

differentiating instruction

five easy strategies for inclusive classrooms

Many general educators believe that they need specialized strategies to teach students with disabilities. While it can be beneficial to know about certain types of disabilities before teaching students with labels, often teachers are effective when they are accepting, look for strengths in their students, provide personal attention when necessary, and allow for differences in the ways students approach tasks and complete classroom work.

Teachers can also support the learners in diverse classrooms by differentiating instruction. But what exactly is differentiating instruction? To put it simply, differentiating instruction involves providing instruction that is accessible and challenging to all:

- When a teacher allows students different ways to express their understanding of a novel (taking a written test, designing a piece of art related to the book, giving a speech about comparing the novel to other works), she is differentiating instruction.
- When a teacher uses cooperative learning approaches and assigns students' roles that will challenge them as individuals, he is differentiating instruction.
- When a teacher provides students with a range of materials to teach immigration (travel documents, costumes, maps, interactive software), she is differentiating instruction.
- When a teacher creates different questions to meet the needs of individual learners during a discussion, he is differentiating instruction.

easy classroom differentiation: five specific strategies

Teachers can also use a range of specific strategies to differentiate in the classroom. Lessons planned using strategies such as big questions, learning agendas, centers or stations, curriculum overlapping, and project-based instruction will support the needs of students with and without disabilities; students with a range of gifts, talents, and interests; and students who are otherwise diverse.



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big question teaching

Perhaps the easiest way to differentiate for all learners is to frame lessons and units as questions, issues, or problems (Bigelow, 1994; Onosko & Jorgensen, 1995). Lessons structured as questions or problems tend to be more challenging and interesting than those that are structured as topics. Think of the typical fifth-grade unit of study. In one classroom, the teacher introduces the topic of “poetry”. In another classroom, the teacher tells students they will be thinking about ways in which popular culture has influenced poetry and poets. Which group will be more motivated and, perhaps, more challenged to engage in higher order thinking? Onosko and Jorgensen (1998) point out that using problems, questions, or critical issues as the base of a lesson or unit helps the teacher to “narrow the topic, delimiting content coverage and reducing the likelihood of fragmented and superficial treatment of subject matter” (p. 76).

The openness of the questions stimulates thought, permits and encourages inventive thinking, encourages different responses from different students, and allows for the pursuit of authentic learning and investigation. Further, students with a wide range of needs can answer “big questions”; some learners will provide answers that are more concrete while others will be able to answer in ways that are more complex and abstract.

Examples of big questions:

- What makes a poem great?
- What are the unsolved mysteries of the pyramids?
- What does it mean to be an ethical scientist?

learning agendas

A learning agenda is a list of projects or activities that must be completed during a specific period of time, usually during a unit of study. Typically, students work independently on their agendas, asking for support when needed and collaborating with other learners when necessary. The agenda helps students to visually track the work that needs completing and the activities they have finished. Students using agendas, therefore, can develop management and organizational skills.

The actual agenda tasks, of course, vary according to specific student needs. In one classroom, all students had the same agenda for a unit on Africa (e.g., make a map and label



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the countries, read a book from the classroom library on African people) but some learners had extra items for enrichment (e.g., write an African folktale) and one child had an item related to her speech and language goals (e.g., using 3 of your personal vocabulary words, write a postcard to a school in Africa).

centers or stations

Using centers or stations involves setting up different spots in the classroom where students work on various tasks simultaneously. Stations invite flexible grouping because not all students need to utilize all stations. Centers or station teaching is ideal for use in the inclusive classroom since it allows teachers to work with individual students or small groups of learners without having to use a more restrictive “pull out” model of instruction. A special educator might have some students rotate to a special writing practice station while the general educator supervises the rest of learners as they work at the rest of the stations. Or a special educator can be facilitating the whole class as they move through the rotations, while a general educator can be checking in with those learners needing enrichment questions, materials, or instruction.

According to Tomlinson (2000), centers should focus on important learning goals, contain materials that promote individual students’ growth toward those goals; use activities addressing a wide range of reading levels, learning profiles, and student interests; provide clear directions; include instructions about what a student should do when he completes the work at the center; and include a record-keeping system to monitor what students do at the center and the quality level.

Stations or centers might be student-led or teacher-led. In a secondary classroom, learners in a math class might rotate through five stations:

- working with the teacher to learn about probability;
- solving probability problems from the textbook;
- generating a list of real-world applications for probability;
- working on new computer program with a small group; and
- completing a review worksheet from the last unit.

curriculum overlapping

Students needing more enrichment or more support might work on objectives that are different from those being addressed by their peers. When teachers use curriculum overlapping,



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some students focus on objectives that are different from but clearly connected to those being addressed by the class. For example, a student who already knows a lot about world geography can opt out some lessons to design a classroom website that helps classmates study geography concepts and connect to pen pals around the world (student works on refining and learning technology skills while practicing geography skills). Or a student who has already read and studied a certain novel being explored by the class can take time to adapt that novel into a screen play (student works on learning a new genre). Or a student who has a difficult time grasping the use and identification of literary devices in fiction might use the class time to learn how to program her augmentative communication device. The student might program words such as “symbolism” and “foreshadowing” and use the device to quiz and learn from her peers.

project-based instruction

Project-based instruction is especially appropriate for students with diverse learning profiles as many student needs and learning styles can be addressed; there are increased opportunities for peer support and the development of relationships; students can work at their own pace; and a number of skills and disciplines can be incorporated into any project. Projects are an ideal learning activity for any student who needs some time alone to work independently and for those who thrive when given opportunities to immerse themselves in one topic. Donna Williams (1992), a gifted author and poet with autism, found that she could be academically successful when a favorite teacher believed in her abilities and let her pursue a topic of special interest:

While the other teachers found me a devil, this teacher found me to be bright, amusing, and a pleasure to teach. At the end of the term, I handed her the most important piece of schoolwork any of my high school teachers had received.

The students had all been given a set date and topic on which to write. I had been intrigued by the way black people had been treated in America in the sixties.

I told my teacher that what I wanted to do was a secret, and she agreed to extend my due date as I enthusiastically informed her of the growing length of my project. I had gone through every book I could find on the topic, cutting out pictures and drawing illustrations over my written pages, as I had always done, to capture the feel of what I wanted to write about. The other students had given her projects spanning an average of about three pages in length. I proudly gave her my special project of twenty-six pages, illustrations, and drawings. She gave me an A... (p. 81)



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In managing projects, teachers should set clear timelines, teach students how to chart their own progress and develop progress reports, and help students to produce a final product or products. Harmin (1995) suggests that teachers steer students away from projects that involve copy work and passive learning and point them towards those activities that will inspire higher order thinking and meaningful engagement.

In order to prevent students from engaging in excessive pencil and paper work, ask them to design a model, compare ideas, create a product, or produce a mural (Harmin, 1995). Instead of asking them to do a report on the school district's recycling practices, ask them to summarize the opinions of two experts, interview two school employees, and invent a model policy to present to the school board.

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