

Strategies for Effective Teaching and Learning

Differentiated Instruction

The goal of schools must be to support and encourage lifelong learning. The most likely way to achieve that goal is differentiation, an instructional strategy that is a popular topic for educators to discuss but one less frequently implemented. Because all fourth or eighth graders are not at the same level of achievement in any content area and their interests differ greatly, differentiation is very important. It is the strategy that is most likely to ensure continuous progress for all children, including those who are gifted and talented.

Effective instruction for learners with gifts and talents involves five steps:

Step 1. Preassess.

Once you have planned the unit of study, the starting point in planning differentiation must be to preassess.

Guiding Question: "Who already knows the content and can demonstrate the skills even before the unit of study begins?"

Step 2. Group children for instructional purposes.

Preassessment results provide information to help you decide which students can be clustered for instructional purposes for a particular unit of study. Grouping facilitates learning, providing the vehicle for differentiating learning experiences.

Guiding Question: "Which students are ready to learn the content at the same level and would benefit from being grouped for instruction?"

Step 3. Match learner experiences to the preassessment data (level of achievement, interests).

Differentiation does not just mean providing different learning experiences or offering choice; rather, differentiation is the intentional match of content (basic to complex), process (level of cognitive skill), and product (visual, written, oral, kinesthetic, and technological) (Roberts & Inman, 2015b).

Guiding Question: "How can the learning experiences be shaped to match the preassessment results and to ensure intellectual challenges?"

Step 4. Provide products (ways to demonstrate what has been learned) that will motivate and teach.

A variety of products can be used that will allow students to show what they have learned but in ways that will motivate them to learn.

Guiding Question: "What products will interest students and prepare them to build expertise for current and future use?"

Step 5. Reflect, reflect, reflect.

Learning experiences that remain isolated do not promote lifelong learning. If learning is to be ongoing, it is essential to reflect on what has been learned and what one wants to learn next.

Guiding Question: "What questions will promote reflection and lead to ongoing learning?"