

# Differentiated instruction

“There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of students of unequal ability.”

– Plato, *The Republic*

Individual students come to the classroom with varying interests, experiences, developmental maturity, background knowledge and abilities. Therefore, teachers are constantly challenged to make learning activities flexible enough to engage each and every student. Accommodating these differences does not mean attempting to offer a different course to each student, but students do need choices as well as varying instructional and assessment methods.

Many students with challenging behaviour also have difficulty with academic work. Their behaviour interferes with successful learning, and in many cases they also have difficulty with work habits and attitudes toward learning. To be successful and engaged learners, many of these students will need positive learning experiences that are personalized to their own learning preferences, interests and needs.

In *Brain-based Learning with Class*, Politano and Paquin (2000) describe an effective approach for accommodating student differences that they call “shared experience, individual response.” Instruction begins with a whole-group activity and then students choose from a variety of activities designed to process their thinking and represent their learning. Students can work together on the same concept but in ways that best suit their learning strengths and developmental stages. Younger students need more variety in instruction and fewer choices for responses while older students need less variety in instruction and more choices for responses.

## Plan for differentiation

Planning for the diverse learning needs of students involves making informed decisions about content, materials and resources, instructional strategies, and assessment and evaluation procedures.

## Learning environment

- What steps will I take to create a supportive learning environment?
- What classroom management procedures do I need to introduce?

## Grouping

- What learning activities are best done individually, in pairs, in small groups or by the whole class?
- How will I determine the pairings and groupings?
- What transitions will ensure a smooth flow from one activity to the next?

## Learning activities

- How will I provide lesson overviews?
- Which graphic organizers will I use?
- What strategies will I use to activate, clarify and extend prior knowledge?
- How will students make connections between what they know and what they will be learning?
- What key words and concepts are essential?
- Which strategies will introduce and reinforce these words and concepts?
- What are the critical questions students need to think about?
- How will students apply their learning?
- What extension activities will reinforce and extend learning?
- Do these learning activities offer a variety of ways to demonstrate learning?
- How will I reinforce instructions; e.g., key words on board, printed instructions, labelled diagrams on board?
- How will students use handouts and other materials?
- Does this learning activity allow for a frequent change of pace?
- Are there opportunities for discussion, writing, drawing and viewing?
- What alternative activities can I use if students need a change of pace or need to refocus their attention?

## Use a problem-solving approach

Some students misbehave because the instruction is too difficult or the learning activities and/or materials do not engage them. Effective teachers adapt instruction using a problem-solving approach that involves:

- identifying the issue (what is causing the problem for the student)
- generating alternative solutions
- trying one or two solutions at a time to see if there is a difference in learning.

Trying and testing simple instructional adaptations can increase success and participation for students who are not sufficiently engaged or not learning.

## Increase student engagement

Students are more likely to concentrate and make an effort when their schoolwork is personally meaningful and engaging. Students tend to respond positively to clarity, structure, predictability and positive reinforcement. They also need clear and concise directions and ongoing monitoring to encourage them to complete assignments and activities.

### Sample strategies for structuring activities and assignments

- *Break long tasks into shorter, easier-to-manage steps.*  
Students vary in their ability to attend, process and remember concepts and texts.

To keep activities and assignments brief:

- cut the assignment pages into small segments and give out one at a time
  - fold under part of the page or cover it partially to block or mask some parts of the assignment; encourage the student to use a “window” to show one problem or piece of information at a time.
- *Introduce students to general information before working on specific information.*  
Some students need to see the big picture first; for them, all details carry the same degree of importance. Some students also need explicit instruction about how to identify the overarching idea and supporting details.
- *Design learning activities that require a high response rate from students.*  
For example:
    - ask students to fill in a study guide or partial outline of information as the class proceeds
    - in large group instruction, provide individual white boards, chalkboards or cards for students’ responses
    - vary questioning to accommodate responses from the whole class, partners and individuals
    - structure partner activities so that students can read aloud to each other, question together, confirm understanding and encourage each other to remain on task.
- *Incorporate students’ interests into assignments.*  
Encourage students to make individual choices—of topics for their activities, the order in which they complete tasks and the materials they use.

- *Incorporate attention-getting devices into assignments.*  
For example:
  - vary the texture, shape and colour of materials
  - provide students with a variety of coloured pens, pencils and markers
  - turn tasks into activities or games; for example, playing *Jeopardy* when reviewing material for a test.
- *Have students demonstrate their understanding of learning outcomes in a variety of ways.*  
For example, when assessing students' knowledge of factual information, allow them to choose to give an oral presentation, do an audio or videotaped project, prepare a news report or present a dramatization.

## Teach for task completion

Some students need explicit instruction and support in order to work more independently and complete tasks.

### Sample strategies for teaching task completion

- *Break learning tasks into manageable chunks.*  
Set short time limits for completing each portion of the task. An egg timer or stopwatch may help motivate some students (although some might find the timer more stimulating than the task). Older students can use less obvious timers such as their watch. When possible, involve students in setting the timeframe to help them develop a sense of the amount of time particular kinds of tasks will likely take.
- *Give feedback on assignments as soon as possible.*  
For example, ask students to signal when they've completed a certain number of questions so you can quickly scan their work and let them know if they are on track.

## Adapt instruction

To adapt instruction to better meet student needs, consider adjusting:

- the level of participation
- the difficulty of tasks
- the size of tasks
- the way instruction is delivered
- the amount of support provided
- the time allotted for completion.

When choosing adaptations for individual students, consider these types of questions.

- Will this adaptation enhance the student's level of class participation?
- Is this adaptation the least intrusive (i.e., least interfering or restrictive) option?
- Will this adaptation give the student a variety of options, or will the same adaptation be used for all or most activities (e.g., always do fewer tasks or work at a different level of difficulty)?
- How does this adaptation ensure an appropriate level of difficulty and challenge for the student?
- How can the student use this adaptation in other classes or activities?
- How will this adaptation lead to more independent effort?



Differentiation:

<https://education.alberta.ca/instructional-supports/differentiation/>