



## How does a Teacher Plan for Differentiated Instruction?



The following document is a summarising of key elements of the Differentiation in Practice Resource Guides written by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson for Grades K – 9 (see end for references). Additional comments and graphics sourced by or created by Intuyu Consulting.

Planning for differentiated instruction involves careful consideration of student characteristics, curricular elements, and instructional strategies. A teacher must coordinate these three components with an eye toward increasing student understanding and engagement with the material being studied.

### A. Student Characteristics

There are three student characteristics that teachers can respond to as they craft classes

#### Readiness

- Has to do with a student's current preparedness to work with a prescribed set of knowledge, understanding, and skill.
  - If a student can breeze through a task they may get a good grade but won't necessarily learn
  - Conversely, if the task is well out of student's current proficiency then frustration not learning is the outcome.
- Each of us learns best when a task is a little too difficult for our current level of knowledge, understanding, and skill AND there is a support system present to support us bridging the gap.



#### Interest

- This is a major motivating factor for learning
- An effective teacher links the required content to student interests in order to HOOK the learner. An example of this is asking an artistic student to interpret what they read through art. This can link their reading to their passion and impact both.
- Due to the interconnectedness of all knowledge there are many ways to link what a learner finds intriguing and what they are supposed to learn.
- Effective teachers also find "cracks in the schedule" that allows students to follow their passions beyond the prescribed curriculum – sometimes through independent investigations.
- The best teachers also support students to develop new interests and passions thus breathing life into a curriculum.



## Learning Profile

- This refers to a student's preferred mode of learning and is shaped by gender, culture, learning style, intelligence preference (e.g. Gardner's work), or a combination of these.
- Some students learn best when they collaborate with peers, some when alone.
- Some need to see the big picture of the thinking behind what they are learning before the parts make sense, while others love to gather bits of learning and construct meaning.
- Some students are more efficient when they do analytical tasks and others when they work on practical applications of ideas.
- Some thrive on individual accolades and others on group commendations
- In essence the teacher attempts to provide ways of learning that makes the learning journey of each student more efficient and effective.

## B. Curricula Elements

There are five classroom elements that teachers can modify to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as possible, as efficiently as possible.



### 1. Differentiating Content

- Content refers to *either* to what a student should come to know, understand and be able to do as a result of a segment of study, or to how the student will gain access to the knowledge, understanding and skill.
- The teacher is the source of synthesis of the standards, texts and guides and must ask the questions
  - What matters most here?
  - What is this subject really about?
  - What will be of enduring value to my students?
  - What must I share with them to help them truly understand the magic of this subject in their lives?
- When a teacher answers these questions they are ready to specify what the students should know, understand and be able to do in a particular subject as the result of instruction presented over a lesson, day, unit or year.



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- The teacher's overarching goal is to hold the essential knowledge, understanding and skills steady for most learners. This means that while students will work at different levels (some with more complex formats and more independence and others with greater scaffolding from teachers and peers) the goal of the entire student group is to gain the essential knowledge, understandings and skills of the topic.
- There are exceptions to this, of course, at the extremes (the student is proficient in the topic or the student has serious gaps and the topic is currently out of reach).
- Once the essential knowledge, understandings and skills or a unit / topic are clear the teacher focuses on how they will ensure student access to that essential knowledge, understanding, and skill set.
- Student access to content can be varied
  - Teacher presentation, textbooks, supplementary materials, technology, demonstrations, podcasts, field trips, incursions, and so on
- An effective teacher asks, "what are ALL the ways I can support my students to gain access to new knowledge, understanding and skills as we move through this topic?"

## **2. Differentiating Process**

- Whilst the line between process and content is blurred, we'll think of the process as beginning when the students begin making personal sense out of information, ideas and skills they've accessed. The student stops being the consumer and starts making meaning in earnest.
- Process is often synonymous with "activities"
- Worthwhile activities
  - Ask students to use specific information and skills to come to understand an important idea or principle
  - They are unambiguously focussed on essential learning goals
  - They call the student to work directly with a subset of the key knowledge, understandings and skills specified as content goals
  - Requires the student to think about ideas, grapple with problems, and use information
  - Moves beyond "giving back information" to see how things work and why they work as they do
  - Snags student interest so that they persist at it even when the task is difficult

## **3. Differentiating Products**

- A product is a means by which students demonstrate what they have come to know, understand and be able to do.
- It refers to a major or culminating demonstration of student learning that comes at the end of a long period of learning (not a class period or two day lesson).
- Effective products have certain hallmarks
  - Focus on essential knowledge, understandings and skills specified as content goals
  - Have clear, challenging and specified criteria for success – both on grade-level expectations and individual student needs



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- Should endeavour to capture student interest
- High quality products are written and guided in ways that support student success in both the process of working on the product and the product itself
- Products can take many forms
  - The flexibility of products make them potentially powerful in classrooms sensitive to learner variance
  - As long as the product demonstrates that the student's capacity to show what they know, understand, and do the non-negotiables of the unit.
  - Tests are one product but teachers shouldn't fall into the trap of using just tests as this can impede students (just like measuring the skill of a soccer player by having them sit a test!)

## 4. Differentiating Affect

- Students, given they are human beings, come to school with common affective needs such as
  - they need to feel safe and secure, both physically and emotionally
  - they need to feel that they belong to the group and they matter to it
  - they need to feel a sense of kinship with the group, a sense that they share common ground with their peers
  - they need to feel affirmed and assured they are valued as they are
  - they need to feel challenged and that they can succeed at a high level of expectation
- Students can feel unimportant to the group if they find themselves on the outskirts of class activities, conversations and plans (or even if the teacher sees the student as a fringe member)
  - The teacher can help by understanding the student's need to be part of the daily fabric of the class, and consciously weave that fabric with the legitimate participation of each student in mind.
- Students can feel a lack of belonging if they cannot ask the questions important to them because a teacher (or others) is impatient with or threatened by them.
  - To address this need for belonging the teacher must make the class a place where legitimate questions are sought, valued and celebrated.
- An Affective Environment includes
  - Modelling respect
  - Teaching about and for respect
  - Supporting students develop and escalating awareness of and appreciation for commonalities and differences amongst their classmates
  - Supporting students to themselves and their peers in the ideas and issues they study
  - Supporting students to examine multiple perspectives on important issues
  - Supporting students to listen to one another so that they not only hear the words but the intentions behind the words and implications beyond them.





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- Supporting students to develop empathy for each other
- Ensuring consistently equitable participation of every student
- Providing structures that promote and support student success
- Creating opportunities to affirm each student
- Establishing shared and individual benchmarks for success
- Coaching the students to work for their personal best
- Celebrating growth AND mistakes / failures as an access to growth
- Supporting students to be more reflective and effective in decision making
- Supporting students to become effective problem solvers, both personally and interpersonally
- Building positive memories for all individuals and the group as a whole, and revisiting those memories to have students develop a sense of shared experience
- A teacher differentiates the affective environment in both planned and reactive ways based on their understanding of the normal needs of all human beings.
- Affect is, by large, shaped by the learning environment – the weather in the classroom. The teacher’s role is often as the “weather-maker”, enabling students to learn more effectively as a result of the classroom weather.

## 5. Differentiating Learning Environment

- The learning environment is both the visible and invisible classroom structures that enable the teacher and students to work in ways that benefit both the individual and class as a whole.
- The teacher’s guiding question is:
  - What can I do to allow students of varying readiness levels, and modes of learning, to grow most fully in this place?
- A flexible learning environment is best for differentiated learning. One would need to examine how space, time and materials can be used flexibly.
- An effective teacher involves students in decisions about how to make the environment work, and supports them in developing rules and procedures to govern the flexible learning environment
  - This creates a sense of ownership as well as empowers the students to solve most issues more quickly and creatively than the teacher (who quite often is dealing with other responsibilities and pressures).
- Decisions About Space
  - The goal of flexible space is to enable the teacher and the students to work in a variety of configurations and to do so smoothly and efficiently
  - Teacher and Students might ask questions such as
    - What are the various ways we can arrange the room to allow for individual, small-group and whole-group work?
    - How can we rearrange ourselves when we don’t want to (or can’t) move the furniture?
    - How can we display student work and other items and still have places in the room which aren’t visually distracting
    - When we need to move furniture, who will do, how quickly and at what noise level?



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- Who may move around the classroom?
- What signal will we use to move from one place or task to another?
- What will happen if someone's movement in the classroom disrupts others?
  
- Decisions About Materials
  - Goals related to flexible materials include making sure students have both what they need to pursue their own learning goals in preferred ways and what they need to work together toward class goals.
  - Questions to ask:
    - What materials and supplies should always be available in the class and what will be needed from time to time?
    - How can we rotate and store materials and supplies?
    - Which materials and supplies should students have access to and which should be only accessible to teachers?
    - How will students know which materials are appropriate for their tasks at a given time?
    - What guidelines will there be when there aren't enough materials or supplies to go around?
    - What constitutes appropriate care for materials and supplies?
    - What will happen if someone misuses materials or supplies or is disruptive to others?
  
- Decisions about Time
  - Time is perhaps the most important classroom commodity. It enables or inhibits learning at every turn – and there is never enough of it!
  - When there is academic diversity in the classroom it is seldom wise to carve time up into chunks and distribute it to everyone in an equal manner.
    - Some students will require additional instruction from the teacher to move ahead
    - Some students will finish work more rapidly than others
    - Some will need longer on particular tasks
  - It often makes sense for a teacher to teach a small group while other students are working alone or in small groups
  - The goal is that everyone knows what to do, how to do it, and by when.
  - Questions to ask include:
    - When will it be best to work as a whole, in small groups, or independently?
    - How will we manage ourselves when we work without direct teacher supervision?
    - What rules and procedures will govern our work at various places in the room and for various tasks?
    - How will we get help when we need it and the teacher is busy?
    - How will we let the teacher know we need help?
    - What do we do if we finish the task before others (even if the task was challenging and we worked at a high level of quality)?
    - What do we do if we need additional time to finish a task?
    - Where do we turn in our work when we are finished?



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- How can I tell if I am doing my work to a high level of quality?
  - How do I keep track of my goals, work and accomplishments?
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- Students can work flexible and successfully as long as they know what's expected and are held to high standards of performance.
  - If we expect young people to become competent, self-guided adults then we must create an environment that develops them and gives them responsibility to develop those skills.



## References

Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum – Grades K-5, Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson, ASCD (2003).

Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum – Grades 5-9, Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson, ASCD (2003).