

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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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 process, you can vary how students make sense of the information, and the activities in which the student engages in order to master the content. The process you use can vary based on students' readiness, interests and learning profile. For example, to vary process by:

- **Readiness:** Use tiered activities with different levels of support, challenge, or complexity. Students struggling with basic arithmetic might use a calculator when attempting to demonstrate the relationship between distance, rate and time.
- **Interest:** Provide interest centers that encourage students to explore subsets of the class topic of particular interest.
- **Learning Profile:** One student might learn best by working individually, while another might consistently thrive in a group setting. One student might learn best by hearing information, while another student needs to visibly see information to process it. Routinely incorporate visual and/or tactile aids into lessons (e.g. consistently refer to maps and/or globes when discussing a geographic location; allow tactile learners to hold the globe and kinesthetic learners to get out of their seats to locate a location on a displayed map).

If a student should be able to explain the causes of the French Revolution, that child could first learn those causes from a text, an audio or video recording or a detailed comic of the event, based on their literacy readiness, their interest, or their learning profile. The goal of differentiated instruction is not to apply different standards to different children, but rather to understand which instructional strategies it will take to help each child reach the same standard.

Here are some of the methods that can be used to vary the instructional processes your offer students.

Strategies to Vary Process

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.)

Flexible grouping

Students might be instructed as a whole group, in small groups of various permutations (homogeneous or heterogeneous by skill or interest), in pairs or individual. Each group (or each student within a group) can learn through different processes. Any small groups or pairs change over time based on assessment data. Not all students will have the same needs. Consider flexible small group instruction to be a key component of meeting those diversified needs.

Small group instruction: Use it focus on specific skills your students need to practice or specific content with which they struggle.

While you work with a designated group of students, other students might be assigned to work

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	<p>independently, in other student-led groups, or to rotate through different learning centers.</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> <p>For an example, see below.</p>
Varied scaffolding of same organizer	<p>Provide graphic organizers that require students to complete various amounts of information. Some will be more filled out (by the teacher) than others.</p>
Stations/ Learning Centers	<p>A station is a collection of materials that students might use independently to explore topics or practice skills. Centers allow individual or groups of students to work at their own pace. Students are constantly reassessed to determine which centers are appropriate for students at a particular time, and to plan activities at those centers to build the most pressing skills.</p> <p>For examples, see the Tools section.</p>

Example of Small-Group Instruction

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.

Computer Program Example

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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.”

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.

Centers: Elementary Example

Ms. Manahan had always been an advanced student, and remembered how frustrated and bored she had always felt in school. She started her first year of teaching 4th grade by making a point to provide challenging, creative work. While her accelerated students thrived, her lower performing students became frustrated, and eventually lost interest and motivation. To counter this, she spent the second half of the year focusing on her struggling students, and found that the accelerated kids became bored and disruptive. Like many other teachers, she finished the year by teaching to the middle, but felt that none of her students’ needs were really being met.

She did some research on differentiated instruction over the summer, and began her second year of teaching determined to incorporate the approach into her classroom. She started the year by diagnosing exactly where her students currently performed, particularly in reading and writing. She developed an academic profile for each student, and used the profile to gauge progress throughout the year. This was a good start, but she knew she needed to change her daily approach as well.

After observing a colleague teaching summer school, Ms. Manahan had noticed that this teacher’s students worked at centers for part of the class period, while he worked with small groups of other students. The major difference between her approach and his was that each of his students did not go to every center. Rather, he had designed the centers so that students worked on the same academic learning standard, at specified centers, and in ways that matched their individual learning profiles.

Following his lead, she designed centers to meet students’ needs based on their readiness levels, as determined by reading and writing diagnostics. At each center, students could choose to work individually or in

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pairs to achieve the goals.

While she knew that her centers were only a partial solution, she found that the majority of her students actively and effectively engaged the reading and writing activities she designed, so she knew she had made a good start towards differentiation.