventory that will enable you to identify the degree to which you currently differentiate instruction.

Chapter 2 engages you in the first step of differentiation: gathering information about your students. It includes ideas on how to solicit information about students from their families. Tools are provided to help you discover your students' interests, learning preferences, readiness, and academic progress.

You'll examine what's important to teach in **Chapter 3**. Working from the Common Core State Standards or the content standards established by your state or province, the chapter guides you through the process of writing essential questions and unit questions to frame and focus your curriculum. You'll find a format for mapping your curriculum and identifying target areas for differentiating instruction. Your curriculum map will serve as a resource in developing other strategies in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 identifies challenge and variety as critical elements in differentiating instruction. It suggests using Bloom's taxonomy as an indicator of challenge and Gardner's multiple intelligences as an indicator of variety. The chapter introduces two planning formats for identifying the degree of differentiation within your existing curriculum units. You'll also find a formula for writing more challenging, varied activities.

The heart of differentiated instruction is flexible instructional grouping. **Chapter 5** describes

¹ *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Book 1 Cognitive Domain*, edited by Benjamin S. Bloom (New York: Addison Wesley, 1984).

² *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* by Howard Gardner (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

and explains flexible grouping and distinguishes it from other grouping methods commonly used in classrooms. It suggests when and how to group students for learning and presents management techniques.

Tiered assignments (differentiated learning tasks developed in response to students' needs) are the instructional component of flexible instructional groups. **Chapter 6** explains six ways to tier activities, along with guidelines for organization and management. It also offers criteria for making tiering less visible to students, so they'll see assignments as both interesting and fair in terms of the time and work involved.

In **Chapter 7**, you'll find four strategies for providing student choice within a framework of differentiated activities. Pathways plans allow you to present a choice of tiered, alternative activities to students who "loop out" of skills instruction by demonstrating proficiency. Project menus and challenge centers are strategies for presenting a selection of tiered assignments that students can choose from based on interests and strengths. Spin-offs are projects that extend and enrich the curriculum and may involve students in designing their own learning activities.

How to grade differentiated tasks fairly, calculate and record grades, make grades reflect rigor and challenge, and establish quality criteria: these are the subject of **Chapter 8**. "Totally 10," a project-based learning activity, is presented as a strategy for encouraging students to engage in higher levels of challenge.

Classroom management can seem like an obstacle to differentiated instruction. Suggestions for organization and management are sprinkled

throughout the book. **Chapter 9** summarizes these ideas and provides more specifics about managing a differentiated classroom.

Even within today's diverse classrooms, two populations require specific approaches to differentiation: special education students and gifted and talented students. **Chapter 10**, which is devoted to these two groups, offers an overview of their needs as well as differentiation strategies.

The appendixes include additional tools that you might find useful in differentiating instruction in your classroom. Appendix A is a reproducible sample letter you can send to your students' families to explain the goals of differentiated instruction. Appendix B offers in-depth suggestions on adding challenge and variety to classroom discussions. These materials will help you design effective questions, tailor discussions to encourage everyone's best thinking, and engage students in challenging dialogue. Appendix C is the Content Catalysts, Processes, and Products (CCPP) Toolkit, which provides a menu-like alternative method you can use in developing differentiated activities.

I sincerely hope that this book becomes a source of ideas from which you can build a repertoire of strategies for differentiating instruction, and that it energizes you and your classroom, increases the likelihood that your students will be successful learners, and enables you to respond to the diversity in your classroom.

Let's get started!

Diane Heacox

P A R T 1

Getting Ready

What Is Differentiation?

Differentiating instruction means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to individual learners' needs, styles, or interests. Differentiated instruction specifically responds to students' progress on the learning continuum—what they already know and what they need to learn. It responds to their best ways of learning and allows them to demonstrate what they've learned in ways that capitalize on their strengths and interests. You can differentiate instruction if your curriculum is district mandated, if it is directed by state standards, and even if learning is measured by statewide basic skills exams or performance assessments.

Differentiated instruction is:

■ **Rigorous.** You provide challenging instruction to motivate students to push themselves. You recognize individual differences and set goals for learning based on a student's particular capabilities. You don't set the bar so low that students need not make their best efforts nor so high that students fail and feel defeated.

■ **Relevant.** It focuses on essential learning, not on “side trips” or “fluff.” Differentiating does not mean more of the same to fill time (for example, more problems instead of more *challenging* problems); differentiating does not mean activities that are fun for students but don't focus on significant learning. These are side trips and fluff. Differentiating focuses on essential learning.

■ **Flexible and varied.** Where appropriate, students make choices about how they will learn and how they will show what they've learned. They may be given opportunities to select topics they wish to explore in greater depth. They may also choose whether they will work independently, with a partner, or in a group. With differentiation, teachers employ many different instructional strategies. Instruction is not “one size fits all.”

■ **Complex.** You don't surf over the top of concepts. Rather, you challenge students' thinking and actively engage them in content that conveys depth and breadth.

Jolenda Henderson's fourth-grade students have been collecting, organizing, and analyzing data in math. Today, they'll be working with line graphs. Students were introduced to line graphs in third grade, but Jolenda has noticed that some are still struggling. Since she knows she needs to provide more time and instruction for these students, she intends to spend today's class reteaching line graphs. First, she'll ask students to gather data from each other, such as who's right-handed and who's left-handed, what everyone's favorite kind of pizza is, and the number of siblings each has. Then she'll draw graphs on the board to represent the data they've collected.

Larry Kimmer's fourth-grade students are also studying graphs in math. Since he knows that graphs were introduced in third grade, he has pretested his students to find out what they recall about data collection and graphing. In the pretest, three students scored at least 85 percent on all concepts he assessed. Ten students scored at least 85 percent on some, but not all, of the concepts. Eleven students' scores indicated that they need practice in both analyzing and representing data.

Based on these results, Larry plans to provide more instruction on line graphs for the eleven students who need review and practice. Once these students have the skills well in hand, he'll ask them to construct their own graphs to represent data he'll provide. For the thirteen students whose preassessment indicates understanding of some or all of graphing, he's designed a menu of activities. The three students who have “tested out” will move immediately to the menu,

choosing from activities that ask them to apply what they know or to design original projects collecting and reporting data. The ten students who have mastered some but not all of the skills will “loop” in and out of instruction. They will be with the instructional group when Larry is teaching a graphing skill they need. When he’s teaching a skill they’ve mastered, they will choose from the menu of activities. He has provided supplies for the menu activities and has posted workcards with directions for projects and quality criteria for evaluating them.

Tony Richards has taught his tenth-grade English class about the elements of Shakespeare’s tragedies, such as structure, conflict, and denouement. They have just finished reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Judging from yesterday’s discussion and written work, Tony knows that about half his students can easily identify the elements and find them represented in the play. The other students are having varying degrees of difficulty both understanding elements and finding them in the play. Today he plans to spend part of the class reviewing the information about elements. Then he’ll divide students into groups to create charts explaining the elements and noting examples of each from the play. His students like to work in groups, and he hopes this exercise will give those who are struggling a chance to learn from those who understand the material.

Marie Fuentes’s tenth-grade students have also been studying elements in Shakespeare’s tragedies and have read *Romeo and Juliet*. Based on class discussions and independent work, Marie has determined that two-thirds of her students understand and can identify the elements of Shakespearean tragedy. The other third are having difficulty both understanding and identifying these elements. Accordingly, today she’ll group her students into three work teams to create posters on what they’ve learned. Team A consists of students needing more direct instruction on elements. She will work with them first and then explain that their poster is to illustrate each element in a creative, visual way. Members of Teams B and C understand the elements and can find examples in the play. They will apply and

extend their knowledge by analyzing whether these elements are also represented in contemporary plays. Their posters will chart examples of the elements from plays they read in the previous unit. These groups are also to represent their ideas in a creative, visual way.

Each team has an identified leader, a sheet explaining quality criteria for evaluating posters, and a workstation equipped with materials. As students move to their stations, Marie joins Team A. This is her opportunity to review the elements with the group before they begin their poster. Once Team A is under way independently, she will move on to Teams B and C to check their progress and answer questions.

Differentiated Instruction: One Size *Doesn’t* Fit All

All four teachers in these examples recognized the learning differences in their classrooms. Jolenda Henderson (fourth grade) and Tony Richards (tenth grade) focused their day’s lesson plans on the needs of those students who still struggled with content or skills. Both teachers chose to *reteach* material to *all* students, including those who had demonstrated varying degrees of mastery. For other lessons, they would likely move all students forward in the curriculum—a decision that would address only the needs of those ready for the next learning objective and would leave behind those who need more time or instruction to master the current objective. Though they recognized the contrasting learning needs of their students, Jolenda and Tony weren’t sure how to plan and manage instruction that required different students doing different activities during the same class period. Their teaching is not yet differentiated.

On the other hand, the teaching of Larry Kimmer (fourth grade) and Marie Fuentes (tenth grade) exemplifies differentiation. Working from their understanding of students’ learning needs, both teachers found ways to provide more instruction for those in need without holding back those who were ready for new challenges. Larry retaught line graphs only to those students

whose preassessment showed a need for more practice. For students ready to move on, he provided a menu of activities at various “levels of challenge.” Similarly, Marie reviewed the material with students who needed it and assigned them an interesting project to demonstrate their understanding. For students ready to move on, she designed a higher-level project so they could apply and extend their knowledge. Marie asked all students to share what they learned in a visual, creative way, rather than a more typical language-arts product that focused on reading, writing, or speaking. The posters enabled Marie to reach those students whose learning strengths are spatial, rather than verbal.

Differentiated classrooms reflect teachers’ thoughtful diagnosis of students’ learning needs and purposeful planning of activities and projects that address those needs. In today’s diverse classrooms, often one size doesn’t fit all.

You May Be Differentiating Already

The first step in differentiating instruction is to start where you are. Good differentiation does *not* require throwing out all your planning from the past two, five, ten, or fifteen years. And many teachers have been using differentiation strategies without even knowing it. Good differentiation means examining how well you’re providing variety and challenge in learning, identifying who among your students is best served by your current plans, and modifying those plans as needed so more students can be successful learners.

Differentiation is a two-step process:

1. Analyze the degree of challenge and variety in your current instructional plans.
2. Modify, adapt, or design new approaches to instruction in response to students’ needs, interests, and learning preferences.

Our Diverse Classrooms

All students have individual learning preferences, backgrounds, and needs. Today, educational research enables us to better identify those variables that can affect a student’s performance in school. Once you’re aware of the differences that can exist, you’re better able to differentiate your instruction to reach as many students as possible. Here are several examples of learner diversity in today’s classrooms.

Cognitive Abilities

In the past, psychologists and teachers narrowly defined cognitive abilities based on students’ scores on standardized intelligence tests or aptitude tests. Now, thanks to the work of educational leaders like Howard Gardner, the definition of intelligence, or “being smart,” has broadened. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences suggests, among other things, that students’ thinking strengths and limitations affect not only the ease with which they learn, but also how students can best represent what they know. For example, when asked to read, write, or speak, a student with verbal/linguistic strengths will always have an edge over a student with lesser verbal capabilities. On the other hand, the verbal/linguistic student may be at a disadvantage if the measure of learning is a role play or skit that calls on bodily/kinesthetic skills. (For more about Gardner’s theory, see Chapter 2, pages 22–25.)

In differentiated instruction, teachers design activities that support students’ learning preferences and strengths while presenting tasks that encourage growth in areas of weakness. The more ways you can engage students in learning—giving them more opportunities to use their preferred ways of thinking—the better their ability to learn. When instruction and assessment are modified according to learners’ unique needs, the likelihood of success increases for all students, whether regular education students, students with learning difficulties, or those with limited English proficiency. **In some ways, differentiated instruction gives every student the specialized instructional focus that’s long been provided for special education students through individualized education plans. But what differentiated instruction**

provides is more manageable, more efficient, and easier for teachers to implement.

Learning Profile

Learning profiles reflect individual preferences for where, when, or how a student obtains and processes information. Students' profiles represent their preferences related to learning modalities, their personal and curricular interests, as well as cognitive preferences. Educators and researchers hold various theories about learning profiles, each of which offers another way of looking at the diversity in our classrooms.

Some learning theories focus on elements such as environment (light, temperature, sound), social organization (working alone, with a partner, or on a team), physical circumstances (degree of mobility, time of day), emotional climate (motivation, degree of structure), and psychological factors (whether a student is reflective, impulsive, or analytic).¹

Other theories focus on learning modalities: sight, hearing, and touch.² *Visual* learners process information most effectively when they can see what they're learning—for example, through reading, writing, and observing. *Auditory* learners need to hear information to help them learn—for example, through oral presentations and explanations. *Kinesthetic* or *tactile* learners learn best when they can manipulate objects or materials—for example, by doing, touching, and moving.

Today, most teachers are familiar with Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. Gardner's work is focused on cognitive or thinking preferences. Thus far, his model presents eight cognitive preferences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and the naturalist. In addition, he notes the existential as a tentative ninth preference.

Differentiated instruction allows you to reach more learners through thoughtfully examining your students' learning profiles and using this data as a lens to inform your instructional planning.

Socioeconomic and Family Factors

Students' backgrounds and home lives have a profound effect on their school performance. You can't assume that all students have similar home environments or the same opportunities outside of the classroom.

If a child is hungry, tired, or stressed, or if he or she lacks a place to study, the ability to learn is affected. Family members may have limited time for helping with children's education, for example, by assisting with homework. Some students' home life is disrupted by chemical dependency, mental illness, physical disability, divorce, or abuse. In some homes, learning and education aren't emphasized or consistently supported. Some parents' high-pressure careers, frequent travel, or long work hours can create a home environment in which an adult isn't always present to monitor, advise, or direct children and teens. Or a parent may simply feel unprepared to help with school assignments.

Students' access to resources and learning experiences outside of school also varies. Not all kids have basic school supplies; not all kids can get to a library. The "digital divide" has created an information gap between kids with computers at home (specifically, Internet access) and those without. While some students' families discuss issues together and travel (whether exploring their own neighborhoods or beyond), other families may be less involved.

A student who has access to resources and enriching experiences may come to school with a greater foundation for learning and a greater depth of understanding than a student who lacks such advantages. Children with actively engaged and supportive parents receive a strong message about the value of learning, a message that can affect their level of motivation and commitment. Differentiated instruction doesn't assume all students are starting at the same level of learning with the same family support and involvement.

¹See, for example, two books by Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Elementary Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles: Practical Approaches for Grades 3-6* (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1992), and *Teaching Secondary Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles: Practical Approaches for Grades 7-12* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1993).

²See, for example, *Applying Educational Psychology in the Classroom*, 5th ed., by Myron H. Dembo (New York: Longman, 1994).

Readiness

As you prepare to introduce new content or skills, you recognize that some students are ready for what you are about to teach, some lack the foundational skills to move on, and some know the material already (or even knew it last year). Some children, particularly those who have had early learning opportunities, begin school with well-developed skills and considerable understanding of various topics; other students arrive as true beginners. **Our challenge as teachers is to find ways to build on and extend the learning of students who are already on their way, while providing basic instruction and practice for students who are beginning or struggling.**

Learning Pace

Students vary in the amount of time it takes them to master a skill or learn a concept. Some will grasp most material right away; for example, many gifted and talented students learn in one-third the time that average learners need. Since they learn rapidly, the gifted and talented students require fewer examples, less modeling, and shorter practice time. Other learners need more instruction, examples, practice time, and feedback to be successful. Differentiation helps teachers develop lesson plans and activities that keep children from being left behind or waiting to move on.

Gender Influences

Brain researcher Michael Gurian provides insights on how gender may influence learning. He notes, for example, that boys take longer to master reading than girls do; they show early mathematical ability and strengths in three-dimensional reasoning; they prefer action and exploration to passive learning; they benefit from regular physical activity and do best with hands-on learning in reading and math.³

Educational researcher Karen Rogers has synthesized research on female learning differences. Her research suggests that girls learn best

when their classrooms provide variety in teaching methods; tasks with many possible right answers; activities that use manipulatives and a hands-on, process approach to learning; opportunities to ask questions and discuss ideas and concepts; visual ways to present information; examples of real-life applications; and a variety of social arrangements in the classroom, such as a balance between independent and collaborative work and balance between same-gender and mixed-gender groups.⁴

Do many boys also thrive with these instructional methods? Yes. Do all girls require them to be successful learners? No. **Gender is merely another way to look at student diversity. If you know something about girls' and boys' similarities and differences in learning styles and strengths, you can provide a balance in teaching methods so that all students are more likely to succeed.**

Cultural/Ethnic Influences

Another influence on learning, although somewhat controversial, is a student's cultural or ethnic background. Geneva Gay, professor of education at the University of Washington–Seattle, has been an active contributor to our knowledge of culturally and ethnically diverse learners. In her view, children begin school with an internalized learning style, including rules and procedures for acquiring knowledge and demonstrating skills. They have developed these ways of learning partly through their experiences within their cultural or ethnic group.

Although Gay agrees that models such as Gardner's multiple intelligences and Bloom's taxonomy have application for all children, she notes that certain learning preferences may be influenced by a child's group identity and affiliations. (For more information about Bloom's taxonomy, see pages 73–76 in Chapter 4. For more information about Gardner's multiple intelligences, see pages 22–25 in Chapter 2.) It's important not to assume, however, that all members of a group will learn best the same way. There are

³ *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* by Michael Gurian (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

⁴ *Challenges of Promise* by Karen B. Rogers, a Title II Research Report (Edina, MN: Edina Public Schools, 1990).

great variations in learning preferences within any group. As with the influence of gender on learning, you can differentiate instruction more effectively when you recognize style preferences among students from various cultural and ethnic groups.⁵

How Students Value Learning

Differences in the value students place on learning and education also affect classroom diversity. Teachers know that when students are interested in and value what they're being taught, they engage in activities with greater commitment, enthusiasm, and motivation. Some students care about what we want them to learn and some don't. How much an activity or topic is valued may reflect an individual student's sense of how relevant or usable the material is. It's a fact of school life that not every topic and activity will interest all learners. However, if you make a point to find out your students' interests, you're better able to devise lessons and assignments that will motivate them.

Students are also affected by family attitudes. If parents or other significant adults highly value a particular subject, chances are the student will, too. Likewise, if adults see little importance in a subject, they may give the student "permission" (tacitly or directly) not to care about it. Some families place a strong emphasis on learning and school success. They see a good education as essential for their children's future. Other families don't see education as a means to a successful, satisfying life. Although some students may embrace beliefs and values about school that are contrary to those of their families, most are influenced by their family's beliefs.

Similarly, if a student's friends value learning and school achievement, this will influence the student's attitude toward education. If a student's friends dislike school or have little interest in learning, the student may come to feel the same way in order to fit in.

When you can respond more specifically to students' interests—and when you show the application of learning to life—you're better able to appeal to your more reluctant learners.

Confidence in Learning

Students who say to themselves, *I can do this, I can figure this out, I am good at this*, learn very differently and are usually more successful than students who tell themselves, *I'm not good at this, this is too hard, I don't get it*. Confident students know that even if they don't succeed in learning something the first time, they will learn it eventually. Students who lack confidence tend to give up or give in to failure. Some students have already decided they can't learn. If you're able to respond directly to individual learning needs and preferences, more students will be confident about their ability to learn and thus be more successful.

What Do We Differentiate?

Differentiated instruction typically involves modifications in one or more of the following areas: content, process, and product.

Content

Content is the "what" of teaching—the curricular topics, concepts, or themes presented to students. Curriculum content is usually determined by the school or district and often reflects state or national standards.

Content is differentiated by concentrating on the most relevant and essential concepts, processes, and skills or by increasing the complexity of learning. Some students need more instruction and practice, and some need less. For students with early or quick mastery, you can eliminate content or speed up its presentation.

You differentiate content (a) when you pre-assess students' skills and knowledge, then match learners with appropriate activities according to readiness; (b) when you give students choices about topics to explore in greater depth; and (c) when you provide students with basic and advanced resources that match their current levels of understanding.

For example, let's say your class is studying historical fiction and all students are required to select a novel and describe the characteristics of historical fiction exhibited in their books. Content can be differentiated by providing a selection of

⁵ For more on Geneva Gay's work, see *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, & Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

books that reflect a variety of reading levels and by matching students with the appropriate book. You may simply group books on desks or countertops and purposefully direct students to make their selections from a particular collection.

You can also differentiate content by selecting resources related to a curricular topic, including some that are basic and foundational and others that are more sophisticated, technical, advanced, or in-depth. Specific content resources can be purposefully assigned to students based on their existing knowledge of the topic under study.

Process

Process is the “how” of teaching. In differentiated instruction, the way you teach reflects the learning profiles and preferences of your students. You can modify process by adding greater complexity or abstractness to tasks, by engaging students in critical and creative thinking, or by increasing the variety of ways in which you ask them to learn.

For example, your class is working on comparing and contrasting two versions of *Cinderella* from different cultures. Having decided to assign tasks based on learning profile (see page 8), you assign students to groups of visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. The visual learners draw pictures of both similar and different elements of the two stories. The auditory learners discuss similarities and differences between the two versions with partners and prepare an oral presentation. The kinesthetic learners create thirty-second scene reenactments that represent similarities and differences between the two versions. At the end of the work time, all groups share their ideas.

Note that while the content is the same, the ways that students are able to learn or *process* the information is different.

Product

Products are the end results of learning. For example, a product may be something tangible, like a report, brochure, or model; it may be verbal, like a dialogue, speech, or debate; or it may involve action, like a skit, mock trial, or dance. Products reflect what students have understood and been able to apply. They show learning in use and may reveal new thinking or ideas.

The work of Bloom and Gardner helps us differentiate products by providing greater challenge, variety, and choice in how students demonstrate or represent what they’ve learned. Products are differentiated when you plan units that reflect many ways to represent learning and when you provide menus of projects for students to choose from. You may ask students to create products that match their learning strengths (for example, a student with strong musical skills writes a song or rap), or you may ask them to practice working in the areas that are not their strengths (for example, a student with solid verbal/linguistic skills makes a spatial product like a model or collage). Differentiate products by encouraging students to take on challenging work, to run with their ideas, or to come up with unique ways to show what they’ve learned.

What Is the Teacher’s Role?

As a teacher who differentiates instruction, you become both a facilitator and a collaborator.

You Are a Facilitator

As a facilitator of differentiated instruction, you have three key responsibilities: providing and prescribing differentiated learning opportunities, organizing students for learning, and using time flexibly.

1. Providing and prescribing differentiated learning opportunities. You *provide* a range of activities that challenges students and offers variety both in the ways students learn (process) and in the ways they present their learning (products). Providing greater challenge and variety means responding to more students’ learning needs and preferences. At times, you offer students an opportunity to choose what they’ll do, how they’ll do it, and what their final result or product will be.

At other times, you *prescribe* particular activities that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of particular learners or groups of learners. To do this, you must first get to know your students’ interests, degree of readiness, and learning preferences. Then you differentiate by matching particular activities with particular students, based on learning needs.

2. Organizing students for learning. As a facilitator of differentiated instruction, you vary the ways you organize and group students. Depending on the assignment, they may work individually, in pairs, in teams, in collaborative/cooperative groups, in flexible instructional groups, or as a class. You determine the most effective way to organize them for particular tasks, based on your curriculum objectives and their learning needs.

Students may also be grouped according to their learning preferences or interests. For example, you could group several students with bodily/kinesthetic preferences for a role-playing activity. Or you could offer opportunities for students to choose their own groups based on their interest in particular topics or projects.

When you group students with common learning needs in flexible instructional groups, students with similar degrees of readiness work together on activities you've tailored to match their specific needs. Sometimes you might have one group working on a basic learning activity and another working on an advanced activity. At other times you'll group students who need more time or instruction on a skill and then form a second group for students who have shown mastery of the skill and are ready to apply what they've learned to a more challenging activity.

Determining the most appropriate ways to organize students for learning is a key task for teachers who differentiate instruction.

3. Using time flexibly. In a differentiated classroom, you use time in different ways with different students. For those who need more explanation, review, or practice, you extend instructional time; for those who have mastered concepts or skills, you replace reteaching or practice time with advanced learning. For students who need less time to master new material, you may also choose to accelerate learning. In the differentiated classroom, time is flexible and its best use meets students' learning needs.

You Are a Collaborator

Differentiating instruction does require time and effort, particularly when you're just beginning, but you needn't go it alone. You can form partnerships with other staff members and share materials, insights, and resources. Here are some ideas:

- Combine classes for an activity facilitated by one teacher while the other teacher works on planning differentiated activities for use by both teachers.

- You and another teacher in your grade level or department might each take a curriculum unit to differentiate and then exchange. Or you might form a differentiation team, dividing the tasks and then sharing the results.

- Share resources for differentiation to make your budget dollars go further.

- Work with the media specialist in your school. She or he can be your ally in finding relevant books, magazine articles, materials, and websites.

- Communicate regularly with other specialists in your school, such as those who work with special education students, second language learners, and gifted and talented students. Like you, these teachers must grapple daily with classroom diversity and they have good ideas on how to reach and teach students with special needs. Ask them for information and feedback on the appropriateness of differentiated tasks for students receiving special services who are mainstreamed in your classroom. Bring them in on your planning. Who can better help you design directed activities than the people whose daily work involves modifying instruction?

Another group of collaborators includes your students' families. In Chapter 2, you'll find ways to solicit the help of parents as you learn about your students' interests and learning preferences. Families are your natural allies in helping more students be successful learners. It is worthwhile to explain what you're doing and ask for their help and support.

Qualities of a Supportive Classroom Environment for Differentiation

A supportive classroom environment is vital to your success in differentiating instruction. Such an environment:

- Promotes acceptance of differences.
- Affirms that all students have learning strengths.
- Acknowledges that students learn at different rates and in different ways.
- Recognizes that for work to be fair, it must sometimes be different.
- Acknowledges that success means different things to different people.
- Allows students to work with various people for various purposes.
- Recognizes that the key to motivation is interest, and that all students have different interests.
- Promotes personal responsibility for learning.
- Builds feelings of personal competence and confidence in learning.
- Values effort and “personal best.”
- Nurtures skills of independence.
- Supports and celebrates student success in challenging work.
- Encourages exploration of each student’s interests, strengths, and learning preferences.
- Nurtures the creative spirit in all students.
- Honors everyone’s work.

Questions and Answers About Differentiating Instruction

Most of us recognize the great diversity of learning needs, styles, interests, and motivations among our students, and we know that differentiating learning activities based on individual differences can increase the likelihood of success for all. So why isn’t everyone differentiating instruction? Teachers at all levels ask questions like the following.

I don’t have strategies for differentiating instruction. How do I do it?

Many teacher preparation programs provide little beyond general strategies for meeting the needs of special education students and gifted and talented students in the regular classroom. Once teachers are hired, school districts may lack time or professional development expertise to provide in-service training in differentiated instruction. Teachers must often get the training they need on their own.

One way to learn about differentiating instruction is to attend workshops or graduate classes. You might form study teams or book clubs with colleagues in your school to read and discuss books such as this one and then help each other apply the ideas in the classroom. **Once you’ve been introduced to the strategies of differentiation, you’ll probably recognize classroom practices you’re already using. Each time you provide a student with extra help, more time, or a modified assignment, you’re differentiating instruction. All good teachers, whether they realize it or not, differentiate to some degree.**

As you’ll see in the following chapters, you will start with your curriculum and then examine your current teaching practices. At that point, you are ready to modify, redesign, or create activities that differentiate based on students’ learning needs. All of this is done one step at a time. No one should feel obligated to tackle all curricular areas or all instructional units in a single school

year. Differentiation is a *process*—your skills will develop, your confidence will grow, and the time you need for planning will decrease.

I'm comfortable with the way I teach. If it's working, why change it?

It's human nature to stick with what you know and what you feel works for most of your students. Trying out new strategies is hard work, at least at first, and it can make you feel less secure about your teaching. You may wonder whether this new idea will help or hinder students' learning, whether it's worth the time and effort to change what you've done in the past. Yet most of us can see that, despite our best efforts, some students struggle, some are held back, some are bored, and some are frustrated and discouraged. Chances are, we wonder how to help them and how to do a better job with all of our students.

With differentiated instruction, the focus is not on what you teach but on what students learn, not on what you've covered but on whether students have accomplished their learning goals. When you differentiate instruction, you know you're meeting the learning needs of more of your students. You're increasing the likelihood that all students—not just some—will be successful learners.

My curriculum is determined by the district and influenced by state standards. How can I differentiate when I'm required to teach specific content and skills and when I must prepare students for district or state assessments?

In many schools standards drive curriculum—whether adopted by school districts, required by state graduation rules, or set by national curriculum organizations or agencies. But keep in mind that while standards may direct your curriculum and focus your learning goals, they *don't* dictate what you do instructionally to get students “there.”

Differentiated instruction is the best response to standards-based education. You simply cannot

get all students to meet the standards unless you differentiate. Teachers and schools are increasingly held accountable for students left behind as well as for students ready to advance who must wait until classmates receive more instructional time. Differentiation, in fact, may be the key to your students' success in a standards-based educational system.

You may assume that differentiation takes more class time—time you simply do not have. **Differentiated instruction, however, allows you to use your time more efficiently.** You adjust pace and depth to the needs of learners and the demands of the curriculum. You eliminate the teaching of specific content or skills for students who have already mastered them. You plan more time and instruction for those who need more practice. **Time may actually be saved as students engage in learning that responds to their needs.** When you provide appropriate individual or small-group projects for some, they work independently and you have more time with students who need your attention. No one is held back or left behind.

The strategies of differentiated instruction can be used to modify and adjust any curriculum to respond to students' needs. **Regardless of how much or how little freedom you have to decide what you will teach, differentiated instruction will assist you in deciding how you will teach.**

With an already full school day, how can I find the planning time to differentiate instruction?

It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all the changes occurring in schools today. Additional course requirements, increased professional responsibilities, changes in state graduation requirements, statewide testing, and your schools' own reform initiatives are creating greater demands on teachers' time and energy. Paperwork, conferences, faculty meetings, committee meetings, coaching, advising, returning phone calls and email: sometimes it seems like you have less and less time for teaching—and who has time to *prepare* for teaching? Although many of us would