

*Teachers who use multiple learning approaches with individuals or small groups are differentiating instruction.*  
~Carol Tomlinson Ed.D.

## Teaching Designed So All Students Can Learn

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encourages coursework that is flexible and supportive of each student's unique learning style.

Parents know from experience that children have different learning styles, rates, and preferences. Just ask any parent who has observed their preschool or kindergarten child's classroom. Some kids are playing quietly by themselves, while others play noisily in small groups. Another child prefers to draw instead of building with blocks. It doesn't take long to realize that children have unique interests and abilities that influence how they learn and get along with others.

Most likely your child's classroom includes students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. Each child is expected to learn the same subject content for their grade level, such as reading, math or writing. Yet we know that students learn differently. How teachers respond to this variety in learners can make a huge difference in the quality and quantity of your child's school experience.

When teachers use the right tools, it enables them to focus on students' interests and needs, while providing high quality instruction and curriculum.



This fact sheet describes three teaching tools to individualize learning for all students—differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and instructional accommodations. Teachers may use one or all of these methods in the classroom, depending on the needs of their students. As a parent, it is helpful to know how these methods can improve your child's education, especially when your child is not being challenged or is struggling in school.

### How does differentiated instruction work?

Differentiated instruction means adjusting teaching methods to meet the individual needs of all students in the classroom. Teachers who use multiple learning approaches with individuals or small groups are differentiating instruction. Differentiating instruction, however, does not mean watering down classroom lessons or expectations for students.

Although each student's learning style may differ, all students are expected to achieve the same academic standards for their grade level. In the case of students who exceed grade level expectations, the teacher's role is to encourage learning at a higher level. While students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans may require modified standards and/or curriculum, they are still expected to achieve those standards to the greatest extent possible. Differentiating instruction allows teachers to focus on the student first and how they learn best.

There are four areas in which teachers may differentiate instruction—content, process, products and learning environment. A brief description of each area with examples follows.

**1. Content** includes the topics students must learn and how they will gain access to information. Teachers vary classroom content by:

- Giving students written materials at varied reading levels.
- Presenting ideas visually and/or auditorily.
- Matching students with learning partners.
- Meeting with students in small groups to reinforce a skill or concept.

**2. Process** means how students will learn or master the content. Some examples include:

- Providing students with hands-on activities.
- Allowing students to complete a task at their own rate of speed.

- Providing more support to students who are struggling.
- Enabling advanced students to pursue topics in-depth.

**3. Products** enable students to show what they have learned as well as providing them with choices. Students may choose to:

- Put on a puppet show or create a drawing
- Work in small groups or by themselves.
- Design a product on their own that meets learning requirements.

**4. Learning Environment** describes the way in which the classroom works for and feels to students. In setting up the classroom, teachers

- Create quiet spaces as well as spaces that encourage cooperation among students.
- Provide materials that are sensitive to their students' cultural and home backgrounds.
- Develop routines that help students access help when the teacher is not available.

### What needs to be in place for differentiation to work?

It is important to restate that differentiating instruction does not mean watering down lessons or curriculum. Teaching should be clearly focused with specific outcomes in mind. Students use a variety of methods and activities to increase their knowledge and demonstrate mastery through individual or small group products that pique their interest. Differentiated instruction works in the classroom when the following features are in place.

- Ongoing assessment—Teachers evaluate student progress toward meeting instructional objectives regularly. They develop an understanding of who the student is and how they learn, and adjust teaching methods based on individual student needs.
- Worthwhile and interesting work—Teachers engage all learners by providing lessons that are interesting and focused on important knowledge and skills. They use multiple ways to reach their students,

taking into consideration their diverse learning styles and needs.

- Student-selected tasks—Students can pursue their interests regarding a specific topic. The teacher encourages them to make choices about the tasks and products they complete.
- Work in small groups—Students have ongoing opportunities to work in small groups to complete tasks. Group composition is flexible so that students interact with a variety of classmates.

Differentiated instruction is a powerful teaching tool that focuses on the unique learning styles and needs of all students. Students are expected to do well, and they are given the support needed to achieve classroom instructional goals. The differentiated classroom is flexible; the work is interesting; and the environment promotes student success.



**What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?** Like differentiated instruction, the goal of UDL is to improve the ways in which students gain access to and use information. Developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), UDL comes from the universal design movement in architecture, which looked at ways to make buildings and other structures accessible to the greatest number of users.

Curb cuts, ramps and elevators are examples of universal design that enable people with mobility impairments as well as the general

public to enter and access a building. Although specifically geared to students with learning disabilities, UDL benefits a wide range of students with and without disabilities.

The Center for Applied Special Technology identifies three principles to guide the practice of UDL:

- **Present information in multiple ways.** Built into the curriculum are a variety of options for helping students learn and understand information. Teachers use a range of presentation styles and materials, such as print, video, audio and speech to individualize instruction.
- **Offer a variety of methods for organizing and completing tasks.** How students approach learning and demonstrate what they’ve learned depends on their ability to plan and organize information, typically called “executive functioning” skills. Teachers provide options for students that optimize their abilities. These may include hands on activities, small group work, oral or visual presentations and multiple-choice tests.
- **Provide multiple ways to engage students in learning.** Motivating students to learn requires multiple methods. Routines and structure work for some students while others prefer less structure and more creativity.

**Universal Design for Learning and Technology** Technology enhances teachers’ abilities to effectively implement Universal Design for Learning in the classroom. For example, digital materials allow teachers to adapt lessons for individual students and to be flexible in how they present information. Teachers will find a great deal of free digital material available through the Internet. There are also many computer programs and devices that make student’s work easier, such as **Inspiration**, which helps students organize their thoughts, and **Kurzweil**, which transfers the written word to speech. Depending on district resources, your child’s school may have a variety of technology resources to use in and outside of the classroom.



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## Instructional Accommodations

Accommodations are changes in a lesson plan, curriculum or learning environment that enable students to access learning. Typically, accommodations are used with students receiving special services through an IEP or Section 504 Plan. Like differentiated instruction and UDL, teachers strive to maintain high quality instruction while enabling students to learn at their own level.

Some examples of instructional accommodations include large print, audiotapes, communication devices, visual organizers, extended time for assignments and a quiet space to work. When used on a regular basis, differentiated instruction and UDL may reduce the need for accommodations.

Note: Information for this fact sheet was adapted in part from Differentiation of Instruction in the Elementary Grades by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Guide to Universal Design for Learning by National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD).

## Resources

### [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#)

Working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work and in life.  
301-966-2234

### [CAST](#)

Helps educators and organizations apply insights from the learning sciences and leading-edge practices to educational design and implementation.  
781-245-2212

### [Reading Rockets](#)

A national project providing information and resources about how young kids learn to read, why so many struggle, and how caring adults can help.

### [Vermont Agency of Education](#)

Special Education Technical Assistance.  
802-828-1256