

Differentiation in Practice

Unit 1: Exploring differentiation

Overview

Aims and outcomes

This unit is intended to promote discussion about:

- pupil learning needs in your school
- existing differentiation practice and the impact it has on pupil learning
- the challenges teachers face when differentiating
- the questions teachers have about differentiation.

It also seeks to:

- engage staff with theory and evidence about differentiation
- provide strategies to try in the classroom
- give examples of professional enquiry for teachers to use after the training.

Participants

Whole staff or a specific teaching and learning group

Resources

- Laptop/computer and projector
- PowerPoint presentation for Unit 1
- Handouts
 - 1.1: Quotes quilt
 - 1.2 Challenge cards
 - 1.3 Helpdesk
 - 1.4 Professional enquiry task cards
 - 2.1 Designing challenging tasks for sustaining pupils' progress
 - 2.5: Planning for differentiation
- Sticky notes (optional, but if you leave them on the tables teachers can pass you questions without disrupting the flow of the training)
- Flipchart

Timing

One hour but could be extended by incorporating the optional Step 1 activity and planning for the follow-up task.

Rationale and background

This unit is designed to provide an introduction to all staff. However, you could work with a small group of teachers initially, who develop their skills before sharing them with others.

The training course has been created in a way that gives the training leader the flexibility to choose the most appropriate activities for the group.

You can choose from two starters: the Quotes quilt and Reasons not to...differentiate.

Participants are then introduced to two tools:

- Challenge cards – a low-risk, easy-to-develop strategy
- Helpdesk – requires pupils to take more responsibility for support, challenge and pace.

If you have more time available, you could also use these strategies from Unit 2:

- **Handout 2.4: Pattern cards**
- **Handout 2.5: Planning for differentiation.**

As a follow-up to the session, participants are encouraged to undertake a professional enquiry.

Now choose Step 1a or 1b.

Step 1a: Quotes quilt starter (15 minutes)

Handout 1.1: Quotes quilt, originally published in *Leading Learning's Challenge and Differentiation Toolkit*, is useful for stimulating conversation while engaging participants with theory and evidence.

Practicalities

- Printing this resource in colour makes it easier for staff to identify different statements during discussion.
- If time is limited, ask participants to read the handout in advance.
- Get staff to work in groups of six to eight.

Suggestion: Read out loud the script here and elsewhere in the unit.

Having read/as you read the Quotes quilt choose one statement that stands out for you. It could be because you really like it or because you disagree. It might be because there is one you like or one really annoys you: simply identify one that resonates. Once you have done that, have a conversation about the choices teachers have made at your table.

A minute before calling a halt, say:

I'm not going to ask you to feed back the detail of your discussion but in about one minute I will ask you to share the common themes that are emerging. These might be questions, comments or observations.

Gather a sample of responses. It's a good idea to check how many groups/teachers have the same issues (ask for raised hands) and invite staff to look around the room to see the similarities.

You can assume that at least some of the following issues will emerge:

- Time: it's impossible to create 30 different tasks every lesson.
- External pressure makes us teach in a particular way and we don't feel we can deviate from that.
- Attainment and progress measures are so demanding that we don't have time – we've got to get them to pass the test.
- Our leadership team tell us we should stop every 20 minutes to do mini-plenaries to demonstrate progress, so how can we let pupils work at different rates?
- We need some ideas to help.
- We can differentiate in terms of what different groups might do within the lesson and are happy to plan extensions but we struggle to respond during the lesson when pupils make unexpected rates of progress.

Note: Activities in Units 1–3 will help you to address these concerns.

Write teachers' issues/comments/questions on a flipchart or whiteboard. It's a good idea to come back to them at the end to check whether the content of the training has addressed the issues raised at the outset.

or

Step 1b: Reasons not to... differentiate (15 minutes)

This is an alternative to the Quotes quilt conversation. It may seem a little absurd but it always seems to work. Your school may be the exception but when discussing new strategies that might be perceived to add to teachers' workloads there can be some negativity. It may seem that giving permission for this legitimises these views but importantly it allows you to park these negatives and move on to a more positive discussion.

Give each group a few sticky notes. Say:

Write down all the reasons why not to, or why it's hard to, differentiate to provide appropriate levels of support or challenge.

Give groups about five minutes to write their own sticky notes before sharing them with the large group. Depending on the size of the group either gather all the sticky notes on one wall and sort them together or ask each group to do this at their table and ask one person to

summarise the common reasons. Record these on a flipchart. Usually, the list is much the same as the one produced as a result of the Quotes quilt.

I acknowledge that these are all legitimate concerns. We are going to place them over here. Now we are going to move on and look at some practical strategies. At the end we will see whether we've done anything to alleviate these concerns and what we still need to pay attention to.

Step 2: Why differentiation? (20 minutes)

In this section there is a facilitator script and two strategies to try with staff. The strategies cater for a differentiated group. Challenge cards are a relatively low-risk, easy-to-develop strategy, while Helpdesk may feel a little riskier for some. It is suitable for those teachers who are happy to let pupils take more responsibility for support, challenge and determining pace. If you have more than an hour you could add Pattern cards and/or the Planning for differentiation activities from Unit 2.

Facilitator introduction

Teachers can find the content of **slide 2** quite challenging as they recognise some of the features in their own lessons, which can feel uncomfortable. Explain that the statements are not judgements. Smart differentiation can help manage teacher workload and accelerate pupil progress.

Use or adapt the script and suggestions to expand on the content of the slide. The numbers in the list below relate to the numbers on the slide.

1. Though there is a need to plan different work for some individuals and for different groups within a class, trying to plan something personalised and bespoke for every child is unmanageable and unrealistic. We need to be smarter than that. We will look at Challenge cards later as an example of a strategy that might help.
2. You may wish to look at the research evidence on setting. Much would advocate mixed ability teaching. Nevertheless some schools feel that setting is their preferred strategy because it helps teachers to differentiate more easily. 'Setting may help you provide "match" for a cohort of pupils but a setted group is still a mixed ability group, simply skewed in a particular direction.'
3. Sometimes tasks are challenging but because the teacher dictates the pace and flow of work and some pupils are quicker than others, it is apparent during observations that some children are filling time until the teacher is ready while others are playing catch-up when the teacher has moved on.
4. This statement could describe a positive learning environment, but it is here as a caution. Why might the scenario result in slower progress for some? Encourage teachers to see that for this strategy to provide challenge pupils must have intrinsic motivation to work at an appropriate pace and the task must provide increasing challenge.

It might also be worth teachers thinking about pupils who are happy to complete tasks that might lack challenge. Many pupils spend their school career being

rewarded for getting the right answer, not for wrestling with complexity. Do all pupils need to do all questions or could they jump ahead once they have demonstrated success, for instance?

5. I see lots of lesson plans where the only description of differentiation is 'by outcome'. With a passion for enquiry and thinking skills I am a proponent of differentiation by outcome, but to be effective it demands skilled teaching, planning for differentiated outcomes and the ability to respond to learning as it unfolds. Differentiation by outcome can be translated by some pupils as 'do as much as you can be bothered to do'. To use this strategy successfully, teachers need to have a good knowledge of their pupils to know what outcomes would reflect that pupil's capabilities and starting point. This is also evident in lesson objectives such as 'all, most, some'. I have a personal dislike of these. Too often I see pupils interpret this phrase as 'I've got to, if I have to and not if I can help it.' Occasionally, analysis of these objectives can identify teachers who don't understand stepped challenge. For instance, one geography lesson asked that 'all' pupils would be able to describe a particular geographical phenomenon, that 'most' would be able to explain it and 'some' would be able to give examples. These are progressively more demanding skills. The problem is that to get even a 4-5 grade at GCSE you need to be able to do all three; therefore all pupils need to be able to do what was only targeted for 'some'.
6. Keeping children busy is laudable but when it has little impact on learning, even if helping you to manage behaviour, it needs to be reviewed. You will be able to use your own examples. The example I use is of a Key Stage 2 science lesson. Pupils were making simple electrical circuits with the intention of lighting a bulb. Each pair had only the right amount of equipment to light one bulb so there were few opportunities to get it wrong and learn from their mistakes. On successfully completing the task there was time to spare so these pupils had been asked to draw and colour their circuit. I asked one boy if he could organise his circuit to light two bulbs and left him to it. He came to me later, perplexed. On asking him what the problem was he explained, frustrated, that he knew how to do it but the bulb just wouldn't light – his battery, however, was getting very hot! Immediately we were having a conversation about energy production. Our focus must be on learning, not simply task completion.
7. Building upon the previous point, pupils may willingly complete tasks, some will even complain when made to think independently but do all pupils need to complete all the tasks you set? How do you create a set of questions which helps teacher and pupil diagnose and demonstrate learning and move to a more challenging task?

Optional extra: Give participants time to discuss, in small groups, their responses to **slide 2** and/or describe the differentiation techniques they identify as having the most significant impact on progress. Encourage them to talk about strategies in relation to impact as that helps to keep explicit the link between teaching and learning.

Slide 3 is designed to help staff consider the personal relevance of a focus on differentiation: the engagement, achievement and learning dispositions of their own pupils (see **Handout**

0.3: Improving differentiation in Bede Academy). Though the evidence presented in this slide could be accounted for by a range of factors, not least issues specific to your context such as home support or lack of it, they all indicate that enhancing differentiation practice might be worthwhile.

The column on the left considers whether outcomes achieved over time might be influenced by provision relating to support, challenge or pupils' disposition to challenge. The column on the right considers behaviours and outcomes that might be evident in individual classrooms.

Give staff time to discuss in small groups their responses to **slide 3** and/or describe the differentiation techniques they identify as having the most significant impact on progress. Encourage them to talk about strategies in relation to impact as that helps to keep explicit the link between teaching and learning.

Persistence and resilience are characteristics of successful learners. During staff training teachers often raise pupils' deficit in these skills as a matter of concern. They feel that some pupils don't display these characteristics, and that when faced with a challenge give up. We therefore need to nurture these attitudes. Differentiation is based on a sound knowledge of what pupils can do and what, with support, they can achieve: what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Effective differentiation is not, therefore, simply about ensuring pupils complete the work you set but we must differentiate according to what will help them learn. If a pupil, for instance, benefits little from group work because they lack skill in asking questions or listening then it is this we must differentiate for.

The outcomes, behaviours and learning dispositions on this slide won't all be evident in your classroom and indeed won't all be explained by differentiation practices. There may, however, be aspects of these that you recognise.

Show **slide 4**, which puts three questions to participants to help them reflect on their differentiation practice.

Slide 5 refers to research by Wang et al. (1993), based on attainment rather than achievement, which supports the view that pupils should be supported to:

- think hard, for extended periods of time, at a rate that is appropriate given the task and their ability
- think about their thinking (metacognition).

If you haven't used the Quotes quilt, before showing the slide ask participants to write down what they think are the drivers of attainment (home support is the fourth driver but has been excluded from this slide given the focus of this CPL). Very few teachers choose what's on the list.

If you have used the Quotes quilt either as the optional pre-training activity or as a starter, use **slide 5** to provide context for the strategies that follow.

The implication of these research findings is that we need to encourage pupils to think hard for extended periods of time at a rate which is right for them individually. At the same time

we want to promote classroom talk which helps them to think about their thinking (metacognition). The two activities we are going to look at next exemplify how this could be organised.

Step 3: Challenge cards (15 minutes)

This is a simple idea that helps to address concerns about workload and the need to increase challenge during lessons as learning is observed.

Challenge cards provide you with a strategy that can address both of these concerns. First, the issue of workload: the beauty of challenge cards is that they are relatively quick to produce and if a team of subject specialists pull them together you can quickly build up a bank of them.

Note: If you are using **Handout 2.1: Designing challenging tasks for sustaining pupils' progress**, Challenge cards provide an example of 'restructuring tasks'. **Planning for differentiation (Handout 2.5)** is a practical activity you can do with staff if you want to model the use of challenge cards in practice.

Distribute **Handout 1.2: Challenge cards**.

Most teachers will have had the experience of finding a gem of a question that forces pupils to reconsider either what they believe to be true or that they have finished their work. It has the ability to stop them in their tracks and make them reconsider. This cognitive conflict, or cognitive dissonance, is a valuable tool in increasing challenge during a lesson.

Challenge cards are simply a way of formalising and planning for these questions. Like a planned extension task they allow the teacher to extend or deepen the thinking of individual pupils but are less time consuming to prepare and can be used more responsively during a lesson to promote different rates of progress. Classroom observations show that students find challenge cards engaging and motivating.

Reminder: A challenge card isn't just an extension task – something else to do. It is a new piece of information or question that causes a learner to reconsider their current knowledge or understanding.

Tips for creating your own challenge cards

- The principle of a challenge card is that it creates a degree of cognitive conflict: i.e., new information appears to conflict with what we know already and forces us to question our existing knowledge and test it to see if it is still accurate. This is an example of a restructuring task (see **Handout 2.1: Designing challenging tasks for sustaining pupils' progress**).
- Work together to create the challenge cards – they are easier to develop when you work together. If you are in a primary school where you might be teaching a subject which is not your specialism, why not find out what degrees or A levels your colleagues have? There may be subject knowledge on your staff that you could make use of.

- Try them out in the classroom and ask pupils what difference they made to their thinking and learning (see Task card 1 in **Handout 1.4: Professional enquiry task cards**).

Task: After sharing this idea with staff give them 10 minutes in curriculum teams to design a Challenge card they could include in a lesson tomorrow.

Step 4: Helpdesk (5 minutes)

Give out **Handout 1.3: Helpdesk** on another approach to differentiation.

A variation on this theme has been used subsequently by Wendy Cooper at the Blyth School who used the idea of a master class to nurture the same independent approach to support and challenge. She writes:

I used the concept of a 'master class' to differentiate. This allowed the pupils to tap into support if and when they needed it. Master classes were offered at different locations around the room at different times. The pupils were free to come and go. The master class concept makes the pupils think they are getting help but everything is done through questioning, so I don't actually tell them how to do anything. As the pupils knew when and where support was available they were very good at managing their time and consequently the lesson was very well paced. The pupils felt trusted and really challenged and consequently every single pupil achieved a least one level higher than predicted and most achieved more.

See three before me

Another simple but effective strategy which can encourage pupils to be less dependent on the teacher is the 'see three before me' strategy. The teacher displays a sign saying 'C3 B4 ME' in their room during tasks where it is appropriate to apply the rule so that pupils know they have to ask up to three other pupils before asking the teacher. This is not intended to disrupt the progress of more able or more conscientious pupils but demonstrate to pupils that the teacher doesn't always have to be their first port of call.

Step 5: Learning into practice (5 minutes)

This is a post-training activity to apply learning from the training through ongoing, collaborative professional learning. Conducting a professional enquiry is one way of enabling teachers to take a structured approach to applying new ideas.

Professional learning tools: professional enquiry

Author's analogy:

I have three young children who must keep their own bedrooms tidy. The reward is their weekly pocket money. The eldest is a very capable tidier but one who really doesn't see the point. He does it because he is held to account and there is a financial reward. Though he always meets the minimum standard, corners are cut and expectations must be reiterated. The middle child can be occasionally untidy when distracted by a good book or game but is,

on the whole, meticulous. The middle child likes their room to be tidy and thus doesn't wait to be told before ensuring it is to their own high standard. They have good systems which they use effectively. Tidying is generally easier and more enjoyable because they want to achieve the desired outcome. The youngest child appears to be from a different gene pool. Most days it appears as though a tornado has ripped through the room. Despite my endless frustration there seemed to be no improvement. Was there, like the eldest child, no real desire for tidiness? It was only when observing her menacingly one afternoon I noticed that the youngest child didn't know how or where to start. She just kept rearranging things without resolving the chaos. It occurred to me she needed to be taught how to tidy systematically: what to throw away, what to keep, how to organise things so they can be easily retrieved and so on.

This analogy is true for teacher and pupil learners: some are perfectly capable but need rewards to maintain their interest because they don't value or possess intrinsic motivation. Others are motivated and skilled – they need little incentive and are highly motivated. Others simply don't have the skills. Even if the desire is there they need support to learn how to attain the desired outcome. Professional learning therefore has to be differentiated for adults too.

Professional enquiry, whether it be 'plan, do, review', action research or another preferred strategy, is an excellent professional learning process, but can feel daunting for a teacher unfamiliar with the process. To ease this process for those who may not be confident planning their own enquiry this set of sample enquiry task cards offers differing levels of support, which participants can pick from and complete within a few weeks (see **Handout 1.4: Professional enquiry task cards**).

You could laminate a set of task cards for each group, curriculum team or phase and invite them to select a question that responds to their priorities. Alternatively there is a blank template which groups can use to design their own enquiry.

Plan in advance what evidence or products you want teachers to share. Not only is this helpful when monitoring the impact of your professional learning but it is likely to make teachers feel their effort is valued because it is worth sharing.

What next?

As the leader or facilitator of this training, you could follow up in the following ways:

- Ask participants about their professional enquiry. How are they progressing? What successes or challenges have there been? I sometimes print out images of a light bulb for teachers to use the second time we meet. I ask them to record their 'light bulb moment'. That could be something they've done as a result of the previous training or clarity they have now that perhaps wasn't there before. Even if you have as many as 30 in your group giving everyone a maximum of 30 seconds to share is a great starter for your follow-up work. You will feel inspired by what people have trialled and it provides a useful way into sharing practice discussions.
- Ask participants if you can come to see them trying out the strategies in class, or perhaps video them (if participants are willing, you could start to build up a library of video clips to use as a professional learning resource).

- Upload handouts to the staff VLE or shared folders so that they can be disseminated more widely.

What's changed?

Evidence that this training and ongoing professional learning is having an impact on teaching and learning might include:

- Participants are engaging in and maintaining their professional inquiries.
- Staff are sharing strategies informally with colleagues, for example in the staffroom. Teachers are designing more challenge cards for different phases or subject areas, using them in the classroom and perhaps sharing them with
- colleagues. Monitoring identifies that teachers are using strategies and pupils are responding favourably to challenge.