

# Leading and Managing a



# Differentiated Classroom

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# 1

## Understanding Differentiation in Order to Lead

### Aiming for Fidelity to a Model



Few would argue that opportunity in life is strongly connected with educational opportunity. However, we have often misconstrued the notion of equal access to education to mean that all students should receive precisely the same pacing, resources, and instruction. The result is a one-size-fits-all education system. Differentiated instruction recognizes that students are not the same and that access to equal education necessarily means that, given a certain goal, each student should be provided resources, instruction, and support to help them meet that objective.

—John Stroup, University of Virginia doctoral student

“My district wanted all of its teachers to differentiate instruction,” the young woman told me, “so they created a notebook of strategies for us. It’s really nice. It’s bound and everything. I guess it must have a dozen strategies in it.”

“I’m glad you found it useful,” I responded.

She paused as she searched for her next comment. “I did find it useful,” she said. “I used every one of the ideas. And now I guess I’m just waiting for the next notebook.”

She was puzzled. She had “done differentiation” cover to cover and had no idea where to go next. Because she had no basis for understanding how the ideas in the notebook had been generated, she was left feeling as if she had no basis for charting her own growth. She was experiencing what Ralph Waldo Emerson understood when he cautioned that if we only learn methods, we are tied to those methods, but if we learn principles, we can develop our own methods. My conversation with the young teacher reflected several common misunderstandings about differentiation:

1. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is a set of instructional strategies.

**Reality:** Differentiation is a philosophy—a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is, in fact, a set of principles.

2. **Misunderstanding:** It’s adequate for a district or school leader (or professional developers) to tell, or even show, teachers how to differentiate instruction effectively.

**Reality:** Learning to differentiate instruction well requires rethinking one’s classroom practice and results from an ongoing process of trial, reflection, and adjustment in the classroom itself.

3. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is something a teacher does or doesn’t do (as in, “I already do that,” or “I tell our teachers that they already differentiate instruction.”).

**Reality:** Most teachers who remain in a classroom for longer than a day *do* pay attention to student variation and respond to it in some way—especially with students who can threaten order in the classroom. However, very few teachers proactively plan instruction to consistently address student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile.

4. **Misunderstanding:** Differentiation is just about instruction.

**Reality:** Although differentiation is an instructional approach, effective differentiated instruction is inseparable from a positive learning environment, high-quality curriculum, assessment to inform teacher decision making, and flexible classroom management. To the degree that any one of those elements is weak, the others are also diminished.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief summary of what we call differentiated instruction; a full explanation of the elements of this approach is available in other resources (e.g., Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2004; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). A clear understanding of the individual elements of differentiation, and how they relate to and shape the classroom system, paves the way for a more robust exploration of the philosophy of differentiation (which directs how teachers manage and lead an effectively differentiated classroom). The following two chapters should eliminate misunderstandings about differentiation—such as those noted above—and help prepare teachers to be effective leaders for differentiation in their classrooms and schools.

## Key Elements of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation can be accurately described as classroom practice with a balanced emphasis on individual students and course content. In other words, in an effectively differentiated classroom, it is understood that

- Students differ as learners in terms of background experience, culture, language, gender, interests, readiness to learn, modes of learning, speed of learning, support systems for learning, self-awareness as a learner, confidence as a learner, independence as a learner, and a host of other ways.
- Differences profoundly impact how students learn and the nature of scaffolding they will need at various points in the learning process.
- Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that all of their students master important content.
- Teachers have to make specific and continually evolving plans to connect each learner with key content.
- Teachers are required to understand the nature of each of their students, in addition to the nature of the content they teach.
- A flexible approach to teaching “makes room” for student variance.
- Teachers should continually ask, “What does *this* student need at *this* moment in order to be able to progress with *this* key content, and what do I need to do to make that happen?”

At the core of the classroom practice of differentiation is the modification of four curriculum-related elements—content, process, product, and affect—which are based on three categories of student need and variance—readiness, interest, and learning profile.

## **Content**

*The knowledge, understanding, and skills we want students to learn.*

During differentiation, we emphasize the methods that students use to access key content (e.g., independent reading, partner reading, text on tape, text with images, listening comprehension, online research, communication with experts, group demonstrations, small group instruction) rather than change the content itself (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). There are instances, however, when some students need to go back to prerequisite content in order to move ahead, when advanced learners need to move ahead before their classmates are ready to do so, and when student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) direct the teacher to change the content itself.

## **Process**

*How students come to understand or make sense of the content.*

Real learning—of the sort that enables students to retain, apply, and transfer content—has to happen *in* students, not *to* them (National Research Council, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The word *process* is often used as a synonym for *activities*. However, activities can be misaligned with content goals and fail to require students to think through, grapple with, or use essential knowledge, understanding, and skills. Therefore, it is wise to substitute the term *sense-making activities* to emphasize that what we ask students to do in the name of learning or practice should help them “own” the content, see how it makes sense, and realize how it is useful in the world outside the classroom.

## **Product**

*How students demonstrate what they have come to know, understand, and are able to do after an extended period of learning.*

A product is not something students generate in a single lesson or as a result of an activity or two. Rather, it is a rich culminating assessment that calls on students to apply and extend what they have learned over a period of time. Tests have these characteristics when they present students with complex problems to