

Frequently Asked Questions about Differentiated Instruction

1. Do state required tests “derail” differentiation efforts? How can teachers be held accountable if differentiation and state assessments work against each other?

I would suggest that state tests do not derail differentiation efforts. State assessments contain knowledge and skill minimal goals that we want EVERY student to meet. If we accept that as a premise and accept that there are many districts and states with wide achievement gaps among subgroups of students, then use of state assessment data, coupled with targeted differentiation, are key tools we can use to help us increase the achievement scores of all students and keep a proactive and laser-like focus on narrowing that gap.

2. Where’s the balance between teaching them the life skill of sitting for a period of time and providing what they need?

We are assuming that this question refers to the need for all students to sit for some part of the day to acquire important information and skills. There are certainly some times when this sedentary act is important in the classroom.

With that said, however, there are also plentiful opportunities throughout the day for learning to be more active. For example, a high school class of sophomores might learn about the connections in a food web by: (1) taking on the role of individual members of a food chain (e.g., primary producers, herbivores, carnivores, decomposers) and then tossing a ball of yarn up the food chain, thereby illustrating the pathway of the web. Finding the balance between “sitting and getting” and more active, hands-on learning will always one of the challenges faced by classroom teachers.

3. Please comment: I’ve always felt that Bloom’s Taxonomy is differentiation. Did that have any part in guiding your work?

Bloom’s Taxonomy was created in 1948 by psychologist Benjamin Bloom and several colleagues. Bloom’s group of psychologists initially met hoping to reduce the duplication of effort by faculty at various universities. In the beginning, the scope of their purpose was limited to facilitating the exchange of test items measuring the same educational objectives. Intending the Taxonomy “as a method of classifying educational objectives, educational experiences, learning processes, and evaluation questions and problems”, numerous examples of test items (mostly multiple choice) were included.

Throughout the years, the levels have often been depicted as a stairway, leading many teachers to encourage their students to “climb to a higher (level of) thought.” The lowest three levels are: knowledge, comprehension, and application. The highest three levels are: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. “The taxonomy is

hierarchical; [in that] each level is subsumed by the higher levels. In other words, a student functioning at the 'application' level has also mastered the material at the 'knowledge' and 'comprehension' levels."

With this history in mind, teachers will see that every student should have multiple opportunities to think at EVERY level. Differentiation is not about giving the struggling students learning activities that continually focus on the knowledge level and beyond-grade level students learning activities that consistently focus on synthesis level. As students become competent with basic skills, our goal is to move them to more complex tasks, those that require thinking at higher levels. The goal of high quality differentiation is to take students as far as we possibly can.

4. Can you please speak to the new wave of Common Core of standards?

Many believe that the Common Core standards will increase the rigor for all students, regardless of the state in which they live. With regard to differentiated instruction and the Common Core, the new standards will help us all "teach up."

5. What does it mean to "teach up?"

Teaching up is about providing high quality educational experiences to all students, not just the ones that teachers feel excel in school. As simple as the statement may seem on the surface, it is based on several key beliefs about education and students that are the foundation of differentiated instruction. Carol Tomlinson suggests that six principles guide what it means to teach up.

1. *Accept that human differences are not only normal but also desirable.*
2. *Develop a growth mind-set.*
3. *Work to understand students' cultures, interests, needs, and perspectives.*
4. *Create a base of rigorous learning opportunities.*
5. *Understand that students come to the classroom with varied points of entry into a curriculum and move through it at different rates.*
6. *Create flexible classroom routines and procedures that attend to learner needs.*
7. *Be an analytical practitioner.*

Tomlinson, C. A. & Javrus, E. L. (2012). Teach up for excellence. Educational Leadership, 69 (5), pp. 28-33.

6. In math, is there a grade-level at which quality DI is not able to keep up with an expanding range of student achievement?

There is no one answer for this question because so much depends upon the student(s) in question. Karen Rogers¹—a noted researcher about acceleration and gifted education—suggests it is wise to consider acceleration when students are two or more years beyond grade level.

¹ Rogers, K. B. (2002). *Re-forming gifted education: Matching the program to the child*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

7. Nationally are many schools leveling in math for grades 3 – 8?

Leveling or tracking has been soundly criticized in recent years, even for mathematics. Thus, many schools have shied away from the practice.

8. Can you talk about how DI relates to student achievement?

Student achievement is optimal when students are working in their “zone of proximal development (zpd). When students are engaged in their zpd, instruction is preceding just ahead of their current level of understanding.

In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers documented that there is a “steering group” of learners in every classroom to whom teachers direct their level of instruction during whole class or group-paced instruction. Even though teachers think they are teaching to the middle, Robert Slavin² noted that the steering group generally represents the 19th to 23rd percentile of ability in the class—far too low for the majority of learners in a classroom.

Differentiated instruction provides classroom teachers with strategies to avoid this “one-size-fits-all curriculum and instruction. When DI is implemented with fidelity, subgroups of students can be working on different versions of the same lesson that have been customized to address different levels of readiness, learning rate or prior knowledge. As such, differentiated instruction is one technique that can be used to increase the likelihood of increased achievement for the diverse students in today’s classrooms.

9. Is it our responsibility as teachers and educators to engage our students and ensure they feel safe, connected and engaged in the curriculum and school?

Absolutely! In this age of accountability, it is essential that we create classroom environments where each student is valued. One way to help ensure this personal connection is to make the learning real-world and relevant to the age group.

10. What do you do if kids don’t care and are not motivated?

Kids are motivated, just not about some of the things that we believe are important for them to learn in our classrooms. So it is part of our sacred responsibility to find and/or create ways to engage students or “hook” them into our lessons. Do we need to provide a more appealing introduction, such as a puzzling discrepant event? Do we need to highlight a critical real-world application of the knowledge we are about to teach so that students see the relevance to their own lives? Do we need to provide increased opportunity for choice in the learning activities so that students develop a sense of ownership and pride for their work?

² Slavin, R. E. (1993). Ability grouping in the middle grades: Achievement effects and alternatives. *Elementary School Journal*, 93, 535-552

11. Differentiated instruction (DI) and Universal Design for Learning UDL): Are they the same or different?

Differentiated Instruction is a philosophy and decision-making process teachers use to enhance the match between the curriculum and students learning needs (e.g., interests, readiness, prior knowledge). It provides different avenues or pathway for students to acquire rigorous content, to process making sense of ideas, and/or developing products that display what they have learned. It originated in the context of regular education. The goal of DI is to honor student learning differences and increase the achievement of all students.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is intended to increase access to learning by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers to learning, as well as other obstacles. It arose in the special education context. The goal of UDL is to minimize barriers for students and increase access.

Thus, DI and UDL arose from different educational contexts and differ in the ways each model meets diverse students learning needs. They are the same in the intent of each model to enhance access to learning and the learning outcomes for all students.

Rose, D. H. and Meyer, A. (2005). A Practical Reader in Universal Design for Learning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

Tomlinson, C. A. (2003). Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom. Strategies and tools for responsive teaching. Alexandria: VA: ASCD.

12. Do you have to use differentiated instruction 180 days of the year?

This is a question that teachers frequently ask because they think they need to use the instructional strategies every day. The answer to the question, however, is that you use the strategies when you need them. Let's say, for example, that you analyze your preassessment data and realize con that no significant differences among your learners exist at this time. Thus, the logical conclusion is that you will use whole group instruction until such time as a critical learning difference emerges and needs addressing (e.g., prior knowledge, readiness to learn, interests, product style preference). So, the answer to the question is that teachers do not necessarily use DI all the time.

13. How do you grade in the differentiated classroom?

This is a seemingly simple question, but the answer is long and complex. In actuality, there are books about the topic. Answering it adequately requires study groups among a school's staff, the development and adoption of policies related to grading, and then finally communicating these policies to key constituents, such as parents.

In the differentiated classroom you have to grade both on growth as well as the degree to which a student meets a standard. In the past, we simply averaged tests and quizzes and assigned grades.

In the differentiated classroom, the teacher is responsible for assessing growth—where the students started and ended up—and the degree to which the student met the standard.

Marzano, R. (2006). Classroom and assessment and grading that work. Alexandria, VA: ASCD
Wormeli, R. (2006). Fair isn't always equal: Grading in the differentiated classroom. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

14. What are the connections among accommodations, modifications, and differentiated instruction?

Accommodations and modifications are terms that arose in special education. Accommodations refer to the actual teaching supports and services that special education students may require to successfully demonstrate learning. Accommodations are intended to reduce or eliminate the effects of a student's disability. Accommodations do not decrease learning expectations and are noted on a student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Examples include, but are not limited to: taped books, math charts of the times tables, additional time, oral vs written quizzes and tests, preferred seating, and adapted keyboards.

Modifications refer to changes made to curriculum expectations in order to meet the needs of the special needs student. Modifications are made when the expectations are beyond the student's level of ability. Modifications may be minimal or very complex depending on the student's learning needs. Modifications must be clearly acknowledged in the IEP.

Differentiation of instruction is the process of teaching in a way to meet the needs of all students with differing abilities in the same class, including those with special learning needs. It's context is the regular classroom. One way to do this is by providing several different avenues by which all students can learn the same material. In differentiating instruction, teachers plan out and implement a variety of approaches to content, process, and product. Differentiated instruction is used to meet the needs of student differences in readiness, interests, and learning needs.