

Differentiation of Instruction

Differentiated instruction is an instructional approach that encompasses several learning strategies, addresses individual student needs, and helps all students access core instruction. Differentiation takes place within the classroom environment, planning content, process, and product. The premise of differentiated instruction is having high expectations for all students, and through the practice of differentiation, all students can achieve those high expectations.



Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Whether teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping make this a successful approach to instruction.

Differentiated instruction is a teacher's proactive response to a learner's individual needs; it is an instructional approach that simultaneously encompasses several learning strategies.

Differentiated instruction helps the student access core instruction (Tier I). Differentiated instruction is guided by principles of differentiation: environment, quality curriculum, assessment that informs teaching and learning, instruction that responds to student variance, and leading students and managing routines.

Differentiation is based on the following:

- *Learning Profile* – preferred approaches to learning
- *Readiness* – a student's proximity to specified learning goals
- *Interests* – passions, affinities, kinships that motivate learning

Successful differentiation is based on individual student strengths, needs, and areas of deficit. First, educators should determine what the student requires to access core instruction, and then effectively plan to meet their need(s). Educators should consult the *Differentiation Inventory for Classroom Observation* to help assess differentiation in the classroom (The *Differentiation Inventory for Classroom Observation* can be found in the *RTI² Implementation Guide*.)

Examples of deficits or areas of need a student may have are:

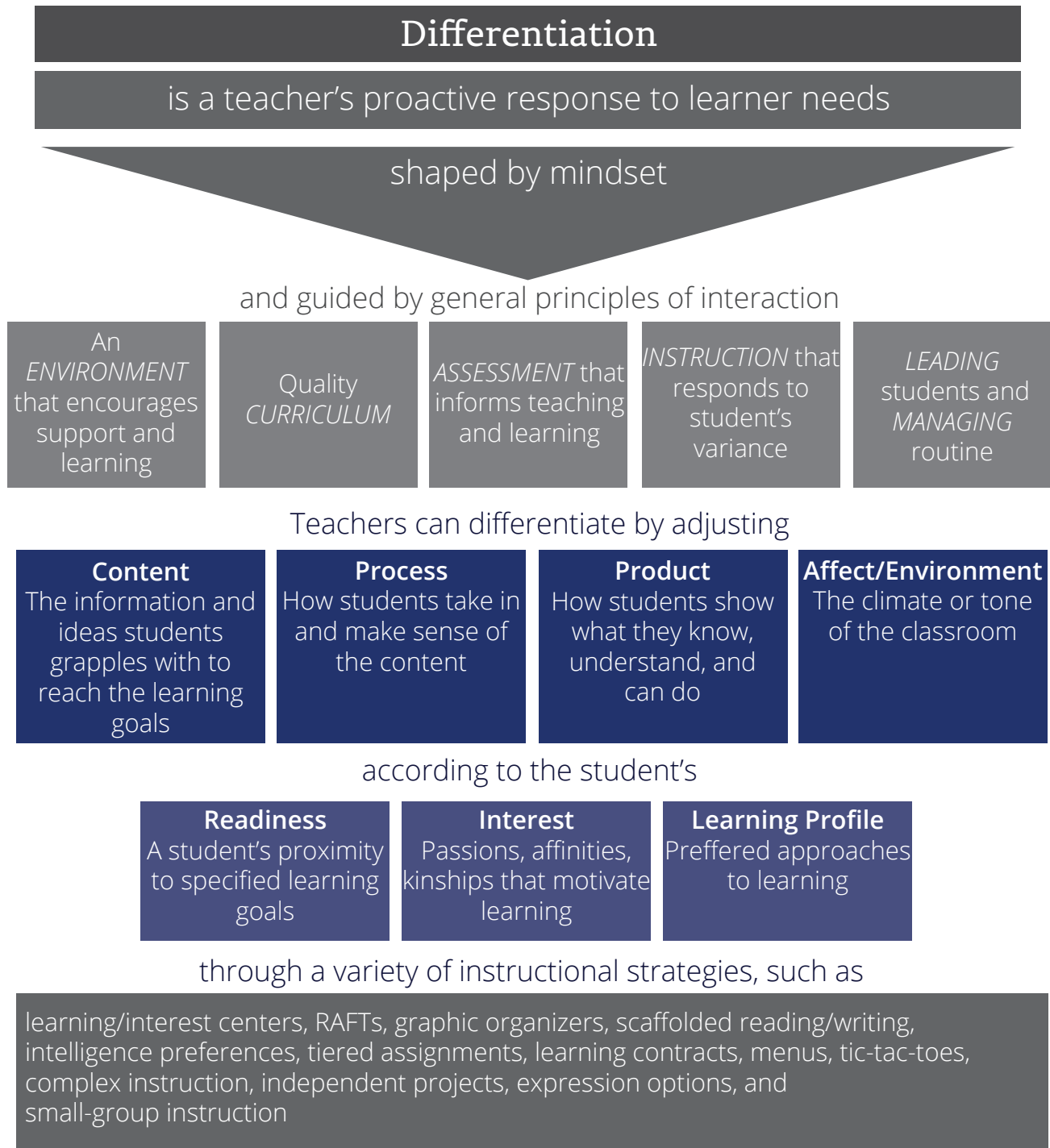
- reading,
- mathematics,
- writing,
- extent of background knowledge,
- English language proficiency, and
- learning disabilities or other disabilities impacting learning.

Determining a student's needs may also include:

- utilizing diagnostic instruments to assess skill level (e.g., inquire: "what do my students know?");
- universal screening and progress monitoring data;
- pre-tests and post-tests;
- surveying background knowledge (e.g., KWL charts, anticipation guides);
- student self-assessments/checklists;
- formal and/or informal assessments;
- being aware of student previous data/schooling background (e.g., student cumulative files, student data profiles, language levels, levels of intervention, school supports provided); and
- determining student interest, preferred way of learning, and environmental comfort (e.g., specific topic, small group setting, partner work, visual instruction, interactive learning boards).

Differentiated instruction may include any of the following:

- Tiered assignments, scaffold to students need/understanding
- Compacting material: big idea
- Collaborative learning centers
- Collaborative learning groups/student seating
- Flexible grouping
- Learning contracts/student goal setting
- Choice of academic boards/classroom print
- Themed units/word walls
- Sentence frames
- Explicit outlined steps to procedures



Differentiation during Tier I uses assessment data (see component 2.3) to identify individual student needs. Instruction addresses individual needs and matches instructional materials to support the specific skills. The small groups that are formed based on this assessment data are flexible, meaning group membership changes based on student progress, interests, and needs.

Differentiated core instruction is not:

- using only whole-class instruction,
- using small groups that never change, or
- using the same independent seat work assignments for the entire class.

Differentiation of Environment

The learning environment is the “climate” of a classroom and includes the classroom’s operation and tone. Class rules, furniture arrangement, lighting, procedures, and processes all affect the classroom’s mood.

The environment includes the conditions and interactions in the classroom that set the tone and expectations for learning. Differentiating classroom environment ensures that all students are held to high expectations. Understanding the learning environment has an impact on students’ needs and in turn plays a role in learning by creating conditions in which the student is able to demonstrate skills and feel comfortable asking questions.

“All students need a teacher who is confident of students’ capacity to learn what they need to learn and who support them vigorously as they do so.”

An optimal environment is invitational or characterized by a transparent commitment to the learning of every student and a consideration of what each student brings to the lesson. Leaders and teachers in invitational environments demonstrate respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality.

Teachers and Students in the Differentiated Environment

Students should feel welcomed and valued at their level of readiness. All students need a teacher who is confident of students’ capacity to learn what they need to learn and who supports them vigorously as they do so. The teacher and student should work together to enhance one another’s growth. Success and failures are inevitable in the learning process, and the classroom is a safe place for both. Hard work results in observable growth that is then celebrated by the teacher and student. **Routines and processes in the classroom should be designed in a way that all students are able to have access and a level of success (i.e., Universal Design for Learning).** Classrooms with respectful environments exhibit more student engagement and fewer negative behaviors. There are clear expectations, and goal setting is taking place for all students.



Leaders and Teachers in the Differentiated Environment

Leaders create an environment in which each teacher feels valued, challenged, supported, and part of a team working together for success. The leader should be clear about what teachers should know, understand, and be able to do (KUDs) in order to differentiate instruction skillfully. Leaders must continually monitor teacher growth toward these KUDs, providing feedback and developing learning opportunities for teachers based on their varied readiness levels, interests, and approaches to teaching and learning. Structures should be designed to ensure that each teacher progresses in facility and comfort with addressing learner needs; this means they must sometimes work with faculty as a whole, sometimes work with the faculty in small groups, and sometimes work with individual members of the faculty.

Differentiation of Content

Differentiated content is what students should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of the study, or how students will gain access to the knowledge. **Differentiation can be done by pre-assessing student skills and understandings, then matching learners with appropriate activities.** Allowing students to have choices and providing students with additional resources that match their levels of understanding adds depth to their learning. Differentiating content should not change what the student is expected to know, understand, or do; rather, it should change how a student accessed that content

Examples of methods for differentiating:

- Multiple texts and supplementary print resources
- Modeling/demonstrations
- Interest-based materials
- Varied support mechanisms for reading
- Reduced number of high quality tasks/problems (if needed)

Standards-based, grade-level expectations should remain the same for all students. However, the delivery and/or expected student response may be differentiated depending on individual students' need.

“Differentiating content should not change what the student is expected to know, understand, or do; rather it should change how a student accesses that content.”

Teachers should know their students and their students' strengths and needs when presenting content in a lesson. Guiding questions for the beginning of planning a lesson may include:

- What do my students know about this unit of study?
- How might students best learn the concepts and skills of this unit?
- How can I provide each learner with appropriately challenging opportunities?
- How can I incorporate students' interests and spark new ones?
- How might I provide students with meaningful choices of different ways to demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives?

Know, Understand, Do (KUD):

- High-quality learning involves goals stated in the form of a KUD.
- Statements that divide learning standards into things students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do or accomplish.

KNOW	UNDERSTAND	DO
Facts, places, people, dates, definitions	Big ideas, expanding ideas that frame details, generalizations	Skills, behavior objectives, outcomes, overall access

Differentiation of Process

These activities are designed to help students make sense of or “own” the content—changing the activity in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content.

Differentiating of process should not change what the student is expected to know, understand, or do; rather, it should change how a student engages in the process.

- Refers to how students make sense or understand the information, ideas, and skills being studied
- Reflects student learning styles and preferences
- Varies the learning process depending upon how students learn

Examples:

- Format presentations of material, if needed
- Learning centers
- Graphic organizers
- Varied models of exploration and expression (including movement/kinetics/multi-sensory)
- Models of student work at different degrees of complexity
- Break up long lessons into smaller meaningful sections

Setting clear learning targets/objectives that tell the student what they need to know, understand, and do are critical to a learner’s success in the classroom. *(See the KUD example in the RTI² Implementation Guide. Strategies and examples to differentiate process by readiness, interest, and learning profile can also be found in the implementation guide.)*

Differentiation of End Product

This is how students may demonstrate and extend what they have come to know, understand, and are able to do. The end product is today’s means of understanding how to modify tomorrow’s instruction.

- Small group instruction supports differentiating the product
- Tends to be tangible: reports, tests, brochures, speeches, skits
- Reflects student understanding
- Differentiates by providing challenge, variety, and choice

Examples:

- Provide assessment options
- Community based projects
- Independent study
- Create a visual response with key details outlined around
- Orally produce responses
- Record their responses
- Use class responders to input understanding