
How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

2nd Edition

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Differentiation suggests it is feasible to develop classrooms where realities of student variance can be addressed along with curricular realities. The idea is compelling. It challenges us to draw on our best knowledge of teaching and learning. It suggests that there is room for both equity and excellence in our classrooms.

As “right” as the approach we call differentiation seems, it promises no slick and ready solutions. Like most worthy ideas, it is complex. It calls on us to question, change, reflect, and change some more.

This second edition of *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* follows this evolutionary route. In the years since the first edition, I have had the benefit of probing questions and practical examples from many educators. This revision reflects an extension and refinement of the elements presented in the earlier version of the book, based in no small measure on dialogue with other educators.

I am grateful to ASCD for the opportunity to share reflections and insights fueled by many educators who work daily to ensure a good academic fit for each student who enters their classrooms. These teachers wrestle with standards-driven curriculum, grapple with a predictable shortage of time in the school day, and do battle with management issues in a busy classroom. These educators also derive energy from the challenge and insight from their students. I continue to be the beneficiary of their frontline work. I hope this small volume represents them well. I hope also that it clarifies and extends what I believe to be an essential discussion on how we can attain the ideal of a high-quality public education that exists to maximize the capacity of each learner who trusts us to direct the course of his or her learning.

Introduction

The students populating U.S. classrooms today are a diverse lot. They come from differing cultures and have different learning styles. They arrive at school with differing levels of emotional and social maturity. Their interests differ greatly, both in topic and intensity. At any given time, they reflect differing levels of academic readiness in various subjects—and in various facets of a single subject. And to complicate things even further, readiness and interest can vary for a given student over time and depending on the subject matter.

Teachers in mixed-ability classrooms face multiple challenges, at every grade level. Each September, many 1st graders arrive already able to read 3rd grade books with comprehension, while their peers grapple for months with the idea of left-to-right print progression or the difference between short and long vowels. Some 3rd graders make an independent leap from multiplication to division before any explanation has been offered. Many of these same chil-

dren, when they reach middle school, also make connections between themes in social studies and literature, or apply advanced mathematical tools to solving science problems before other students in their classes grasp the main idea of a chapter in the textbook. In high school, students who may have been previously identified as “slow” or “average” may surprise everyone when they’re able to develop a complex and articulate defense of a position related to scientific ethics or economic strategy. And some of their classmates who had, until now, found school a “cinch” must work hard to feel comfortable with applications at a more abstract level.

In life, kids can choose from a variety of clothing to fit their differing sizes, styles, and preferences. We understand, without explanation, that this makes them more comfortable and gives expression to their developing personalities. In school, modifying or differentiating instruction for students of differing readiness

and interests is also more comfortable, engaging, and inviting. One-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch—exactly as single-size clothing would—students who differ in need, even if they are chronologically the same age.

Acknowledging that students learn at different speeds and that they differ widely in their ability to think abstractly or understand complex ideas is like acknowledging that students at any given age aren't all the same height: It is not a statement of worth, but of reality. To accommodate this reality, teachers can create a “user-friendly” environment, one in which they flexibly adapt pacing, approaches to learning, and channels for expressing learning in response to their students' differing needs.

While the goal for each student is challenge and substantial growth, teachers must often define *challenge and growth* differently in response to students' varying interests and readiness levels.

This book provides guidance for teachers who are interested in creating learning environments that address the diversity typical of mixed-ability classrooms. The principles and strategies included here can help teachers address a variety of learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels. The goal here is to help teachers determine what differentiated instruction is, why it is appropriate for all learners, how to begin to plan for it, and how to become comfortable enough with student differences to make school comfortable for each learner who comes their way.

WHAT Differentiated Instruction **IS—AND ISN'T**



Kids of the same age aren't all alike when it comes to learning, any more than they are alike in terms of

size, hobbies, personality, or likes and dislikes. Kids do have many things in common because they are human beings and because they are all children, but they also have important differences. What we share in common makes us human. How we differ makes us individuals. In a classroom with little or no differentiated instruction, only student similarities seem to take center stage. In a differentiated classroom, commonalities are acknowledged and built upon, and student differences become important elements in teaching and learning as well.

At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means “shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In

other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.

In many classrooms, the approach to teaching and learning is more unitary than differentiated. For example, 1st graders may listen to a story and then draw a picture about what they learned. While they may choose to draw different facets of the story, they all experienced the same content, and they all had the same sense-making or processing activity. A kindergarten class may have four centers that all students visit to complete the same activities in a week's time. Fifth graders may all listen to the same explanation about fractions and complete the same homework assignment. Middle school or high school students may sit through a lecture and a video to help them understand a topic in science or history. They will all read the same chapter, take the same notes, complete the same