

Augustana College

PRAXIS Review Sheet: Differentiated Instruction; Alternative Assessments and Testing Modifications

Concepts addressed:

Differentiated Instruction; Alternative Assessments and Testing Modifications

Differentiated instruction, alternative assessments, and testing modifications all relate to how teachers address student diversity in learning styles, multiple intelligences, preferred modalities of learning, culture, cognitive abilities, and a host of other factors. Teachers recognize these differences, but how can they address them when delivering instruction and assessing student progress?

According to Tomlinson (*How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms, 2001*), teachers should incorporate a variety of learning materials and activities at different levels of difficulty, with variations in student time spent on a topic, and with different levels of support. She recommended use of multiple grouping arrangements (whole class, peer assisted instruction, cooperative learning, individual work, etc.) to help accomplish this. Instructional materials and activities should be selected on a continuum that includes many dimensions of learning such as concrete to abstract, simple to complex, more structured to more open, less independence to more independence, and other dimensions. Tomlinson recommended that teachers differentiate four aspects of instruction: content (what students learn and how they access information); process (the activities the student do to master content); products (projects in which students rehearse, extend, or apply what they learn); and learning environments (how the classroom works and feels). Other proponents of differentiated instruction add that assessment methods also can be differentiated. An ideal lesson would not find students in rows, doing the same thing, at the same time, and taking the same chapter test. Instead, students would be pursuing the topic of the lesson in different ways, in various grouping arrangements, creating different products, and being assessed in different ways.

While use of differentiated assessment methods are appropriate in any mixed ability classroom, it is especially important in classrooms that include students with individualized education programs (IEPs) who are identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as having a disability. Each student's IEP will indicate if the student requires testing modifications when being tested via teacher-constructed tools covering content learned in the classroom and when being tested on district, state, or national assessment instruments (such as district writing assessments or standardized "bubble sheet" tests). Furthermore, each student's IEP will indicate what kind of testing modifications the teacher must use (must use, as it is a legal responsibility) when assessing that student. Examples of testing modifications that may be listed on an IEP include: having the test read to the student by the teacher or by computer facilitated methods; having the student answer questions orally instead writing an essay; simplifying the content, level of abstraction, or vocabulary level of the test; breaking large blocks of "matching" items into smaller blocks; providing extra space for the student to write, providing more time for test completion, etc. Having become comfortable with testing modifications used in the classroom, students on IEPs will use the same modifications (within the parameters

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established by the test publishers or other authorities) when they take district, state, or nationally normed tests such as those required under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Classroom teachers usually work collaboratively with special education teachers to construct and administer modified tests.

Under IDEA 2004 and NCLB, a small percentage of all students in a school district (1-2%) may be exempt from taking district, state, and national tests. Usually these students have severe cognitive disabilities, for which the content of the tests would have little meaning. IDEA and NCLB require that each state select valid alternative assessments that will be used to measure these students' progress on learning goals in an individualized, functional curriculum. The time these students spend in general education classrooms or special education settings varies greatly based on the student's needs and extent to which the school district practices inclusion. Special education teachers are usually responsible for the administration of alternative assessments, but they may seek input from general education teachers in whose classrooms the students are included.