

A Working Definition of Individualized Instruction

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What are the common elements of individualization of instruction? What procedures should a teacher use in this approach? How can the teacher provide for excellence, for socialization, and other significant learning goals?

Individualized instruction is one of the major themes in education. Few professional educators are not in favor of it, though a good many doubt that it is feasible except with a small percentage of students.

Considering the large array of approaches to individualization described in the literature, it is puzzling that educators lack a generally-accepted working definition of individualized instruction.

Much of the recent literature has focused on one or more of the major systems designed to individualize instruction—IPI, PLAN, IGE, and open education. This focus does not offer an adequate basis for a general definition of individualization since it does not take into account many other approaches. These include ability grouping, intraclass sub-grouping, the project method, independent study, peer tutoring, programmed instruction, nongraded programs, and various alternative programs. Also, special education exemplifies individualization.

The task undertaken here is that of pro-

viding a definition and instructional models broad enough to include any approach intended to suit instruction to learner differences.

A One-Sentence Definition of Individualized Instruction

The following definition is offered as one that includes any provision for adapting instruction to the learner. *Individualized instruction consists of any steps taken in planning and conducting programs of studies and lessons that suit them to the individual student's learning needs, learning readiness, and learner characteristics or "learning style."*

Individualization must not be viewed as all-or-none. It can exist in all degrees from ignoring student differences most of the time to continually giving explicit attention to each student's special needs, readiness, and learning style.

Learning needs can be identified with the grade-level curriculum or they can be seen as reflecting individual experiences and interests.

Planning can include a careful appraisal of whether each student possesses the readiness to undertake a given learning program or lesson, or it may fail to do so. Also instruction can give more or less attention to the student's most effective, or preferred, ways of studying—concrete or abstract approaches, working in groups or working alone, and other expressions of learning style.

Ability, or achievement-level, grouping is the least refined approach to individualization, since members of a group usually are taught as though they are alike. Instruction making use of the project approach, independent study, peer tutoring, or programmed instruction offers greater attention to the individual. IPI, PLAN, IGE, and open education offer a high level of individualization by providing individual students with lessons planned for them.

Six Modes of Individualization

In adapting instruction to the student, any or all of six general modes of individualization can be employed. The six present the building

principal and instructional staff with a set of options for achieving a high level of attention to the needs, readiness, and learning style of each student.

1. At any level of schooling, different students can work on different learning tasks toward different goals. Even within a standard curriculum, many options can be offered the student reflecting individual interests and experiences.

2. Different students can use different learning materials or equipment in working toward the same learning goals. A familiar example is the use of manipulative materials in mathematics to supplement textual materials.

3. Different students can study a given task in different types of individual or group settings. Included are individual seat work, pupil-team arrangements, class sub-groups, or whole-class settings. Alternative programs, and career education with business or community organizations, also illustrate this mode.

4. Different students can work on a given learning task with use of different methods of



Photo: Charlene Rothkopf.

teaching/learning. The method can be lecture, group discussion, tutorial assistance, or independent study. There can be drill in skill areas and the project approach in social studies, science, and the arts.

5. Different students can be assigned to

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different teachers to produce effective student/teacher match-ups. The personality and teaching style of the teacher are important in determining how well a given student progresses. Taking this into account in assigning students to teachers is an important form of individualization.

6. Different students can be allowed different amounts of time as needed to complete a learning task. This mode is a central feature in nongraded programs, open classroom plans, and the IPI, PLAN, and IGE instructional systems. Many teachers employ differential pacing in the conventional classroom, particularly in teaching basic skills.

A Teacher's Model for Individualizing Instruction

A general model for individualizing instruction should offer a problem-solving procedure suitable for formal individualized systems and any other ways of adapting instruction to the learner. In each step of the model, the student's participation in decision making should be provided for, with the level of such participation varying according to the student's capabilities.

1. Determine what learning task the student needs to accomplish next in the curriculum area. When the curriculum presents a set sequence of learning units, determining the next unit the student will undertake simply requires knowing the last unit completed. When there is no set sequence, the choice of what the student

will next work on can be based especially on the student's preferences.

2. Assess the extent to which the student already has mastered the chosen task. Determining this calls for pre-assessing the student's level of command of the task's objectives by formal or informal, individual or group, assessment.

3. Diagnose the student in terms of learning readiness and style to determine how best he or she can work on the task. This step concerns decisions on how different modes of individualization should be employed. What learning setting should be chosen for the student? What materials or equipment? What teaching/learning methods? What provisions for rate of learning?

4. Decide on a lesson plan. The plan should be based on the pre-assessment and diagnostic information obtained in Steps 2 and 3. Ideally, it would be a contract between student and teacher specifying what is to be learned and how.

5. Provide the student with help as needed in performing the learning task. The help needed will be less when the learning materials offer guidance in performing the task, and when the student is capable of overcoming difficulties without aid. Often, when members of a group have the same learning task, the lecture or discussion method is appropriate, supplemented with individual attention to students as needed.

6. Assess the student's performance of the lesson to determine whether mastery has been reached. If the student shows mastery of task objectives, planning the next lesson should follow. If mastery is not shown, further study is needed, often using a revised lesson plan.

Individualized Instruction and Excellence

A chief justification for individualized instruction is that it can permit every student to achieve mastery of tasks undertaken. Mastery criteria linked to task objectives set the level of advancement or sophistication the student is expected to reach. The conditions for attaining mastery are these: the task has been selected as appropriate for the student; appropriate materials and equipment are provided; appropriate instructional methods are employed; and the student is allowed sufficient time to achieve mastery.

For the student, mastery-referenced instruc-

tion removes the need to repeat learning tasks and provides prerequisites for progressing to other tasks in the instructional program. Also, mastery should increase the student's motivation to learn and should enhance his or her self-concept.

For the teacher, mastery-referenced instruction reduces the burden of remedial instruction and offers heightened satisfaction resulting from success with students who previously had been failing.

Individualization and Student Self-Direction

The central problem of individualization is that a teacher cannot give individual attention to more than one student at a time. How is it possible, with a student/teacher ratio of 25:1 or higher, to stress individualized rather than whole-class or sub-group teaching? The answer is to provide for students learning effectively without continual guidance or direction from the teacher.

One way to emphasize student self-direction is to provide the student with structured learning materials offering specific cues for proceeding with the task. Programmed materials and study guides are examples. A second way is for students to assist one another. A third is for the student to learn and use competencies in planning and conducting learning activities without depending on the teacher.

Individualization and Different Types of Learning Goals

Most of the attention given individualized instruction has focused on teaching basic skills in language and number at the elementary level. This is readily understood when we consider the critical importance assigned to skill learnings and the fact that learning materials in the skill areas can readily be structured in forms permitting a high level of student self-direction.

A second type of learning goal known as inquiry or problem solving calls for special provisions. The basic approach becomes the project method in which students learn to perform such tasks as conducting experiments in science or analyzing issues in social studies. Both group and individual projects are appropriate.

A third type of goal is found in the arts and crafts—creative writing, drawing and painting,

musical performance, and shop activities. Opportunities for individualization are always present in these areas through individual or group projects.

Another type of goal encompasses those social learnings involved in interpersonal and intergroup relations. Since this type of goal calls

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for social interaction, individualization normally should occur within group settings such as group projects or class discussions where the values, attitudes, and reactions of different individuals are analyzed, compared, and evaluated.

Finally, learning goals related to the student's personal development require attention. How can individualization in this area be accomplished? Two important bases are inherent in the nature of individualized instruction. When students work on tasks designed for them and share in decisions about those tasks, their sense of individuality and personal worth should be enhanced. Also, when students are enabled to master their learning tasks routinely, they should have an improved sense of their competence and personal worth.

An important way in which teachers can contribute to their students' self-concepts is through taking advantage of opportunities to give each student attention, encouragement, and praise. Closely related to this is the informal counseling interview a teacher can hold to help a student examine values, cope with problems, make plans, and the like. *[E]*



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