

Differentiation to improve engagement and learning

Teachers who differentiate effectively call on information that pinpoints what students know now, and what they are ready to learn next.

Differentiated teaching is how I target my instruction to extend the knowledge and skills of every student in every class, regardless of their starting point. The objective of differentiation is to lift the performance of all students, including those who are falling behind and those ahead of year level expectations. Differentiation benefits students across the learning continuum, including students who are highly able and gifted.

When differentiating my teaching to suit the needs of individual students, I use a variety of strategies to help students become personally invested in and take ownership of their learning. Differentiated teaching allows students at risk of disengagement to experience meaningful learning.

What is effective differentiation?

I think teachers who differentiate effectively use a range of data sources to pinpoint what students currently know, and what they are ready to learn next.

Data enables me to plan well-scaffolded learning pathways so that all students have a point of entry. Student data can also identify gaps in knowledge and skills that can be used for learning intervention.

Some examples of potential data sources include observations in the classroom (including the observations of other teachers, helps to have a collaborative department in PE), formative assessment, and feedback from students and their parents or carers.

Using data, I can decide what to differentiate in my instruction, choosing from:

Content: what students are expected to learn.

Process: how I will teach and how students will explore or undertake their learning. This includes looking at the type of instruction and activities undertaken in the lesson.

Product: how the students demonstrate their learning.

Learning environment: the physical and effective nature of the classroom. Classrooms should be stimulating and conducive to learning, and places where students feel valued, safe and supported to take risks to support their learning. I implement classroom-based strategies to support differentiated teaching. I draw upon existing sources of evidence to assess student learning needs and strengths.

To implement differentiated strategies to support student needs and strengths, I:

Reflect on the available information on students as learners and any additional social, emotional and behavioural considerations I need to consider when planning the learning and teaching program.

Consider the following elements when planning a differentiated approach: the curriculum, the set-up of the learning environment, approaches to classroom management, the use of formative assessments for learning and instructional strategies that are responsive to student need. I base interventions on information gathered about the student's readiness, interests and learning profiles.

To effectively target my teaching, I consider:

1. Students with disabilities or disadvantaged backgrounds may need additional adjustments of varying degrees to participate in the classroom on the same basis as their peers.
2. I ask for input from colleagues including specialist staff who can assist me to implement a range of teaching strategies that support the different learning goals and learning needs.
3. I emphasise student agency and engagement by providing choice and input into the learning activities from students and assisting them to set realistic and challenging goals.
4. I use formative assessment practices to monitor my students' learning progress toward and beyond learning goals and I adjust my learning plan in response to this formative feedback.
5. I undertake targeted interventions to supplement the learning for groups of students experiencing difficulties. These interventions could be planned in collaboration with Learning Specialists.

The questions below are important to ask if you are going to successfully differentiate.

How can I assess prior knowledge?

What ongoing formative assessment tools can I employ to respond to student needs?

How well do I collaborate with students to co-design appropriate goals to progress their learning?

How can the classroom environment support my students to learn?

Where are we located on the continuum of practice for High Impact Teaching Strategies 10: Differentiated teaching practice?

What professional learning will support me to improve my practice?