

DIFFERENTIATION – WHAT and HOW?

A few decades ago the world of education was very exercised by the forerunner of differentiation which was called 'mixed ability teaching'. Then people began to realise it was not just ability that could be "mixed" and that teachers had to cope with a plethora of differences: learning style, age, motivation, prior learning and experience, gender, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and so on. Consequently the term 'mixed ability' began to be replaced by the less vivid term: 'differentiation'. But what does differentiation mean exactly?

Differentiation is an approach to teaching that attempts to ensure that all students learn well, despite their many differences. Catch phrases which go some way to capturing this concept include:

'Coping with differences'.

'Learning for all' or

'Success for all'.

There are a number of common misconceptions about differentiation. Some believe that it is something 'added on' to normal teaching and that it just requires a few discrete extra activities in the lesson. In fact, differentiation permeates everything a good teacher does and it is often impossible to 'point' to a discrete event that achieves it. It is not what is done often, but the way it is done that achieves differentiation. For this reason differentiation may not show up on a lesson plan or in the Scheme of Work. However some teachers try to show their intentions to differentiate by setting objectives in the following format:

All must....

Some may...

A few might...

This may help novice teachers to think about the diversity of their learners, but having such objectives does not guarantee differentiation. It is the strategies, not the objectives that achieve differentiation, and this should be the focus of our interests.

Differentiation is not new, good teachers have always done it. However, it does chime with a new conception of the teacher's role. Once we teachers taught courses, subjects and classes. But no more. Now we are teaching individuals.

Once education was a sieve. The weaker students were 'seived out' and they left the classroom for the world of work, while the able students were retained for the next level. 'Drop outs' were planned for, and seen not just as inevitable but as desirable. Put bluntly, the aim was to discover those who could not cope, and get rid of them.

But now education is a ladder, and we expect every learner to climb as fast and as high as they are able. 'Drop outs' are seen as a wasted opportunity, for the learners, and for society as a whole.

Underpinning these conceptions of education as being a sieve or a ladder, are assumptions about the capability of learners and the nature of learning. Once learners were thought to have a genetic disposition for learning, or not, which was measured by their 'IQ'. This placed an upper limit on their possible achievement. Some students were thought to reach their 'ceiling' after which further teaching would be in vain.

This is no longer thought to be the case. Experts on the brain and on learning now stress that everyone can learn more, if they are taught appropriately, whatever they have previously achieved. A vivid illustration of this is provided by the work of Professor Reuven Feuerstien. He teaches learners with what we call 'moderate learning difficulties', using a very special and unusual programme involving intensive work for one hour a day every day. Four years later these learners have 'caught up' and are found to have an average 'IQ'. They can live independent lives, learn normally, and are indistinguishable from average members of their societies.*

Needless to say, remnants of the 'ceiling' model of learning can still be found in many teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning. These ideas need to be tackled. Luckily in most colleges examples can be found of students who entered the college on a level 1 programme, and progressed well, eventually leaving for university. These are persuasive role models for other learners and for teachers. Teachers can make much greater differences than they themselves realise, and we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of what is possible.

**For more information on Professor Feuerstein's methods:
Visit the website of 'The International Center for the Enhancement of Learning
Potential' <http://www.icelp.org/>**

*Howard Sharron 1996 'Changing Children's Minds: Feuerstein's revolution in the teaching of intelligence' 3rd Ed Imaginative Minds 27 Grederick Street Hockley Birmingham B1 3HH

Adey P. and Shayer M. (1994) 'Really Raising Standards: cognitive intervention and academic achievement' Routledge

If every learner achieves at their maximum rate this has huge consequences for their own lives, but also for society at large. Social inclusiveness, welfare to work, and the reduction of crime, drug abuse, and even ill health all require an educated citizenship and workforce. Many of the ills in our time have a remedy in the classroom. But differentiation has economic consequences beyond that of ensuring that citizens can provide for themselves through work.

Economists stress that the market is now global, and that an industrialised nation like ours cannot compete on the basis of low wages, only on the basis of the skill, knowledge, and adaptability of our workforce. Industrialists have long known that a better educated workforce is much more 'trainable', and so can adapt to the rapid change now facing most places of work. The Economist, a journal not noted for valuing the public services, once dedicated a whole issue to education, making the case that economies were highly dependent on skills and knowledge, and that the big global economies were now competing for their futures in their classrooms.

Differentiation has a lot to offer individuals, society and the economy, so it's worth getting it right.

Introducing differentiation

Background

These activities allow you to explore what is meant by differentiation and consider some of the barriers to achieving it. Three activities are given below. These are alternatives, so please choose the most suitable for the participants you will train. The first two assume some knowledge of differentiation and to factors that might prevent it taking place. The third activity assumes no knowledge of the subject.

Activity: 'Snowballing' a definition of differentiation.

Aims

- To explore individual and group understanding of differentiation
- To identify perceived obstacles which may hinder differentiation in practice
- To identify catalysts which may stimulate differentiation in practice.

Resources

Flip chart/s, post-it notes, standard pens and flip chart pens, OHP.

Organisation

The first stage is organised as a 'snowball exercise' commencing with each participant writing a personal definition of differentiation on a post-it note. Participants pair up and combine/ revise their definitions. Two pairs then combine /revise their definitions and so on to a maximum of 8 in a group. Each group then writes their definition on a flip chart. The definitions can then be compared and discussed with mediation from the facilitator. The facilitator may wish to show some academic definitions (see the box) for further discussion/ clarification. Teachers often produce a more useful definition than those in the box.

- Individual definitions of differentiation (3 mins)
- Pairs merge / develop definitions (5 mins)
- Pairs get together into groups of four or more and again merge / develop a common definition and write this on flip chart for discussion (10 mins)
- Facilitator – led discussion (15 mins)

The next exercise, 'obstacles to differentiation' follows on from this activity very well.

Some definitions for 'Differentiation'.

Teachers often come up with clearer and more useful definitions than these:

'Differentiation is..... the process of identifying, with each learner, the most effective strategies for achieving agreed targets'.¹

(Weston 1992)

'Differentiation is the process whereby teachers meet the need for progress through the curriculum by selecting appropriate teaching methods to match the individual student's learning strategies, within a group situation'.

(Visser 1993)

'Differentiation should be seen as integral to learning, not an add-on for those situations when things do not go as well as planned and problems occur. Differentiation is not about troubleshooting. It is a concept that has to be seen in an inclusive way, applying to everyone.'

Obstacles to Differentiation

This follows on well from the previous activity, but can also stand alone, and requires each of the working groups to identify up to 3 major obstacles which could prevent differentiation in practice. You may want to ask them to identify one obstacle at each of the following levels in College:

- Institutional
- Systems
- Operational

Each obstacle is written on a flip chart sheet with ample space for further comments. The groups, or the flip chart sheets, then rotate in a 'round robin'. Each group now has another groups' list of obstacles and the task is to find solutions or catalysts to overcome these obstacles.

The facilitator should then summarise the findings.

- a. Each working group identifies and writes on their flip chart up to 3 major obstacles in making differentiation happen in FE (5 mins)
- b. Groups rotate and try to identify solutions / catalysts to overcome the obstacles identified by the other group/s (10 mins)
- c. Groups move on to next flip chart and try to add to solutions / catalysts identified by the previous group (5 mins)
- d. Facilitator- led discussion and summary (10 mins)

Note:

This session may serve as a 'barometer' to measure attitudes and understanding. It may identify some key organisational issues which need to be addressed in order to promote differentiation in practice.

How do you cope with difference?

Aims:

- To develop an understanding of differentiation
- To share common differentiation difficulties
- To share effective differentiation strategies

Organisation

The facilitator introduces the activity by describing 'mixed ability teaching', and then pointing out that it is not just ability that can be 'mixed'. They establish that there are many differences between our students that affect their learning and so should affect our teaching. The term 'differentiation' is explained as meaning to cope with such differences.

Task 1 Pairs exploring the meaning of 'differentiation'? (approx 10 minutes)

- in pairs, participants brainstorm the differences between students that they must cope with. 'Mixed ability' is given as one to start them off. They are given two minutes.
- then the facilitator goes round from pair to pair, getting one idea from each until most ideas have been presented. There is a very short discussion of any difference the facilitator believes everyone might not understand. The importance of some ideas is stressed by the facilitator and extra explanation added if necessary.
- the facilitator concludes by saying that 'differentiation' is about 'coping with these and other differences'. 'Coping with difference' could be a quick definition for discussion.

Task 2 Small groups sharing differentiation strategies (20 minutes)

- in groups of 3-5 participants share ways of coping with the differences outlined in task 1 by telling their group one or two strategies that they have found to work.
- the facilitator takes one suggestion at a time from each group, gives it a name if necessary, and writes it on a flip chart or OHP. They go round the groups until most suggestions have been heard. There is a very short discussion of each method if it is necessary to ensure that everyone understands it.
- the facilitator can offer to type up this list of strategies.
- the facilitator concludes that differentiation is
- coping with difference
- something we have always done,
- important if all learners are to benefit from our teaching
- can make the difference between passing and failing for many students, and so is the ladder to success for all.
- if a student passes because of effective differentiation, that will make a real difference to that student's life. They might get a job, a career, indeed a life they would not have got otherwise. "Teachers touch lives for ever"
- teachers have important jobs and differentiation counts

Tutor notes:

You might like to do this before you pass out the packs of materials to prevent staff reading out strategies from the pack!

It is important to value the ideas in a very positive manner if they could be effective in some context

If most teachers come from a similar curriculum area there would be some merit in typing up their suggestions.