

Are You Making these Four Differentiated Instruction Mistakes?

Robyn Jackson

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If we truly want to help ALL students meet or master the standards, we must provide effective differentiation for our students. However, over the years, several practices have crept into the way we differentiate lessons that actually make student success LESS likely. The following are four practices that actually interfere with effective differentiated instruction.

Creating multiple assignments rather than multiple pathways. Differentiation is not about the number of assignments you create; it's about giving students multiple pathways to success and then helping them choose the pathway that is best for them. Simply providing multiple assignments not only creates a lot of work for you, it can pigeonhole some students into lowered expectations and decreased opportunities to stretch and grow. Instead of creating different assignments, create ONE assignment and provide students several different pathways to success on that assignment. By focusing on different supports rather than different assignments, you can better target students' needs and give them the scaffolding they need to reach success.

Differentiating by learning style versus learning needs. Not every lesson you give will accommodate students' preferred learning style - nor does every lesson need to. Our time is better spent examining students' particular learning needs for each assignment and using their learning needs to identify and provide the support and scaffolding they need to be successful. Learning styles are static while learning needs constantly change and shift depending on students' current content and procedural knowledge. Learning needs give you a much more accurate picture of where students are currently and what you must do to help them successfully master a range of standards and skills. From there you can create [customized pathways](#) and supports to help all students meet or exceed the standards.

Differentiating by achievement level rather than by students' current learning level.

Some will tell you that there are three kinds of students - high, medium, and low. But this distinction is not very useful. There are times when a student you consider to be in your high group will struggle with the content. Other time, students in your low group will sail through an activity, outperforming the students in your high group. Because students bring a variety of skills and experiences to the classroom, classifying them as high, medium, and low doesn't really help you adjust your instruction effectively to meet their complex needs. These static groupings also limit students. Once you start thinking about students in these ways, it is difficult to see them any other way. Differentiating by achievement level often results in lowered expectations for struggling students and extra work for advanced students. Lowering the target for some students while raising the learning target for others is not differentiation - it's tracking. Real differentiation takes into account where students are at a particular point in time. It doesn't label kids "low", "average," and "advanced"; it groups students by their current understanding of the content and processes involved in a particular learning activity and then provides students with the targeted supports they need to successfully master that activity.

Differentiating up rather than down. When we differentiate down, we tend to look for ways to "dumb down" an assignment to students' current learning level and hope that over time, they will begin working at the level demanded by the standards. In most cases, our efforts fall short. Differentiating up means starting with the standard and figuring out what supports students will need to reach the standard. All assignments are written at or above grade-level. We can offer students varying degrees of support and different routes to success but the target itself should never change.

By avoiding these mistakes, you can make your efforts at differentiation much more successful -- and much less stressful. Take a look at your differentiation practice and make sure that you are not unintentionally making things harder for both you and your students.