

Teaching and learning issues

Stretch and Challenge

As tutors in adult education we work with groups where learners have a variety of experience and abilities. We might have a practising artist learning drawing alongside someone with little art experience, a university professor sitting alongside someone new to historical study, or a language class where some learners have studied the language before at school, and some are completely new.

Differentiation - meeting the needs of all these learners - is a big challenge. More recently, educationalists have started moving away from this term, with its slight overtones of deficit, to using the term '*stretch and challenge*'.

Dale Mineshima Lowe, History Co-ordinator, completed a stretch and challenge project with tutors in Humanities last year, as part of a cross London project with the Education and Training Foundation. She first surveyed tutors as to how they perceived 'stretch and challenge' and summarised the results as follows:

'Stretch and challenge' in learning was generally defined by the group as finding some task or method that can serve as a tool for students to move their own learning and progress forward on a course, no matter the students' own starting points'.

The term has the advantage of emphasising the need to stretch everyone - including the most confident learners. It is not normally about designing different tasks for learners at different levels (a kind of 'streaming') - unless, for example, beginners are mixed with advanced students repeating the course. It is usually about finding a way everyone can push themselves round the same topic or theme. Very often this is about small adjustments, not major changes to the way we teach.

In the Humanities project, tutors worked together to

Extension activities



One of the commonest ways of stretching more confident learners who finish quickly is to plan 'extension activities' - that is exercises on the same topic that they can move on to if necessary.

One of the most frequent errors is to simply ask learners to do more of the same. Eg a tutor asks students to practise labelling items of food in a different language. If a group finishes quickly they simply get more pictures to label.

To stretch, the exercise should then move up Bloom's Taxonomy* and be more challenging.

So it could be '*Now choose 3 foods and put each in a sentence using an adjective. Eg 'This is a large apple.' Share your sentences with someone else in your group.*

Or suppose students are practising a performance and they have finished theirs before the rest. You could ask them to redo it with an added challenge eg *Now practice the first few lines paying particular attention to tempo*, or whatever you felt was their next challenge.

*If you are unsure of Bloom's Taxonomy, you can just google it. Try searching for *Blooms Taxonomy and Task Design -Geoff Petty*

experiment with stretch and challenge in their subject. The results are described overleaf.

Stretch and Challenge Humanities Project

In 17/18, four tutors from Humanities (Science, Politics, History, and Philosophy) identified a method or task that would provide stretch and challenge for their learners. The project provided tutors with the opportunity to test out a small *tweak* that could be built into their current practice. The *tweak* would allow learners to be stretched and challenged at their own level, but within the larger class. In addition, the project provided tutors with support and mentoring as needed: to discuss in advance the task to be implemented, and to discuss the results from initial trials and any new adjustments. The group finally had a follow-up session to review all that had been trialled and the results – for themselves as tutors, and for their learners in terms of their learning. Four ‘tweaks’ were as follows:

‘Modern France: politics and society since 1900’: Creating a ‘balance sheet’.

Individually and in pairs, students created a ‘balance’ sheet about achievements and failures of the French Fourth Republic before participating in class-wide discussion.

Reflection by tutor and learners: The activity encouraged students to reflect further on their previous learning on the course, and provided a means to focus on key issues. It allowed them to formulate and reflect on their answers *before* class discussion, rather than just through discussion itself. It allowed for all students to participate and take a role in the discussion where, in other instances, only those more confident would have contributed.

‘Chinese Philosophy: an introduction’: Create a diagram

This group exercise was to create a diagram of key concepts in Chinese Philosophy to promote a wider processing and understanding of the concepts.

Reflection by tutor and learners: The learners felt that the exercise overall highlighted their insufficient grasp of the concepts, but individuals were able to self-assess their own understanding and where they needed further work and development.

‘Introduction to botany’: Bring in a plant

Students were asked to collect a specimen (or picture) of a plant to share in class, locate it on the Plant Kingdom classification chart, and if possible, to identify it with its full botanical names as well as common name.



Reflection by tutor and learners: Students were very positive about the task and the fact it made them start to *look* more carefully and with curiosity, at plants on their everyday travels. All students on the course participated in the task and found the practical aspects of taking something from everyday life and understanding its place within the plant classification system useful and eye-opening.

‘World War into Cold War’: Questioning

1. Students were given questions on a topic a week in advance of the session, and asked to research and prepare their responses at home.
2. The tutor planned questions for the class to consider at specific moments during PowerPoint presentations.
3. Students completed short quizzes in pairs, but without necessarily a ‘right’ answer.

Reflection by tutor and learners: Learners were encouraged to move away from a ‘good’/‘bad’ approach to history and to develop a more distanced viewpoint - considering a range of factors that lead powers to pursue particular policies. They began to reflect further on their existing beliefs and move away from *confirmation bias*. Even if they held on to their own beliefs and views, they could recognise there were other ones that are held in tandem.

Overall, tutors found the methods they trialled worked well in enabling their learners to determine their own levels of learning and progress. They felt that reflection and preparation by students were central to ‘stretch and challenge’, and that *all* students were learning and progressing, but differently based on individual starting points. Overall feedback from students was positive: the activities made them think more reflectively on the topic and how it related to other topics. Or, in the instance of the Botany group, it made them *look* more carefully and with curiosity, at plants and spaces as they went about their everyday lives.

Stretch and Challenge in Languages

Brendan Gleeson from Languages was also part of the ETF cross-London Stretch and Challenge project. He trialled some methods in his own teaching which he is planning to disseminate to colleagues.

Peer correction

Learners correct others' homework in pairs. Learners work is anonymous, but the tutor assigns it a number so they can track who is who. Stronger learners get a chance to discuss language and explain structures and meaning, while weaker learners are exposed to writing with fewer errors, more complex structures and a wider range of vocabulary.

The tutor keeps copies to monitor and pick out common errors and gives targeted homework to address these.

Flipped learning

(This technique was also used in the Humanities project.) Students present to the class new points of grammar and vocabulary which they research beforehand. The tutor can give this out as homework the week before - either allowing learners to choose the degree of difficulty, or allocating tasks according to where they know the learner needs to work.

Learners discuss how they learn

Learners are given regular opportunities to share what they consider challenges in language learning and how they overcome/deal with them. Eg learners who have visited or lived in a country can explain what they found difficult in learning the language, and how they improved. Others who have managed to conquer certain areas can share their strategies and resources.

The tutor can also give learners tips on taking risks since that is how they will stretch themselves. Encouraging students to take risks is the only way they will improve. Even just speaking in front of the class is a risk for many learners.

Repeat an activity but with a new challenge

This gives extra practice but pushes learners further forward. Eg in languages - *this time do it without using mime, or finding a synonym for difficult words.*

Other techniques

Projects and personal research

Students working on personal projects have an excellent opportunity to challenge themselves at different

levels. The tutor should support them in finding something testing, but not so hard they lose heart.

Medals and missions feedback - giving learners an individual challenge

Medals and missions feedback is an excellent way of stretching and challenging as it can be tailored to individuals. The tutor gives one or two strengths and a 'mission' or challenge on what to work on next. For example,

- *Your writing is well structured. Great!*
- *Work now on writing more complex sentences avoiding 'and' and 'but' ...*

Graded worksheets

We used an example of this in issue 12. The worksheet is from Creative Writing, and designed by Helen Cox. It takes students through an increasingly challenging group of questions and they can choose when to stop. Individuals can carry on to the harder levels for homework if they wish.

This was the worksheet, questions moving through the various levels of Bloom's taxonomy:

Staged Questions: Language in Creative Writing

- Pick out three verbs in this piece of writing that stand out to you in some way. Discuss why you've made those choices.
- How might the reader respond or react to these verbs and why? Explain your ideas on the post-it notes provided.
- Choose one of the verbs. Experiment with three other powerful verbs that could replace it.
- Rank your experimental verbs in order of effectiveness. Are any of them more effective than the original verb? Why or why not?
- Offer a suggested rewrite of three sentences focusing on the use of adjectives. Experiment in the same way as you did with the verbs.
- Based on your discussion and analysis, how would you rate the effectiveness of the verbs and adjectives in this piece of writing. Offer some feedback on the post-it notes provided.

E.g. *The writing would be crisper if verbs didn't need support from an adverb. 'He said angrily' could be changed to 'he growled'.*

Make a mindmap, chart or picture

Tutors in the Humanities project used this approach. Working together on a mindmap, or any visual image, in groups encourages everyone to reflect on their learning and apply it in context. It is lively and enjoyable and results in much discussion and reflection by learners. Stronger students can support others, but all can contribute

Teach someone else

This is a great way of stretching learners who finish quickly - ask them to go and support someone else. Millie Easter in Family learning was teaching entrepreneurial skills. She taught one group how to use flower arranging foam correctly and safely, then asked them to teach another group. This continued till everyone had learned.

Finally: Revising the basics

Geoff Petty reminds us of the importance of regular checking of the basics through 'mastery tasks' - activities which revise fundamental knowledge, understanding and techniques. Everyone needs these for any new subject or topic: how verbs conjugate, basic massage movements, how to do a colour wash... Making sure these are revised regularly ensures all learners have the tools they need to move on to higher levels of understanding. It will also make sure those who are less confident recognise they are progressing and achieving.

Hopefully the above examples give you some new ideas on how you might further develop stretch and challenge activities in your own teaching.

Tutor Development Workshops, Spring 2019

Free for all City Lit teaching staff. More information and to book a place: www.tutordevcitylit.eventbrite.com.

Ticket code : spring2019

Mental Health Awareness and Dealing with Challenging Situations

Part 1: Mental health awareness and recognising potential barriers to communication

Part 2: Dealing with challenging situations and behaviours

Dates: 28 Mar & 4 Apr, 5.30 - 8.30 or 8 & 15 April, 1 - 4

Follow up session (optional): 3 June, 1 - 2.30

Neurodiversity: Learning in the Brain

You will explore strategies for teaching in the 'neurodiverse' classroom with a particular emphasis on 'atypical' students.

Dates: 8 Mar, 12.30 - 2.30 or 13 Mar, 5.30 - 7.30

Follow up (optional): 8 May, 5.30 - 7

Anxiety and Stress in the Brain

This session aims to develop your ability to support students experiencing anxiety, using neuroscientists' findings on its impact on the brain.

Dates: 29 Mar, 1.15 - 3.15pm or 11 Apr, 5.30 - 7.30

Follow up (optional): 17 May, 1.15 - 2.45

Practical Strategies for Teaching Students with Dyslexia/SpLD

This session aims to develop your skills to teach students with dyslexia/specific learning difficulties.

Dates: 19 Mar, 1.30 - 3.30 or 20 Mar, 5.30 - 7.30

Follow up (optional): 28 May, 1.30 - 3

Managing Challenging Behaviour

You will explore how to manage the most common types of challenging behaviour in class.

Dates: 21 Mar, 4.50 - 6.20 or 2 Apr, 1.15 - 2.45

Follow up (optional): 23 May, 5.30 - 7

You can register for 2 workshops. Contact for any queries: tutordevelopment@citylit.ac.uk