



An ASCD Study Guide for

How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2nd Edition

This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding of [*How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2nd Edition*](#), an ASCD book written by **Carol Ann Tomlinson** and published in April 2001. It will help you make connections between the text and the school or school district in which you work.

The study guide can be used after you have read the entire book or as you finish each chapter. The study questions provided are not meant to cover all aspects of the book; rather, they are intended to address selected ideas we thought might warrant further reflection.

Most of the questions contained in this study guide are ones you can think about on your own. But you might also consider pairing with another colleague or forming a group of people who have read (or are reading) *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2nd Edition*. You might also consider modifying the questions for use in any professional development you might be involved in on the topic of differentiating instruction.

Chapter 1: What Differentiation Is and Isn't

1. Because students have always differed within any classroom, there has always been a need to develop routines and procedures for attending to those differences. With your current knowledge of what we call "differentiation," how is it similar to and different from other approaches to dealing with student differences that you're aware of?
2. This chapter talks about "micro" differentiation versus "macro" differentiation. At what points in your teaching does "micro"

differentiation seem to be adequate to address the student differences in your classroom? When is it not enough?

3. Why is a "quantitative" approach to differentiation unlikely to work for advanced learners? For learners who struggle?
4. In what ways is differentiation likely to be "organic" based on both teacher growth and the passage of time in a given classroom?

Chapter 2: The Rationale for Differentiated Instruction

1. What would change in schools if we truly tried to maximize the capacity of each learner?
2. The chapter makes three assertions about differentiation (Students of a given age or grade are not standardized. There is no substitute for high-quality curriculum and instruction. Even with high-quality curriculum & instruction, students don't all learn at the same pace or at the same level of understanding.) In what ways do you agree or disagree with those statements based on your classroom experience?
3. We cannot reach those students whose minds we don't engage. Who are the students in your classroom or school that remain frequently disengaged? What efforts in your classroom or school are consistently made to engage these learners?
4. Look at the brief profiles of Lin, Rafael, Serena, Trevor, Lesley, Danny, and Theo. Who do they remind you of in your school or classroom?
5. In what ways does your experience affirm or refute the possible pitfalls of advanced learners in schools? What advice would you add to the chapter's suggestions for working effectively with these students?

Chapter 3: The Role of the Teacher in a Differentiated

Classroom

1. When "covering information" becomes the driving goal in a classroom, what happens to learners' needs? Why?
2. Agree or disagree with the statement that differentiation is a key feature of high-quality teaching. What implications does the statement suggest for our schools?
3. The chapter lists 17 skills of learning to differentiate instruction. With which of those are you most comfortable in your teaching? With which are you least comfortable? Why?
4. The chapter suggests three extended metaphors for an effectively differentiated classroom. Generate and share one of your own.
5. How would you modify the list of guidelines for differentiation at the end of Chapter 3?

Chapter 4: The Learning Environment in a Differentiated Classroom

1. How do you know the degree to which students feel respected, safe, and welcomed in your classroom and school?
2. To what degree do you feel contemporary schools emphasize norms and competition over individual growth? What is the effect of that emphasis on particular students you teach?
3. What indicators do you see in your school or classroom that "gotcha" teaching is alive and well? That teaching for success is a valued goal?
4. How would you help students move from defining "fair" as treating everyone alike to defining it as making sure everyone gets what he or she needs to grow and succeed? What challenges might you face along the way? How would you address them?
5. What potential benefits do you see for individual students in

flexible grouping? For the teacher? For the class as a whole?

Chapter 5: A Look Inside Some Differentiated Classrooms

1. What do you see as the pros and cons of the classrooms sketched out in this chapter for the full range of learners? For the teacher as a professional?
2. In what ways would your classroom and those of your colleagues be similar to the classrooms described? In what ways would they be different?
3. Based on your ideas and experiences, what would be a logical and feasible next step for you to take in crafting your classroom to be more effective in addressing the needs of academically diverse learners?

Chapter 6: Strategies for Managing a Differentiated Classroom

1. Discuss elements in a solid rationale for differentiation that you might use with parents, students, or other colleagues.
2. What do you see as the most important "next steps" for you to take in making your classroom more academically responsive? What support would be helpful to you in that process?
3. Review the 17 guidelines for managing a differentiated classroom suggested in the chapter. What can you add to each one in the way of concrete suggestions based on your experience? What other guidelines would you add to the list?

Chapter 7: Preparing Students and Parents for a Differentiated Classroom

1. What are the key questions you believe students would ask you about differentiation? What specific responses and steps might

you take to help them join you in establishing and maintaining an effectively differentiated classroom?

2. What key questions do you believe parents would pose about differentiation? What responses and steps would you need to take to help them understand your goals initially? As the year progresses?
3. What might you do to rebuild the trust of parents who feel their students have frequently been ineffectively served in school?
4. What might you do to establish the trust and partnership of parents who stay away from school because they themselves have not felt welcomed or accepted in school?

Chapter 8: The How To's of Planning Lessons Differentiated by Readiness

1. What indicators do varied students give when tasks are not appropriate for their readiness levels?
2. What are the implications for students when tasks consistently under-challenge them? Over-challenge them? Answer these questions in regard to a period of days, weeks, months, and years?
3. Make a list of approaches you can think of to help learners who struggle succeed with materials, tasks, and products so that they experience more success and less frustration.
4. Select or create an activity you might use in your classroom. Adjust it by moving it along one or more continua of "The Equalizer" (for example, making it more abstract than the original version, or more structured.)

Chapter 9: The How To's of Planning Lessons Differentiated by Interest

1. Reflect on a time in your life when an adult acknowledged and tapped into your interests. What were the benefits for you as a

learner and as a person?

2. What approaches do you currently use to learn about student interests? To tap into them as part of your curriculum? To expand them?
3. Take a look at the 8 instructional strategies suggested in the chapter to invite students to link their interests with the requirements of curriculum. In what specific ways might you use one or more of these strategies to draw on student interest in your classroom?
4. What scaffolding or support might you provide to ensure high-quality interest-based student work?

Chapter 10: The How To's of Planning Lessons Differentiated by Learning Profile

1. Think about the students you teach. In what ways do you see gender influencing how students respond in the classroom? In what ways do you see culture influence learning? (Be sure to think about both majority and minority cultures.)
2. Give examples of students of a given gender or a particular culture who generally do not respond in the classroom as do peers of the same gender and/or culture.
3. In what ways do classrooms create an unlevel playing field for some students based on gender and/or culture? What actions do we consistently take to understand and address those inequities?
4. In thinking about the intelligence preferences proposed by Howard Gardner, which are favored in school? Which are likely undervalued? Which of the three intelligence preferences proposed by Robert Sternberg are favored in schools? What potential implications do you see for students you teach in any consistent imbalance of school attention to intelligence strengths?

5. What approaches do you currently use to understand students' learning preferences? To use them in your instruction?
6. Take a look at the instructional strategies suggested in the chapter to encourage students to work in preferred learning modes. In what specific ways might you use one or more of the strategies to help students learn more effectively?
7. Study Figure 10.3 and/or 10.4. What do you see as potential benefits of the differentiated versions of the classrooms compared to the nondifferentiated versions for students who struggle with school? For advanced learners? For "typical" learners? For students with particular learning profile preferences?
8. In what ways might you use or adapt the assessment idea reflected in Figure 10.5?

Chapter 11: Differentiating Content

1. Describe some times in your classroom when you see the need to differentiate what you teach students. Describe some times when you see a need to vary how students get access to what you want them to learn? How do you distinguish between the two?
2. Describe some times in your classroom when you do or could differentiate content based on student readiness. When you differentiate content based on student interest. When you differentiate content based on student learning profile.
3. The chapter offers several instructional strategies for differentiating content. Which of these might you use (and when) to enhance learning for some of your students? What other strategies for differentiating content might you add to the list?

Chapter 12: Differentiating Process

1. What is the potential difference between an "activity" and a "sense making activity"? Why is it important to make sure you're differentiating a sense making activity rather than just an activity?
2. How do you decide which instructional strategy is best suited to particular learning goals in your classroom?
3. Share a scenario from your classroom which, like the examples in the chapter, show how you differentiate (or might differentiate) process based on student readiness, interest, and/or learning profile.

Chapter 13: Differentiating Products

1. Explain the difference between process and product as this book uses the terms.
2. Look at Figure 13.1 and the explanation that accompanies it. What modifications would you make to the figure as you think about how you plan for powerful student products?
3. Think about your most effective product assignment. Analyze the assignment by using Figure 13.1 and the accompanying explanation. What are the areas of "match" between your product assignment and the guidelines? Areas of mismatch? What insights does this analysis give you about the product assignment? About the guidelines?
4. Which of the suggestions for helping struggling learners develop effective products have you successfully used? What other suggestions would you add to the list based on your experience?
5. Which of the suggestions for helping advanced learners develop meaningful and challenging products have you successfully used? What other suggestions would you add to the list based on your experience?

Chapter 14: Grading in a Differentiated Classroom

1. If someone from a "parallel universe" who knew nothing about our traditional approaches to grading, but did understand learners and learning, were to visit our schools, what do you think he or she would find logical and helpful about the way we grade? Illogical and less useful? On both counts, why?
2. Think about how grades work for a student who has a learning disability, who speaks little English, who finds many school subjects very difficult. Now, think about that student over a period of years. What positive and negative roles are grades likely to play in that student's development as a learner and a person?
3. Think about a student who is very advanced in your class. Now, think about that student over a period of years. What positive and negative roles do grades play in that student's development as a learner and a person?
4. Generate a list of descriptors for how you feel grades should be used. How can you get closer to that in your classroom? What do you feel the effects would be if you were able to achieve your ideal?
5. What advice would you add to that in Chapter 14 for helping parents think along with you about grading in positive and productive ways?
6. What's the message in Kathleen's poem to you as a teacher? Does the poem surprise you in any way, or affirm what you believe about teaching?

What other questions and answers might I add to these? Consider sending them to the author, Carol Ann Tomlinson, at Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, 287 Ruffner Hall, 405 Emmet Street South, P.O. Box 400277, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4277; Phone: 1-804-924-7471; E-mail: cat3y@virginia.edu.

How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2nd Edition was written by Carol Ann Tomlinson. This 120-page, 8" x 10" book (Stock #101043; ISBN 0-87120-512-2) is available from ASCD for \$16.95 (ASCD member) and \$20.95 (nonmember). Copyright 2001 by ASCD. To order a copy, call ASCD at 1-800-933-2723 (in Virginia 1-703-578-9600) and press 2 for the Service Center. Or buy the book from ASCD's [Online Store](#).