

What is differentiated learning?



Differentiated Learning

Differentiated learning is an approach that offers opportunities for learners to customize a learning pathway to meet their learning needs, aspirations and preferences.

It can also empower learners to show what they know in different ways.

Learners are provided with multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn.

Flexible learning is at the heart of differentiated instruction. Teachers design activities to meet the needs and capabilities of each learner or group of learners. If learners are working in groups, they might not be in the same group for every part of the lesson.



Four Areas of Differentiation

It is a way of ensuring that

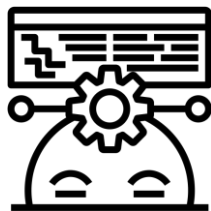
- what learners learn
- how they learn it
- how they communicate what they have learned

is a match for their readiness, interests, and preferred modes of learning.

There are four main areas where teachers can differentiate instruction.



Content



Process



Projects

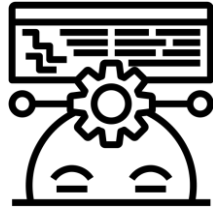


Environment





Content



Process



Projects



Environment

Content

- Figuring out what each learner needs to learn and which resources will help.

Process

- Activities that help learners make sense of what they learn.

Projects

- Ways for students to show what they know.

Learning environment

- How the “classroom” feels and how participants work with instructors and each other.



Differentiated Content

Learners might be provided with different readings at different reading levels. They might be given choices to learn about different aspects of a topic and then share what they have learned.

Learners might be given a choice, or they might be assigned different activities based on their prior learning, their learning strengths and the skills and strategies they want to enhance. They might be required to start in different places on a pathway depending on their knowledge and experience about a subject or concept.



Differentiated Process

Learners might be given the option to read an article, watch a video or listen to a podcast to learn something new. They might be provided with different readings at different reading levels. They might be required to start in different places on a pathway depending on their knowledge and experience about a subject or concept. They might be given choices to learn about different aspects of a topic and then share what they have learned.

Learners might be given a choice, or they might be assigned different activities based on their prior learning, their learning strengths and the skills and strategies they want to enhance.



Differentiated Projects

Some might share what they have learned and what they think about what they have learned by writing a paragraph or blog post. Others might create skits or presentations. A third option might be to create a poster or an art project.

DIFFERENTIATION <i>of product</i>	
CONSIDER STUDENT CHOICE & LEVEL.	
READING INSTEAD OF A RESPONSE	RESEARCH INSTEAD OF A RESEARCH PAPER
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. response cube</i><i>2. poster or illustration</i><i>3. retelling</i><i>4. graphic organizer</i><i>5. craft</i><i>6. story arc</i><i>7. video</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. flip booklet</i><i>2. digital presentation</i><i>3. Venn diagram</i><i>4. Jeopardy game</i><i>5. website</i><i>6. coloring book</i><i>7. comic strip</i>
MATH INSTEAD OF A PROBLEM SET	SCIENCE INSTEAD OF LAB REPORT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. how-to poster</i><i>2. project or craft</i><i>3. game</i><i>4. student-created story problems</i><i>5. illustrations</i><i>6. skits</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. photographs</i><i>2. presentations</i><i>3. articles</i><i>4. demonstrations</i><i>5. related experiments</i><i>6. prototypes</i><i>7. illustrations</i>



Differentiated Environments: Space

The learning environment includes the physical layout of the classroom, the way that the facilitator uses the space, and elements such as heat and lighting.

Differentiating learning in a physical space might be as simple as acknowledging that some people like to sit by an open window while others prefer to sit by the heat source. Or it might mean giving learners the choice of a soft chair or a desk with a laptop.

Ideally the space should allow for flexible seating with areas for quiet work as well as areas for group work and collaboration. The setting should encourage learners to participate in a variety of ways as well as they ways they like best.



Differentiated Environments: Atmosphere

Literacy instructors do not often have much control over the physical aspects of the learning environment, but they can set the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

Creating an environment that supports each participant's quest for affirmation, contribution, power, purpose, and challenge sets the stage for each learner to develop their own learner identity.

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2004) Point/counterpoint, *Roeper Review*, 26:4, 188-189, DOI: [10.1080/02783190409554268](https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190409554268)

Differentiation happens when instructors ask, "What does this learners need at this moment in order to be able to progress with this key content—and what do I need to do to make that happen?"

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2014) [The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, 2nd Edition](#)



Learner agency

In differentiated instruction, instructors can support learner agency, confidence and independence by:

- scaffolding instruction so that all learners experience success.
- building on learner interests and skills to increase motivation.
- providing opportunities for appropriate learner choice and independent learning.
- helping learner to build a personalized repertoire of strategies to organize information, make sense of ideas, communicate clearly, and retain and retrieve information, concepts and ideas.
- providing frequent opportunities for learner to set goals, reflect on their own learning and develop self-monitoring and self-assessment skills.



Differentiated learning example: Jigsaw

The “jigsaw classroom” is a cooperative learning approach ...In the jigsaw system, each student [or group of students] receives one small part of a bigger lesson— then, in small groups, students pool their knowledge together and teach each other what they learned.

[Boosting Student Belonging With the Jigsaw Technique](#) from Edutopia

How to do a jigsaw activity: [Jigsaw Collaborative Discussion Method](#)

Watch a jigsaw activity in an adult ESL classroom: [Developing Reading Skills for Intermediate / Advanced Learners](#)

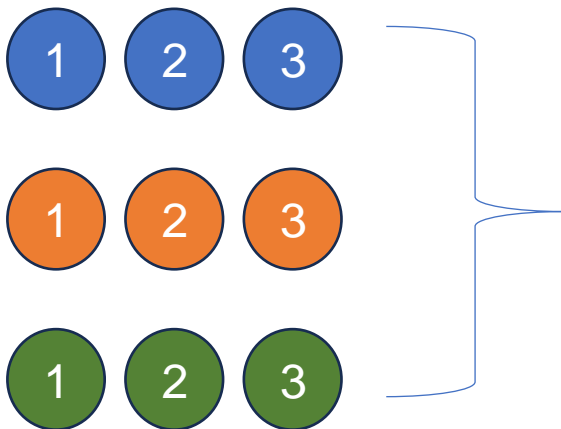
In jigsaw activities, each learner belongs to two groups; an expert group and a home group. Each expert group works together to develop knowledge on a topic and then each member returns to their home group to share that knowledge.



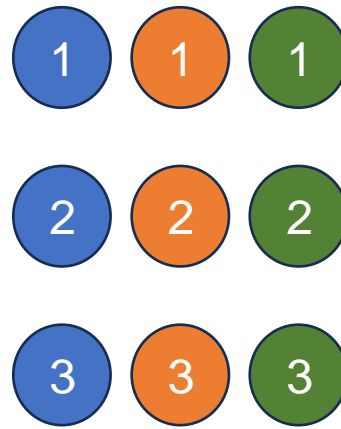
How Jigsaws work

Step 1: Each learner leaves their home group to join an expert group. The expert groups gather, explore, analyze and collate relevant information on a specific aspect of the topic under investigation or develop a particular skill.

Home Groups

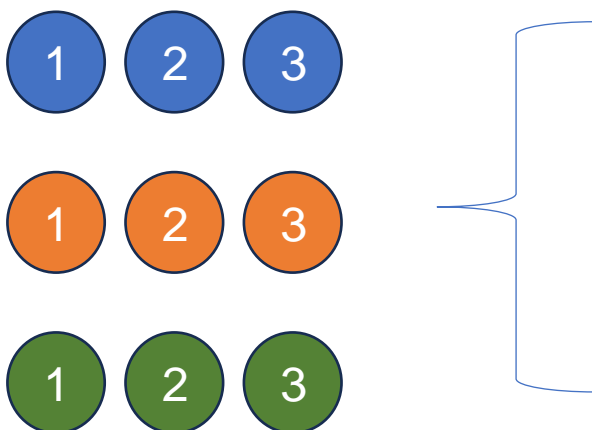


Expert Groups

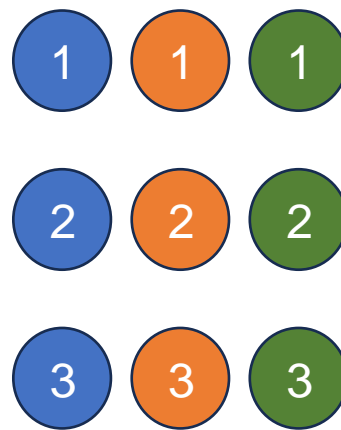


Step 2: Each learner returns to their home group to share what they have learned.

Home Groups



Expert Groups



Jigsaw Learning:

Differentiated Content, Process and Projects

In most jigsaw activity templates, each expert group of learners are asked to read different texts or different parts of a text and then return to the “home” group and share what they have learned.

In a differentiated setting, each expert group of learners might be encouraged choose to access information in different ways: by reading, by watching a video, by listening to podcast, by interviewing an expert, etc.

The expert groups might also choose a specific way to share information: talking about what they learned, presenting a graphic, making a video or slide presentation, creating a skit, etc.

The expert groups might be convened based on their preferred method of information gathering or presentation.



Notes on terminology

Individualized Learning

Individualized instruction changes the pace of how students learn. It also requires an individual approach for each student, which isn't the case with differentiation.

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning is where students have their own learning profiles and paths to follow.

Read more

- [How can I empower learners with choice?](#) by AlphaPlus
- [Making a difference: meeting diverse learning needs with differentiated instruction](#) from the Government of Alberta [Inclusive Education Library](#)



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