

**Easy as Zip! Zap! Zop! Differentiating, Accommodating, and Modifying  
Theater Instruction for Students with Autism**

*TIPS AND TAKEAWAYS*

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Differentiated Instruction is an instructional framework that supports teachers in planning for the learner variability in their classrooms. It asks us to consider what we know about our students in every instructional choice that we make. It encourages us to be proactive, designing for our diverse group of students from the start, and also to be flexible and responsive to an evolving understanding of who our students are and how they learn best. Finally, Differentiated Instruction is marked by high-quality curriculum delivered to students in ways that offer them the optimal level of challenge.

When applying the Differentiated Instruction framework to theater classrooms for students with autism, it's important to keep a few things in mind:

**Differentiate through your content, process, product, and learning environment in response to students' interests, readiness levels, and learning profiles.**

When applying these practices in your classroom, remember that you're making choices in response to what you know about your students. Specifically, there are avenues you differentiate *through* and student characteristics you differentiate *for*.

You can differentiate your content, process, product, and learning environment. Content refers to the “what” of your instruction, or the learning goal that you're working on. Your process refers to instructional delivery decisions like grouping or in-class activities. The product is how students demonstrate their understanding back to you. The learning environment is your classroom setup and culture.

In thinking about your students, Differentiated Instruction asks us to specifically consider students' interests, readiness levels, and learning profiles. Interests refer to the unique preferences and passions every student brings into your classroom; these can be leveraged to generate engagement in learning. Readiness levels refer to the foundational vocabulary, skills, or understanding that are necessary to participate in your lesson. Learning profiles include information about how students learn best, including what you may know about any disabilities that may be influencing cognitive functioning.

**Focus on the learning goal when adapting instruction.**

Differentiated Instruction is designed to meet the needs of students in inclusive classrooms; if you are applying the framework well, you should expect most of your students—with and without autism—should be able to participate fully. However, you may need to provide adaptations in the form of accommodations or modifications to support specific students' needs.

For most students, a simple accommodation, which offers a tool or strategy so the student can participate in the same activity as their peers, will be enough. Some students may need a more significant modification, which is when you modify what the student is expected to do in order to

participate in the activity. For either adaptation, remember that all students should be working on the same learning goal in whatever way offers them the optimal level of challenge.

Consider this example: If students in your theater class are working on demonstrating emotional expression through monologues and one student struggles to memorize their lines, an appropriate accommodation might be to allow that student use of a script. They're still working on the exact same assignment, but you've removed a significant barrier to fully engaging with the core content of emotional expression. That's an accommodation. Let's say you have another student who is minimally verbal and struggles with nonverbal communication. Simply identifying emotions is challenging for this student. It's likely that learning a full monologue that expresses emotional range is going to be far beyond the "optimal level" of challenge for this student, so you might offer them a modified assignment; perhaps they are asked to generate facial expressions or gestures for heightened emotions like sadness, anger, joy, or surprise. For this student, you have provided a modification. You've changed the expectation of a final product, but you haven't changed the learning goal. This student, like all their peers, is working on emotional expression.

### **Students with autism are not a monolith.**

Special education practices can offer us insights for adapting instruction that are based on many common characteristics of students with autism. These are a valuable starting point. However, students with autism, like all your students, are unique individuals and deserve individualized approaches to instruction.

Don't assume that all of your students with autism will respond to sensory input the same way, communicate through the same avenues, or take interest in the same things. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that many special education practices were designed to address functional impairments rooted in a deficit-based understanding of autism. These ignore the many passions, creative ideas, and unique perspectives your students with autism will bring to class.

As an art form, theater offers so many possibilities for tapping into and celebrating your students' strengths. Don't miss that opportunity!