

Some useful differentiation strategies

Differentiation is the process by which we, as teachers, strive to ensure that the needs of all students in our class are accommodated, and that each student is provided with the best possible chance of maximising their progress. Yet this is not an easy thing to do in a class of up to 32 students, where the differential between the most able and least able could be several National Curriculum levels or grades. However I strongly believe that in effectively differentiated classrooms, the learning benefits are for all students, not just the less able. Through providing stretch and challenge more able students can also find themselves challenged in new ways, which leads to higher levels of learning for all.

Effective differentiation does not have to mean planning several lessons in one, in fact this is one of the least productive – not to mention least time-effective! – ways of catering for differing needs. Neither is ‘differentiation’ by outcome always the most appropriate course of action. So how can you quickly, easily and effectively ensure that all students are making rapid and sustained progress?

Below are 10 easy and diverse strategies that I have found to be effective in shaking up my approach to differentiation, and to have an immediate and noticeable impact on my students.

Choice of task

Allow students to choose how they present the final version of their work. This could either be done through different forms of writing, or could stretch to more adventurous formats such as debate, artwork, computer generated graphics, stop animations, film etc.

Differentiated because: By stipulating the content but not the process, students are able to choose a format in which they know they have strength, or an interest in development. I have often found a student who struggles academically turns out to be a fabulous artist or filmmaker, and by attempting the work in a medium in which they feel confident, you can see some brilliant results. Plus, they tend to quite enjoy it.

Provides challenge because: all students are able to push themselves to try transforming their ideas into a new format.

Exit assessment

At the end of a lesson (or as a mid-plenary if you like) ask students to write down or articulate what they understand about the topic, or to answer a question on a post-it note. By collecting these in you can quickly assess students’ understandings, and this may inform your planning of groups or future lessons.

Differentiated because: All students demonstrate their knowledge, allowing you to identify misunderstandings, or lower levels of knowledge quickly and efficiently.

Provides challenge because: you could identify the most commonly misunderstood aspects of a topic and ask more able students to answer these questions at the beginning of the next lesson. Alternatively, you could ask differentiated exit questions in the first place and students could work their way through answering up to the highest level they can.

Crowd sourcing

A picture, or other simple visual or audio stimulus, can be used to ask students what they think is going on e.g. a picture of the trenches in World War One, or a rainfall graph etc. Based on the discussion that emerges from students' prior knowledge, information will be shared between students.

Differentiated because: All students are able to access the simple stimulus material. Listening to knowledge of other students will help them to adapt their own initial thoughts.

Provides challenge because: more able students are able to make links between the initial stimulus and their own knowledge, potentially in ways they have not thought of previously.

Skills audit

Following an assessed piece of work, students could complete a self-assessment of their skills. It is best if you produce a list of criteria against which they can measure themselves; you could take this from GCSE or A Level criteria or from the National Curriculum programme of study for your subject at KS3 for instance. Based on the results of this audit, students can then select a task in order to develop their weakest skill, or they could focus on developing their weakest skill in the next task/assessment.

Differentiated because: Students are identifying their own strengths and weaknesses from a standard list, and choosing to develop this. Each student therefore has a personalised target, or set of targets.

Provides challenge because: the standard list could itself contain graded criteria, allowing the most able students to develop top level skills as their target. Alternatively you could offer moderated GCSE criteria in Year 9 for example.

Groups by cards

To randomise groups and prevent students from always working with the same people, or falling into routine patterns of behaviour, use a pack of playing cards. Students can be issued a playing card on arrival, or at a point during the lesson, and this will dictate which group they work in. You can do this randomly, or pre-plan it depending on what you want to achieve. N.B for more than 4 groups, separate out the picture cards, or aces etc.

Differentiated because: You can either direct students to particular tasks by card e.g. hearts = comprehension task, diamonds = analysis tasks, or you can group students so that each group has a mix of abilities.

Provides challenge because: More able students with certain cards could be designated helpers for less able students, or they could themselves be directed to a more challenging task.

Envoys/spies

Group students into groups, each with a task but with different information. Each group (or you) can then nominate an envoy to visit another group to find additional information to help with the task. If

you want to introduce an element of competition, then you could make your envoys spies, and send them to negotiate with other groups for an information exchange.

Differentiated because: Initial information can be distributed to certain groups depending on the levels of the students in those groups.

Provides challenge because: More able students could be designated as the envoys/spies in order to bring additional information to the group.

Create a meme!

Recently fashionable, a meme is a symbol or picture accompanied by a snappy phrase that communicates a cultural idea. They are essentially a form of political cartoon, and require students to choose an image and communicate a message using very few words.

Differentiated because: Students have a choice of images, or can draw their own, and choose their own phrase. This allows for the idea to be as complicated or as simple as the student chooses.

Provides challenge because: Memes are still capable of transmitting really complicated ideas, or making ironic or sardonic comments on issues. Images can be chosen to be more subtle.

Help envelopes/cards

Quick to create, help envelopes or cards provide additional information, markschemes, or exemplar work for students to use if they get stuck. However the challenge is to try and go as long as possible without using the help cards to encourage students to be a bit more resilient and try several approaches to problem solving first.

Differentiated because: Help is available when it is needed. You could even level the help available in the envelopes so students could try the lightest help first etc.

Provides challenge because: Those who are capable of working without additional help can do so. You could even further challenge able students to be the ones who create the resources for other help envelopes in the first place!

Every student

The Holy Grail of teaching and easier in smaller classes, but you could challenge yourself as a teacher to speak individually to every student in the lesson, every lesson. Or at least in one dedicated lesson.

Differentiated because: You get a real sense of each student's understanding of a topic or issue, and students are able to raise with you, in a reasonably private setting, any concerns that they have.

Provides challenge because: You can identify any students who have sailed through and need further challenge.

Argument=equation

Students can explain their thoughts, argument or answer as an equation. This can start off at a simple level e.g. sunlight + water = plant growth, and become increasingly complex e.g. external

treaty (internal divisions + reduced size of army)=dissatisfaction with political system of Weimar Germany.

Differentiated because: Students who struggle to express themselves through extended writing are still thinking about the relationship of factors, and explaining them in a concise and visual way.

Provides challenge because: Mathematical equations can become complex, and allow students to show subtlety of relationships or prioritise the importance of factors through the equations they choose.

Charlotte Grove

See more at:

<http://freedomtoteach.collins.co.uk/10-top-tips-for-differentiation/#sthash.YKG3qrwg.dpuf>