There are many theories about instructional planning. The term “differentiated instruction” is a commonly heard term among educators, especially those committed to both equity and excellence in their classrooms. What is differentiated instruction? In the simplest terms, differentiated instruction is instruction that is responsive to the diversity—in learning preference, ability, interest, aptitude, culture, social skills, communication skills, and more—in students. It is instruction made different for the purpose of supporting all students to learn.

Differentiated instruction is rooted in a number of learning theories including the theory of multiple intelligences developed by psychologist Howard Gardner. Gardner’s theory asserts that people have one or more of nine core intelligence preferences, including: spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential. Differentiated instruction provides learners with flexible options for receiving and processing information and ideas depending on those students’ “intelligences.”

Differentiated instruction is not “one-size-fits-all” teaching. When we offer students just one way to learn, some students will experience feelings of failure and/or boredom. Responsive teachers may rush in after instruction and offer students remediation, review, and enrichment. Students may in fact accept this help and learn, but even the most sincere assistance from the teacher sits on top of a learning experience that may leave the learner with a feeling of not being “smart” and/or of there not being anything worth learning at school.

Differentiated instruction builds the remediation, enrichment, supports, and accommodations into the original design of the learning experience.

Teachers who differentiate instruction begin the process by asking themselves “How can I design this lesson to accommodate the diversity in my classroom?” “What will it take for each student to access this lesson?” Access is sometimes afforded with a physical accommodation (e.g., a student needs a ramp to be able to perform on stage); a cognitive accommodation (e.g., students need to read the story ahead of time to comprehend it during class); an emotional accommodation (e.g., a student needs to work alone rather than in the small group); a language support (e.g., students need both written and oral instructions); a technology support (e.g., digital versions of text that can be personalized for the student’s sensory strengths and difficulties); and/or sometimes a behavioral support (e.g., students have a list of acceptable ways of “taking a break” during a class lesson). Although these accommodations and supports are made in response to a specific group of students, they often lead to changes in the original lesson design that is offered to everyone.

One common framework teachers use to achieve differentiation is Universal Design for Learning or UDL. Using UDL, teachers meet the diverse needs of their students by designing instruction that provides varied means of 1) access to information, 2) engagement with learning materials and activities, and 3) showing what they know.

Imagine that a teacher brought in multiple copies of the book Stone Soup (written at different reading levels, and representative of different cultural versions of this tale), and offered students the opportunity to choose which version to read.
she/he might offer just one version of the book, but offer multiple means for reading (e.g., “You can read it on your own, with a partner, or you can hear Mrs. Johnson read it aloud with her amazing storytelling skills”). She/he might provide students with three options for responding to the text: write a letter to the old woman explaining how she was tricked, transform the story into a comic strip, or perform a silent skit of the tale with classmates. The point here is that the teacher designs different ways to learn and demonstrate learning into the original lesson design so that students do not have to experience failure and/or boredom in order to have the teacher extend accommodations and supports.

Students with emotional/behavioral disabilities are sometimes expected to learn without supports and accommodations, but if boredom and/or failure set in, anxiety quickly follows, and for some kids, this can become a wildfire that prevents learning. Differentiated instruction is not typically considered to be a part of a positive behavioral support plan, but, in fact, differentiated instruction can prevent significant amounts of failure and/or boredom for students, which can trigger anxiety and lead to behaviors that challenge other people.

Although differentiated instruction means giving students the opportunity to participate in creative ways that do not always require reading and writing skills that are challenging for them (e.g., skits, songs, re-enactments, etc.), all students with disabilities should have accessible text and supports that enable them to read and write. Not only is this a good idea, it’s the law. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says: “In order to meet its responsibility…to ensure that children with disabilities who need instructional materials in accessible formats are provided those materials in a timely manner, the State Education Agency must ensure that all public agencies take all reasonable steps to provide instructional materials in accessible formats to children with disabilities who need those instructional materials at the same time as other children receive instructional materials.”

Thus, it’s no longer enough to say that some students must just listen to stories being read by others or dictate what they want to write to a paraprofessional or peer. All students with disabilities can learn to read and write using the ever-growing wealth of technologies that are available on the Internet and through tablets, AAC devices, and easy-to-use “apps.”

In conclusion, differentiating instruction is not a special education strategy just for students with disabilities. Rather, it is a way to teach an increasingly diverse population of students, holding high expectations for their achievement, while honoring their learning styles and preferences.

**GUIDELINES FOR DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION**

- Emphasize critical and creative thinking.
- Engage all learners.
- Provide a balance of teacher-assigned and student-selected assignments.
- Use multiple elements and materials to support the content being presented.
- Align tasks and objectives to learning goals.
- Deliver concept-focused and principle-driven instruction. The content of instruction is the same for all students; however, complexity, breadth, and depth is adjusted based on students’ needs.
- Consistently use flexible grouping.
- Conduct initial and on-going assessments of student readiness and growth.
- Allow for multiples means of expression, degrees of difficulty, types of evaluation, and scoring.

**WHAT WORKS: DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION**

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**SOURCES**