

Purposeful Planning



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“Good plans shape good decisions.”
– Lester R. Bittel, in *The Nine Master Keys of Management*

Differentiated instruction focuses on diversity and flexibility, two characteristics that can easily overwhelm a teacher. However, with active and strategic planning processes differentiated instruction can be both effective *and* manageable.

Differentiated instruction involves considering not only the commonly identified elements of content, process and product, but also how these elements intersect with programs of study and with students’ personal contexts and experiences, skills and abilities.

In Alberta, the starting point for all differentiation must be a sound understanding of the provincial program of studies, followed by the deliberate question, “What do I need to do to make these learning outcomes accessible for every student?”

Through this process of planning, you will have the opportunity to reflect on and apply your fundamental beliefs about learning, and about your role in creating effective, meaningful learning environments. Planning for differentiated instruction can start with an exploration of the following questions.

- What do you believe about the individual needs of students?
- What do you learn from your students?
- What range of abilities, interests and aptitudes do you see in the students you have taught?
- What languages do they speak and what cultural backgrounds do they represent?
- What range of skills, concepts, values and attitudes are reflected in the program of studies?
- What are your abilities, interests and aptitudes as a teacher? How do these connect with your students and the curriculum?

Consider planning models

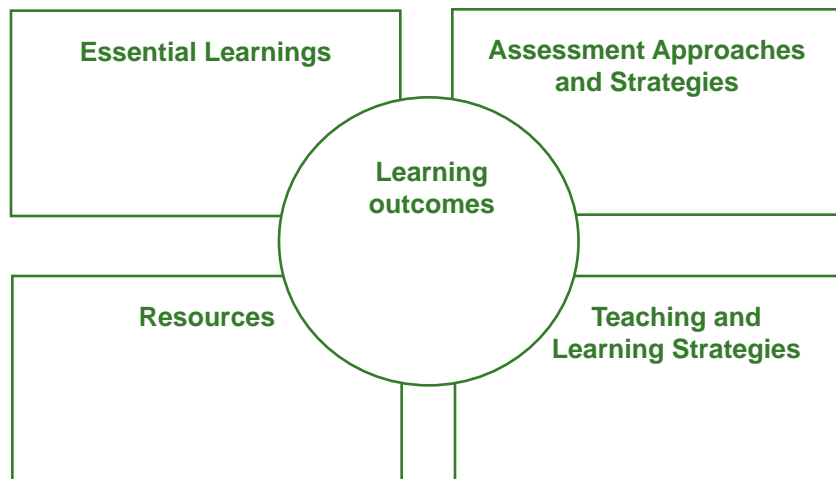
There are an increasing number of educational models and instructional approaches that emphasize purposeful planning and differentiated instruction. As you make planning decisions on how you will structure your instruction, consider what the impact will be on the overall effectiveness of teaching and learning, as well as how these decisions will address individual learning needs.

A purposeful learning experience connects curriculum outcomes and expectations to relevant, meaningful contexts. These contexts are created when students have opportunities to:

- build deep and meaningful understandings of content
- transfer those understandings to different contexts
- develop skills and understandings of critical processes
- ask questions relevant to them and conduct inquiries
- explore and act upon values, beliefs and attitudes
- make connections to build their own evolving sense of purpose and identity.

These elements of meaningful context-building are not new; they are repeatedly reflected in educational provincial research, theories and approaches. They also are commonly reflected in provincial programs of study and other curriculum documents.

Planning to create such contexts and to meet the individual needs of students involves processes of reflection and purposeful design. A purposeful design is a meaningful sequence of learning opportunities that starts with learning outcomes, clustered and aligned with essential learnings, assessment approaches and strategies, resources, and teaching and learning strategies (see diagram below). This alignment is critical to purposeful planning.



Your planning approach also should consider:

- the levels of difficulty at which curriculum outcomes can be interpreted
- the materials, resources and tasks needed to support varied interests, aptitudes and abilities
- the scaffolding or supports required to facilitate student learning
- how to include varied approaches to assessment and evaluation
- time requirements.

It is essential to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the provincial curriculum before making decisions about what and how to teach. You may begin simply by critically and thoughtfully exploring curriculum outcomes with students in mind. Then consider the question, “If this is where I have to take my students, how do I most effectively get them there?” You also may consider questions such as the following.

- What are the overall expectations for students in this program of studies?
- What conceptual understandings and big ideas are emphasized within these overall expectations?
- What are the organizing constructs; e.g., strands, themes, topics?
- What are the specific expectations for learning in this program of studies? What concepts, skills, processes, values and attitudes are emphasized?
- If the learning outcomes in this program of studies are not already organized, what organizing constructs can be brought to the outcomes?¹
- What prior knowledge, experiences and interests correlate or connect to these learning expectations?
- What have students learned in previous years of the program? What will they be expected to learn after they complete this year of this program?
- What differences in prior knowledge, understandings, experiences and interests might be found between individual students?

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Be flexible when planning with differentiated instruction in mind. The planning process should be one of continual assessment, reflection and adjustment, as it is centred on the premise that instructional approaches should be varied and flexible for both teachers and students. Recognize also that successful implementation includes a range of learning situations, including individual, small group and large group experiences. This range should be explicitly planned in the learning sequence. The planning process, therefore, is cyclical and considers the key elements of instructional design as checkpoints that should be revisited and realigned as an instructional sequence unfolds.

Know every student in the classroom

Knowing and responding to each student as an individual is perhaps the most fundamental element of differentiation. Effective teachers naturally get to know their students over time; however, in a differentiated classroom, you will *plan* specific ways to learn about your students and to use the information you gather. This allows you to move from planning, based on how students *can* differ in general, to a more proactive approach of planning, based on how your students *do* differ in particular. Learner profiles, discussed in-depth in *Chapter 3: Developing Learner Profiles*, are a valuable tool for identifying and recording student strengths, needs, readiness, learning preferences and interests.

1. Text to this point adapted from Douglas Ramsay and Patricia Shields-Ramsay, *Purposeful Planning* (Edmonton, AB: InPraxis Learning Systems, 2006), pp. 1–7.

Identify essential learnings²

Essential learnings are the big ideas of the curriculum. These big ideas help students to connect facts and skills to conceptual frameworks and prior experiences. They encourage students to recognize and apply familiar ideas and help students build deep understandings through transferring what they learn to new and different contexts. A planning approach that is based on broad concepts and process skills, or essential learnings, is more effectively differentiated than one based on specific, narrow facts and topics. Both you and your students have more flexibility to make choices and to develop meaningful, personally relevant connections. Students have more opportunities to question existing conceptions, develop skills and establish their own learning goals.

Purposeful planning is centered on essential learnings, including knowledge and understandings, skills and processes, and values and attitudes, that are articulated explicitly from a program of studies. Develop essential learnings that are closely aligned with the curriculum by using clusters of recurring concepts, words, terms and processes to reflect broad topics, themes, concepts, ideas or questions. Well-aligned essential learnings should offer numerous opportunities to make connections both within and between subject areas.

Expand essential learnings into essential questions³

Essential questions are a critical planning element. These questions help students to focus on the important aspects of the essential learnings. Essential questions also help to emphasize that continual questioning is a critical component of a unit. Together, essential learnings and questions identify the understandings and processes that all students must attain and, in doing so, provide the anchor for a unit.

Each essential question should:

- be directly related to the programs of study
- contain critical concepts and important vocabulary or terms that recur in the curriculum
- be written at a level that students can understand and use
- be written in a way that avoids ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers
- facilitate critical thinking by starting with “Why...”; “How...”; or “To what extent...”
- be written at different levels of difficulty to scaffold learning and support the learning of all students
- provide a logical sequence that can guide the construction of an instructional unit.

2. Section adapted from Douglas Ramsay and Patricia Shields-Ramsay, *Purposeful Planning* (Edmonton, AB: InPraxis Learning Systems, 2006), pp. 8–11.

3. Ibid.

Essential questions are developed from essential learning statements and emphasize key concepts and processes. For example, the essential learning statement, “Changing social and economic conditions can influence movement and migration patterns” can be developed into the essential question, “Why do changing social and economic conditions result in movement and migration?” Essential questions encourage exploration of authentic problems and queries that are open-ended, with the potential to include a variety of perspectives and approaches.

Other examples of essential questions include the following.

- Why do communities change over time?
- How does change result in the movement of peoples?
- Why is change inevitable?
- Why do living things adapt in response to their environments?
- How can individuals participate in decision-making processes?

These types of questions facilitate effective differentiation because they typically reflect recurring and authentic life issues, and create more possibilities for differentiating processes and products.

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The open-ended nature of essential questions creates opportunities:

- for all learners to reflect and respond
- to make connections to students’ cultures, backgrounds and life experiences
- to accommodate a range of student differences, including skill levels, interests and learning preferences.

The conceptual planning model developed by Erickson (2002) suggests that essential learning statements and questions should be scaffolded to represent different levels of complexity and sophistication. She suggests a process based on “how, why and to what extent” questions.

Scaffolding essential learnings⁴

Level 1:

All cultures have celebrations.

How do cultures celebrate special events?

Level 2:

Celebrations express the traditions of a culture.

Why are traditions important to cultures?

Level 3:

Traditions reflect the beliefs, values and heritage of a culture.

To what extent do celebrations and traditions reflect the beliefs and values of a culture?

You also can provide opportunities for students to develop their own “how, why and to what extent” questions at varying levels.

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Break essential questions into unit questions⁵

Unit questions are a way of breaking down the essential questions of a unit into more focused pieces. They can focus on the specifics of the unit, such as:

- developing vocabulary
- exploring terms and concepts
- guiding research.

To make them most useful, unit questions should be:

- written to guide inquiry and uncover the essential questions and learnings of the unit
- sequenced to provide the flow of the unit.

For example, unit questions that support the essential question, “Why is change inevitable?” could include the following.

- When does change occur?
- How do people react to change?
- What are the visible results of change?
- When is change a good thing?
- When is change challenging?
- How does change help solve problems?

4. Adapted from H. Lynn Erickson, *Concept-based Curriculum and Instruction: Teaching Beyond the Facts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 2002), p. 87.

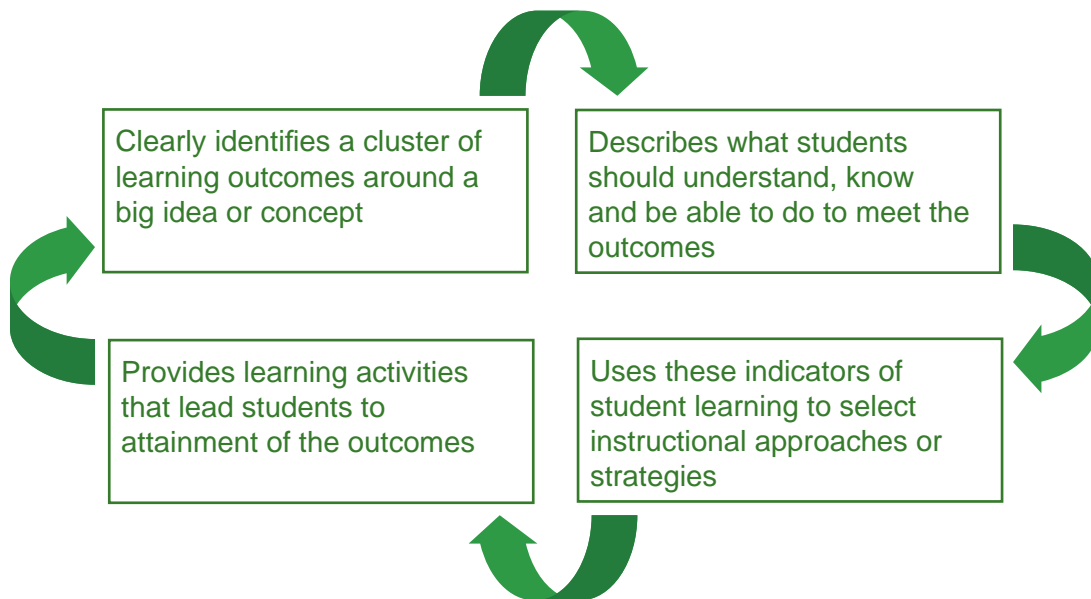
5. Section adapted from Douglas Ramsay and Patricia Shields-Ramsay, *Purposeful Planning* (Edmonton, AB: InPraxis Learning Systems, 2006).

To support differentiation, develop unit questions that provide options and flexibility for students with different interests, backgrounds and abilities. Tier or scaffold questions to accommodate different paths and allow students to investigate what is most interesting and relevant to their learning needs.

Identify assessment tasks

Initial and ongoing assessment is an essential teaching tool in differentiated classrooms. Considering assessment early in your planning process will help you to make more effective decisions about student learning needs.

Essential learnings and questions reflect expectations for student achievement across the curriculum. When outcomes are clustered around these “big ideas” they become the basis for articulating expectations, selecting strategies and developing activities. Well-aligned units and lesson plans incorporate a series of learning experiences that are designed around a process (see diagram below).



Assessment can be thought of as the “arrows” in the process of planning. In a differentiated approach to planning, assessment considers questions such as the following that focus the planning process on students and help set the direction of the unit.

- What do students know and understand about the essential learnings?
- What do they need to learn?
- What will help them to learn?
- How well are students developing understandings during the unit?
- How are students responding to the processes used in the unit?
- What assessment tools will best gather this information?
- How will students be involved with the assessment process?
- How and when will students assess themselves?
- In what ways can assessment be used to motivate and engage students in the learning process?

Plan a series of performance tasks that will open the unit, guide students through learning experiences and wrap up the unit. The final performance task typically involves culminating projects that require students to synthesize and apply understandings. These projects should be closely aligned with the values and attitudes, knowledge and understandings, and skills and processes outcomes from the learning clusters. In differentiated planning, performance tasks also should provide for different modes of demonstrating learning as well as options for student choice.

Chapter 4: Differentiated Assessment provides an in-depth exploration of differentiated assessment and its role in instructional planning, student learning and effective evaluation.

Plan differentiated learning experiences

There are countless strategies and activities that you can use to create differentiated learning experiences. How can you choose the right ones for your classroom? Planning for purposeful instruction is intended to promote maximum student achievement. Strategies and activities are planned to move students toward the learning goals represented by essential learnings, questions, outcome clusters and assessment tasks. In a differentiated unit, strategies and activities also incorporate such elements as:

- flexible grouping options
- scaffolded instruction
- choice
- different learning modalities
- interests.

When selecting differentiated learning experiences, the activities, resources and materials should:

- focus on essential learnings and questions
- develop opportunities for students to explore unit questions and inquiries
- capture rich, compelling and engaging relationships between concepts
- enable students to apply what they have learned in multiple contexts
- involve, support and develop higher-order thinking skills
- form the basis for students to test and question generalizations and expand their learning to new and different contexts.

Consider the following questions to help you to select learning experiences.

- What strategies and instructional practices align with essential learnings and questions?
- How will the learning environment in the classroom support these strategies and instructional practices?
- What learning activities and tasks will engage and motivate students?
- How will these learning activities, tasks and materials build understandings, skills, values and attitudes?
- What are the roles of the teacher and students in different learning contexts throughout this unit?
- What learning supports will students need throughout this unit?