

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

What Makes a Differentiated Classroom Different From a Traditional Classroom?

In the chart below, you'll notice the ways in which a differentiated classroom differs from a traditional classroom. You may find that some aspects of a truly differentiated classroom may be unrealistic to implement in your classroom or your school. For example, you may not be able to change a district grading scale to define success as student growth and improvement. This chart simply aims to convey the *intent* of differentiation and encourage you, when possible, to create policies and assignments that recognize where individual students begin and how individual students learn.

Comparison of Differentiated and Traditional Classrooms	
Traditional Classroom	Differentiated Classroom
Student differences are masked or acted upon when problematic.	Student differences are studied as a basis for planning. Explanation
Assessment is most common at the end of learning to see "who got it".	Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to the learners' needs. Explanation
A relatively narrow sense of intelligence prevails.	Focus on multiple forms of intelligence is evident. Explanation
A single definition of excellence exists.	Excellence is defined in large measure by individual growth from a starting point. Explanation
Student interest is infrequently tapped.	Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices. Explanation
Relatively few learning profile options are taken into account.	Many learning profile options are provided for during instruction. Explanation
Whole-class instruction dominates.	Many instructional arrangements are used in the classroom, including whole-class, small group, and individual learning. Explanation
Coverage of texts and curriculum guides drives instruction.	Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction. Explanation
Mastery of facts and skills out-of-context are the focus of learning.	Use of essential skills to make sense of and understand key concepts and principles is the focus of learning. Explanation
Single option assignments are the norm.	Multi-option assignments are frequently used. Explanation

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A single text prevails.	Multiple materials are provided to students. Explanation
Single interpretations of ideas and events may be sought.	Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are routinely sought. Explanation
The teacher solves problems.	Students help other students and the teacher solve problems. Explanation
The teacher provides whole-class standards for grading.	Students work with the teacher to establish both whole-class and individual learning goals. Explanation
A single form of assessment is often used.	Students are assessed in multiple ways. Explanation

Adapted from Carol Tomlinson's *How To Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2001)

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1. **Student differences are studied as a basis for planning.** Teachers determine students' individual needs and create lesson plans accordingly. They know who their students are well enough to decide what and how to best teach them. To determine student differences, they:

- use learning style inventories
- examine student work
- know student interests
- examine past performance(standardized test scores, report card grades, etc.).

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2. **Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to learner need.** Pre-unit assessments will help teachers decide what to teach. Post-unit assessments will help determine how well the teacher did, not simply how well their students did. Teachers use "exit cards" (among other strategies) in which students can convey at the end of class what they took from a lesson. Tomlinson adds, "Think of assessment as a road map for thinking and planning...Fruitful assessment often poses the question, 'what is an array of ways I can offer students to demonstrate their understanding and skills?'" (pp. 19-20).

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3. **Focus on multiple forms of intelligences is evident.** Teachers offer students a variety of ways to express their understanding of knowledge, without favoring any one style. Students might draw their comprehension of an idea, dramatize it, create a model of it, write a letter to the editor about it, or re-write a section of the textbook to supplement what's missing.

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4. **Excellence is defined in large measure by individual growth from a starting point.** Students' progress is not measured in relation to what their peers achieved or to a fixed standard. Their progress is their achievement.

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5. **Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices.** Students are given options at every step of the academic unit, from determining which aspects of a topic interest them (content) to selecting the most beneficial means of acquiring the knowledge (process) to choosing a method of expressing their knowledge (product).

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6. **Many learning profile options are provided for.** Teachers identify and accept the ways in which students learn best, without "tracking" them or pigeonholing them into fixed roles. Students can "decide whether to work alone or with a peer, to sit in a desk or curl up on the floor with a book, to accept inevitable classroom sounds or screen them out by using earplugs or headphones" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 64). Teachers present information in a fashion that is accessible for many learning modalities (i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic). Regardless of their individual learning profile, all students will benefit from multiple and varied exposure to the same concept. As Tomlinson (2001) writes, "If a student has heard about an idea, sung about it, built a representation of it, and read about it, success is far more likely than if one avenue predominates" (p. 14).

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7. **Many instructional arrangements are used.** Flexible grouping prevails. Sometimes the whole class stays together, sometimes students meet in smaller groups organized by readiness, interest, or learning profile, and sometimes you will meet with students individually. Sometimes you will present information to the class, while other times students or guest lecturers will present information to the class. Frequently updated learning centers and interest centers further accommodate instructional flexibility. Exceptional students can engage in short or long-term independent investigative studies, with appropriate guidance and structure in place.

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8. **Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction.** Students' needs shape the content of instruction. What ideas are they grappling with? What current events haven't yet been incorporated into teaching materials? Which skills have they not yet mastered? What might be a more effective mode of assessment than the one in the curriculum guide? How might a particular lesson be tailored for kinesthetic learners? How might the key concepts of a curriculum guide lesson be extrapolated, but transformed them into a lesson students might find more compelling? What alternative assignments might be created for those students who already get it?

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9. **Use of essential skills to make sense of and understand key concepts and principles is the focus of learning.**

Teachers minimize memorization and regurgitation of isolated facts. Students need to know how to think, not what to think. Tomlinson (2001) identifies the following benefits of this approach (p. 74). Students:

- "Understand rather than memorize"
- "Retain ideas and facts longer because they are more meaningful"
- "Make connections between subjects and facets of a single subject"
- "Relate ideas to their own lives"
- "Build networks of meaning for effectively dealing with future knowledge"

Context is key. Teachers relate all learning to the actual function the concepts play in the real world. They explore the resources of their community at every opportunity. Examples:

- If an elementary student challenges the relevance of math, they might bring in a chef to discuss how she uses fractions, or a carpenter to discuss angles, or a pharmacist to discuss volume measurements.

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- They might take a field trip to a local bridge and have an engineer meet the class there to explain the physics involved, then require students to construct their own bridges to span a local brook.
- They might instruct their students to find and interview someone who uses specified skills in their profession.
- If high-school students study the Bill of Rights, they might examine the amendments that are still controversial today.
- They might invite a member of the NRA to debate with a pro-gun control advocate in their class.

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10. **Multi-option assignments are frequently used.** Teachers give their students choices in how they prefer to learn. Meaningful choice is more intricate than simply offering three different essay questions from which to choose. A more substantial choice for exploring a topic might include the following: writing and performing a play, creating a newsletter complete with photos and articles, creating a multiple-choice exam, interviewing older students who have already studied the topic or introducing the topic to younger students. Remember: Assignments should vary by content, process and product to address differences in readiness, interest and learning profile.

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11. **Multiple materials are provided.** Textbooks are treated as one of many resources. Whenever possible, teachers present primary source documents. Examples include:

- historic and current newspaper articles
- Letters to the Editor discussing an historic or timely controversy
- print or television advertisements
- screenplays
- famous artwork
- unique software
- public records
- historical documents
- experts in their field
- political comic strips
- non-fiction books.

Furthermore, teachers tailor the use of different sources for different students to best match their needs, and/or offer a selection of materials from which students can choose.

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12. **Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are routinely sought.** Often the most valuable use of any educational resource or textbook is to discuss its limitations—i.e., What story is not being told? Whose perspective dominates? How do other textbooks cover this same topic? For example:

- If studying the American Revolution, re-write a chapter from the textbook as it might be written in England. Or find an equivalent chapter from a British textbook.
- Compare newspaper articles on the same topic from different regions of the country.
- Compare news updates from one channel to the news updates of another examining who owns certain channels and why the perspective and content coverage might differ.
- Stage debates often, and require students to argue both sides of the issue.
- Read competing accounts of the same time period (i.e. a novel about 19th century America written by a white person, and a novel about 19th century America written by a black person; stories that portray the differences between women's lives and men's lives during common eras, etc.).

Every story has a perspective; help students determine whose perspective is represented and whose isn't.

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13. **Students help other students and the teacher solve problems.** Teachers find the students who excel in certain subjects and enable them to lead the way by:

- Incorporating peer tutoring into course work and pairing capable students one on one with those students needing help.
- Assigning a different element of a topic to each student and have each present their findings to their group.
- Instead of having to search for all they source materials, making the pursuit of the materials part of their students' assignment.
- Having peers edit each other's work before a document is considered complete.
- Assigning an "expert-of-the-day" to answer questions when students are working in groups.

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14. **Students work with the teacher to establish both whole-class and individual learning goals.** As Tomlinson (2001) writes, "Students will be 'graded against themselves' rather than in competition with other students" (p. 93). Teachers devise imaginative and productive ways for both themselves and their students to assess student growth. Learning contracts, agreements between teachers and students that specify work requirements, help students organize their goals and force them to actively articulate and acknowledge their academic commitments. Letter grades, which assess achievement compared to the class at large, can be coupled with numerical grades indicating personal progress and effort.

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15. **Students are assessed in multiple ways.** Some students can comfortably demonstrate their knowledge in more traditional testing formats, while others benefit from the representative and potentially more expressive nature of a portfolio.

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