

What is Differentiated Instruction?

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One of the key questions for a classroom teacher is: How do I create lessons and units of instruction that meet the needs of the variety of learners in my classroom? The goal of any classroom teacher, no matter what grade level, is to provide specific ways for each student to learn content and skills with depth and complexity of

understanding. In order to reach these goals, teachers can differentiate content, process or product. A teacher makes decisions about how and what to differentiate based on thoughtful planning. At St. Margaret's, our faculty follows the Understanding by Design model for curriculum planning where specific standards for content and skills that students need to know and be able to do are determined collaboratively by teachers of the same course or grade level. Once the curriculum standards are determined, the path to how students obtain the knowledge and skills can be different based on a student's interest, learning profile and readiness.

The following are more specific examples of how differentiation works at different grade levels and in different subject areas:

Differentiation for Interest and Product:

When planning for his unit on climate and weather patterns, a Middle School science teacher creates a task where students have to choose the role of a meteorologist, a military general or a local farmer and conduct an analysis of the local weather trends in southern California and how those trends impact their respective roles in society.

In this example, the students can choose to take the role and perspective that is most interesting to them, but they are all studying and charting weather patterns in the area. Depending on the chosen role, students will write a weather report for a local news program, a brief about troop maneuvers for Camp Pendleton or a plan for economic impact of weather on crop growth.

Differentiation for Readiness and Process:

Readiness refers to a student's prior knowledge and understanding of the topic or skill being taught.

A Lower School teacher assesses her students and realizes that some of them have mastered the concept of "bossy r," while others need more practice. She divides her class into three groups. The group that has mastered the concept writes a sentence using "bossy r" words; the second group is proficient but they need more practice so they read a book and identify words with

"bossy r" in the story; and the third group of students who need re-teaching of the concept work on sorting word lists with "bossy r."

In this example, the content is the same for all the students but the process of learning and the product being produced is different.

Differentiation for Learning Style and Content:

Learning style refers to the preferred way in which a student likes to learn: visual, auditory or kinesthetic. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences could also be used to determine a student's learning style.

In an Upper School history class, the students are doing a culminating project that demonstrates their knowledge of the historic theme of impact of individuals on history. Students are given the choice to work alone or in a group of up to four people on one of the following assignments: writing a script for a play about their chosen individual, creating a video documentary describing their individual's impact on history or writing a research paper on the individual.

In this example, the content is different, as each student can choose the individual that he or she would like to study in more detail. Tasks give students with different learning styles the ability to report what they have learned about their individual in a variety of ways.

Information for this article is based on the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) in *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*.

