Teaching InSITEs:
Differentiating Instruction

Do you often find yourself preparing to teach a wildly diverse class of learners? Do some students have a great depth of prior knowledge, while others seem to know nothing about the topic? Are some students motivated by the topic and assignments, while for others it all seems like drudgery? Meeting the challenges implied by these questions means figuring out how to **differentiate instruction**.

DEFINITION

"Differentiating instruction means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to individual learners' needs, styles, or interests" (Heacox, 2012).

Differentiating instruction does *not* mean adjusting instruction to accommodate *every difference* among students. But, it is also *not* planning one-size-fits-all instruction for everyone then reacting in the moment when students don't understand. Differentiating instruction falls somewhere in between.

RATIONALE

Teaching mentors and well-meaning colleagues often coach new instructors to 'teach to the middle.' A problem with this approach is that if we teach to the middle, we may be missing the majority. Educator and researcher Carol Ann Tomlinson says instructors need to ask, "What supports and adaptations should I build into the lesson to address learning needs of particular students that will likely help other students" (Tomlinson, 2010)?

Individual differences among students usually exist with respect to their **prior knowledge**, **ability**, **interest**, and **motivation**. The two most fundamental tasks related to differentiating instruction are assessing and planning. We gauge the level of difference in prior knowledge, ability, interest, and motivation by assessing students; then we plan accordingly.

3 INSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENTS TO DIFFERENTIATE

Although the overall big ideas and goals of a course, as well as many student characteristics, remain fixed, there are three elements of any learning experience that are flexible and may be differentiated in ways that invite engagement from a broader range of learners:

CONTENT	PROCESS	PRODUCT

Content: *Specific information and skills (What, are students supposed to learn?)*

Hold tight to the big ideas and goals of your discipline, program, and course. Still, consider ways to make the content more relevant to students. Perhaps they could achieve the goals and objectives while having some choice among multiple pertinent topics.

Process: *How information and skills will be taught (How do they learn it?)*

There are usually many possible paths to the same destination.
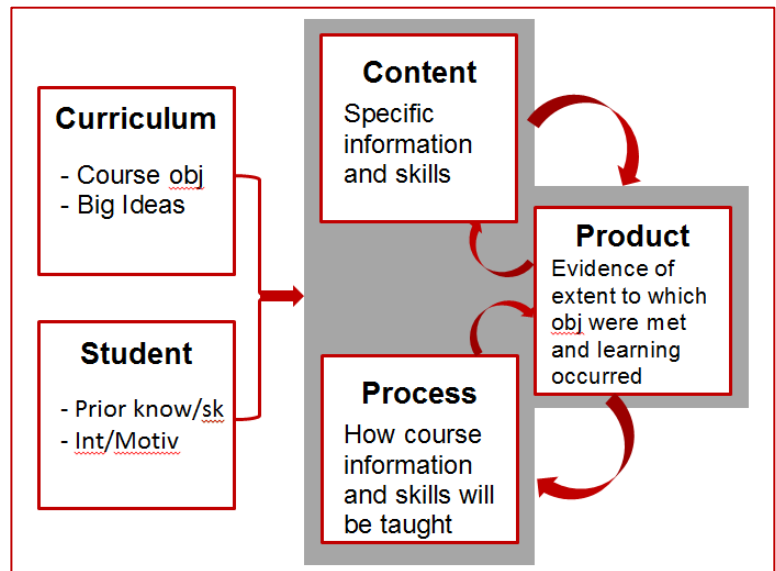
Adapted from Effective Classroom Practices Report, NCAC

Product: *Evidence of the extent to which objectives are being met and learning is occurring (How do they show what they've learned?)*

Consider ways that assessment can guide and inform learning, not just measure it. Often the products overlap with the process. When assessment becomes an instructional tool, providing regular feedback to instructor and students about the extent of learning, it gives the instructor more precise information to help meet students' needs.

A specific strategy to consider: Group quizzes. The link below is to a video of a professor at Iowa State who administers group quizzes. He collects answers on paper. Clickers could be used as well.
http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching-resources/classroom-practice/large-class-instruction/group-quizzes/

> **What if…?** If you feel, as many instructors do, that some academic needs are so great you can't possibly meet them all in the classroom, don't hesitate to refer students to other university resources. The Undergraduate Admissions Office website lists an extensive range of services for students: www.admissions.psu.edu/life/support/academic/

References:

Hall, T.; Strangman, N; and Meyer, A. (nd). *Differentiated instruction and implications for UDL implementation: Effective Classroom practices report.* U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/differentiated_instruction_udl#.U3N9poFdV8E

Heacox, D. (2012). *Differentiating instruction in the regular classroom: How to reach and teach all learners.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2012). Slides from ASCD presentation. http://www.caroltomlinson.com/2010SpringASCD/Tomlinson_QualityDI.pdf