

Differentiation

Twelve Ways to Help Challenge Advanced Potentials in a Mixed-Ability Classroom

Adapted from Dr. Bertie Kingore

In differentiated instruction, teachers customize instruction to learners' needs by adjusting the pace, level of instruction, and/or varying the products produced to reflect student's best ways to learn. Differentiated instruction is designed to match the readiness levels of students in the classroom. Differentiated instruction acts on the theory that all students learn differently. It is not a matter of a good or bad classroom, or who is working the hardest. It is doing what is instructionally right for the students – beginning where students are and taking them as far as they can go in learning.

The following twelve differentiation strategies are presented in alphabetical order and can be used in any order. The success of each strategy will depend on the needs of the students, the teaching style and skill of the instructor, and the objectives of the educators making instructional decisions in response to state and district standards.

- **Curriculum Compacting** – Compacting is an instructional strategy designed to eliminate further instruction in an area where the student has already mastered the curriculum. Advanced students can demonstrate mastery on a pre-assessment before instruction begins. For those students that demonstrate mastery in areas, up to 50% of the current grade level curriculum could be eliminated and replaced with material that would continue their learning without lowering achievement test results.
- **Flexible Grouping** – Flexible grouping recognizes that no single group matches all of a student's needs. It is in stark contrast to the more stagnant grouping procedures in which students remain in the same group the entire year and receive whole-group instruction. In flexible grouping, groups do not remain constant nor expect everyone to learn in the same way. Working arrangements and group make-up are continually shifting according to instructional objectives and students' readiness levels.
- **Learning Centers or Stations** – A learning center or station is a physical area of the classroom that is organized with various materials and learning experiences for specific instruction. Centers could be year round, such as a writing center or they may change periodically. The focus of these centers or stations could be on practice, mastery of a concept, and/or extension of concepts and skills. The most productive centers involve open-ended inquiry rather than simple activities. Centers that challenge advanced learners need to include complex tiered activities and beyond grade level resources – particularly an ample variety of non-fiction materials.
- **Learning Centers (Student Produced)** – One area of the classroom can be devoted solely to student-produced centers. Students should be encouraged to develop centers that are interest-based, well researched, demonstrate in-depth knowledge rather than a flashy production. All student centers need to include; a visual aid or graphic demonstration of part of the research, the materials related to the center, clear directions for how to use the materials, and answer keys where needed.
- **Open-Ended Tasks** – Open-ended tasks such as writing in a journal are flexible learning activities determined by the teacher. Responses, however, are as individual as the

students. Open-ended does not imply that quality is not important or that any response is acceptable. Rather, these tasks signal that there is more than one way to approach a task and more than one correct response.

- **Preassessment** – The goal of preassessments is to accurately identify students' current levels of learning and determine the modifications needed for the next stage of learning. Preassessment needs to be done before teachers can compact curriculum, develop tiered assignments, or put students into flexible groups. Many teachers immediately think of preassessments as only giving a test before a unit is taught, however, there are many ways that information can be gained. The kinds of information needed depends on the teaching objectives. Other preassessment strategies include; reviewing portfolios and products generated from prior experiences, interviewing the student, observations of the learning situations, discussing concepts and skills, interpreting students' self-assessments, and/or reviewing students independent reading of fiction and nonfiction materials.
- **Product Options** – Products are what students create to demonstrate and extend what they learned as a result of content and process. When allowing students to choose product options, teachers should strive to incorporate a balanced offering of products that encourage students to demonstrate their best ways to learn and validate the significance of all modalities and intelligences. Product options for students do affect grading procedures. Rubrics provide the better option than a letter/point grade. Rubrics allow the teacher to look at the quality of the product and yet allow the perfectionist student the freedom to try a product that they have never tried before.
- **Research and Independent Study** – Research and independent study contrast with teacher-guided or teacher-directed projects in which students are asked to research information and grow in knowledge by reporting or recording what is already known. Research and independent study require a personal interpretation and response rather than merely reporting information already in print. Research and independent study should be: student-interest based; student-directed; investigations of real problems; dependent on student's skills; and an ongoing replacement of task for students who pretest beyond the planned curriculum.
- **Students as Producers** – In most classrooms, students are consumers using up the tasks teachers prepare. For “students as producers”, students investigate real problems and add to knowledge, ideas, or products to the field of study. “Students as producers” goes beyond the concept of open-ended task. Open-ended tasks are determined and driven by the teacher. When students are producers, the teacher determines the content area as well as which concepts and skills to integrate, but does not determine the format of the response. Consider a math problem. On the test for everyone else, you could give $73 \times 14 =$, with typical multiple-choice answers. For a student as a producer problem: “write and illustrate a word story problem that involves multiplying 73×14 for its solution. Explain your problem.”
- **Student's Self-Assessments** – When students are partners in their assessment, they are more motivated to achieve. Students should routinely analyze their work in progress and their achievements and set goals for their continued achievement. One of the best ways for students to assess their work is through rubrics. Rubrics should: be shared with the student before they start the work; encourage students reflections and high-expectations; reflect the most significant element related to the success of the task; and

accurately enable students and teachers to consistently identify the student's level of competency.

- **Thinking and Inquiry** – Incorporating selected thinking skills into the curriculum requires students to understand and apply information rather than to just memorize and repeat it. Teachers can use questioning techniques to guide students into reasoning and problem solving as they explore multiple contents. High-level thinking is more engaged as it invites students to interpret and relate to the content rather than to just *know* the content. An example of thinking and inquiry would be to ask the following question while having a discussion of Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address; “What does Lincoln seem to assume in his speech?”
- **Tiered Instruction** – Tiered instruction enables the teacher to ensure that students with different learning needs and different levels of readiness are successful. Instruction can be tiered by:
 - content -the complexity of what students learn
 - process – how students learn
 - products – how students present their learning

Bases upon preassessments, the teacher can vary the complexity of an activity into several levels of difficulty and then match each appropriate version to students level of readiness. The intent is to ensure that all students explore ideas at a level that builds upon what they already know and facilitates their continued learning.

For more information: *Differentiation: Simplified, Realistic, and Effective: How to Challenge Advanced Potentials in Mixed- Ability Classrooms* by Dr. Bertie Kingore