



Are You Making these Four Differentiated Instruction Mistakes?

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<http://edge.ascd.org/Are-You-Making-these-Four-Differentiated-Instruction-Mistakes/blog/3321350/127586.html>

If we truly want to help ALL students meet or master the standards, we must provide effective differentiation for our students. However, over the years, several practices have crept into the way we differentiate lessons that actually make student success LESS likely. The following are four practices that actually interfere with effective differentiated instruction.

Creating multiple assignments rather than multiple pathways. Differentiation is not about the number of assignments you create; it's about giving students multiple pathways to success and then helping them choose the pathway that is best for them. Simply providing multiple assignments not only creates a lot of work for you, it can pigeonhole some students into lowered expectations and decreased opportunities to stretch and grow. Instead of creating different assignments, create ONE assignment and provide students several different pathways to success on that assignment (for more on planning differentiated lessons that rely on ONE assignment, check out [The Differentiation Workbook](#) for a lesson plan and process). By focusing on different supports rather than different assignments, you can better target students' needs and give them the scaffolding they need to reach success.

Differentiating by learning style versus learning needs. Not every lesson you give will accommodate students' preferred learning style - nor does every lesson need to. Our time is better spent examining students' particular learning needs for each assignment and using their learning needs to identify and provide the support and scaffolding they need to be successful. Learning styles are static while learning needs constantly change and shift depending on students' current content and procedural knowledge. Learning needs give you a much more accurate picture of where students are currently and what you must do to help them successfully master a range of standards and skills. From there you can create [customized pathways](#) and supports to help all students meet or exceed the standards.

Differentiating by achievement level rather than by students' current learning level. Some will tell you that there are three kinds of students - high, medium, and low. But this distinction is not very useful. There are times when a student you consider to be in your high group will struggle with the content. Other time, students in your low group will sail through an activity, outperforming the students in your high group. Because students bring a variety of skills and experiences to the classroom, classifying them as high, medium, and low doesn't really help you adjust your instruction effectively to meet their complex needs. These static groupings also limit students. Once you start thinking about students in these ways, it is difficult to see them any other way. Differentiating by achievement level often results in lowered expectations for struggling students and extra work for advanced students. Lowering the target for some students while raising the learning target for others



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is not differentiation - it's tracking. Real differentiation takes into account where students are at a particular point in time. It doesn't label kids "low", "average," and "advanced"; it groups students by their current understanding of the content and processes involved in a particular learning activity and then provides students with the targeted supports they need to successfully master that activity.

Differentiating up rather than down. When we differentiate down, we tend to look for ways to "dumb down" an assignment to students' current learning level and hope that over time, they will begin working at the level demanded by the standards. In most cases, our efforts fall short. Differentiating up means starting with the standard and figuring out what supports students will need to reach the standard. All assignments are written at or above grade-level. We can offer students varying degrees of support and different routes to success but the target itself should never change.

By avoiding these mistakes, you can make your efforts at differentiation much more successful -- and much less stressful. Take a look at your differentiation practice and make sure that you are not unintentionally making things harder for both you and your students.

Moving from Individualization to Customization

<http://mindstepsinc.com/2010/07/moving-from-individualization-to-customization/>

Share with students the goal of the lesson and give students several choices as to how they can meet that goal. Discuss with students the pros and cons of each approach so that students can make intelligent decisions. Show students how to take into account their learning style preference, their resources, the amount of time they have available, and their skill set when making these choices.

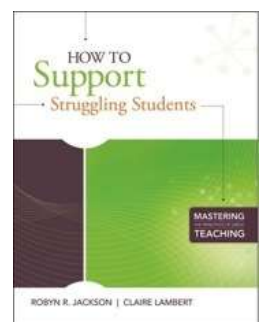
Demonstrate to students several different ways that they can solve a problem or complete an assignment. Discuss with students the advantages and disadvantages of each approach and allow them to choose which approach they will take. Ask them to explain their choice as a part of the assignment.

Setting Students Up for Success

<http://mindstepsinc.com/2010/08/setting-students-up-for-success/>

We spend a lot of time trying to remediate students who have failed or are failing our classes. I often wonder why we don't take that energy we use addressing failure by doing what we can to prevent failure in the first place.

As you begin your plans for the year, look for ways to set students up to be successful.





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Here are five steps you can take:

1. **Anticipate Confusion:** As you plan your lessons for the year, take time to think about how students will react to them. What might they find confusing? With what vocabulary will they be unfamiliar? What skills does the lesson demand that they may not have? Think through every phase of your lesson and look for areas for which students may be unprepared or under-prepared. Then address these areas by putting into place the supports they will need to be successful before the lesson begins.

2. **Pre-teach key vocabulary:** Many students struggle in school because they do not understand the academic vocabulary required. It's hard to read a chapter, keep up with a class discussion, or effectively complete work if students don't understand the key concepts and terms being used. Set students up for success by pre-teaching the key concepts and vocabulary prior to, or right at the beginning of a unit. Don't just teach the definition, have students put the definition into their own words and create non-linguistic representations (such as pictures, diagrams, or drawings) of the concept. Doing so can increase student achievement dramatically and even a brief exposure to the word prior to learning will help students learn more effectively. You can then reintroduce the word within the context during the actual lesson.

3. **Accelerate Students by Pre-teaching Required Soft Skills:** Soft skills are those skill students use to learn. Knowing how to take notes, or read a text effectively, understanding how to participate in a class discussion or organize their notebooks and papers or study for a test are not skills that most students naturally acquire. They must be taught. When you show students how to take notes on the chapter you've just assigned for homework (or better yet, give them a graphic organizer they can use!), when you show students how to study for an upcoming test or quiz, or when you prepare students to read a chapter by giving them a graphic organizer that makes the organization of the chapter clear for students and gives them a tool for taking notes, you make it more likely that students will complete these tasks successfully and learn more meaningfully in the process.

4. **Provide Advanced Organizers:** The key to learning meaningfully is for students to organize new information in their minds so that they can access it later and manipulate it in a way that helps them create meaning for themselves. Many students cannot access or think rigorously about what they have learned because they do not organize information in their minds. They just dump new information into their short-term memory and hold it there long enough to pass the upcoming quiz or test. Information stored that way evaporates. Instead, show students how to organize and store new information in their minds by giving them advanced organizers. It might be a graphic organizer they can use to take notes, or a visual way to see how the concepts in the unit you are working on connect, or even a template they can use to keep their notebooks and planbooks organized. Show students how to organize new information and how it relates to the information they already know. Doing so will help them learn in a meaningful way and retain what they are learning.

5. **Activate or Back-fill Key Background Knowledge:** Activating background knowledge is a powerful strategy for helping students connect what they are about to learn to what



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they know already. But what about those students who are missing critical background knowledge. Instead of waiting for these gaps in background knowledge to interfere with students' new learning, uncover these gaps early and backfill them. You can use a pre-assessment to find out what background knowledge students are missing, and then plan mini-lessons or a mini-units to help students acquire at least a familiarity with foundational concepts they will need to be successful with an upcoming unit. You can use film clips, children's books, grade-level appropriate supplementary readings, or even a brief demonstration and practice exercises disguised as a game to help students acquire a familiarity with key background knowledge.

Seven Myths About Rigor

<http://mindstepsinc.com/2011/01/seven-myths-about-rigor/>

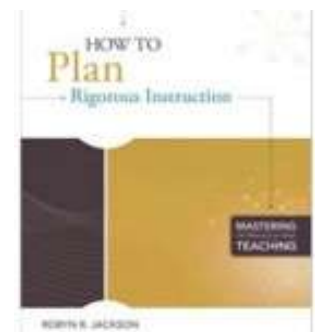
Unfortunately, over the years the term rigorous has accumulated a lot of baggage. The following are seven myths about Rigor.

Myth One: If you have rigorous standards, you have a rigorous course. Rigor isn't as much about the standards as it is about how you ask students to reach the standards. There are times when students are asked to achieve highly rigorous standards in un-rigorous ways. And other times, teachers are able to take mediocre standards and help students achieve highly rigorous learning by designing rigorous learning experiences that correspond with those standards.

Myth Two: Rigor means more work. While rigorous instruction may require that students put forth more effort, it is not based on the volume of work students complete. Rigor is about the quality of the work students are asked to do, not the quantity. [More assignments or more reading does not guarantee more rigor](#). In fact, rigorous classrooms often have less assignments and homework.

Myth Three: Rigor means harder. Rigorous classrooms do present more challenge to students but there is a difference between challenging and difficult. Challenging work asks students to stretch and reach for new understanding. Work can be difficult however for a variety of reasons including unclear instructions, a lack of necessary resources, [a lack of adequate support](#), demands that are too great for the time allotted, etc. We can all think of assignments we endured that were difficult without being intellectually challenging. Thus, it is a mistake to think that just because students had difficulty completing their work, they have engaged in a rigorous assignment.

Myth Four: Rigor is a matter of content. Just because you select highly rigorous content does not guarantee a highly rigorous learning experience for students. [How you ask students to engage in the content](#) also determines the level of rigor for your course.





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Myth Five: Younger students cannot engage in rigorous instruction: Even young children can think and interact with material in highly rigorous ways. In fact, left to their own devices, children naturally take what they are learning to solve unpredictable problems and deal with uncertainty. Doing so is at the very nature of learning. The key is to make sure that your rigorous instruction is developmentally appropriate.

Myth Six: In order to engage in rigor, students must first master the basics. Rigorous thinking is involved in learning even the most basic material. Students can learn the basics in highly rigorous ways. They can learn how to build adequate representations, organize those facts in some way, analyze and construct relationships among those facts, and make inferences beyond what is explicitly presented *while* they are mastering the basics.

Myth Seven: Rigor is for the elite. All students can and should have access to rigorous instruction and learning. To reserve rigorous learning opportunities for an elite group of students while relegating others to lives of memorizing disconnected facts and blindly participating in meaningless activities is to leave them unprepared to meet the demands of a 21st century and beyond.