

Case Study – Improving differentiation in Bede Academy

Hilary Caisley has been a Geography teacher for 12 years, two of them at Bede Academy, an all-through 3–18 Academy. Here she describes how her own interest in differentiation has developed and how Bede Academy has used this and other input to enhance practice beyond the Geography department.

Why differentiation?

My personal interest in differentiation arose from a realisation that it was an area of my own teaching in which I wasn't particularly skilled. I was given an opportunity four years ago to use some of the differentiation techniques outlined in this pack and in the *Challenge & Differentiation Toolkit* and challenged to try to use them in my own classroom to improve my own practice. It was with some trepidation that I agreed to do this and feed back to a small group of practitioners from a range of schools on the results and impact.

As I ventured I began to discover an enjoyment for trialling new ideas and the rigour of having to feed back to other teachers but also the stimulation of conversing with fellow practitioners around teaching, listening to their experiences and learning from others. I soon gained a motivation for wanting to go back, retry, tinker and develop differentiation further in my own classroom and began to, possibly for the first time, truly understand the importance of differentiating for my students.

Developing practice beyond my classroom

From this personal endeavour of trying new techniques in my own classroom, questions arose.

1. Could I help Bede Academy improve differentiation at a whole school level?
2. How could I test if my efforts in differentiating and challenging students were having an impact on their learning?

The Academy knew of my personal interest in improving differentiation and it was also an area that they had identified as a whole school improvement target, and so the journey began.

What did we do?

Phase 1 – Small scale Inset session – 1 hr

My first task was to lead a CPD session on differentiation for NQTs. The aim of the session was to allow the teachers to share their own experiences of differentiation

If you are sharing practice across departments, key stages or even school don't underestimate how daunting this can be. It is important to remember that when a teacher adopts effective practices already well established in another school or classroom what is 'old hat' to one represents innovation to another. (Hargreaves)

Teachers often tell us that being accountable to one's peers is the most effective form of accountability.

Professor David Leat describes the importance of giving teachers a 'platform or a pen' (*Partnerships and Participation in Teacher Research*, NCSL, David Leat), i.e. an outlet for what they are learning through professional enquiry. Hilary has been given this opportunity which has served as a catalyst for further effort on her part.

in their classrooms which gave me a useful insight into where they were at.

It allowed me to judge their feelings on differentiation, the techniques they were trying but also the struggles they had with differentiating successfully. From this I was able to share many of the techniques found in this publication such as pattern cards and challenge cards and along with leaving the teachers with some new tools for differentiating it opened up positive conversation around differentiation that lasted well beyond the session.

What did I learn?

- The techniques I shared, which included got it get up, pattern cards and challenge cards, were received positively. Teachers saw them as practical and manageable.
- Staff were very willing to listen to new ideas and trial them in their own classrooms.
- The group was also small enough that I was able to continue talking informally to these teachers after the session, discussing techniques they had tried and were further developing.
- There was a motivation amongst staff to improve their own practice and reflect on their teaching in a small group.
- NQTs want tools they can see themselves using and prefer training sessions to be discussion based rather than didactic. They also appreciated hearing other teachers admit their struggles in this area.

Staff feedback:

'These were excellent practical examples that made differentiation seem simpler and more realistic.'

'These were completely new ideas that I had never heard before.'

'Relieved to hear an experienced teacher admit they don't think they do it well!'

Phase 2 – Whole school Inset – 1 ½ hr

The second stage was a whole staff Inset on differentiation and challenge. This increased the profile of differentiation at a whole school level and highlighted its relevance to everyone.

The aims of the session were to think through the following:

- Why differentiate?
- How do we currently differentiate? Reflecting on our own practice
- Practical examples

In Bede Academy I knew there were other teachers who were also trying to improve differentiation in their classrooms so a maths teacher and a science teacher joined me in delivering this Inset. Involving others was important in order

Giving due attention to pupils' starting point when it comes to classroom differentiation also needs to be applied to teachers' learning.

Creating opportunities for staff to talk about what they find hard is a really important step in improving practice.

'Effective teacher professional learning is motivated by their need to know rather than someone else's desire to tell' (Timperley, p14). Giving teachers time to talk about their classrooms and explore why differentiation may help them to accelerate their pupils' progress is important.

to increase the range of practical examples presented and to ensure teachers realised this was an area of teaching and learning that other colleagues were focussing on also; it wasn't simply a top down development but that staff from across the academy were motivated to improve this aspect of their practice.

Without a range of examples some staff can't or won't apply an example to their area and may therefore see it as irrelevant. It's a good idea to gather examples from a number of teachers in different curriculum areas or phases in advance.

In this session I gave plenty of time for discussion, reflection and sharing of good practice. I gave time for staff to discuss their experiences both cross curricular and within department. From my NQT session feedback I had learnt that staff wanted practical examples they could go and try the next day but also time to discuss what happens in their classroom. There is often so little time to reflect with colleagues yet so many staff feel encouraged and re-motivated when they can do this. I also gave over time to allow staff to share why they don't differentiate and the barriers they encounter. Recognising these barriers early in the session and allowing staff to 'get them off their chests' (acknowledging that they are a reality) made later discussion much more profitable and positive.

Giving permission to teachers to say what they find difficult or off putting is the logic for the activity.

What did I learn?

- Staff appreciated not simply being told they must differentiate more but given tools they could realistically use in their classrooms.
- They found having time to discuss within departments how the tools could be adapted to their subjects very useful.
- Some staff were very keen to know what impact increasing differentiation in my own classroom was having. This led me to realise the importance of evaluating impact which was to be my next phase.

Teachers always tell us they want practical strategies to go away and try. This provides a context to explore pupil and teacher learning needs. The challenge is how to move beyond this. "It is quite possible to make superficial changes to practice within shorter time frames but the process does not achieve the kinds of deep learning that make a sustainable difference to entrenched problems with student engagement, learning and well-being." (Timperley, p17)

Staff feedback

'The ideas were thought provoking and I would love to have more time on this.'

'Examples were concrete. Ideas I could see myself using.'

Phase 2b – Gathering evidence of professional impact

Six weeks after the Inset I questioned the whole staff about their use of differentiation.

Maintaining dialogue with staff is important. It keeps staff focused when it's easy for other demands to distract and divert.

I wanted to investigate whether:

- staff were differentiating work more
- Inset had been effective in providing practical, realistic and useable tools for the classroom
- which tools had proved most useful to staff.

I used the opportunity of another Inset session where I knew staff would be spending time in their departments to issue a simple questionnaire. This prompted a good questionnaire return. The results were very encouraging.

- 97% of staff said that even 6 weeks later the Inset was leading them to think more about the use of differentiation in the classroom.
- 92% said that as a result of Inset they had increased their use of differentiation in the classroom.

Quick wins sustain effort. Plan for them from the outset.

- 83% said that they had used the new tools in their lessons or intended to.

It was clear from these results that the Inset had increased the profile of differentiation and that many appreciated learning new techniques but also using techniques they had in their words 'forgotten' about.

I also emailed staff asking them to share ways they had used differentiation strategies in their lessons. A number of staff emailed back. From their responses I could see that they were beginning to further develop the tools in their own classrooms and were thinking more deeply about their practice in this area.

Phase 3 – Small scale action research with Geography team – 2 lessons

To assess the impact of introducing more challenge and differentiation the Geography department conducted a small scale action research project (see below).

The future

I have realised that if practice is to continue to improve, the profile of differentiation has to remain high. It isn't enough to deliver an Inset and leave it at that. There could be many more phases to improving differentiation in a school including the following.

Phase 4 – Rolling out small scale action research to another department

Another department in Bede Academy has shown an interest in using some of the impact tools. I plan to disseminate the work and findings of the Geography department and offer to guide other departments in the use of the impact tools.

Phase 5 – Evaluating the impact of differentiation

I also believe it will be important to complete a larger action research project on differentiation and challenge in the future, where more data is collected on the impact of classroom practice. By feeding back results to the whole staff I hope this will continue to focus their minds and motivate them in this important area of teaching and learning.

Gathering evidence of impact

- Lesson observation evidence
- Action research in Geography department
- Staff feedback after sessions but also 6 weeks later
- Staff blogs
- Filming of lessons/peer observation

Evidence of impact at Bede Academy

- Staff are differentiating more in their lessons. (Questionnaire results, 92%)

Evidence of this nature is useful evidence to present to Ofsted as it demonstrates impact of whole school CPD.

All learners know something already - we need to engage with that to build upon it.

Develop a strategic plan at the outset which reflects the characteristic of CPD with positive outcomes.

- Staff have new tools at hand and are adapting the tools in their own subjects. (Email responses and commentaries along with conversation with staff)
- In the Academy the number of lessons where differentiation was noted as a strength more than doubled. Though the number where it was identified as an area for development also increased (is this due to observers being more aware of what good challenge and differentiation look like and focusing on them more?) (Lesson observation analysis)

Lessons learned/advice for a lead learner

- **Try all the techniques and tools in your own classroom first**

This has enabled me to test and understand the tools and techniques allowing me to speak with greater credibility.

- **Maintain staff motivation**

Be approachable and accessible to staff who wish to share their experiences and discuss how they may improve their own teaching

- **Keep communicating with staff**

I regularly email all staff to ask them to share what they are trying in their classrooms. This seems to maintain their interest and as long as I remain enthusiastic, most of them do as well. This is also allowing me to see how they are developing and tackling issues that may arise.

- **Keep going**

If staff are to be kept motivated and encouraged then they need to be reminded of the importance of challenge and differentiation and ensure they remain at the forefront of their minds. This can be achieved through formal CPD/Inset as well as informally through conversation and encouragement.

Enquiry is an iterative process. As you answer one question your evidence will enable you to ask more focused questions. Don't imagine that an inset day and a bit of departmental time are going to make a sustainable difference to teacher practices or pupil outcomes.

This might seem time consuming, but informal support is often the difference between effort being sustained and a project failing.

Small scale departmental action research cycle

Lesson 1

We all taught a lesson where we aimed to challenge our students and at the end of the lesson pupils completed an evaluation sheet.

- Had they felt challenged in the lesson?
- If so, when?
- If not, why not?
- How could they have been challenged more?

Findings

- We planned our second lesson in light of the outcomes of the student voice and our own observations.
- Students were keen to have a voice. They filled the evaluation forms in very comprehensively which was encouraging.
- Their answers showed pupils had a number of ideas as to how the lessons could be more challenging including being spoon fed less information and being made to work more out for themselves.

Lesson 2

We planned our lessons to tackle the areas where pupils felt unchallenged which for us was higher ability students.

After the lesson pupils completed the same evaluation form and a small group of students were interviewed about the lesson.

In addition the second lesson was filmed to allow a deeper level of reflection.

Findings

- We were all able to see by graphing the data gathered that pupils felt more challenged in the second lesson.
- The interviews gave a greater insight into the students' understanding of challenge and differentiation and their experiences both in Geography lessons and the wider Academy. For example, students claimed that they were aware when their peers were given different work in lessons and while that can be embarrassing they would rather that than have work they couldn't manage.

Staff feedback

Staff in the Geography department were very positive about this small research project.

Importance of student voice They agreed that listening to the student voice had been much more insightful than they had expected and increased their motivation to continue to develop differentiation and challenge.

Increasing accountability By asking the students to reflect on their own learning and lesson experience we all felt much more accountable in improving our lessons.

Informed future planning They also agreed that getting feedback after considerable effort had been made in their planning of the lesson validated their efforts and has informed their future planning.

Lessons learned

- Gathering evidence helps teachers understand the impact of their changed actions and is more secure than anecdotal evidence
- Even small scale data collection, as a starting point, can be very informative
- Students want to express their views about learning in lessons and this can provide helpful insight to inform teaching