Key Features of Differentiated Instruction

1. **Flexible Learning Groups**

   In a differentiated classroom, students are grouped and regrouped, frequently and flexibly based on their:
   • Readiness to learn a concept
   • Interest in a concept
   • Learning preferences in working with or thinking about a concept; or
   • Environmental or social sensitivities

   Flexible, short-term groups are sometimes determined by the teacher, sometimes by the students, and sometimes they are random, all depending on the purpose for grouping. When students learn in a variety of short-term groupings, they become comfortable working with all members of the class and a supportive community develops.

2. **Choice**

   We give students choice in their learning because choice, as brain researchers confirm, is a great motivator. We cannot know all that students bring to our classrooms, so choice provides students with personalized opportunities to connect with their prior knowledge, interests and learning preferences. When students, particularly adolescents, have some choice, they feel a sense of ownership for and commitment to their learning that is not possible when it is being directed by us.

   Choice-based differentiation needs to be carefully constructed so that all choices address the same curriculum expectations (with the exception of students on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) whose task may focus on modified curriculum expectations), take approximately the same amount of time, and require all students to work at the edge of their current readiness. It is far more important to develop a few high-quality choices than to provide students with lots of choice. Too many choices are time consuming for to create, monitor and assess and can prove to be overwhelming and confusing for students.

3. **Respectful Tasks**

   In a differentiated instruction classroom, all students focus on their learning goals and learn in ways that are motivating and challenging. Tasks are respectful when students are engaged in learning opportunities that are just as interesting and appealing as those of other students. Respectful tasks support risk-taking in students at a time when they may be reluctant to take

chances in learning for fear of appearing foolish in front of their friends. Students are more likely to feel secure in beginning and persevering with a task when everyone in the class is working on something that they find personally demanding and challenging.

4. **Shared Responsibility for Learning**

As educators, we not only have a responsibility to help our students achieve curriculum expectations, we also need to support students in developing the knowledge and skills required for them to learn independently. Students who are aware of how they learn best and who know how they are progressing towards a particular learning goal can inform our next steps as teachers. In addition, they develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and for the conditions that support their learning. It makes sense, especially in a differentiated classroom that is based on responding to student learning needs, that we help our students develop the skills and habits they need to be their own best assessors—by presenting and modeling opportunities for students to assess themselves.

Any assessment opportunity requires knowledge of the learning goal and a set of criteria to help gauge progress towards the goal. It is important that students be involved in the development of assessment criteria so that they understand what a "quality demonstration" looks like and so that they "own" the results.

Once the criteria are determined, a variety of strategies can be used to gather the assessment information from students such as exit cards, journals, checklists or simply listening to students share self-assessments after a think-pair-share.

The reflective learning skills and the knowledge of their own thought processes (i.e., metacognition) that students develop by self-assessing not only serves to inform our instruction but helps students clarify and advocate for their learning needs. A shared responsibility for learning is fostered and students become increasingly independent in their learning.