

Complete Differentiated Instruction Continuum for Administrators

Introducing the instructional mind-set that has changed the face of American education!

Most teachers naturally differentiate their instruction to some degree. The more differentiated a classroom, the more its students feel successful and motivated, resulting in higher student achievement. The secret to creating a highly differentiated classroom involves matching a responsive mind-set with practical, proven strategies.

This Continuum describes the stages through which educators travel as they move from a non-differentiated, “one-size-fits-all” learning environment to one that is highly differentiated. Use this tool to assess the level of differentiation in your classrooms, and to determine what types of professional development might be needed to ensure maximum student achievement.

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated Instruction makes it possible to maximize learning for ALL students. It is a professional and responsive mind-set where the teacher is proactively planning for the needs of diverse learners. This proactive mind-set is the key to successfully implementing differentiated instruction. The teacher must make a conscious and deliberate effort to know each learner as an individual in order to create multiple pathways through which every student can experience success.

Students Differ: Students differ in how they learn best, in what interests them, and in their readiness for the content being taught.

- When a teacher is attuned to how students learn, there is more efficient learning.
- When a teacher pays attention to student interests, there is greater student attention and focus.
- When a teacher aligns lessons to student readiness, there is increased growth and achievement.

What to Differentiate: A particular lesson can meet the various needs of individual learners by differentiating content, process, and/or product.

- Content can be adjusted by altering how students access the learning. For example, audio recordings, advanced reference materials, etc.
- Process can be modified by considering the different ways in which students make sense of key ideas. For example, visual brainstorming, interest-aligned groupings, etc.
- Product can change by giving students the option to use a variety of ways to demonstrate what they understand and are able to do. For example, songs, skits, etc.

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The stages of differentiation below describe activities and strategies you might observe in classrooms implementing various levels of differentiation. Use this chart to assess where your school or district is on the continuum and to plot out how you can create more highly differentiated classrooms.

STAGE 1

Early Implementation

- Begin learning about students' interests and learning profiles
- Establish classroom management procedures
- Start using pre-assessments to determine students' readiness levels
- Begin using formative assessments
- Experiment with flexible grouping

STAGE 2

Intermediate Implementation

- Design activities to target students' interests and learning profiles
- Use data from pre-assessments to design lessons
- Use data from formative assessments to guide instruction
- Explore types of flexible grouping
- Begin using anchor activities
- Incorporate learning contracts for some students

STAGE 3

Full Implementation

- Target students' interests and learning profiles regularly
- Continue to use data from pre- and formative assessments to design lessons and guide instruction
- Implement student-led formative assessment
- Broaden use of flexible grouping
- Experiment with tiering

STAGE 4

Advanced Implementation

- Compact curriculum for some students
- Create tiered activities as needed
- Ensure all assessments are in alignment
- Share responsibility of learning with students
- Address grading questions/issues
- Coach colleagues who are at different levels of implementation

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STAGE 1

Early Implementation

Teachers in the early stage of implementation have typically had some training on differentiated instruction and may have an idea about what it should look like in the classroom. However, they have little, if any, experience in actually implementing it. Stage 1 defines the initial incremental steps teachers can take to gain confidence and experience as they begin their journey along the continuum:

Begin learning about students' interests and learning profiles

Start getting to know your students through interest inventories, multiple intelligences surveys, anecdotal notes, parent conferences, etc. Think of ways you can use this information to make learning more interesting and fun for your students. Create a filing system to keep track of and provide easy reference to the information you gather about your students.

Establish classroom management procedures

Create a positive learning environment by establishing student expectations through the use of appropriate rules, signals, routines, and rituals. Rules and signals should be simple, easy to follow, and enforceable and are effective in areas such as conversation levels, getting help, respect for each other, participation, and transitions. Routines center on time and procedures such as turning in assignments and moving through centers or to anchor activities, while rituals help build classroom community.

Start using pre-assessments to determine students' readiness levels

Find out what students know and can do in order to determine their learning needs. Begin using a variety of pre-assessment strategies. Think about how your lesson plan design may need to change based on the results of the pre-assessment.

Begin using formative assessments

Discover what your students are learning through formative assessments such as portfolios, journals, anecdotal notes, exit cards, observation, and others. Think about how your students' formative assessments might affect your instruction.

Experiment with flexible grouping

Place students in temporary groups based on their readiness, learning profiles, and/or interest for specific skills, units of study, or other learning activities. When making decisions about grouping, think about the purpose of the activity as well as the personalities of the students, and then consider what type and size of group will work best.

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STAGE 2

Intermediate Implementation

Teachers in Stage 2 have experienced basic implementation of differentiated instruction and are ready to expand on what they have learned. These teachers should continue to take incremental steps as they progress through Stage 2:

Design activities to target students' interests and learning profiles

Teach more ways in order to reach more students. Design lessons with the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners in mind. Target the multiple intelligences through choice boards, centers, stations, and other student-oriented activities. Motivate learners by incorporating their interests in math problems, stories, problem-based learning, etc.

Use data from pre-assessments to design lessons

Determine your students' prior knowledge through pre-assessments in order to help you plan your initial unit of instruction. Pre-assessments may be given from one day to two weeks before instruction is scheduled to begin. The results may guide you in forming readiness-based flexible groups.

Use data from formative assessments to guide instruction

Use formative assessment throughout a unit of study as a diagnostic tool to indicate what skills have been mastered and where reteaching is needed. The results are used immediately to make instructional changes or to regroup students in flexible skill groups, if necessary.

Explore types of flexible grouping

Create different types of temporary groups depending on the purpose of the learning. In interest groups, students explore learning and find similarities based on common interests; in multiple intelligences groups they learn about and value each others' strengths; skills/readiness groups focus on a similar level of readiness for the content; and, cooperative groups are formed to share responsibilities and participate equally.

Begin using anchor activities

Provide meaningful, ongoing assignments that students can work on independently or in small groups while the teacher works with small groups. Examples include writing journals, writing prompts, word games or activities, math-fact games and practice, independent projects, small-group projects, and others.

Incorporate learning contracts for some students

Develop learning contracts for students who either need more time and/or support to complete their products or seem to know the content at a fairly high level already.

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STAGE 3

Full Implementation

Teachers in Stage 3 have moved from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side.” They are no longer dispensers of knowledge, but facilitators of learning. Their small groups are flexible, and so is their teaching! In the Full Implementation stage, teachers have an opportunity to evaluate and refine what they have been doing, as well as try something new.

Target students' interests and learning profiles regularly

Continue to keep VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) in mind as you plan and teach. Provide choices for students in order to target their strengths and address their weaknesses. Integrate the differentiated strategies you are using to create a balance among what the students are learning, how they are learning it, and the ways in which they are showing mastery of what they have learned.

Continue to use data from pre- and formative assessments to design lessons and guide instruction

Evaluate the effectiveness of the assessments you are using. Make sure your pre-assessments are giving you an accurate picture of what your students already know or are able to do. In addition to guiding your instruction, formative assessments should help students understand their learning objectives and where they are in their own learning.

Implement student-led formative assessments

Deliver feedback to students during the instructional process through formative assessments. Use portfolios and rubrics to help students understand their learning objectives and self-assess where they are in their learning.

Broaden use of flexible grouping

Use flexible grouping to expand the student-directed learning in your classroom. Create random groups to provide students with the opportunity to process or collaborate before or after a lesson. Encourage them to learn from each other in heterogeneous groups.

Experiment with tiering

Learn what tiering is and is not. Practice adjusting the complexity of an activity based on student readiness using two or more levels. Try it with a classroom and then evaluate its effectiveness.

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STAGE 4

Advanced Implementation

Teachers in Stage 4 routinely achieve the “vision of success” of a highly differentiated classroom. They do not rest on their laurels, however, as they continually add new tools to their toolbox. These are the teachers who can guide less experienced colleagues as they ask, “How do I do DI?”

Compact curriculum for some students

Use curriculum compacting as both an instructional approach and a management tool to serve the needs of students who either already know the material to be taught or learn it very quickly. Follow the steps of curriculum compacting to compress content for these students and extend their learning in meaningful ways.

Create tiered activities as needed

Use assessments to determine when students need tiered lessons or activities, such as when some students have already mastered the content standard and others have not quite grasped it, or when some students need more time on a standard and others are ready to move on. Remember to change the complexity of the assignment, not the amount of work involved.

Ensure all assessments are in alignment

Use summative assessments to measure achievement at the end of a chunk of learning or at the end of a unit of study. They should match the material that has been taught and reflect the pre- and formative assessments used during the course of study.

Share responsibility of learning with students

Encourage students to be architects of their own learning with strategies such as: problem-based learning, in which students apply knowledge, research, and critical thinking skills to solve challenging problems; project-based learning, where students demonstrate understanding through projects and performances; and independent studies, in which students research topics of interest. Flexible grouping in these strategies promotes cooperation and communication skills.

Address grading questions/issues

Discuss and decide with your colleagues how to fairly and accurately report mastery of content, work habits, and learning progress over time. This could include addressing issues such as assigning zero as a grade, grading homework, averaging, and grade book formats.

Coach colleagues who are at different levels of implementation

Guide other teachers on their journey to create a highly differentiated classroom through demonstrations, modeling, observations, collaborative planning, etc.

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How do I evaluate professional development training options?

The single most influential factor in successfully implementing differentiated instruction is the teacher. The teacher who is fully trained in differentiated instruction and has been exposed to a variety of situational applications will see the greatest gains in student achievement. This makes choosing a professional development program one of the most critical investments you can make in your implementation plan. Before launching a training program, use the table on the right to help evaluate your professional development options.

QUESTION	WHAT YOU SHOULD BE LOOKING FOR
Does the company's training methodology complement the differentiated instruction philosophy?	Differentiated Instruction is based on the idea that everyone learns differently—including teachers. Differentiated Instruction training should mirror this philosophy.
Can the training be adapted to fit budget and time limitations?	Differentiated Instruction can be implemented in big and small ways, within any budget and time constraints. You want a provider that knows all these options and can work with your needs.
Is the company connected to a particular curriculum?	You need professional development that is independent and comprehensive. This gives teachers the ability to apply their learning to any curriculum or even to those teachable moments that happen outside designated teaching blocks.
Is the training customizable to specific school needs?	You want a provider that can work with you in your school—with your curriculum, and can address your unique challenges.
Does the company offer training in a variety of learning modes?	The most effective training utilizes a variety of modes to meet your needs. You want a provider that can offer on-site training and public workshops as well as correlating teacher resources (print and electronic) and online courses.
Is the training classroom proven and led by Differentiated Instruction training experts?	You need a provider with a strong background in classroom application, one that understands that teachers learn best from other teachers, and one whose trainers will be in the classroom regularly.
How long has the company been providing Differentiated Instruction training?	Professional development providers that were early advocates of Differentiated Instruction have a forward-looking mind-set and can be trusted to bring regular updates to keep you ahead of the curve.

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Meeting the Common Core Standards

From the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts ...

“By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed.... Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.”

“The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations. No set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom. However, the Standards do provide clear signposts along the way to the goal of college and career readiness for all students.”

“All students must have the opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-high-school lives.”

“Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know—to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention.”

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Meeting the Common Core Standards

From the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics ...

“These Standards do not dictate curriculum or teaching methods. For example, just because topic A appears before topic B in the standards for a given grade, it does not necessarily mean that topic A must be taught before topic B. A teacher might prefer to teach topic B before topic A, or might choose to highlight connections by teaching topic A and topic B at the same time. Or, a teacher might prefer to teach a topic of his or her own choosing that leads, as a byproduct, to students reaching the standards for topics A and B.”

“What students can learn at any particular grade level depends upon what they have learned before. Ideally then, each standard in this document might have been phrased in the form, ‘Students who already know A should next come to learn B.’ Learning opportunities will continue to vary across schools and school systems, and educators should make every effort to meet the needs of individual students based on their current understanding.”

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Meeting the Common Core Standards

A final word...

The Common Core State Standards outline rigorous content expectations and have a greater emphasis on the larger end-goal (CCR Anchor Standards for English/Language Arts and the Standards for Mathematical Practice for Mathematics). They are highly supportive of educators differentiating instruction to ensure all students are given every opportunity to meet these overarching achievement goals. This continuum is intended to assist you in evaluating your levels of differentiation and in taking the first step toward creating a new generation of college- and career-ready students.