

Differentiated Instruction



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By Heather Fountain, PhD

Lessons and instructional materials developed by Davis are designed with attention to differentiated instruction and the challenge that art teachers face in adapting instruction to the needs of all learners. Students are not all alike. Based on this fact, differentiated instruction provides multiple options for students to take in information and make sense of ideas. Differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to change themselves to fit one mold or static curriculum. It is not individualized instruction, but rather providing varied ways for students to find success in learning.

To differentiate instruction is to recognize variations in students' backgrounds—prior art experiences, readiness, language, learning preferences, and interests—and to respond accordingly. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where she or he is and assisting in the learning process. You will find that the consideration of students' learning differences and needs will help students be more connected to their learning. It is very common to discover that adaptations or modifications that are made for a few students are beneficial for most.

Guidelines for Differentiated Instruction

1. Identify and clarify essential concepts and instructional objectives.
2. Use pre-assessment to gather information about what students already know about the content and about students' learning styles, interests, and backgrounds so instruction can be proactively designed to meet students' needs.
3. Vary tasks and routines within an instructional block.
4. Emphasize critical and creative thinking.
5. Invite students to be part of the learning by valuing their voices, ideas, and interests. One way to do this is to assure that students have purposeful choices in their learning and understand where their learning strengths are and what they need to strengthen. Provide a balance between teacher-assigned and student-selected media, subject matter, and tasks, building confident, engaged students.
6. Use ongoing assessment—during and following instruction—as a teaching tool to check comprehension and extend learning by modifying instruction as needed, not merely to measure instruction. Students can be part of the assessment process by setting goals, self-assessment, and peer critiques.

Planning for Differentiated Instruction

- 1** Know your students. Determine their prior knowledge, ability levels, learning styles, and interests.
- 2** Prepare for a variety of teaching strategies, such as:
 - a** Direct Instruction can be used to cover a lot of material in the least amount of time.
 - b** Inquiry-Based Learning works well for developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students can conduct independent investigations or be directed or guided through the process of discovery.
 - c** Cooperative Learning involves grouping small teams of students heterogeneously to accomplish tasks. Three to five students in a group is ideal where possible.
 - d** Information Processing Strategies include, but are not limited to, using mnemonics, reciprocal teaching, Know/Want/Learn charts, graphic organizing, scaffolding, think-pair-share, or webbing.
 - e** Choice-based Strategies help students take ownership over their learning and think more critically about what and why they learn. Choices can be based around interests and learning styles. Utilize contracts, choice boards, and learning menus, among other strategies, to help students meet objectives in ways that elicit personal engagement.
 - f** Varied Grouping can help students accomplish certain tasks in more meaningful ways. It is appropriate to adjust grouping in ways such as whole group, large groups, small groups of three or four, or pairs. It is also helpful to create groups of students based on their similar or varied learning styles. When students are grouped by varied learning styles, as a team, they complement each other's learning with their strengths.
- 3** Identify multiple ways to assess or evaluate student progress. Varying means of student assessment is necessary if students are to be given every opportunity to demonstrate authentic learning. A variety of assessment techniques can include portfolios, rubrics, performance-based assessment, self-assessment, and knowledge mapping.

Knowing and Respecting Your Students

After defining and identifying students' learning styles and areas of strength, teachers can adapt suggested strategies to address the different ways in which their students learn best.

Kinesthetic Learners. Some students learn best when actively engaged in hands-on approaches, body-movement activities, and other tactile experiences.

Verbal Learners. Verbal or auditory learners seem to learn most readily through speaking and listening activities. These students often think through ideas by talking them through to themselves or others.

Logical Learners. Some students seem to learn best when engaged in problem-solving or step-by-step explorations. Logical learners tend to see quantitative results.

Spatial Learners. Spatial learners tend to explore the world around them. They are visually oriented and learn best with pictures, three-dimensional props, and activities that require them to translate verbal or written materials into visual terms.

Musical Learners. Some students learn best when they have the opportunity to listen to or create rhythms, mnemonic learning devices like songs, rap, or poetry. Such students tend to be musically inclined.

Gifted Learners. Students who learn at an accelerated pace need assignments that challenge their abilities. When working with these students, teachers can employ the strategies for all of the learning styles above. Pre-assessment on a topic can help you see what students already know, so that you can design learning that meets them where they are and challenges them to move toward higher achievement—not more work, rather the right level of challenge. Challenge them appropriately from the start to avoid boredom, while also helping them stretch to higher levels of learning.

Talented Learners. Talent plays a role in students' interest and skill in art, just as it does in other subjects. During projects, encourage a variety of artistic accomplishments and understandings, not just skill in representational drawing. Ensure that choices have the ability to let students creatively widen their possibilities, not limit them. It is unwise to identify a few students as "class artists," or to compare their artwork

in a manner that discourages others. This accomplishes the opposite of the goals of differentiated instruction, and can alienate students and make them shut down and withdraw from art. Always respect each student's unique efforts and insights about art.

ELL Learners. Students acquire English in successive stages, from nonverbal understanding to fluency. To aid these students, consider using picture clues, real-life scenarios, and peer work with English-speaking classmates. Be sure not to always pair the student with the same peer, unless they decide to work together, so that individual students don't feel like they are a burden or are being burdened. Despite any language barriers, students who are acquiring English will exhibit characteristics of the above learning styles.



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Respecting Cultural Differences

An important aspect of art education is learning about the arts of various cultural groups. Identify individuals and groups in your community who can help familiarize students with unique cultural traditions in the arts and crafts. All students can benefit from learning

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about these examples of "living cultures" within their own community. Often, for middle school learners, it is extremely valuable

to hear the perspectives of artists they can relate to who are real and living in their community. Occasionally, parents or students may be willing to participate in an art lesson to share and help others understand their own cultural or religious values.

Meeting Other Special Needs

To the extent possible, introduce the regular curriculum to students with special needs. All students can benefit from a balanced program of creative work in two- and three-dimensional media and from the opportunity to try out different approaches to art. It is important for students with special needs to have the opportunity to engage in the same work as their peers. Most often this is possible and preserves their dignity and honors their need to not be separate from their peers. Creativity is one of the most important considerations as you teach art and adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual students and groups who have special needs. Artwork that is copied from adult art or based on photocopied outlines does not involve the student in significant creative activity and should not be encouraged. It is essential for you to promote original thinking and authentically creative work. Providing a student with choice, even on a basic level when intellectual disabilities are present, helps students take ownership and pride in their work. Adaptive strategies and tools can be helpful for all students.

Visual Impairments. Students who are blind or otherwise visually impaired can respond to discussions or artwork, especially themes portrayed in artworks that are related to the students' experiences. In Studio Times and Studio Explorations, provide materials such as clay, material and textured paper to create tactile, kinesthetic artworks. In some cases, creating a bold line or a raised glue line can guide students in their work and help them be more successful. Also, it is important to remember that students with visual impairments do care about color and often are concerned with using colors that are associated with specific things such as green grass or a yellow sun. To aid with this, you can arrange paint, watercolors, and other media in specific ways, such as rainbow color order, so that the student knows where each color is located. You can also place paints in cups or mask off watercolors, except the one being used, in order to help student have greater success.

Speech and Hearing Impairments. Students who are deaf or have hearing impairments can find verbal communication challenging and tiring. Having directions visually available through demonstration, written steps to follow, and images will help students find success. Some students simply need cues as to where or whom communication is coming from before speaking begins so they can find and focus on the

speaker and not miss the first part of the communication. Also, it helps to speak at a consistent, even rate and use nonverbal means of communication. Present information through diagrams, charts, brainstorm lists on the board, and other visual aids. This nonverbal communication can be valuable for all students.

Impaired Mobility. Students who are nonambulatory or have otherwise impaired mobility may need to use alternate tools and materials for some activities. Rehabilitation specialists such as occupational therapists may help you solve unique problems. A number of special tools are available for students with physical impairments (adaptive scissors, a mouthpiece that holds a pencil or brush, etc.). Many adaptive tools are simple and can be created or found in your own classroom. Having a bag with handles available will help students gather the materials they need while leaving their hands free. Students with fine and gross motor issues may find it helpful for a ball or Model Magic to be added to the top of paintbrushes and pencils for easier grasp and less fatigue on their hands. Many things found in your classroom can be used to adapt tools.

Intellectual Disabilities. Children develop at different rates and in different ways; therefore, it is essential to adapt instruction to meet these needs. Students who are developmentally delayed or have intellectual disabilities often respond to art in a direct and insightful manner. They are often able to portray their ideas or feelings more successfully through art than through words. Some may even be nonverbal and find art an important and joyful means of communication. Success can be achieved by simplifying and breaking down tasks into specific steps, especially for difficult studio activities. By completing one task at a time, students can find success and frustration can be reduced. Encourage independent thinking about the ideas that students want to express (discourage exact copies of any examples you have made), while also providing them support and a few choices so they do not become overwhelmed. Often students with intellectual disabilities will not follow the typical intellectual development of their similar age peers, yet should be treated with equal respect.

Autism Spectrum Disorder. Children who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum have a wide range of conditions and abilities, but do have two common symptoms: deficits in their ability to communicate and interact socially and restricted, repetitive patterns of activity, behaviors, and/or interests. In addition to challenges with social interactions, children on the spectrum might also have sensory issues with light, sound, or texture. Often their thinking is very concrete and words are taken literally, so directions must be specific and clear. In the case of tactile sensitivity, simple modifications such as using a glue stick instead of liquid glue or having gloves available can help the student avoid the pain or displeasure caused by their sensitivity.



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