

Differentiation Design Guide

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Planning for Differentiation can feel challenging and overwhelming. Having written on this topic numerous times, a common concern raised by teachers is how complex it appears to plan for six elements:

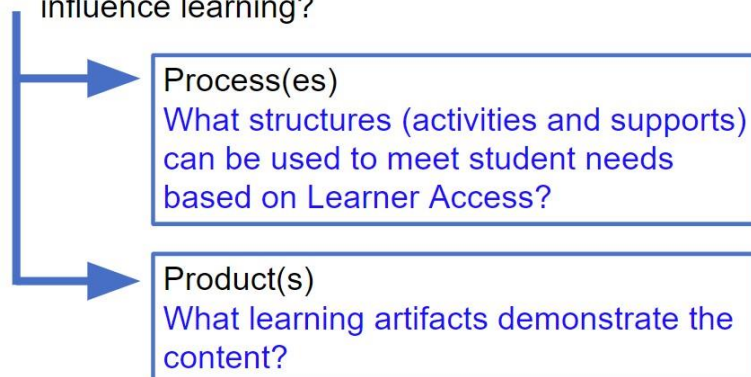
- Instructional Planning: Content, Process, and Product
- Learner Access: Readiness, Interests, and Learning Preferences

Planning should not be so difficult, especially for teachers experienced with designing and teaching quality lessons. But perceptions of Differentiation make these challenges seem like the reality. After careful reflection and interactions with teacher who are confident in instructional planning for differentiation, a new paradigm took shape. This approach takes the classic elements of Differentiation and explores them through a different lens then is typically considered.

DI: Instructional Planning Steps

Content

- What concepts and skills must students learn?
- What learner challenges and opportunities influence learning?



Learner Access

Readiness

--Current Skill Level

Interests

--Choices and Backgrounds

Learning Preferences

--Brain Intelligences

The elements for Instructional Planning should be looked at as three steps for learning experiences.

1. Content is what learners need to know, understand, and do something with.
2. Process are the activities, methods, and/or structures for how learners participate “during” the learning experiences.
3. Products are the artifacts and evidence that learners complete or create that demonstrates their levels of comprehension and application.

The elements of Learner Access are used as pathways that influence each of the Instructional Planning steps. Readiness, Interests, and Learning Preferences can be used individually or in combination when developing each step for the Instructional Planning.

What follows is a breakdown of each Instructional Planning step and the role of the Learner Access elements. Share your questions at jmccarthy@openingpaths.org or on Twitter: [@JMcCarthyEdS](https://twitter.com/JMcCarthyEdS).

Planning Steps:

When designing differentiation into a lesson or activity, follow these steps to ensure a careful consideration of learner access needs based on the requirements of curriculum.

Content

1. Review the content and level of expected learning required.
2. Identify the combination of learner access needed based on data: Readiness, Interests, and/or Learning Preferences.

Process

1. Design activities that meet content learning expectations and learner access areas (Readiness, Interests, and/or Learning Preferences)
2. Review the lesson (or lesson collection) for addressing learner needs and revise where necessary.

Products

1. Craft or choose an artifact, assessment, or action that collects data on learner achievement(s) or gaps(s) based on the lesson experience.
2. Evaluate and revise the product for assessment fog before implementing.
3. Products should reflect one or more learner access area: Readiness, Interests, and/or Learning Preferences

Reflection

1. Review the lesson experience for strengths and opportunities for improvement based on the learner experience.
2. Where possible, get feedback from students and professional colleagues.

These steps are a quick view for developing effective and efficient intentional differentiation for all learners. What follows is an in-depth explanation of the relationship of the elements for instructional planning--Content + Process + Product through the lenses of Learner Access: Readiness, Interests, and Learning Preferences. The result will be stronger learning experiences that engage more learners.

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Understanding and Using the Language of Differentiation

Effective and efficient differentiation requires understanding the core language. Naming the components, understanding their roles, and how they work collectively can elevate how we meet the needs of all learners. What follows is clarifying language for each of the core elements for Differentiation. Also included are reflective questions and considerations for when and how to use the elements with learner needs at the center of decisions. Combined with the Differentiation Planning Guide steps, the resulting implementation can have a constructive and productive impact on learning.

Content

What are the knowledge, skills, and/or concepts that learners must level up by the end of the lesson or learning experience?

The first step with differentiation is to review the content. Be clear and concrete for students about what the curriculum outcomes require for achievement. This standard is kept as the end in mind when planning activities and lessons. Adaptations or modifications must align to the curriculum outcome(s).

What challenges and opportunities do learners bring to the experience, based on assessments and learner access data (Readiness, Interests, and/or Learning Preferences)?

Students digest content based on their varied approaches to processing, which are the Differentiation elements that form Learner Access: readiness, interests, and learning preferences. Considering and identifying one or more of these learner access elements is key to engagement and participation into a lesson that meets student needs. Reflect on these and other challenges and opportunities as a concrete way to use a student lens when deciding on needs and activities that will support the learner.

Challenges:

- Gaps in baseline or fundamental knowledge or skills
- Low interest or purpose
- Lack of connecting to learner life context
- Difficulty making sense of abstract concepts or ideas

Opportunities

- Strong prior knowledge of the topics
- Content contains relevance to interests of the learners
- Contains multiple options for learners to self-explore
- Self-directed learning opportunities
- Real world connections to learner life context

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Process

What activities, groupings, and/or personalized supports will best support learner access to the instructional focus? Include one or a combination of Learner Access elements: readiness, interests, and/or learning preferences.

Lessons are structures for students to build knowledge and comprehension, apply skills, and critically assess and synthesize concepts for deeper understanding. Choosing activities and crafting supports based on one or more Learner Access elements is how we intentionally plan for targeting needs of different learner groups.

What follows are explanations and examples of structures when organizing effective processes that students will use to achieve the content outcomes during a differentiation-based lesson.

Readiness

Learners succeed academically when they are challenged based on their level of understanding and skills. There are a variety of ways to meet learner Readiness needs. Here are three category approaches, which influence decisions about groupings and activity choices and structures.

Tiered Instruction:

All leveled activities directly address the learning outcome(s). In leveled groups, students will complete tasks that share a common structure. They will include differences in language and support based on what learners need to achieve the learning outcome(s).

- Create an activity that addresses content at the expected outcome level.
- Next, create one or more additional duplicates of the same activity that includes supports for:
 - learning gaps for groups of learners.
 - more complexity above the outcome level for groups of advanced learners

Leveled Instruction:

Activities and tasks may look differently for each leveled group based on their needs for scaffolds and/or extensions. Students with gaps in foundational knowledge will do some activities to address those needs before doing tasks that meet the target learning outcome(s).

- Option 1: All leveled activities address the content at the expected level, including added scaffolds and supports.
- Option 2: All leveled activities “align” with the learning outcome(s). However, some students complete activities that address building blocks or fundamentals needed before tackling the core outcome(s).

Curriculum Compacting

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Learners who show mastery of the learning outcomes for the unit are given independent or teamwork that explores content above and beyond the expectations of the learning outcomes. Such work can take the form of a learning contract or independent project. Students are held accountable to demonstrating content mastery at a higher complexity level.

Interests

Empower students to explore content through the lens of what interests them or is familiar to their world inside and outside of school. Here are three different approaches that can be applied individually or in powerful combinations.

- **Authenticity:** How can content be presented and experiences in connection to the students' world beyond school? What contextual connection can be made between academic concepts and practical applications inside and beyond school?
- **Choice:** What options can be given to students to choose what and how they learn content? This can lead to choices in artifacts learners will produce that have the most meaning to them.
- **Voice:** How can students be given opportunities to design and propose their preferred way to learn content? This includes empowering them to propose the product form that best suits their ideas.

Learning Preferences

As learners, we process or make sense of ideas and concepts in a variety of ways. There are many documented approaches to thinking based on brain research and psychology. In education, Gardner's Theory on Multiple Intelligences and Robert Sternberg's Triarchic Theory on Multiple Intelligences are examples used or referenced. However, there is opposition to how effective their and other's work may be. For example, it is best not to label a learner as being strong in one area like visual, practical, or interpersonal. A better approach is to consider that learners are more complex in their processing for learning, and likely have strengths in multiple areas. Instead of planning activities that focus on one modality, include a variety and allow learners to be exposed to all of the modalities used. The result is that learners process the content from a variety of different perspectives, rather than be limited to only one approach, such as a lecture.

Here are tools for giving students multiple opportunities to process what they are learning "as" they are learning through their different preferences for sensemaking.

3-Dimensional Thinking and Learning

- What are 2-3 or more ways that your learners use to make sense of concepts?
- What are 2-3 ways do learners process understanding?
- What are three different ways to represent a concept or skill for learners to experience and practice?

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- What 2-3 learning preferences could students be exposed for processing ideas and skills?

Reflection and Metacognition

- How can wait-time (5-20 seconds) be used to build students' skills for constructing answers?
- How can think-time (30 seconds to 3 minutes) be used to build students' skills for self-reflection and comprehension?

Products

What types of products can students develop to show what they know and do not understand, based on the learning outcomes?

What potential assessment fog exists and needs to be cleared before implementation?

An important part of the learner experience is finding out what they know and do not understand after the activity or lesson. The artifact, assessment, or action they do after helps inform the students and teachers for intuitive support in the midst of the work and next steps for intentional differentiation before the next lesson. Products should be aligned to the content curriculum outcomes. This ensures that students who are on track maintain their progress and growth. It also ensures that students who have major gaps in their foundational knowledge are building those skills that follow a route that aligns with where all students are moving towards.

Make sure that the product is free of assessment fog. This means that logistical requirements are separated out from the content requirements that will be assessed. Also, ensure that the action steps do not require skills, not being assessed, to communicate content to be evaluated. For example, writing an explanation for how to solve a math equation could be difficult for someone with weak writing skills. They may need the option to explain orally so as to accurately assess their math thinking skills.

As with Process, designing products should be constructed through one or a combination of Learner Access elements: readiness, interests, and/or learning preferences. Look through the lens of how learners could experience the product development through the learner access elements, and thus intentionally craft the artifact, assessment or action. The purpose of Process is building the learning journey through activities and action steps. Products are the destination points to track progress and growth of learners along the map.

Readiness

How might the product or artifact be tiered or leveled?

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When designing products based on readiness, there will be a different option or set of choices for each group of learners based on their current skill level and needs. It is important that each product aligns with the content curriculum outcomes.

Tiered Instruction:

All leveled products directly address the learning outcome(s). In leveled groups, students will complete an assigned product or artifact that shares a common structure. They will include differences in language and support based on what learners need to achieve the learning outcome(s).

- Create a product that addresses content at the expected outcome level.
- Next, create one or more additional duplicates of the same product directions that includes supports for:
 - learning gaps for groups of learners.
 - more complexity above the outcome level for groups of advanced learners

Leveled Instruction:

Products or artifacts may be different for each leveled group based on their needs for scaffolds and/or extensions. Students with gaps in foundational knowledge will work on products that address those needs before completing a product that meets the target learning outcome(s).

- Option 1: All leveled product directions address the content at the expected level, including added scaffolds and supports.
- Option 2: All leveled product directions “align” with the learning outcome(s). However, some students complete steps or components that address building blocks or fundamentals needed before tackling the core outcome(s).

Interests

Context matters for learners to make sense of content for creating products. A helpful approach is to connect the product to something that is an authentic part of the world that learners know or are familiar with. A result is that producing the product gains value and purpose. Choice and voice are powerful ways to engage learners into the product. Ownership and accountability is more present and valued by students when they are empowered with making those decisions.

- **Authenticity:** How can product options connect to the students’ world beyond school? What contextual connection can be made between academic concepts and practical applications inside and beyond school?
- **Choice:** How can different product formats and topics be offered that may interest students?
- **Voice:** How can students be given opportunities to design and propose their preferred way to demonstrate their learning? This includes empowering them to propose the product form that best suits their ideas.

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Learning Preferences

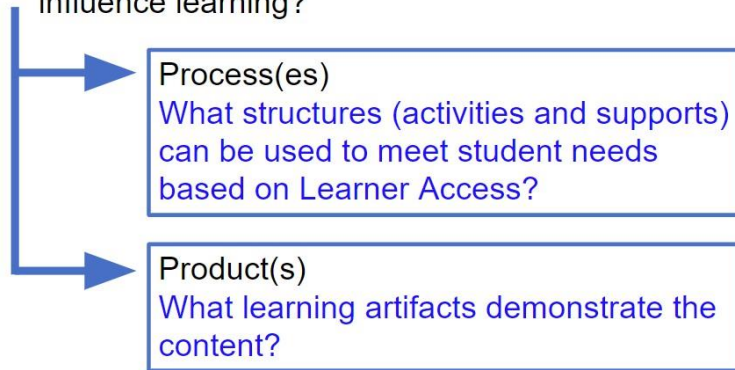
As discussed in Process, we make sense of ideas and concepts in a variety of ways. Explore how products can include three or more modalities in its construction or offer multiple versions of the product, which includes a variation of modalities in each, and let the students choose the one that they prefer.

- What are 3+ modalities or perspectives that learners will experience through the product?
- What are at least 3 different versions of the product format and structure that can be offered to learners?

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