

## Handout 1.3: Helpdesk

I would encourage you to ask staff to tell or email you details of strategies that work in their classroom. After a training session recently I received an email telling me about *Helpdesk*, a simple yet effective strategy that Joanna Lamb from Norham High School in North Tyneside has found engages pupils and promotes challenge. Here she describes what she has been doing.

### Helpdesk

The *helpdesk* is an approach to differentiation which encourages pupils to seek the support they need at the time they need it rather than the teacher directing it. Rather than intervening in group talk the teacher mans a helpdesk which pupils access as needed.

A typical lesson involving this strategy might run as follows:

- teacher sets initial task with high level of challenge (though this could still be differentiated for different groups)
- pupils are given a fixed period of time which is determined by age, stage or ability in which they digest and discuss the task and strategies for tackling it
- groups who feel able to tackle the task without support 'get on' and work independently
- groups who feel they need support in tackling the task send a representative to the helpdesk. There the teacher provides appropriate support such as extra resources, supplementary questions or prompts before representatives take these back to their group to enable them to progress with the task
- groups can send a representative to the helpdesk at any point during the lesson (if they start to over-rely on it, a number of 'tickets' or credits can be issued at the start to limit visits to the helpdesk, although in my experience this is not usually a problem)
- once all groups are working independently, the teacher will call selected pupils up to the helpdesk for a progress check during the lesson. I find this works best if pupils within a group number themselves or allocate specific roles at the start and I would then call 'all 1s' or 'all researchers', for example, to the helpdesk. Those who are able to demonstrate their understanding and explain next steps return to their group and get on; those who need clarification or further support stay at the helpdesk until they feel confident in going back to their group and getting on.

The important difference to me between this and other methods of differentiation is that the level of support required is determined by the pupils rather than the teacher – they are usually much better judges! Having to make the journey across the room to the helpdesk seems to be enough to make the pupils stop and think about whether they really need that teacher support – often they don't and independence and resilience are improved as a result. Some pupils (often younger ones) like to visit the helpdesk too frequently, and where this is the case I have found it effective to issue 'tokens' to these pupils at the start of the lesson to restrict the number of visits.

As the teacher, being able to sit back and observe the class is always revealing – and allows you to identify those who genuinely need the extra support rather than intervening with those who don't. This also allows the teacher to identify the moments where a mini-plenary with the whole class may be genuinely appropriate, rather than an artificial 'progress check' inserted at an arbitrary point in the lesson plan.

The impact on groups with whom I have used it frequently has been significant. For instance:

- improved resilience
- pupils working for longer periods without teacher intervention

- these groups now accept high challenge as the norm and do not expect to be continuously 'spoon fed' with next steps.

It does take a while to establish as it is a different approach to 'normal' classroom practice and some pupils feel lost at first without their teacher looking over their shoulder all the time to see what they're doing. Other colleagues who have trialled this in school share similar experiences.