

The Challenge of Differentiation

Ideas on how to help everyone in your class succeed.

Teachers of adults have to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. Learners may differ in their experience of the subject, their educational backgrounds, or their motivations for being on the course. Some may not have English as a first language. They may have a disability, or very different learning style such as dyslexia.

How can we accommodate these different needs? It is no easy task. This issue explores the principles and describes some methods used by City Lit teachers.

Does differentiation mean splitting a group into levels?

Differentiation in adult learning needs careful planning, but rarely means giving different activities according to level. Adults do not like to be picked out in this way. There are many ways of setting up the same activity so it suits different levels of learner.

Mastery and Development Tasks

Geoff Petty has a very useful way of considering differentiation. He divides activities into 'mastery' tasks and 'developmental' tasks.

Mastery tasks are straightforward tasks that can be right or wrong.

For example (from different subjects):

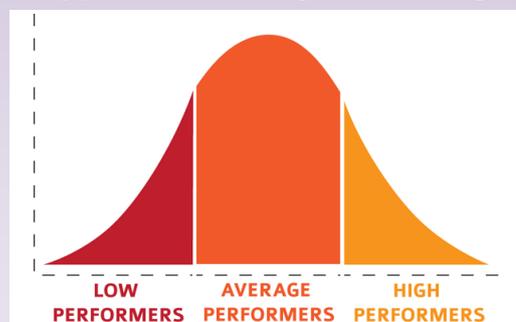
- Name the reflexology points on the foot

What is differentiation?

Differentiation is planning for groups of learners to make sure everyone in the group achieves.

Instead of using a 'one size fits all' approach, the teacher considers the differing experience, needs and motivations of learners and adapts their teaching accordingly.

This might seem a superhuman task. However, a useful way of looking at this is to see any class as a bell curve with a large group of students fitting into a 'mainstream' range but with some falling outside it—either needing extra support or stretching and challenging.



To differentiate effectively, teachers need to consider and plan for these different groups. Even 'mainstream' students may need to be considered individually. For example, if a student has a particular motivation for being on the course.

- Apply a colour wash
- Use capital letters correctly

Everyone in the class should be able to do/know these, whatever their ability and teachers should revise and check these regularly. This learning will build confidence as it can be **right or wrong**.

Types of Differentiation

Differentiation by task

This is where students are assigned differentiated activities pitched to their level. Although we do not usually want to appear to be 'streaming' students, this does not rule out differentiation by task. For example, it is possible to stage an activity so those that finish early can continue on to more challenging work on the same topic.

Differentiation by outcome

In this type of differentiation, students all complete the same task but can achieve different outcomes within it. Projects and independent research are good examples of this.

Differentiation by resource

In this case, learners can be referred to

additional written resources to help them catch up or extend their learning. These could be on google classroom, or additional help sheets.

It can also include adaptations to the classroom or resources to meet the needs of learners with specific needs.

Differentiation by interest

Students can be encouraged to pursue a topic which is of interest to them personally or fits in with their long term goals.

Differentiation by individual support

Individual support can be given in class by a support worker, or outside in tutorials. In practical classes, teachers can support individually through one to one discussion.

Developmental tasks require more complex thinking — synthesising ideas, judgement, creativity. There is no strict right or wrong. These are higher level tasks that can stretch and challenge all learners, and particularly more confident ones. Developmental tasks ask questions such as 'What would you consider most important..?', 'What would be best to use if?'

Extending learners does not mean learning more at the same level—but stretching them beyond.

Building a group

Ironically, although there is currently much emphasis on personalised learning, one of the keys to effective differentiation is to build a good group.

Ian Wollington, who teaches English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), believes effective differentiation relies on an understanding by the teacher of how their students work together, and the ability to build on what emerges within the group/class. Ultimately, he argues, it is the group

that is the subject, not individuals. He compares it to football—the objective is to perform as a team. What makes the team effective is how the players relate to each other to produce something that is then beneficial to them all. A good football manager knows the players, and orchestrates and empowers them to achieve the common objective. Similarly, a teacher of ESOL orchestrates the group of learners to produce and achieve the target language. Essential to this is knowing how each student works.

A good group will keep people safe, motivated and allow them to take risks and make mistakes. They will learn with and from each other. Paulo Freire calls this 're-creating knowledge in the classroom'.

There are many things a tutor can do to build groups — icebreakers, group contracts, mixing small groups regularly to avoid cliques. Good groups **can** happen by accident, but not reliably. The tutor's role is key in building and leading them.

Many of the techniques described in the rest of this issue rely on the safety of a good group.

Differentiation through questioning

Teachers who differentiate effectively ask the right question to the right student. Questions can be 'mastery' for some, and more 'developmental' or higher level, for others.

For *stretch and challenge* on Art Foundation, Ian Tucknott advocates 'why' and 'how' questions such as 'Consider why you have chosen this subject, technique, approach.....' 'How can you achieve your goal of....?' In Ceramics, Kate Fuscoe challenges more advanced students to focus on specific aspects of their work using questions such as, 'Now consider the quality of the rim of the pot. How can it be improved?'

In her History and Politics classes, Dale Mineshima Lowe uses tiered questioning for pair/group work. She gives one main question to all, and additional questions that stretch those more able or quicker.

All students: *Identify TWO key points from each side of the debate?* (all students)

Extension questions: a) *Which side do YOU think was put forth strongest? Why? – provide one reason for your opinion*

b) *Explain WHY the debate came about*

Planning small groups

Another key differentiation technique is planning who works with whom in small groups. Sometimes this means mixing more able and less able students. Sometimes it means the reverse. For example, for oral practice in her French classes, Estelle Héloüin puts people with roughly the same ability together so the more confident don't intimidate the less confident, and stronger students are not with those struggling to construct a sentence. Feedback from students is very positive — less confident students prefer it as they don't feel humiliated. At other times she puts stronger students with weaker ones, eg when discovering a grammar point, so the stronger students can help the less confident ones. It also helps stronger students really

understand the grammar point as they have to explain it to someone else.

Using Help sheets

Help sheets are differentiation 'by resource'.

Lorraine Braggins, in her lipreading classes, often asks students to lipread a prose passage she reads out loud. Students have the text and they can choose to lipread with or without it.

Estelle also gives her French students help sheets which they can choose to use or not. For example, she might give students a handout with the questions or a gap-fill activity on one side, and the list of possible answers on the other. Students can either try to do the activity without looking at the answers or, if they have less experience, look and choose from the list.

Estelle feels it is very important **how this is presented**. Everyone gets the help sheet so no one is picked out. She says, 'You can do it with, or give it a try without, then use it at the end to check'. She doesn't say, 'Ask me if you want the help sheet', or, 'If it's too difficult for you, use the help sheet'. This ensures people are not exposed.

Chili peppers

This method is a form of differentiation by task but again where students choose. It was advocated recently by a consultant for English and Maths. The teacher prepares an activity on the same topic at 3 levels of difficulty and names them 'mild' 'spicy' and 'hot' Students choose their level of difficulty. If they finish easily they can move on to the 'hotter' level.

Using Projects and Research

Projects and independent research are an excellent way of enabling learners of different levels to achieve and also learn from each other.

In 'hands on' subjects, such as in the Visual Arts, individual projects are the backbone of learning. Here the teacher needs to plan carefully so the

project is suitable for all in the group, but students can achieve at different levels. The teacher can also support individuals one to one.

In History and Politics, Dale asks students to independently explore specific topic(s) and to bring their research into class to share— including additional resources they have found (e.g. cartoon, news article, academic article). Students can carry this out within their comfort zone without obviously doing more or less than their peers.

In French, Estelle chooses a topic for her students to research every week. She gives links to texts at different levels and they do a brief presentation the following week in groups of 2 or 3, using key words from the text. Then 2 or 3 students present their partner’s text (so they learn vocabulary) to the rest of the class. Students choose by topic, but also by level of difficulty. None of the others are any the wiser and everyone can do a presentation.

Accommodating students with particular needs.

Alongside general differentiation methods, Francesco Buccioli, Italian teacher, plans specifically for two students - one with severe dyslexia and one with mental health issues. G. finds it difficult to read text with lots of words, so he replaces some words on his worksheets with images (good practice anyway). F. panics when they do group activities where students walk around the room talking to each other, so he allows her to stay sat down and students go to her (or he directs them to her).

Guided discovery

Discovery learning, rather than telling, can help everyone in a group grasp a key learning point. Instead of presenting a grammar point on powerpoint, which she might pitch too high or low, Estelle asks her French students to work out the rule themselves in small groups. This takes careful preparation and well formed questions. eg ‘What is the difference between x and y in this list and this list?’ If students collaborate to work the rule out she can be sure everyone understands.

Using video to self assess

Part way through his Ballet course, Martin Wimpress asks his students to use their own mobile or tablet to video themselves in practice. He then emails each student a video of a professional replicating the movement and asks them to compare their performance against that of the professional performer on line.

To differentiate: less confident students focus on a single area of comparison with the movement they have been practising; more confident students can extend themselves by comparing multiple aspects of their performance. In this way students can use the video to self assess, practice independently and extend themselves whatever their level.

Correcting written work

Where students hand in written work, feedback can support and challenge learners. For example, Estelle marks French homework using codes: eg underlining = incorrect, Sp = ‘spelling error’, ✓ = sentence makes sense. She doesn’t correct at the same level for every student but decides how much is appropriate for that student. She then asks students to self correct in class. In her feedback, Estelle doesn’t only correct mistakes. She also gives students a **challenge** which she finds students are very keen to take up.

Directed reading

In History and Politics, Dale sets her students readings with questions (in class or as ‘homework’): one short piece, with questions, that everyone is expected to read before the next session, and an additional reading (longer or more complex) which is optional for those who would like more challenge.

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These are some examples of differentiation—there are many more. Hopefully this issue has helped with ideas for developing teaching in this difficult area.

Teaching and Learning Issues is written by Wendy Moss, Head of Teaching and Learning.
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