

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

Differentiate *What You Teach* (Content)

Once you have determined the ways in which your students differ by readiness, interest, or learning profile, you address these differences by individualizing your instruction to them. By varying the content, you can vary what students learn, or how they are presented the information. The content you present to students can vary based on their readiness, their interests and their learning profile. For example to vary content by:

- **Readiness:** One student might be ready for double-digit subtraction, while another student might still be struggling with single-digit subtraction. If a student has already read *The Outsiders*, challenge her with *Lord of the Flies* instead of asking her to repeat what she's already accomplished. Use reading materials at varying readability levels. Use spelling or vocabulary lists at the varying readiness levels of students. In an elementary classroom, the teacher may set up three centers: in one, students are practicing repeated addition, using manipulatives; in another, students are performing one-by-one digit multiplication on their own and two-by-two digit multiplication with a calculator; a third group is performing two-by-two digit multiplication through strict computation.
- **Interests:** Use reading materials to match students' interests (i.e. if they are passionate about hip-hop music, astronauts, and horses, let them read passages about hip-hop music, astronauts, and horses).
- **Learning Styles:** Use centers to allow for tactile experiences. Present content simultaneously in multiple ways to stimulate and acknowledge multiple learning styles.

Remember: all students across the spectrum of performance levels require and deserve complex, engaging work. Here are some of the methods that can be used to vary the content you present to students.

Strategies to Vary Content

Note: some of the examples in the table below are saved in pdf format. Some pdfs will open with documents turned 90 degrees. To straighten, look for the rotate button in the top toolbar, and choose "Rotate Counterclockwise" (the little black arrow on the right). Please note, many pdfs have multiple pages.

Varied journal prompts, spelling or vocabulary lists	<p>Students are given a choice of different journal prompts, spelling lists or vocabulary lists depending on level of proficiency/assessment results. For example, an elementary teacher attempting to meet spelling standards might develop a tiered assignment of target words for different levels of proficiency, assigning weekly lists to everyone based on their starting level.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section.</p>
Choices of books	<p>Different textbooks or novels (at different levels) that students are allowed to choose from for content study or for literature circles.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section.</p>
Tiered assignments	<p>In some situations, you can use varied levels of student practice and activities to ensure that students explore ideas at a level that builds on their prior knowledge and prompts continued growth. For example, a teacher might strategically choose each student's book for a book report assignment to be sure that each student reads a book that reasonably challenges his or her ability. Clearly, this strategy requires some degree of caution by the teacher to ensure that a different assignment does not become a stigma among students. However, with careful</p>

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	<p>planning and implementation, tiered assignments can be an excellent means of simultaneously promoting students' confidence and challenging students' intellect and skills.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section.</p>
Varying review activities	<p>Different review or extension activities, based on readiness levels, are made available to students during a specific section of the class (such as at the beginning or end of the period).</p>
Homework options	<p>Students are directed to specific homework based on student needs.</p>
Student-teacher goal setting	<p>The teacher and student work together to develop individual learning goals for the student.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section</p>
Varied computer programs	<p>The computer is used as an additional center in the classroom, and students are directed to specific websites or software that allows them to work on skills at their level.</p>
Games to practice mastery of information and skill	<p>Use games as a way to review and reinforce concepts. Include questions and tasks that are on a variety of cognitive levels.</p>
Vary the levels of questions	<p>Teachers vary the sorts of questions posed to different students based on their ability to handle them. While all students need to be accountable for the objectives for a particular lesson, students will master that objective at different speeds. Varying questions is an excellent way to build the confidence (and motivation) of students who are reluctant to contribute to class discourse. Question variation based on achievement should be a well-considered decision designed to facilitate the academic advancement of each student by addressing individual needs.</p> <p><i>Note: Most teachers would probably admit that without even thinking about it they tend to address particular types of questions to particular students. In some cases, such tendencies may need to be corrected. (For example, a teacher may be unknowingly addressing all of the more challenging questions to one student, thereby inhibiting other students' learning and fostering class resentment of that student.)</i></p>
Choice Boards	<p>Work assignments are written on cards that are placed in hanging pockets. By asking students to select a card from a particular row of pockets, the teacher targets work toward student needs yet allows student choice.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section</p> <p>For more on giving students academic choices, visit the I-2 page.</p>

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Jigsaw Activity	<p>The jigsaw technique allows you to tackle the same subject with all of your students while discreetly providing them the different tools they need to get there.</p> <p>To reach the learning objective with students of different literacy levels, group students based on their reading proficiency, divide a given topic into pieces (the economic, political and social impact of the Civil War, for example), and find an appropriate text for each group to learn about one of the areas of study. Students later get into heterogeneous groups to share their findings with their peers, who have read about different areas of study from source texts on their own reading levels.</p> <p>For an example, see below.</p>
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Journal Prompt Example

Kate Williams '02, First Grade Bilingual

I differentiate journal time:

- The students who can not write without assistance are given 5 minutes to work on their journals independently before I call them to me for help (or I let them work independently for the entire journal time, but call them back on a prep).
- For students who can use basic sight words and appropriate capitalization/punctuation, I put a post-it note/sticker on the outside of their journals. Students know that means they might be expected to write more sentences, respond to an entirely different prompt, and/or use a simple writer's checklist to revise their work. I make the specific difference clear to them as journal time begins. At least once a week, I call each of my students to my desk individually so they can confer with me about how their writing can improve.

Computer Program Example

Kate Williams '02, First Grade Bilingual

For those of you who feel overwhelmed by the thought of differentiation, I suggest you start with one small step like I did. You can always add to what you are doing or scale back if you feel like you are trying to do too much too soon. The first "differentiation strategy" that I introduced into the classroom involved strategic use of the one computer and one Leap Pad we had in our classroom. That's right, 30 students with two pieces of technology - but it really has been effective.

Using the Fast Foreword computer program (which helps with attention and reading) and the Leap Pad electronic book reader, I set up a schedule where most students got 30 minutes per week total on the computer and about 15 minutes per week on the Leap Pad (those who needed more help were scheduled to use the computer slightly more often). I taught students to look at the schedule and the clock to know when to "quietly tap the next person without disrupting the class."

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This worked really well - all of the students were able to learn at their own pace because the computer game kept track of how each student was doing and which concepts each child knew. I could set Fast Foreword to higher ability levels, and children could challenge themselves on the "super smart student" setting. The best thing about this computer schedule? Students saw – yet didn't question – that not everyone would be doing the same thing at the same time. Differentiation had begun, and I could gradually add more and more strategies into my classroom.

Jigsaw Activity: High School Example

Mr. Watts thinks his 10th graders are ready for some independent study, but he knows they need a substantial structure in place to keep them sufficiently on-task. He decides to apply the Jigsaw method to an activity exploring the history of the Civil War. He divides his 28 students into seven groups of four intentionally distributing those who he knows will be effective leaders, those who he thinks will be exceptionally passionate about the topic and those who he assumes will need the most support. Each person in the group is allowed to select one topic: Slavery, Industrialization, Battles and Key Players. For two weeks, students will alternate working independently, working with their groups of four, and working with the other six students who share their topic. Throughout the two weeks he meets with both the four-person groups and the seven-person groups to track progress, and also meets individually with students who request assistance or with those he suspects need more guidance.

Mr. Watts presents several films to the class at large, both documentaries and dramas, and his students are required to take substantial notes on content that relates to their topic. He has set up four learning centers, one for each topic, with numerous resources for the students to access, such as first person slave accounts; biographies of key generals, politicians, and suffragists; and war maps. After two weeks of research has been conducted, each group is required to make a formal presentation of its findings. Specific requirements are detailed, but the style and type of presentation may vary. The groups are given a week of class time to create and polish their presentations.