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# Differentiation: An Overview

Diversity is everywhere! Our foods, clothing styles, the languages we hear, and our religious and political beliefs all reflect this central reality in 21st century Australia. As classrooms are microcosms of the greater society, teachers, too, realise that diversity is everywhere.

Most teachers have discovered that teaching such diverse types of students doesn't work using the traditional 'one size fits all' approach. At one point in time, 'teaching to the middle' may have been an effective strategy. As students have become more diverse, however, teachers are increasingly seeking ways to diversify and differentiate their instruction.

A differentiated curriculum moves teachers away from the 'one size fits all' approach to curriculum that really fits no one! It encourages students to become more responsible for their own learning and to recognise and use their own strengths, thereby helping them become lifelong autonomous learners. Differentiation works best in a positive, encouraging classroom climate where students are led to take responsibility, accept challenges and learn as much as they can.

Brain research done in the past decade reveals much about how humans learn, and it provides yet another reason for differentiating curriculum. Learning occurs when the brain seeks connections to what it already knows. These connections form differently for each person because each person's experiences are different. They individualise our brains and our learning experiences need to be, too.

Differentiation is particularly valuable with our diverse student population, because it is an approach to teaching that acknowledges differences in students and provides them with a variety of ways to learn. In examining learning options, we need to consider each student's interests, levels of readiness and ability, languages spoken at home, pace of learning, learning styles and modalities, strengths and weaknesses, and types of intelligences. On the other hand, we also need to bear in mind the relevant standards they require us to teach to all students. This is a big order for any teacher.

Simply stated, differentiated instruction allows each student to learn at the depth, complexity and pace that is most beneficial to them. Differentiating curriculum and instruction is a rich and effective strategy to use when providing for the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs such as students with learning disabilities, gifted and talented students, and English language learners. They especially need differentiation when those students spend most or all of their time in regular classrooms.

**The philosophy of Differentiation includes structuring classrooms so there are provisions for:**

1. Different ways to take in, work with and learn information
2. Differing amounts of time to complete work
3. Different approaches due to language acquisition and cultural differences
4. Different levels of thinking, readiness and ability
5. Different assignments for students in the same classroom
6. Different means to assess what has been learned

# Individualised Work

## Independent Study

Independent study is a process that facilitates in-depth inquiry into an area of interest or into a topic that extends the regular curriculum. It provides an opportunity for students to develop their individual talents, expand their research skills and explore special interests.

There are many types of independent study, from a short research report, to a more complex project, to a formal essay. During any of these, the teacher needs to schedule times with the student for formative assessment. This often includes establishing checkpoints to assess and oversee student progress toward stated goals. Rules and guidelines for the study are essential and should be monitored by the teacher or another responsible adult such as a mentor.

Some factors to consider when students are doing independent study are:

- Developing research skills
- Determining the reliability of sources (print, email and websites)
- Evaluating types of information
- Planning long range projects
- Developing organisational skills
- Choosing products or performances to demonstrate learning

All of these will be later in this chapter or throughout this book.

It is important to realise that students are at different levels of independence in terms of being able to do independent study. Some will not know how to organise their work or what resources to use. Learning and achievement come when we move students toward greater independence a little at a time.

In this chapter, in addition to looking at various facets of developing research skills and independence in learning, we will consider several approaches to giving students individualised work.

These include:

- **Learning Contracts**
- **Resident Experts**
- **Anchoring Activities**
- **Learning Centres/Stations**

Many of the other differentiation strategies in this book also require as least some skill in doing research and independent work. For this reason, independent learning skills are basic for students to know in order to function well in a differentiated classroom.

## To Summarise. . .

### Independent or Individualised Work

- ▶ **Independent study** provides an opportunity for students to use their unique abilities and talents and to explore areas of special interest.
- ▶ There are many types of independent study. All types must be appropriately guided and monitored. **Rules, guidelines and checkpoints** are essential for the success of this approach.
- ▶ When they are doing any type of research, students need to know how to determine the **reliability of their sources** whether they use print, Internet or other media. They also need to evaluate the quality of the sources and information they use.
- ▶ Requiring **records and logs** of individual student progress helps the teacher know how each student is progressing in their work. This also teaches students how to be accountable for their own learning.
- ▶ **Learning contracts** are formalised agreements between the teacher and a student that delineate the independent learning tasks a student will do during a unit of study. Learning contracts usually include due dates, rules, working conditions and expectations for behaviour.
- ▶ The **Resident Expert** strategy allows students to pursue in-depth study in areas of interest to them. Resident experts can be students from all ability levels. The work is differentiated based on the interest of an individual student.
- ▶ **Anchoring activities** are ongoing relevant tasks that students do when they have completed the assigned work. Anchoring activities are done independently without teacher assistance.
- ▶ **Learning centres or stations** are pre-planned, structured activities set up in a portion of the classroom or school. Students visit learning centres to complete a specific learning task. In a differentiated classroom, not every student needs to go to every centre or do every activity in the centre. Learning centres can be tiered to meet the needs of both higher and lower-ability levels.