

# DIFFERENTIATION

## What Differentiation Is--And Is Not

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In a differentiated class, the teacher uses (1) a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content, (2) a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which students can come to understand and "own" information and ideas, and (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned.

A class is not differentiated when assignments are the same for all learners and the adjustments consist of varying the level of difficulty of questions for certain students, grading some students harder than others, or letting students who finish early play games for enrichment. It is not appropriate to have more advanced learners do extra math problems, extra book reports, or after completing their "regular" work be given extension assignments. Asking students to do more of what they already know is hollow. Asking them to do "the regular work, plus" inevitably seems punitive to them (Tomlinson, 1995a).

## Characteristics of a Differentiated Class

Four characteristics shape teaching and learning in an effective differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 1995a):

1. Instruction is concept focused and principle driven. All students have the opportunity to explore and apply the key concepts of the subject being studied. All students come to understand the key principles on which the study is based. Such instruction enables struggling learners to grasp and use powerful ideas and, at the same time, encourages advanced learners to expand their understanding and application of the key concepts and principles. Such instruction stresses understanding or sense-making rather than retention and regurgitation of fragmented bits of information. Concept-based and principle-driven instruction invites teachers to provide varied learning options. All students have the opportunity to explore meaningful ideas through a variety of avenues and approaches.
2. Ongoing assessment of student readiness and growth are built into the curriculum. Teachers do not assume that all students need a given task or segment of study, but continuously assess student readiness and interest, providing support when students need additional instruction and guidance, and extending student exploration when indications are that a student or group of students is ready to move ahead.

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3. Flexible grouping is consistently used. In a differentiated class, students work in many patterns. Sometimes they work alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups. Sometimes tasks are readiness-based, sometimes interest-based, sometimes constructed to match learning style, and sometimes a combination of readiness, interest, and learning style. In a differentiated classroom, whole-group instruction may also be used for introducing new ideas, when planning, and for sharing learning outcomes.
4. Students are active explorers. Teachers guide the exploration. Because varied activities often occur simultaneously in a differentiated classroom, the teacher works more as a guide or facilitator of learning than as a dispenser of information. As in a large family, students must learn to be responsible for their own work. Not only does such student-centeredness give students more ownership of their learning, but it also facilitates the important adolescent learning goal of growing independence in thought, planning, and evaluation. Implicit in such instruction is (1) goal-setting shared by teacher and student based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile, and (2) assessment predicated on student growth and goal attainment.



## Helpful Definitions

**Flexible Skills Grouping** - Placing students of similar ability in the same class or group for purposes of instruction. Research shows higher academic achievement gains for all students when grouped by ability and taught at a pace that matches their learning rates. Compare with tracking.

**Acceleration** - Faster presentation of content to more closely match the speed at which gifted students learn. Compare with grade skipping. See pacing, compacting.

**Compacting** - Eliminating repetition, minimizing drill, and accelerating instruction in basic skills or lower level classes so that gifted students can move to more challenging material.

**Content** - The academic subject matter studied in an educational program or class.

**Enrichment** - Deeper coverage of content often provided for gifted students. Contrast with acceleration.

**Independent study** - Self-education, often using self-selected resources and driven by student interest.

# Common Misunderstandings About Differentiation

## Misunderstanding

## Clarification

By: Carol Ann Tomlinson, Ed.D.

Differentiation is not a set of strategies.	Differentiation is an entire philosophy grounded in knowing students and responding to their needs.
Differentiation is not a work group.	Differentiation employs thoughtful, purposeful flexible grouping. Sometimes students work alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes as a whole class and sometimes in small groups depending on the demonstrated student need.
Differentiation is not just the next educational fad.	Because differentiation is a philosophy of meeting a broad range of students' needs, only when students cease being different will the need for differentiation disappear.
Providing choice = differentiation.	Different activities have to be held together by clear learning goals.
Differentiation isn't fair.	Fair doesn't always mean "the same." In order for students to reach the same goals, they may need to take different paths to get there.
Differentiation means "dumbing down" the curriculum for less advanced learners.	Differentiation means providing appropriate scaffolding to help all learners reach common learning goals.
Differentiation only works when students are well-behaved.	Differentiation is creating a responsive classroom can be a great way to improve student behavior, as students' needs are being met.

# Differentiation of Instruction

Is a teacher's response to learner's needs

Guided by general principals of differentiation

(e.g.)

respectful  
tasks

flexible  
grouping

on going  
assessment and  
adjustment

Teachers can differentiate the

Content

Process

Product

According to students'

Readiness

Interest

Learning

Through a range of instructional management strategies such as:

multiple intelligences  
jigsaw  
task cards  
varying organizers  
varied tasks  
supplementary materials  
independent study

tiered assignments  
tiered centers/products  
literature circles  
learning contracts  
small group instruction  
group investigation

varied journal prompts  
varied strategies  
compacting  
interest centers/groups  
Interest groups  
varied homework  
and more!