

Nonnegotiables of Effective Differentiation

As we learned in previous modules, differentiated instruction is not a cookbook recipe—it’s a model that constantly evolves, striving to address the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Consequently, many teachers who practice differentiation often wonder how they can make sure they are staying true to the model and philosophy of differentiation. What can help guide teachers in the process are five key aspects of effective differentiation, which Carol Ann Tomlinson calls “nonnegotiables” of differentiation:

1. An environment that supports learning
2. High-quality curriculum that focuses on understanding
3. Ongoing assessment to inform instruction
4. Instruction that responds to student differences
5. Leadership and flexible classroom management.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these aspects.

An Environment That Supports Learning

For learning to take place, the classroom environment—the physical and emotional context in which learning occurs—needs to support learning. “The appearance, organization, and structure of a classroom can invite learning with appealing colors, effective displays of student work, spaces for both solitary and collaborative work, easy access to materials and supplies, furniture arrangements that focus attention on peer input rather than largely or solely on the teacher, and visible cues that support quality work” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 19).

The emotional climate of the classroom is even more important.

“Students learn best when they feel safe, respected, involved, challenged, and supported,” write Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010, p. 19-20). Therefore, effective

differentiation—as effective attention to the learning needs of each student—requires a learning environment in which

- The teacher is attuned and responsive to the affective, cognitive, and physical needs of learners.
- Students feel safe, both physically and affectively.
- The teacher respects and supports the possibilities inherent in each student.
- Students learn to respect and support one another as a community of learners.
- The teacher and students share in the decision-making process about daily routines and classroom operation.
- Hard work is an expectation.
- Physical arrangements are flexible and support student access to a variety of learning options.
- A range of resources are available and support student access to content.

Learn about specific ways to create a safe, welcoming, respectful, challenging, and supportive environment for differentiation in the PD Online® course *Differentiated Instruction: Creating an Environment That Supports Learning*, available at <http://pdo.ascd.org/catalog/browsecatalog.aspx>.

- Flexible student grouping capitalizes on student strengths and allows effective attention to student weaknesses (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 20).

High-Quality Curriculum That Focuses on Understanding

High-quality curriculum has several important qualities. It needs to be engaging and challenging; authentic, accurate, and based on standards;

scaffolded and developmentally appropriate; relevant to students' lives and connected to earlier learning. In addition, it should promote inquiry and higher-level thinking, and include the use of technology (Strickland, 2007).

According to Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia Imbeau (2010), all students in the differentiated classroom (unless an IEP indicates otherwise) should

- Work with the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills in a lesson and unit of study.
- Be expected to think, and be supported as thinkers, as they engage with curriculum.
- Work with respectful tasks—tasks that are equally interesting and engaging, and those that promote understanding of, and the ability to apply, essential content.

When planning curriculum in the differentiated classroom, it's imperative that teachers keep the KUD dynamic in mind—identifying what students need to **know, understand**, and be able to **do** as a result of their learning experiences, says Carol Ann Tomlinson. Knowledge includes familiarity with important

vocabulary, definitions, rules, people, places, dates, and other key information. Understanding means students' ability to understand concepts and big ideas of a discipline, and doing involves mastering the skills necessary in the discipline—such as basic skills, skills of communication, thinking, or planning (Strickland, 2007).

To learn in depth about developing and teaching a high-quality curriculum in the differentiated classroom, look for the PD Online® course *Differentiated Instruction: The Curriculum Connection*, available at <http://pdo.ascd.org/catalog/browsecatalog.aspx>.

Ongoing Assessment to Inform Instruction

Developing good curriculum is only part of the equation. If students don't have the

prerequisite tools to learn it, aren't interested in it, or if the curriculum doesn't mesh with their learning profiles, learning will suffer. That's why ongoing assessment is critical in the differentiated classroom.

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) define assessment as “a data-gathering and analysis process that determines the degree to which students have achieved essential outcomes and informs decisions about and planning for instruction” (p. 21). In a differentiated classroom, the use of three types of assessment is emphasized:

- **Diagnostic assessments** (preassessments) to determine individual students' entry points into a unit of study in terms of their readiness, interest, and learning profiles. This process is essential to planning for student variance.
- **Formative assessments** to measure students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles. This process is essential to planning for and supporting student variance.
- **Summative assessments** to offer varied modes of expression and

scaffolding (based on students' needs in terms of language, time allocation, writing, etc.) This process helps students express what they know, understand, and can do relative to essential outcomes. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, pp. 21-22)

Learn to plan differentiated instruction based on ongoing assessment in the PD Online® course *Differentiated Instruction: Using Ongoing Assessment to Inform Instruction*, available at <http://pdo.ascd.org/catalog/browsecatalog.aspx>.

Differentiated classrooms provide flexible pacing, levels of complexity, scaffolding, and opportunities for extension, so ongoing assessment can help teachers take guesswork out of unit planning “by helping to identify who needs what in a lesson and when”

(Strickland, 2007, p. 14). In addition to assessing for readiness, pre-assessment can help teachers “systematically incorporate students’ general and topic-specific interests into the unit of study and provide students with opportunities to learn in ways that are comfortable for them—especially when they have difficulty with the material” (Strickland, 2007, p. 14).

Instruction That Responds to Student Differences

Instruction is “the process of teaching, educating, and engaging students with content—the mechanism used to ‘deliver’ the curriculum” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 22). In the differentiated classroom, instruction should

- Align with essential knowledge, understanding, and skills.
- Be designed with student differences in mind, including differences in learning, culture, language, and gender.
- Be flexible in terms of time, materials, support systems, student groupings, instructional modes, and teaching and learning strategies.

- Offer various routes to accomplishing essential learning outcomes.
- Help students develop self-efficacy and independence as learners.
- Help students develop proficiency in collaborative learning.
- Provide classroom routines that balance student needs for guidance and freedom. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 22).

To master the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills, students work with the content through **respectful tasks**—activities that help them own the content, making sense of it. Such activities are engaging and appropriately challenging, leading all the students in the classroom to the same or very similar learning goals—with the exception of students who have individualized education programs and those who have already mastered the knowledge, understanding, and skills of the unit (Strickland, 2007).

Keep in mind that quality differentiation is qualitative, not quantitative. In other words, advanced students should not simply get more assignments than struggling students;

the complexity of assignments should vary. Likewise, if some students are playing a game to master their skills in a particular unit, then all students in the class should play a version of the game appropriate for them (Strickland, 2007).

Another principle of differentiation that helps support instruction that responds to student differences is **flexible grouping**. Teaching a differentiated classroom doesn't imply that students will always be working in groups. Depending on the students' needs, sometimes employing whole-class instruction is appropriate; in others, students will work with partners or in small groups. Likewise, sometimes students will be matched according to their readiness levels, interests, or learning profiles; at other times, they will work with students who differ from them in these categories. In some cases, students will choose their grouping; in other cases, the teacher will make the choice or the choice will be random.

When deciding how to group students, Strickland (2007) recommends using "whatever type of differentiation and flexible grouping would best help *these students* meet *these objectives* at

this time" (p. 21). What matters most is not the type of grouping that is used for a particular lesson but that teachers "are clear on their learning goals and think carefully about how to best meet these goals, given the characteristics of the students for whom they are differentiating" (p. 21).

Learn how to connect content and students and how to plan and deliver instruction that responds to your students' needs in the PD Online® course *Differentiated Instruction: Teaching with Student Differences in Mind*, available at <http://pdo.ascd.org/catalog/browsecatalog.aspx>.

Leadership and Flexible Classroom Management

In the differentiated classroom, the goal of the teacher is to build a classroom that functions like a team—and where kids understand the purpose

behind differentiation and are contributing to it. To achieve this goal, it's essential that the teacher leads the student in that effort.

“Leading a differentiated classroom is like leading anything,” says Carol Ann Tomlinson. “A leader has a vision, a leader can express that vision to followers, a leader can enlist the good will of followers, and a good leader always sees to the welfare of followers, always makes sure things are going right and doesn't let the followers get so off track that they're become issue that can damage people along the way,” she explains.

While leading students to personal growth and to reaching their learning goals, teachers still have to manage details in the classroom, figuring out where to put materials, how to start and stop class, or how to give directions on differentiated tasks. And although in every differentiated classroom these routines and practices may be unique, it's important that teachers proactively think through and plan for ways to

- Start and stop lessons.
- Start and stop routines.

- Get materials.
- Get directions on tasks.
- Manage noise.
- Assign kids to groups.
- Manage different pace of work in the classroom.

Learn more about specific ways to lead students and manage details in the differentiated classroom through the PD Online® course *Differentiated Instruction: Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*, available at <http://pdo.ascd.org/catalog/browsecatalog.aspx>.

Interdependence of the Classroom System

The nonnegotiables of differentiated instruction are considered interdependent because “the way in which the teacher envisions and enacts each of these elements shapes each of

the other elements. For example, an assessment that feels judgmental to students will negatively influence the learning environment. Likewise, a classroom in which curriculum is highly prescribed, with few or no options for a teacher to make professional decisions

on behalf of students, limits that teacher’s options for instruction” (Strickland, 2007, p. 19).

The following table represents all five nonnegotiables of DI and shows how they are shaped in an effectively differentiated classroom.

Nonnegotiable of DI	What It Looks Like in an Effectively Differentiated Classroom
Learning environment	Individual differences are accepted as natural and positive. The teacher respects and supports the possibilities inherent in each student.
	Physical arrangements are flexible and support student access to a variety of learning options.
	The teacher is attuned and responsive to the affective, cognitive, and physical needs of learners.
	Students feel safe, both physically and emotionally.
	Hard work is an expectation.
Curriculum	Student interest, abilities, backgrounds, and learning preferences help shape curriculum.
	Students work with the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills in a lesson and unit of study.
	Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are sought.
	Students are expected to think, and be supported as thinkers, as they engage with curriculum.
Assessment	Diagnostic pre-assessment is typical and is used to determine individual students’ entry points into a unit of study in terms of their readiness, interest, and learning profiles—and to plan for student variance.
	Clearly established criteria are used to help support student success.
	Students are evaluated in multiple ways, with emphasis on personal growth.

	Formative assessments measure students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles. This process is essential to planning for and supporting student variance.
	Summative assessments can vary in modes of expression and types of scaffolding in terms of language, time allocation, writing, etc.).
Instruction	Instruction aligns with essential knowledge, understanding, and skills and is planned based on assessment data.
	The teacher helps students develop multiple ways of making sense of ideas, focusing on helping students develop self-efficacy and independence as learners.
	Instruction is flexible in terms of time, materials, support systems, student groupings, instructional modes, and teaching and learning strategies.
	Collaborative learning is one of many key tools.
	Flexible student grouping capitalizes on student strengths and allows effective attention to student weaknesses.
	Students work with respectful tasks—tasks that are equally interesting and engaging, and that promote understanding of, and the ability to apply, essential content.
Leadership and flexible classroom management	The teacher and students share in the decision-making process about daily routines and classroom operation.
	A range of resources is available and supports student access to content.
	Classroom routines balance student needs for guidance and freedom.
	Variable pacing is standard. Time use is flexible in response to student needs.
	The teacher is primarily a coordinator of time, space, and activities rather than primarily a provider of information.

Sources: Tomlinson, C.A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2010). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.