What's the Deal with Differentiated Instruction?

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Differentiated instruction, adjusting instruction to meet student needs, is a fact of life in adult education. How can we meet the needs of our students working at different grade level equivalents without going crazy? Find out in this workshop where we will discuss effective ways to differentiate instruction through changes in content, process, product, and learning environment.

Today's Objectives

At the end of today's workshop, I will be able to:

- Describe methods for differentiating instruction for adult learners

- Apply differentiated instructional techniques in the classroom

- Access applicable resources

Differentiated Instruction Is . . .

"Simply a teacher attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small groups of students, rather than teaching a class as though all individuals in it were basically alike."

(Dr. Carol Tomlinson)

We can differentiate instruction by changing:

1. **Content** - What students learn
2. **Process** - How students make sense of information
3. **Product** - How they show what they have learned
4. **Affect/Learning environment** - The climate or tone in the classroom

"This modification is based on assessment of student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile" (ASCD, 2011).

Same Activity with Different Difficulty Levels

Take an activity and think about how it would look at two or three different difficulty levels. Ask:

- How can I make this task easier or more complex?

- How can I modify the amount of structure or time allowed to meet all students' needs?

Use Generative Artificial Intelligence to Create Different Levels

Generative AI's two best features are differentiating and contextualizing instruction. Diffit for Teachers can create learning activities at different educational functioning levels. We can input a topic, article, YouTube link, text, PDF, or vocabulary list, and Diffit will create learning activities from a 2nd to 11th grade level equivalent.

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Get student-ready resources for...

🌐 Literally Anything   🔗 Article or YouTube Link   📄 Text or PDF   ☰ Vocabulary List

1. Enter a topic, theme, or question here

e.g. "Gravity", "Why didn't the U.S. participate in Treaty of Versailles?"

Levelled Reading Resources

ReadWorks
ReadWorks has some articles at two or three different reading levels called StepReads. StepReads are "less complex versions of our nonfiction and literary Articles…handwritten by…authors who preserve all of the important knowledge of the original article, as well as the key academic vocabulary, rich syntax, word count, and beauty of writing" (ReadWorks.org).

In order of difficulty, StepReads are:

Original Article ➡ StepRead 1 (Less complex) ➡ StepRead 2 (Even less complex)

Newsela Lite
Newsela's free version provides four current events articles at five different reading levels. It also has "reading comprehension quizzes, customizable writing prompts, and annotations," and the ability to make customizable assignments. It links easily with Google Classroom (Newsela.com).

Tiered Writing Resources: Sentence and Paragraph Frames

Frames are outlines of words or key phrases with plenty of blank lines that provide a structure so learners can focus on what they want to say. Frames remove the, "I don't know where to start" problem and help students gain confidence in their ability to write. As students become more confident writers, we can provide them with less structure over time. Adapted from M. Corley (2012)	**An Example Frame**: I am going to describe how _____ _____ . I start by _____ _____ . Then I _____ _____ .

Class Summary

In class today, I learned that _____

_____ .

This is important because _____

_____ .

I still wonder about _____

_____ .

Goal Setting

I have several goals for my life. In school, I plan to _____

_____ .

Once I finish that, I will _____

_____ .

For a career, my goal is _____

_____ .

I will reach this goal by _____

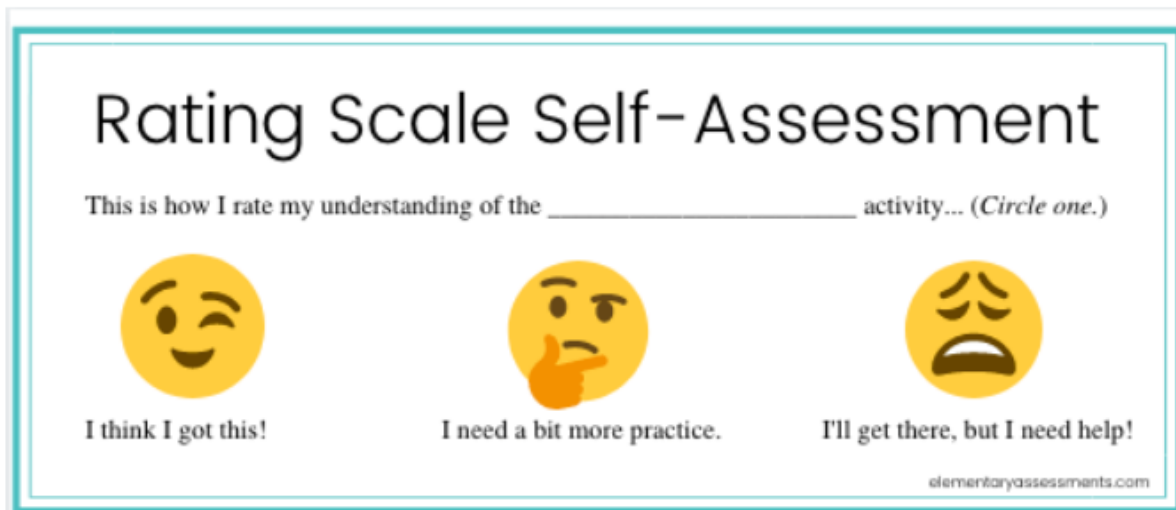_____ .

Give Choices with Different Difficulty Levels

Let students choose their difficulty level during learning activities. Adult learners are self-aware and will usually make wise choices. Choice helps students save face while giving them a voice and buy in to their learning. Explain why you are offering different difficulty levels.

Be careful how levels are named. Use positive framing instead of Easy/Medium/Hard. Some creative labels are:

- Almost There, Got It, Feeling Strong

- Rookie, Pro, Hall of Famer

- Bronze, Silver, Gold

- Mild, Medium, Hot

- Good, Better, Best

Use Student Self-Assessments

Students assessing their own learning increases motivation and develops the skill of reflective practice and self-monitoring. It assists students in becoming self-directed learners while learning transferable skills. Some possible self-assessment scales are:

Rating Scale Self-Assessment

This is how I rate my understanding of the _____ activity... (*Circle one.*)

I think I got this! | I need a bit more practice. | I'll get there, but I need help!

elementaryassessments.com

Self-Assessment	
4	I can help others with this
3	I can do this without help
2	I'm starting to understand but still need help
1	I don't understand it yet

More about Assessment

Assessment does not have to be complicated. Ask your students questions like, "How's this working for you?", "Does this make sense?", and "Please tell me about what you're doing here." Find out what strategies work best for each student. Use what is learned from students to make adjustments to teaching going forward. Use exit tickets to gain information.

How can students demonstrate learning beyond traditional tests and quizzes? **Give students choices like**: give a presentation, create a visual (chart/diagram/infographic), write a paragraph, design a comic, build a portfolio, or demonstrate the skill.

Exit Ticket

1. What are the two most important ideas that I learned in class today? _____

_____

_____

2. What questions do I have about the lesson? _____

_____

_____

3 2 1 Exit Ticket	
3	**Things I learned today**:
2	**Things I found interesting:**
1	**Question I still have:**

Use Flexible Groups

Peers can explain and help in different ways than instructors can. Create groups based on the activity, student readiness, student interest, or student level. Groups can be purposely created or made at random.

The grouping planner can help us decide on our grouping strategy:

Grouping Planner	
Use or Purpose of Grouping *What learning experience has prompted the decision to group?*	❑ Practicing/Applying Skills ❑ Investigating New Content ❑ Examining a Text, Data Set, etc. ❑ Working on a Project
Duration *How long will this grouping last?*	❑ Less than a class period ❑ A class period ❑ Less than a week ❑ More than a week
Student Characteristics *What characteristics matter for this task or learning experience?*	❑ Readiness/Skill Level ❑ Interest ❑ Preferred Way of Learning/Thinking ❑ Experience ❑ Background
Composition *Should the group be homogeneous or heterogeneous by student characteristic?*	❑ Homogeneous ❑ Heterogeneous
Configuration/Size *What is the best configuration for this learning activity? What size makes sense, given the goals?*	❑ Partners ❑ Circles (groups of 6-8) ❑ Small Groups of _____ (#) ❑ Split Class
Formation *How will the groups be formed?*	❑ Teacher Choice ❑ Student Choice ❑ Randomly

Source: teachthought.com

Get to Know Your Students

Teach in ways your students learn best. How can we find this out? Ask your students!

"The most effective professional development for me was becoming good friends with my students and finding out what worked for them, what didn't, and how I could have done it better.

"I've never met anyone who couldn't teach me something. Ask people: 'What are you really good at? How did you learn to do that?'"

(Parker, 2019)

Provide Scaffolded Support

Just like construction scaffolding, scaffolding in education gives support for all learners until they master a skill. This could take the form of:

- Anticipating trouble spots, where will students need extra help?

- Providing an overview of the lesson so students know what to expect (like a movie trailer)

- Using graphic organizers

- Providing KWL charts

- Pre-teaching vocabulary words

- Reading an assignment/article aloud as a class

- Chunking: Break longer readings into parts. Break longer assignments into parts.

- Working with a partner or small group

Teach with a Growth Mindset

"We need to get away from the idea of fixed capability – that we are born with certain strengths and weaknesses that cannot be changed. Students come into a classroom with a high degree of capability, but not always the right tools and the right skills.

"Neuroscience research has shown us that the brain is not modular – in other words, one particular brain region isn't responsible for one particular function. Your brain is comprised of a network of regions that work in concert to accomplish a given task, and its plasticity and malleability are astounding" (Hoxworth, 2018).

Make clear to each student that they are capable of learning no matter what their story is. Tell your stories about overcoming obstacles. Show Dr. Carol Dweck's TED talk on ***The Power of Yet***. Use the **Teaching Your Students Malleable Intelligence** handout to show students how the brain can learn. As you teach, explain the why behind what you do and how you do it. Some other ideas:

"1. Normalize struggle. Struggle is part of the learning process, and emphasizing and reinforcing that idea helps students react positively when they feel challenged.

2. Encourage engagement with challenges. Portray challenges as fun and exciting, and easy tasks as boring.

3. Embrace the word 'yet'. If someone makes the statement 'I'm not a math person,' adding a yet will signal that a process exists for gaining ability. 'You're not a math person yet.'

4. Tout the value of hard tasks to the brain. Promote the idea that brains are malleable 'muscles' that can be developed.

5. Demonstrate mistakes and celebrate corrections. Mistakes should be viewed as learning opportunities. Teachers can model this outlook in reactions to their own mistakes.

6. Set goals. Having students set incremental, achievable goals demonstrates the attainability of growth and progress.

7. Avoid praising intelligence. This may seem counterintuitive, but praise for 'being smart' reinforces the idea that intelligence is a fixed trait."

(American University, 2020)

Flexible Grouping Arrangements

1. **Leveling a Multi-leveled Class**

Here is an option that allows you to provide structure to a multi-level class:

Divide your class into two groups:

       Group A Students who need more help

       Group B Students who need less help

How It Might Look in a 3 Hour Class:

6:00 – 6:30   Instructor explains independent study assignments for the evening

6:30 – 7:30   Focused, instructor–facilitated instruction with Group A students, Group B students complete independent study assignments

7:30 – 8:00   Whole class lesson on a topic critical to all: study skills, career exploration, reading/math/writing skill, workforce prep

8:00 – 9:00   Focused, instructor–facilitated instruction with Group B students, Group A students complete independent study assignments

Shift the Group A/B order around during the next class!

2. **The "Backward Piggy": IGIP**

- Individualized
- Group
- Individualized
- Planning

How It Might Look in a 3 Hour Class:

6:00 – 7:00 **Individualized Instruction**: Students work independently or in small groups** focusing on reading, writing, and math skill development. Instructor teaches mini lessons to individuals and small groups.

7:00 – 7:45 **Whole Class Lesson/Discussion**: Instructor teaches whole class lesson

7:45 – 8:45 **Individualized Instruction**: Students work independently or in small groups focusing on reading, writing, and math skill development. Instructor teaches mini lessons to individuals and small groups.

8:45 – 9:00 **Planning**: Go once around the room to help students plan what they will be doing during the next class.

(McLendon, 2013)