

Differentiation Methods for Performance Assessment

Students have different learning needs, and one of the responsibilities of a teacher is to provide an assessment experience that allows each student to demonstrate his or her learning while taking into consideration unique interests, learning styles, and needs. Differentiation of instruction refers to a teacher's response to a learner's needs. A teacher can differentiate content, processes, or products according to a student's readiness, interests, and learning profile through a range of strategies, such as varied texts, tiered lessons, interest groups, among others (Tomlinson & Demirsky Allan, 2000). Performance assessment can help teachers meet this goal due to the student choice and agency inherent in performance assessment tasks. Teachers can use a range of methods to differentiate a performance assessment for all students, though in some instances, students with disabilities may need more traditional types of accommodations or modifications to demonstrate their learning.

How to Differentiate a Performance Assessment

There are several ways to adjust assessment practices to meet the needs of all students. In performance assessment this might entail giving students options regarding the performance medium or allowing them to incorporate their own personal interests to make the task personally relevant. It might also include offering several options for students to demonstrate their ability to transfer their knowledge and skills to new contexts, the pace and structure of the task, or the complexity of resources used. Specific differentiation methods for performance assessment, based upon the literature for differentiated instruction strategies (Tomlinson & Demirsky Allan, 2000; Tomlinson, 2014)., include:

Student choice: Offer multiple response formats and performance mediums such as, written, oral, graphic.

Personal relevance: Allow students to include their own relevant personal experiences to a topic. For example, discuss experiences of prejudice in a task related to Martin Luther King Jr.

Transfer of knowledge and skills: Offer variation in requiring transference of knowledge and skill to novel, complex situations. For example, some students might measure a simpler three-dimensional object, like a see-saw, while more advanced students measure a complex object, like a climbing structure on a playground.

Pace and structure: Provide students with flexibility in the amount of time allowed to complete the task and offer a variety of structures and supports to students. For example, provide a study carrel for an easily distracted student.

Complexity of resources: Provide resources and materials with a range of complexity. For example, texts at different reading levels.

Some of these methods may be more relevant or applicable depending upon the students' particular needs in your classroom. When developing assessments, it is important to consider the students in your classrooms and how best to structure the assessments to allow every student to demonstrate his/her understanding.

Guidance for Performance Assessment Design

It may be useful to consider the tenets of "universal design" (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002) in considering how to differentiate performance assessments. In a universal design approach, the

assessments are designed, at the onset, to allow participation of the widest possible range of students and are continually refined to address the needs and abilities of the students in the classroom.

Thompson et al. (2002) put forth the following criteria to support strong assessment practices:

Define an inclusive assessment population. In other words, the population of students whom the teacher will assess should include the broadest range of students, including those with disabilities and limited English language proficiency.

Define performance outcomes precisely. When teachers consider the knowledge and skills they expect students to demonstrate, they clearly define those overarching goals for mastery. Do teachers want their students to become strong persuasive writers? Develop financial literacy? These will be the foundations for the specific performance outcomes that teachers may want to measure with an assessment, and these outcomes should be clearly defined so that teachers are well aware of what accommodations could be made without compromising the integrity of the performance outcome to be measured.

Create accessible, non-biased tasks. In developing the assessment, the teacher should aim for language that is accessible and tasks that do not privilege some students over others. For example, a teacher who wants students to show an understanding of measuring area may want to use simple language and use examples that are accessible to the broadest range of students. The teacher might not ask students who do not take public transportation to measure the distance from their home to the closest bus stop but instead might ask them to measure the distance from their home room to the lunch room. The assessment is not measuring students' knowledge of bus routes, so using an example that is not relatable might serve as a barrier to students' demonstrating their mathematical knowledge and skills.

Create tasks amenable to accommodations. While teachers do not have to set up the task with all possible accommodations at the onset, they should design the task to be flexible enough that they could develop accommodations that would not interfere with assessing the important learning constructs.

The procedures for completing the task should be simple, clear, and intuitive. Instructions may be clear to us as teachers but entirely confounding to some students. Teachers should check the language used in all directions and consider how a student with language-based disabilities, for example, might interpret the directions.

Related to the point above, teachers should **aim for maximum readability and comprehensibility** for the broadest range of students. Consider how to make the directions accessible to students—will visual representations, for example, help to increase the comprehensibility?

Aim for maximum legibility. Legibility is the physical appearance of the text/task. Use text size and fonts that are accessible to the broadest range of students. Consider the age and ability of students and how much text should be on a page, what size the text should be, how much space should be provided between directions, and so on.

Additional guidance related to readability and comprehensibility is included in the table below.

Table 1. Plain Language Editing Strategies

Strategy	Description
Reduce excessive length	Reduce wordiness and remove irrelevant material.
Use common words	Eliminate unusual or low-frequency words and replace them with common words. For example, replace “utilize” with “use”.
Avoid ambiguous words	For example, “crane” should be avoided because it could be a bird or a piece of heavy machinery.
Avoid irregularly spelled words	Examples of irregularly spelled words are “trough” and “feign.”
Avoid proper names	Replace proper names with simple common names such as first names.
Avoid inconsistent naming and graphic conventions	Avoid using multiple names for the same concept. Be consistent in the use of typeface.
Avoid unclear signals about how to direct attention	Well-designed heading and graphic arrangements can convey information about the relative importance of information and the order in which it should be considered.
Mark all questions	Give an obvious graphic signal, such as a bullet, letter, or number to indicate separate questions.

Adapted from Thompson and Thurlow (2002)

References for Guidance for Performance Assessment Design

Perks, K., Morrow, C., Barmore, J., Strand, M. (2015). VITAL collaboration: Facilitator's resource guide. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

Thompson, S. J., Johnstone, C. J., Anderson, M. E., & Miller, N. A. (2005). *Considerations for the development and review of universally designed assessments* (Technical Report 42). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved May 15, 2018, from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Technical42.htm>

Thompson, S., Johnstone, C. J., & Thurlow, M. L. (2002). *Universal design applied to large scale assessments* (Synthesis Report 44). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Thompson, S., & Thurlow, M. (2002). *Universally designed assessments: Better tests for everyone!* (Policy Directions No. 14). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved May 15, 2018, from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Policy14.htm>

Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Tomlinson, C.A. & Demirsky, S.A. (2000). *Leadership for differentiating schools and classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C.A., et al.,(2003) Differentiating instruction in response to student readiness, interest, and learning profile in academically diverse classrooms: A review of literature. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 27(2-3): p. 119-145 . <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=&id=EJ787917>