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Differentiated instruction online: questions and answers

Can online learning be differentiated? Let us begin with the core question: what is differentiated instruction? Basic strategies for differentiating involve content, process, and product. Think about the task of driving a car in terms of an objective: the student will drive from the Audubon Zoo to Southeastern University. This task allows students to use differentiated processes. One may drive on Highway 55 where another may drive on the causeway. The content (driving) is the same, but students were able to determine the process. For this particular example, students also have differentiated options when determining the product, Southeastern. One student may drive to the University Center whereas another student may drive to the Pennington Center. Both products represent Southeastern, but the student had a choice.

Should online learning be differentiated? All learning should be differentiated to meet the needs of each learner. Differentiation is a vital component of experiential education when determining student outcomes. In the case of field experience, differentiated learning will naturally occur through the process of learning outside of the classroom.

How does this look in a classroom? Please refer to the chart to examine content, process, and product with student attributes.

Basic Strategies for Differentiating *Differentiating by…*			
	Content	**Process**	**Product**
Student Attribute *Differentiation according to student…* **Readiness**	• Varied presentation methods • Content presented without extraneous information • Materials at varied reading levels	• Flexible groups with varied skill levels • Different learning activities focused on the same goal • Varied levels of structure, independence, and pace	• Aligned to skills • Scaffold using timelines and learning contracts (Puckett, 2013) • Create parallel tasks
Interest	• Real world problems • Choice in activities • Range of materials used to present content • Share examples based on student interests	• Use choice and relevance • Group students for discussion or activity by interest • Allow students to specialize in an area of interest	• Provide choice • Products are relevant to personal interest • Provide opportunities for students to share results of independent areas of personal interest
Learner Profile	• Audio and/or visual presentation of content • Demonstration of content • A physical model of the content (when applicable)	• Encourage independence • Activate learner strengths and styles • Provide students with numerous options for an activity	• Products take the following into consideration: ○ multiple intelligence ○ learning style ○ gender ○ culture

Source: Adapted from *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (p 2), by Tomlinson, C.A. and Moon, T. R., Alexandria, VA: ASCD. © 2013 by ASCD. Learn more about ASCD at www.ascd.org.

How does this work in an online classroom? Differentiation works in a virtual environment through the use of real-world assessments. Objective example: the student will create a brochure to explain academic honesty to an assigned audience. The content is the same for everyone: academic honesty. Students will be assigned different audiences, which adjusts the end product and the process.

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What about giving extra time for a quiz? This would be an accommodation. Refer back to the driving analogy: the seat may need to be adjusted based on each person's height, which is an accommodation.

Where do I find additional information?
Sanford Inspire offers free modules and resources for teaching practices including but not limited to differentiated instruction, objective writing, and backwards design.
https://sanfordinspire.org/