

## Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is an approach that enables instructors to plan strategically to meet the needs of every learner. The approach encompasses planning and delivery of instruction, classroom management techniques, and expectations of learners' performance that take into consideration the diversity and varied levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles of learners.

### About Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is an approach that enables instructors to plan strategically to meet the needs of every learner. It is rooted in the belief that there is variability among any group of learners and that instructors should adjust instruction accordingly (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). The approach encompasses the planning and delivery of instruction, classroom management techniques, and expectations of learners' performance that take into consideration the diversity and varied levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles of the learners.

Differentiated instruction can be looked at as an instructor's response to learner differences by adapting curriculum and instruction on six dimensions, including how the instructor approaches the (1) **content** (the *what* of the lesson), (2) **process** (the *how* of the lesson), and (3) expected **product** (the learner-produced result), and takes into consideration the learner's (4) **interest**, (5) **profile** (their learning strengths, weaknesses and gaps), and (6) **readiness**. These adaptations can be planned to happen simultaneously, in sequence, or as needed depending on the circumstance and goals of instruction. Teaching small groups of learners, grouped based on instructional approach and learner profile, is a cornerstone of differentiated instruction.

### How Does It Work in Adult Education?

Here is an example. An instructor who is teaching writing (the **content**) in an adult basic education (ABE) class needs to understand the various learners' **readiness** to write independently or collaboratively, the supports they might need to engage in the

**process** based on their learning **profiles**, the quality and quantity of the learner **product** to be expected, and the learners' **interests**. Some of this understanding will come from professional observation of the learners over time; some of it will come from informal assessments gathered from previous writing assignments.

Planning is critical. For instance, knowing that some learners need templates, prompts, or advance organizers to prepare them to write, or software to assist them with spelling, means that the necessary supports, such as use of the computer lab for the use of concept-mapping software and word processors, need to be planned for in advance. Perhaps a colleague who has more experience with a particular level or type of learner can collaborate or team teach a small group to better meet their needs. Perhaps a more advanced peer learner can run a small group or provide technology assistance.

An instructor teaching persuasive essays (the **content**) may begin with a study of various models such as op-ed pieces from the local newspaper to identify the elements of such an essay. The class may spend time brainstorming to elicit learners' **interests** in various "hot topics" of the day, while creating lists of vocabulary words to support composition. Deciding on a couple of key topics, learners may be grouped to continue to generate possible argument points. A scribe in the group can generate a web or advance organizer that captures the discussion. Learners can then be regrouped according to the level of support they need (their **profile** and **readiness**) for composition (the **process**).

Those who can compose on their own can work independently or in dyads to conduct further research on the Internet to provide evidence for their argument; those who need technical support can work in the computer lab with the instructor and an advanced peer, possibly with a pre-created outline or template; those who cannot compose on their own can work in a smaller group with a tutor or the instructor to generate a group essay that learners can each then work on for editing and revising. Conferencing with each learner can be another opportunity for accommodating learners' **readiness** by focusing only on the mechanics,

grammar, or organizational elements that the writer is able to master. Final products can be shared in various ways: published by the learners to a blog or submitted to a newspaper, posted in the classroom, read to the class, etc. The essays, the **products**, which result from the group will be varied in their complexity and sophistication, yet all learners will have engaged in the process and basic key elements of a persuasive essay (brainstorming, planning, outlining, composing, editing, revising, and sharing).

### How Can Technology Help?

Technology tools can help make this coordination more efficient by providing productivity support for instructors, by providing supports for learners at varying levels of readiness, and by offering learners options for demonstrating their understanding and mastery of the material. To see how technology can help, see the TEAL Center fact sheet, *Technology-Supported Writing Instruction*.

### Managing Differentiated Instruction

Classroom management to coordinate flexible groupings and projects is a key component of applying differentiated instruction. Following are some ideas for creating and coordinating groups in a multi-level, differentiated class:

- Set up stations in the classroom where different learning groups can work simultaneously. Such stations naturally invite flexible grouping.
  - Encourage peer-to-peer learning and mentoring and help learners learn to be tutors.
  - Ask volunteers to lead small group instruction stations.
- Structure problem-based learning (PBL) to have learners actively solve problems, either individually or in small groups.
  - Use WebQuests (<http://webquest.org/index.php>) as PBL for teams of learners; these inquiry-based projects are pre-arranged and many have teaching supports (lesson plans, tips, handouts, and additional materials) linked to them.
  - Share reflections with other instructors leading problem-based learning at [www.Edutopia.org](http://www.Edutopia.org).
- Assign tiered activities to allow learners to work on the same concepts but with varying degrees of complexity.
  - Find texts on a single, encompassing topic (for example, climate change) in various levels of complexity and readability.
  - Encourage learners to find audio books and digital text at their interest level rather than their independent reading level.
- Employ compacting: assess learners' knowledge and skills before beginning a unit of study and allow learners to move to advanced work based on their pre-assessment.
  - Find ways to give credit for independent study and advancement if a learner is particularly motivated or interested in a topic.
  - Help learners supplement class instruction with online classes or learning opportunities such as webinars, online chats, blogs, social networks, or daily content blasts (e-mails such as a *Word of the day*, or *This day in history*, can be a boost to vocabulary and content knowledge).
- Institute chunking, or breaking assignments and activities into smaller, more manageable parts, and providing more structured directions for each part.
  - Have learners make personalized lists of tasks to complete the chunks in a specified but flexible timeframe.
  - Encourage self-study, especially when learners have to "stop out" of regular attendance.
- Model differentiation by keeping grades and scores in a variety of ways.
  - Use portfolios as a means for reflecting on learner growth over time, and encourage learners to critique their growth.
  - Keep scores and observations in a spreadsheet that can be sorted flexibly to reveal natural groups.

### What's the Research?

This TEAL Center fact sheet draws on two NCSALL *Focus on the Basics* articles (Corley, 2005; Silver-Pacuilla, 2007), and resources created by the Center for Implementing Technology in Education ([www.cited.org](http://www.cited.org), see the Research section).

For adult education, the principles of differentiating instruction are not new: engaging learners based on their interests, creating activities based on learners' needs and roles, and recognizing and honoring the diversity in any classroom. Applying these principles informed by the analysis of formal and informal assessment data may require a new way of working, however, as well as enhanced coordination among instructors within a program, lesson planning, and instructional delivery. See related TEAL Center fact sheets on Student-centered Learning (No. 6), Lesson Planning (No. 8), and Adult Learning Theory (No. 11).

### References

Corley, M. (2005). Differentiated instruction: Adjusting to the needs of all learners. *Focus on the Basics*, Vol. 7, Issue C: March. Available at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=736>.

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Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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About the TEAL Center: The Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) Center is a project of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), designed to improve the quality of teaching in adult education in the content areas.